ETHICS OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: EXAMINING ACCOUNTABILITY AND INTEGRITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Unethical leadership has been inimical to Nigeria's governance and national development. The purpose of this study is to examine unethical leadership epitomized by lack of integrity and accountability in Nigeria's public service. It is poised to answer three main research questions: (i) to what extent is Nigeria's political leadership perceived to exhibit accountability as instruments of governance? (ii), to what extent do government officials discharge their obligations with high level of integrity? To answer these questions, extant literature on unethical leadership, news articles and other secondary sources were sourced from the internet and reviewed. The research problem was seen from the theoretical framework of transformational leadership theory. The merits of this theory is its emphasis on leaders inspiring followers to transcend their parochial interests to achieve higher goals like national development. It was revealed that successive leaders have failed to adopt accountability and integrity as instruments of governance. Additionally, they fail to engage citizens in policy formulations. As a consequence, followers rarely trust them and so, show low levels of support for government. The study concludes that good governance is only achievable when the two ethical issues of accountability and integrity are vigorously applied in Nigeria's political leadership.

Keywords: ethics, political leadership, accountability, integrity, transformational leadership

Introduction

Ethical political leadership has been a burning issue in the discourse on Nigeria's governance. The deficit of integrity and accountability have been traced as major boosts of corruption in the country's public service. The duo combined with other factors have cost Nigeria over 30 trillion Nigeria through embezzlement and fraud within the public sector alone (Sunday & Lawal 2016; Beetseh & Kohol, 2013; Okekeocha 2013; Agbo, 2012). Not only has it cost the nation tens of millions of naira through fraud and looting of public resources and pushing millions more below the poverty line, it has made leaders the target of attacks and hatred by the suffering masses and

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disenchanted followers from trusting their political leaders, hence, being unsupportive of governance processes. The study focuses on the twin problems on ethical leadership in Nigeria. It identifies contradictions between actual delivery of public service delivery and citizens' expectations of public service office holders' obligations. By investigating the ethical dimensions of political leadership, this article explores how accountability and integrity are understood and practiced within Nigeria's political landscape, offering insights for better governance. The study examines the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of the federal government beaming its light on the presence or lack of these important virtues as key ingredients of ethical leadership. The research questions upon which this study is hinged are as follows: (i) to what extent is Nigeria's political leadership perceived to exhibit accountability as instruments of governance? (ii), to what extent do government officials discharge their obligations with high level of integrity? And finally (iii), what factors militate against the entrenchment of accountability and integrity in Nigeria's public leadership?

The specific objectives of the study are to: (i) examine the level of accountability in the public sector; (ii) ascertain if public sector bureaucrats discharge their duty with high level of integrity; (iii) investigate the challenges of entrenching accountability and integrity in Nigeria's political leadership. The study adopts logical argumentation as its methodology and the elite theory as theoretical framework.

Conceptual Review

In examining ethics of political leadership with focus on two virtues accountability and integrity in Nigeria calls to mind the distinct, though related entities involved: the leaders, the institutions and the rules governing them. Though they are often confused, they are, indeed, different. Bratton and Mattes (in Alemika 2004: 11) explicated that "Regimes are sets of rules, states are sets of institutions, and governments are sets of leaders". Examining the ethics of political leadership with a focus on accountability and integrity will thus beam a light on the leaders, the institutions they govern and the quality of decisions they make and its implication on the public. To establish the link among the concepts ethics, leadership, accountability and integrity in Nigeria's public sector needs a clarification of the sense in which these key concepts are used in this paper.

Ethics

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014) defines *ethics* as 'moral rules or principles of behavior for deciding what is right and wrong'. The word *ethics*, is derived from the Greek *ethos*, which means 'character'. Taken this way, if one is described as an ethical person it means one who has character. What constitutes 'character' has a broader semantic field. Ethics is an aspect of philosophy which studies the intent, means, and consequences of moral behavior. It dwells on the study of moral judgements and right and wrong conduct. Manning & Curtis (2007) identifies two roots to ethics: religious and secular, with the religious perspective based on a God-centred view of the world while the secular thinking based on a scientific view of the world. Whether viewed from the religious or secular origins, both may agree on many shared values such as the importance of honesty, having an impeachable moral conduct, being transparent and acting to promote general good (Manning & Curtis 2007: 88-99).

