

Nigeria and the Culture of Post-Truth Politics

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Abstract

This article is a philosophical discourse on the problem of truth in politics as expressed in what is called post-truth and epitomized in political speeches, political rallies and political campaigns. The substance of such speeches has often turned out to be lies, false promises, deliberate misrepresentation of facts, and exaggerated claims. Candidates for elections in desperation resort to half-truths and even outright falsehood to compete for media attention and votes. This is a characteristic of post-truth politics. It is often the case that the core issues of a winning election have been what was later discovered to have been a white lie/deceit, or at best a broken promise, depending on whether one believes the party in question knew at that time that the promise would never be kept. The article highlights the consequences of lies on the one hand and on the other hand, articulating the need of truth and sincerity in politics and in our corporate existence. The article further suggests pragmatic ways of dealing with the problem of lying. While it is true that lying in politics has a long history. It is undesirable in our time as civilized people. Political lies should be condemned, banned and punished to safeguard the wellbeing of everyone. This article, therefore, demonstrates that the problem of lying in politics can be effectively dealt with.

Keywords: Truth, Politics, Lies, Campaign, Democracy, Promises.

Introduction

The seemingly irreconcilable relationship between truth and politics is not new. The discussion has a long history in philosophy that goes as far back as to the times of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Many great thinkers in the history of our civilization and democracy have brought their minds to bear on the problematic of truth and politics. In our contemporary time, Hannah Arendt's words quickly come to mind: "No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues. Lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politicians and the

demagogues but also of the statesman's trade" (Arendt, 2006, 128). The above state of mind seems to exist when many people think of the truth in relation to politics. The continuous existence and predominance of this state of mind or attitude have persisted for so long in our moral and social psychic. So that, instead of looking at the problem of political lies or organized lies by public officials or politicians with the deserved repugnance and resentment they would naturally feel towards the activities of a professional criminal organization, they rather tend to encourage and glorify it. This belief and practice is so entrenched in our political culture, many have come to accept without question that politics is dirty in itself and there is nothing one can do about it. Consequently, between two politicians our choice is often for the devil you know and the angel you do not know.

This paper is a philosophical examination that seeks to challenge the above state of mind in view of the age-old principle of telling the truth or keeping a promise and never tell a lie in relation to political campaigns or political lies before an election. What should be our social, political and moral rule concerning campaign promises and assertion or statement of intent concerning truth and politics? Beyond moral outrage, could there be justifiable grounds for liability and thus punishment for lying or concealing the truth in politics? Or are there no morally and rationally justifiable context to deter, condemn and punish political liars? (Ellington, Wick, p.164).

Nigerian post-truth political environment

The term politics is not easily and commonly understood. It conjures up different images, meanings and memories in the minds of citizens (Cf. Marty and Moore, 2000; p. 6-7). Politics and democracy are like two faces of one coin. They are theoretical/mentally separate and distinct but in practice they are so intertwined and inseparable, capable of producing both the good, the bad and the ugly, depending on the context. It is common today to see or hear citizens engulfed passionately in political and democratic discourses. On the other hand, the mere mention of the terms is alien to many people. It is not uncommon too, to see people who are utterly indifferent to issues of politics and democracy. The fact is that, whatever side of the divide one belongs, the impact of politics and democracy, good or bad, are felt by all citizens.

Recent experiences, in Europe, Asia, America and indeed the world over, have been nothing short of clumsiness. The level of political corruption and lack of democratic culture, deceit, betrayal, politically motivated violence, abuse of political power and privileges have been unprecedented. "Politics is," as MacIntyre says, "civil war carried on by other means." (2007, p. 253).

The widening gulf of what accounts for politics, political correctness, and political rhetoric on one hand and truth telling, acceptable moral behaviour and

values, on the other side, is largely responsible for the detachment of many citizens from political participation. The erosion of good political and democratic culture by political corruption is endangering the legitimacy of politics and democracy as the best form of government. The transition from one regime to another and change of personnel in government as the outcome of elections have produced only one recurrent effect, shattered hopes or disappointed expectations; leaving the citizens confused, and tragically exchanging one set of political liars for another at the end of every regime. We are at the crossroads where we risked trading freedom, reason and truth for falsehood and share nonsense as better options. When elections are approaching, we are confronted with what Arendt calls 'organized lying or systematic lying' where rival political parties and politicians are at their usual game of lying to the public in desperation to win votes.