Ethics is a moral code of what is good or bad in a given situation based on established duties and obligations. The implied view of ethics is that conducts of public officials are not morally neutral, but always fall within the binary 'good' or 'bad' category. Considered from a broader perspective, Maduabum (2012) conceive ethics as a set of principles which guide the behavior of an individual, group of people, organization and the society in general. These principles are not set with any individual in mind; it is not made to favour or disfavor any official. They provide, in simple terms, a template for judging what is good and acceptable and what is bad and unacceptable. They are made with the view of strengthening the corporate institution. Thus, within the purview of public service, ethics could be conceptualized as rules and regulations public bureaucrats are expected to conform with in the discharge of their official obligation (Melton et al, quoted in Fatile 2013).

An efficient and effective public bureaucracy is necessary in a democratic system because the delivery of goods and services by the government are determined by the bureaucracy. There will be a diminished quality of goods and services provided by government when the public bureaucracy is marred by unethical conducts. Some of these issues are lack of accountability and integrity.

Leadership

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014) puts the meaning of *leadership* in two apt ways for the present study. In the first sense, it defines

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leadership as 'the position of being the leader of a group, organization, country, etc'. In the second sense, it defines *leadership* as 'all the people who lead a group, organization, country, etc'. In the present paper, we are interest in both the concrete and the abstract sense of the word.

Mohammed & Ayeni (2018) contend that the only hindrance to Nigeria's greatness is leadership where 'corruption is almost the second name of political office holders in Nigeria' (ibid: 322). Their recommendation was only a breath away from endorsing capital punishment for people found guilty of corruption. With one scandal after another in political leadership, the need for ethical leadership in Nigeria has become more relevant today than ever. Leadership scholars among whom are Ronald Heifetz, James MacGregor Burns, and Robert Greenleaf coinage of 'servant leadership' have broadened and enriched the perspective on leadership. A central theme in their postulations is the need for leadership based on moral courage, honesty and service to others.

Accountability

Accountability as the state of being 'responsible for the effects of your actions and willing to explain or be criticized for them' (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2014). This conception is similar to that in Okekeocha's paraphrase of Boven who defines accountability 'as the process of making elected and non-elected officials liable to the citizens who elected or appointed them for their actions while in office. Likewise, accountability connotes the state of being liable and requires a specified person or group of people to report and justify his/her actions in relations to specific matters or assigned duties' (Okekeocha 2013: 31). This definition brings to mind words sometimes used interchangeably with accountability, namely 'responsibility', 'answerability', 'blame-worthiness' and 'liability', words commonly associated with the expectation of giving account of stewardship.

Of what relevance is accountability to ethical leadership? It was this question that social science scholars have attempted to answer. The literature reveals at least four importance of accountability in the public sector. First, it promotes good and ethical government which is necessary to gain public trust. Secondly, accountability and good governance demand that bureaucrats be responsible in their official conducts. Third, accountability checks to ensure institutions are strong to support the democratic process. Finally, accountability, a major benefit that comes with democratic governance, is predicated on the citizens' expectation of public

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servants to show record of stewardship (Iyoha & Oyerinde 2010; Okekeocha 2013;).

Three forms of accountability have been categorized: public, fiscal and administrative. Public accountability places vigilance on public officials to use power and public resources including funds, equipment and materials judiciously. The second form of accountability is the fiscal or financial accountability which calls for good conduct by public officials in the raising and spending of public funds. It emphasizes financial auditing to ensure adherence to financial rules and regulations. Thirdly, administrative accountability makes a case for the need for control and reporting systems. This insists on keeping to official chains of command in public service to ensure checks and balances. Finally, political accountability which stresses the need for political leaders to keep to their campaign promises. This form of accountability ensures that political leadership is in sync with the demands of the people (Omotoso, n.d. 123-125).

The idea of accountability underscores the expectations of the public on public office holders to fulfil their obligations. It is a yardstick for measuring the effectiveness of an office holder. Accountability is an antidote to corruption in public office. However, public corruption has stifled accountability in Nigeria's public sector leadership. Public accountability is a continuum. Bureaucrats are to be accountable to the elected political office holders. In turn, the political office holders are to be accountable to the people, in whom power to govern resides.

Gberevbie and collaborators (2017) and Osunyikanmi & Foluke (2012) blamed the high-handedness of the military era (1966-1979; 1983-1999) as a period that accountability and transparency were most lacking in the public sector. The lack of these increased the level of poverty in the nation (p 2). Ironically, with one military coup after another, the coupists have, according to Olowo and Ayeni, sought to justify their power takeover by the need to 'redeem the poor accountability image of the preceding regimes' (in Iyoha & Oyerinde 2010: 368). This underpins the diminishing confidence of the people in their government which is a direct consequence of accountability deficit in public governance. Therefore, any society where leaders are not accountable will experience high level public corruption which will in turn stunt development.

Integrity

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (2014) defines *integrity* as 'the quality of being honest and strong about what you believe to be right'. This definition is similar to Manning & Curtis' definition of the concept as 'a quality of character requiring honesty and courage; a virtue necessary for trust; the most important quality desired in a leader' (2007: 398). It brings to mind the related words commonly associated with *integrity* which include 'completion', 'wholeness', and 'soundness'. They further argue that 'the most important quality of leadership is integrity' which they dissect as 'honesty [and] strength of character'. Can any leadership make a meaningful achievement without integrity? Manning & Curtis answer in the negative:

> 'without integrity there is no trust, the number one element in the leader-follower equation. Integrity leads to trust, and trust leads to respect, loyalty and ultimately, action. It is trust coming from integrity that is needed for leading people from the boardroom, to the shop floor, to the battlefield' (p. 31).

Take integrity out of the equation, and everything holding the leader-follower relationship will vanish.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the transformational leadership with its focus on elevating the potential of followers beyond parochial interests such as ethnicity and religion, to achieve a grander, common goal such as national interest. It is believed that this theory provides a viable perspective through which the problem of accountability and integrity deficit in Nigeria's leadership can be viewed, analyzed and surmounted. National development is below expectation partly due to citizens' low level of trust in government's policies as well as scant engagement by the government. This echoes the lack of integrity and accountability in the system. Government will achieve more if it is able to gain the citizens' trust and support. Accountability and integrity by the government are the doorway to citizen's hearts. This theory is adopted because of the dire need Nigeria has for leadership that raises aspirations and transforms followers into higher levels of performance. This will be the only cure to the climate of gloom and doom that has settled over the political leadership landscape of Nigeria. When despotism are employed as instruments of governance, policies are formulated without citizens' input and the policies flop as a result (Ejere & Abasilim, 2013; Imoke, 2014).

The insights from this theory will address the lack of accountability as a problem of unethical political leadership in Nigeria because of its merits, which highlights followers' input in the important process of governance (Manning & Curtis 2007: 26-28). Transformational leadership has merits in contrast to, say, transactional leadership as distinguished by Burns (ibid.). While transactional leadership, as the name implies, focuses on exchanges between leaders and the led. An example is the votes for jobs, rewards for favours transactions between Nigerian politicians and citizens. This kind of leadership has marred the leadership selection process as parochial interests trump national interests.

Transformational leadership holds promise for Nigeria's governance and development as its perspective is one that inspires loyal followership that will support government unto success. According to Manning & Curtis, transformational leaders 'use optimism, charm, intelligence, and a myriad of other personal qualities to raise aspirations and transform [followers] into new levels of high performance' (2007: 28). A transformational leader is, essentially, a charismatic leader.