This scenario is cementing the belief that politics is a dirty game, with no clear-cut moral norms for good political conduct. Living ethically and actively involved in politics does not longer resonate with what is acceptable in a political and democratic community. There is no doubt that political corruption and lack of democratic culture are largely responsible for bad governance. Political, democratic structures and procedures are essential for the emergence and selection of good leaders. But these have been marred by the culture of vote buying, rigging of electoral votes, ballot snatching, and bribery of elective officers in many developing democracies. In advanced democracies, where these scenarios are not the problems, political lies have accomplished the same results, to win an election and hold on to power by manipulating public opinion. The immediate effect is the emergence of lousy leadership and a government with no moral authority and a catastrophe waiting to happen. Thus, people seek political power by all means. And once they acquire it, they do everything to remain in power. They employ harassment, blackmail, intimidation, brutality, unlawful arrest and detention to suppress genuine opposition to bad rule.

In politics, it is a typical situation to have political opponents. However, these days, oppositions or opponents are branded as enemies of the state, detractors and trouble makers that must be crushed or eliminated. Politics indeed has been made to look like a game without a referee and anything goes in the name of politics: conspiracy, incitement of violence, hate speech, manipulation of public opinion, lies in the name of campaign and so on (Kukah, 1999, p. 4).

The emergence of separatists' groups in all the religions of Nigeria and the clamour for restructuring, resource control are all indications of skewed political and democratic structures and procedures. There is a perceived sense of injustice, marginalization and alienation by many groups. Thus, supporting one group or aligning with a particular course or region is used to score political

points. Given the way the country is structured geographically, religiously and ethnically some politicians have found it convenient to manipulate the people for their selfish interests. Politics is mixed up with ethnicity, religion and regionalism. Thus, religions have been pitched against each other. Ethnic groups have been raised against each other and likewise, regions have been organized against each other (Kukah, 1999, p. 41; 97). Hence, the country is always at the brick of crisis all the time. These are symptoms of a sick nation. Nigeria has for a long time been a stage for the actualization of the Machiavellian style of politics. Beat your opponents by all means possible, that is what matters (cf. Kukah, 1999, p. 3).

Cerovac (2016, p. 75) observed that: "Democratic procedures are characterized by equal status of all citizens participating in the decision-making process. This procedural fairness represents one of the central aspects of democracy's legitimacy - generating potential and should not be rejected or weakened." However, the electorates are often left without a genuine choice. The elite or so-called elders or political godfathers manoeuvre the process and impose their candidates on the people. These candidates often turn out to be political stooges to maintain the selfish interest of those who brought them to power. The above scenario has generated all forms of conflicts to the detriment of the masses. Thus, politics and democracy have lost much appeal in the minds of many citizens.

Skewed political and democratic structures and procedures have not allowed the country to take advantage of its enormous human and natural resources that would have meant a good and stable life for all. It has made the forging and building of national identity and cohesion impossible. However, the point is that from the top to the bottom corruption is the order of the day. Though corruption may not be peculiar to Nigeria, the extent to which it has eaten into the fabric of Nigerian life is a thing of concern. The moral decay has left the country impoverished, bankrupt and indebted to foreign creditors.

Nigeria from the beginning was a child conceived in crisis and was born in crisis and has never been far away from a crisis that threatens her unity and corporate existence. This however, does not justify her current decay, stagnation and ruination. Nigeria is expected to find her bearing from where she was given birth. But some things are lacking, for instance; nationalism, patriotism, identity and cohesion. To move forward, politics, justice and truth must coexist and these grave wrongs are acknowledged and addressed. Politicians feed the electorates with lies and false campaign promises in the name of politics. Stamping out bad politics and entrenching a healthy political and democratic culture necessarily means a zero tolerance to lying and liars. Lies destroy human relations and weaken trust which is needed for the rise of any social group or society and the advancement of human wellbeing. The general public

must learn to weigh or judge any claim, assertion and promise against factual and rational truth and remind public office holders and politicians that they will defend their claims and assertions and substantiate every promise with a corresponding action. This will not be an easy undertaking.

Campaign promises or lies

Apart from the political Party's Manifesto, political party's ideology, and the actual candidate for election, it is often the case or custom/practice that political propaganda or campaign usually have a content. The content of a political campaign is what the party or candidate intends to achieve while in office if elected. This also forms part of the mandate for a Party to form a government. The content of any political campaign is either actual or mere lies. An election promise or campaign promise is a promise or guarantee made by a candidate for election or political party to the electorate prior to an organised election. Electioneering appeals or political campaigns or propaganda are among the many ways that political parties or individual candidates' canvas or lobby for votes. These activities aim at packaging or presenting a candidate seeking an elective post to convince or sway the electorates to vote in favour of the candidate and the Party he represents. Whatever it may be, the fact remains that the content of a political campaign was used as bargaining chip to win an election or to get the mandate from the electorates to govern. The voters therefore, have genuine hope and realistic trust that the said government will deliver on its promise. However, when a Party and a candidate fail to perform based on the promises made prior to elections because they lied, should there be consequences? Do electorates have a legal right to demand for justice? Have an agreement or a contract been bridged? Should a past government or political Party hold to account for its failed promises or lies?

Once political campaigns are over and elections are won or lost, there seems to be a curious difficulty exercising reflective thought upon the grounds, promises, ideas and ideologies that galvanized or convinced the electorates to choose or vote for one candidate or party against the other. On the other hand, where questions are asked, or demands are made on elected political office holders to deliver or fulfil election promises, they resort to excuse and blame games as to why they cannot perform. Throughout our history of democratic experience, there is not on record, as far as I know, a single instance of Party adherence to a fixed principle, or political theory or ideology. Neither has there been any attempt to deliver democratic dividends or campaign promises based on the mandate on which elections were based or won. We cast our votes every time on the same popular terms of electioneering appeals or propaganda, without ever coming close to achieving any. Thus, this raises the question are campaign promises merely lies and a political means to political power?

Two conditions that could make an assertion, statement or proposition a lie. First, when an assertion, a statement or proposition is factually inaccurate.

Second, when such a statement or proposition is so asserted with the aim to deceive (Flannery, 2016, pp.193-211). "A lie may be described, then, as an intentionally deceptive false statement." (Almond, 2004, p.144). Therefore, any attempt by whatever means to spread a lie and convince any person or persons to believe it as true for any form of gain or benefit is immoral and a fraud. To secure people's votes on this basis should be considered as undue manipulation of conscience tantamount to the bridge of national security depending on the scale and significance of the lies in relation to the political office secured by such means.

When a deliberate or intentional lie makes one candidate or Party to gain favours, privileges or a political position otherwise it does not merit or deserve; it must be judged immediately to violate not only a moral rule but the rights of the people to know the truth. Such political liars are cheating on the general public and should be punished. The gravity of the lie must be judged to constitute electoral malpractice or fraud and punishable by law. The victims, opponents and the public should be able to seek redress and justice. (cf. Ellington, Wick, p. 164). Since election confers the mandate to govern, to lie in order to obtain that mandate is a fraud or an act of stealing. Such an order received by a political leader and his Party has no moral basis or backing. Truth itself and the public have been robbed. The reason for redress Kant argues:

The kind of advantage to be gained by lying are of course various and so therefore are motives for lying. Many lies... motivated by fear of harm at the hands of others... Some are intended to maximize advantage in competitive situations... Some lies are told by office-holders from devotion to what is taken to be the public interest and some are told both to and by office-holders to subvert that interest. But in each of these cases, if a lie has been successful, it may well be that the liar will have altered the relationships of power in her or his own favour, or perhaps in favour of someone else. Yet in so doing, whether the lie is successful or not, the liar will also have altered her or his relationship to others in general, by deliberately violating the norm presupposed in all human relationships involving assertive speech-acts. She or he will have relied upon the general human regard for truth, while failing to have regard for it. "Without truth," Kant wrote, "social intercourse and conversation become valueless." And the offense of the liar, thus understood, is not a matter of the harmful consequences of particular lies. To tell a lie is wrong as such, just because it is a flouting of truth, and it is an offense primarily not against those particular others to whom this particular lie has been told, but against human rationality, everyone's rationality, including the liar's own rationality. By lying she or he has failed not only to acknowledge truth as a good that is indispensable in rational

relationships with others, but also to recognize that a failure to respect truth is a failure in respecting oneself as a rational being. (McIntyre, 2006, p.111).