Manning & Curtis further identified five characteristics of charismatic leaders which include the following: (1) they model and embody the beliefs and values they desire their followers to imbibe; (2) they elicit competence that commands the respect of followers; (3) they have ideological goals with moral overtones; (4) they exude high expectations for their followers and show confidence to meet those goals; (5) they ignite followers' motives to act. Motives range from affiliation, power and achievement.

Under this scenario, followers are inspired to go beyond their parochial interests and work toward the ambitious but achievable goal imprinted in their minds by the leader. Effah (2013), however, points out that "not everybody who is occupying a leadership position is a leader' points to the fact that some leaders stray into power and lead by accident (in Gberevie and collaborators, 4). The foregoing shows that ethical leadership predicated on accountability and integrity will enhance good governance and gain followers' support for national development.

Methodology

This is an exploratory research aimed at examining the deficit of accountability and integrity as forms of unethical leadership in Nigeria's governance. This study like most exploratory studies relies on qualitative techniques of data collection. These sources include the Internet, journals,

books, newspapers, and magazines. The justification for the adoption of the historical research method in this work is based on the fact that it enables a proper analysis of data and interpretation of events to be realized (Gberevbie, 2014).

Nexus Between Accountability and Integrity and their Implications for Better Governance

Nigeria's public sector has evolved through long years of colonial, military and democratic rule. A highlight of the major events in the nation's political history will provide a solid basis on which to examine accountability and integrity as instruments of ethical political leadership in the country's public service (Okekeocha, 2013). The spirit of ethical leadership implies that public office holders should be accountable in carrying out their obligated duties. They are not expected to be people of questionable character but should be perceived to have integrity in their conduct. Accountability and integrity are important elements of ethical leadership.

A lack of public accountability by public bureaucrats will have the dire consequences of any government losing or wasting money or other public resources due theft and inefficiency in the execution of job duties. Nigeria's public sector is not accountable to the people. In living memory are records of unaccountability by public officials which was swept under the carpet. It is manifestly clear there is a divide between real happenings in the government and what gets reported to the citizens.

Unethical political leadership breeds a climate a corruption. When a nation's leadership is infested by corruption, good governance cannot thrive therein.

In the over six decades of the nation's independence, Nigerian leaders - civilian and military alike- have battled one integrity issue to another, making it difficult for citizens to trust them. They usually promise to turn Nigeria into an el dorado but once they acquire power, they turn it to an instrument for primitive wealth acquisition. They loot the nation's wealth and other resources for themselves. There is virtually no past Nigerian leader from 1960 till date who has not been fingered in one corruption scandal or the other.

Another leadership problem bedeviling Nigeria is unethical conduct in, say, public declaration of assets by political leaders, especially presidents. Rather than show example by being transparent, they choose to make their

wealth a mystery in order to evade public scrutiny of how they acquired their wealth.

These impeachable conducts as well as character issue in our leaders makes Nigeria to have past leaders but not national leaders. National leaders are scarce in Nigeria. Nigeria does not have national leaders like other countries have. Nigeria needs a national leader the way South Africa had Nelson Mandela; Nigeria needs her Winston Churchill, her Abraham Lincolns, her Charles De Gaulle, and more. Sadly, we only have a collection of tribesmen and regional leaders and ordinary men privileged to be in positions of power but driven by parochial interests.

Conclusion

Nigerian followers have grown too numb and passive through perennial misgovernance to understand their rights and the duties of the political elite. Insisting on people with integrity and holding office holders accountable strengthens political governance and democracy. However, the political leaders, from their style of rulership manifest in the nation's history, have adopted impunity as an instrument of governance. They shrink followers' civic space while enlarging theirs to entrench high-handedness. The views of Ocheni & Nwankwo (2012) that ethical political leadership can be best promoted in Africa by creating an atmosphere in the nations' institutions where accountability and integrity are made the pivot on which governance spins on harmonizes with the contention of this paper. The power of transformational leader to command loyalty will galvanize citizens support for good governance. Is there any ray of hope on the horizon for Nigeria to have on the saddle of political leadership transformational leaders who are accountable to the people and their integrity elicits followers' trust? We expect there is.

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