The same applies to false promises. Promises made during an election campaign without the intent to fulfil them becomes lies. Since promises or statements of intent made in a context for a specific end in the future, the maker of the obligations must be held responsible for the fulfilment of his promise in context of which he made the promise. Not fulfilling a promise after all the conditions concerning the pledge have been met will amount to deceit or breach of a contract. If it is discovered that there was no intention to keep a promise or fulfil it and there is no existing condition for the promise to be fulfilled ab-initio then that could be considered as not just a lie and a deceit but forgery. Campaign promises are binding on the bases that there exist the desirable and perfect conditions and means of fulfilling them and thus generate obligation (Vogler, 2016, p.119-132). When a candidate or party wins an election through political lies and any government formed as a result of such, lacks moral credibility and should be judged as lacking constitutional backing. The need to win an election and the zeal to serve should not depreciate truth, morals and reason.

To willingly tell a lie unsolicited or deliberately engage in telling lies is a character flaw. The act and the art of lying for any form of benefit is fraudulent. When politicians use party structures or platforms to spread falsehood or tell blatant lies without being reprimanded it becomes corruption and organized lying. Aquinas says "It is not that sometimes we ought to lie. And what is not true we should never try to persuade anyone to believe." (Summa Theologia II-II, q. 110, a. 4c). It is a moral duty not to accord any form of tolerance to lies and structures or organizations that support them. If there are political parties or organizations, the least the public could do is to reject them through the ballot box. Just as in some contexts, like in the court of law where lies or even concealing the truth or tampering with evidence are uncompromisingly condemned and punished if found guilty, such should be the case when politicians or public office holders tell a lie during political propaganda or campaign.

Truth is the aim of many human activities. Orchestrated lies or falsehood disconnect people from facts or reality, and from each other, as such undermine the foundations of democracy and politics (cf. Acosta, Reimers, 2016, p.67). This is because a lie as deception or misinformation distorts and misleads on purpose. The occurrence of lies in politics or in daily political discussions and conversations raises concern to our corporate existence and the very foundation of human wellbeing. We need to know the number of lies or falsehood sold to the public in the name of political campaigns and the social and moral potential

of these lies to our corporate life. Lying destroys some of our basic fabric of corporate existence as social animals, which is trust and healthy relationships (McIntyre, 2006, p.115). Gaita (2016, p, 1) further states: "In politics mendacity can affect the kind of collective that citizens can honestly believe themselves to be, what kind of "we" they can honestly say that they are... Even if the lies of their politicians do not at all affect their material interests, pervasive mendacity can defile citizens' love of country, making it impossible for them to love clear-sightedly without pain." The search for truth is correlated with the human search for meaning and fulfilment. "Truth along with reason, is one of the pillars of humanity's thought." (Almond, 2004, p.144). Therefore, truth should not be sacrificed on the altar of selfish interest of one single individual or a few persons. The duty to tell the truth should be ranked above every other duty and self-interest (I. Kant Ethical Philosophy. Trans. Ellington & Wick 2nd Ed. p.163). Although lying and deceit are commonly considered as obnoxious behaviour in normal life, it seems an acceptable conduct in only politics because there are sometimes good strategic reasons for politicians to lie to their opponents and even to their own people. It seems unquestionable that politicians and their followers believe that lying is an integral part of politics. However, a lie even when said for a just reason, is a lie and should not be made a norm of behaviour. "The general rule is, that truth should never be violated, because it is of utmost importance to the comfort of life, that we should have a full security by mutual faith..." (McIntyre, 2006 p.102). Truth is required of all in speech and acts to guarantee the wellbeing of all people. A lie in this situation threatens the corporate existence of the society because it is a breach of public trust. Lying with facts or misrepresenting social situations of common interest besides being a breach of semantic rules is immoral action. Almond (2004, p.144) asserts:

While there have been special defences of lying in contexts...it is more commonly and traditionally been regarded as morally wrong. So, the question that has been widely discussed is not whether lying is wrong, but whether it is always wrong. Or can the duty to tell the truth be ranked against other duties? Many... thinkers have taken an absolutist position on this, insisting that there can be no circumstances in which it is right to lie.

Immanuel Kant is one of the modern thinkers to hold an uncompromising position against lying. "Kant has two main reasons for holding this absolutist position. One is a logical argument derived from his categorical imperative. Kant's point is that the very possibility of lying presupposes the normality of truth. The second reason is that to lie to people is to fail to treat them as equals and as ends in themselves" (McIntyre, 2006 p.102).

A deliberate lie is a conscious act of cheating. A lie conceals the truth which is the object of knowledge. It is expected that telling lies should have dire

consequences to deter people and especially public officials from doing so. A statement has a truth value and carries a moral weight. The liar may succeed in his or her endeavour but cannot make lying or lie the object of his or desire or the aim of his activity. In other words, he or she will not want to be deceived or lied to. Hence, there should be no exception to the rule of not telling lies in the public domain because every lie is an offence against truth. According to McIntyre (2006, pp.104-145),

The liar, as Kant put it, cannot consistently will that the maxim upon which she or he acts in lying should be the universal rule governing truth telling and lying. What successful lies achieve for those who utter them is an advantage over those who are deceived. And successful liars necessarily deceive us not only about the subject matter about which they lie, but also about their own beliefs and their intention in asserting what they assert falsely, and indeed about their further intention to conceal this intention from us.

Developing democracies need a fervent commitment to truth and transparency from politicians and citizens alike. Thus, politics must rise to the pure love of truth for the sake of the truth and the practical benefits that it brings. We are reliant or dependent on people in many ways. Hence, the standards of truthfulness need to be high to guarantee the stability required for us to live and function as a civilized human society. According to McIntyre (2006, p.114) "What is needed is the identification of some mode of institutionalized social practice within which generally established norms and reflective habits of judgment and action could sustain a coherent and rationally justifiable allegiance to a rule concerning truth and lying in a way and to a degree very different from the present dominant culture."

Besides this fact, ethical education in politics is required to change the thinking and erase the suspicion that truth and politics or ethics and politics cannot cohere. Truth as man's search for authenticity and fulfilment requires the benefits that politics as right ordering of human society confers. On the other hand, politics needs truth as its end. This is in line with Aristotle thought that the ethical requires completion by the political. Politics should be answerable to truth and not the other way round.

Politics as the right ordering of society should be distinguished from the perverse activities of politicians. To think that there is no way of doing politics that would not accommodate truth is to insult the collective rationality of humans. Kant is right to ground the rule "prohibiting lying in the rational nature of human beings" (MacIntyre, 2006, p.122). There are no rational bases for thinking that politicians are incapable of telling the truth or that truth and politics are irreconcilable. Lying in politics is a moral flaw and weakness that

has so long been accepted as inevitable to the effect that mentally we cannot think of one without the other.

The separation of truth and politics is a misconception rather than the inevitability of the two realities to cohere. Politics is a genuine human activity that engenders responsibility which often comes in conflict with the ethical or truth. In such a situation of conflict, truth is a virtue and a value when removed or neglected or even concealed is a deliberate choice with implications. It is a failure not to live up the moral truth and even to recognize certain higher standards or values. More accurately, it is a failure not to recognize that truth does not merely regulate a practice or activity; truth defines the kind of practice or activity called politics and at the same time legitimizes it. We give away or concede too much to politics, if politics is allowed to determine truth. Truth should determine politics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, because truth matters in politics, changing the culture of lying in politics and in the public domain will necessarily require first, that the general public develop the habit or culture of fact-checking of claims made by politicians and indeed by anyone. This will have the double effect of identifying liars and will ensure that liars have great difficulty deceiving the public. Second, imposing heavy sanctions on political liars in such a matter that the people suffer negative consequences and loses greater than what they gain will decrease the incentive to lie. Third, constantly reminding citizens about ethics and recognizing and rewarding honest citizens by society will increase commitment to truthfulness. Four, Electoral bodies or Commissions should be empowered to investigate, evaluate, and judge campaign activities and speeches to determine what is right and wrong and the appropriate action necessary when a party or individual has crossed the red lines. Five, Political claims should be regulated for the interest of truth, promotion of sincerity, and avoidance of deliberate misleading of electorates. A campaign morality is needed to checkmate not only lying/deceit in politics but the excessive desire to take power by whatever means. Thomas Hobbes correctly sums up this matter in *Leviathan*: "Before the names of Just, and Unjust can have place, there must be some coercive Power to compel men equally to the performance of their Covenants.... Where there is no Common-wealth, there nothing is Unjust." (As quoted in Mearsheimer, 2011, p.19).

Democracy is not merely about a system of voting. It is about a choice which has a moral content and value that a candidate or political Party represents. It is a violation of conscience to persuade people with lies to make the wrong choice or come to wrong conclusions. "Thus, it makes good sense to stigmatize and discourage lying on the home front." (Mearsheimer, 2011, p.18).

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