

AN OVERVIEW OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The truth harboured in the statement, that a good understanding of history aids good decision-making for the future, seems most prominent in socio-political affairs. The issue of leadership is at the heart of all socio-political engagements. In many African nations, it has been observed that the failure of leadership is the crux of the multifarious problems bedeviling such nations, of which Nigeria is one. Using predominantly expository method, this paper takes a look at the socio-political events about leadership which unfolded in some parts of Africa, up till the year 2007. Nigeria is given prominence in the scope covered, not only because she prides herself as the giant of Africa but also because she is a typical African country with respect to the issue in question. The paper lays bay some socio-political actions of the past which resulted in the situation in which Africa finds herself in the recent past. This is with a view to providing a part of the wealth of experience which should guide present and future socio-political actions and decisions.

Keywords: Political, Africa, Leadership

Introduction

In every human collectivity, there is one form of leadership or the other. The kind of leadership which exists in a society determines the nature of government which exists therein. Basically, there are two major forms of government – monarchy and republic. Monarchy is a form of government in which a ruler such as an emperor, a king, a queen or an empress holds power (actually or ceremonially), sometimes for life. Monarchy is based on the divine right of the ruler. The claim, where monarchy holds, is that rulers or monarchs owe their political power to God and, as such, should be obeyed with total submissiveness. The understanding in those days was that the rulers or monarchs were God-sent, and they should command obedience just as God should. In other words, to obey the ruler was to obey God, and to disobey the ruler was tantamount to disobedience to God.

On the other hand, a republic is (a country with) a form of government in which there is no king, queen, emperor or empress; such things as the power of government and law-making being given to one or more elected individuals or representatives (for example, a president, senators, members of parliament).

From the foregoing, it is manifest that the ideology of a republic contradicts the medieval ideology where political authority was based on the theory of the divine right of the ruler. As the social contract theory began to gain more acceptances, the divine right theory began to pine away simultaneously. With time, agreement and the consent of the people gained ground as the source of political power. The understanding that power was God's gift to his chosen ones was replaced with the view that citizens constitute the basis for political power. Hence, the social contract theory constitutes the nucleus of the republican ideology. The two systems of government which fall within the republican enclave are aristocracy and democracy. Aristocracy is a government of leadership by the few whereas Democracy is a government of leadership by the majority.

One of the major differences between monarchy and republic as forms of government is that in the former, unlike what obtains in the latter, power lies in the hands of one individual. It is worse in the case of absolute monarchy where the power of the ruler is not checked by any constitution. The danger is that there is the tendency for such latitude of power to be abused (Unegbe, 1994). Unfortunately, this has been the situation in most African nations where military rule has been the order of the day. All African nations have now been extricated from the shackles of European colonialism. It is, however, disturbing that after liberation from the entanglement of western colonialism, the peoples of many African nations now face one form of internal 'colonialism' or the other.

The leaders in most of these nations, which inherited democratic governance from their erstwhile colonial-master countries, have abandoned democratic ideals and adopted, in its place, dictatorial governance, reducing their peoples to slaves even in their own homes. Some still adopt the name of democracy, and yet operate what is

anything but democratic leadership. A mere mention of the names of some former African leaders send cold shivers down the spine: names like field Marshal Idi Amin Dada of Uganda, Samuel Doe of Liberia, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now Congo democratic Republic), Charles Taylor of Liberia, Laurent Kabila of Congo Democratic Republic, Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo, Laurent Gbagbo of Cote D' Ivoire, General Dennis Sassou Nguesso of the Peoples' Republic of Congo, Sani Abacha of Nigeria, Mathieu Kerekou of Benin republic and Jean Bokassa of the Central African Republic. This work takes a glance at Africa *vis a vis* the nature of political leadership that existed in some of her countries.

An overview of political leadership in African

The basic problem with dictatorship is that the leaders' use of power is not checked by law or any official body. The implication is that there is the likelihood of such power being abused because as the saying goes, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. When power is abused, as is likely to be the case in such a situation, it could trigger off such things as socio-political crisis, high-level corruption and economic destabilization. The ultimate result is that the majority of the people are poverty stricken. This is the situation in many African nations where the people have been subjected to all sorts of inhuman treatment. For instance, the people of Zaire suffered much during the thirty-two years regime of Mobutu Sese Seko, who was born in 1931 and became president in 1965, after murdering the Prime minister (Patrice Lumumba) in a coup. The central African country was a Belgian colony from the 19th century until independence in 1960. It was formerly known as Belgium Congo. Civil war followed the secession of Katanga (now Shaba) province. In 1971, Mobutu changed the name to Zaire. His reign was a terror. He massacred 500 members of a religious sect, 300 university students and 250 residents of Kinshasa, to intimidate the citizenry, and warned against any opposition to his government. He had 20 mansions in 10 countries and 4 billion dollars stashed in Swiss banks, while his country reeled in debt and abject poverty (Amuta, 1999:102). Suffice it to say that leadership in most African nations, including the acclaimed democratic ones, gears towards dictatorship.

Agbanusi

An Overview of Political ...

Even if we use Nigeria as a case-study of the ugly leadership situation in Africa, we find out that we are still faced with the same situation of relentless power tussles and power greed. These phenomena have existed throughout the nation's history – from independence in 1960 till May 19, 2007 when Olusegun Obasanjo handed over power to President Musa Yar' Adua. The nation's first republic which started on October 1, 1963, was brought to an abrupt end in the early hours of January 15, 1966, when a group of young military officers led by Kaduna Nzeogwu, staged a coup. The men struck killing Ahmadu Bello (the premier of the Northern Region), Chief Akintola, Tafawa Balewa (the Prime Minister) and Chief Okotie Eboh (the Federal Finance Minister).

Following that coup, major-General Johnson Thomas Aguyi Ironsi became Nigeria's military head of state. Ironsi remained in power until July 29, 1966, when he and Adekunle Fajuyi were killed in a counter coup by military officers of Northern extraction. The counter coup was accompanied by general lawlessness and insecurity as there was no central government in Nigeria for three days. On August 1, 1966, General (then lieutenant colonel) Yakubu Gowon became Nigeria's second military head of state. Within and after the civil war, Gowon remained in power. On July 29, 1975, Gowon was overthrown by Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo while he was attending a commonwealth conference in Kampala, Uganda, Akinjide et al (2002:221). Murtala then became the Nigeria head of state. Murtala spent only 201 days in office and was killed on his way to work by Bukar Suka Dimka on February 13, 1976. Following Murtala's assassination, Olusegun Obasanjo became Nigeria's fourth military head of state. On October 1, 1979, Obasanjo handed over to Shehu Shagari, a civilian president. After his first tenure of four years, Shagari was re-elected for a second tenure. However, his second tenure was quashed on December 31, 1983, as he was removed from office through a palace coup.

On August 27, 1985, less than two years in office, Ibrahim Babangida and cohorts usurped power from the young Buhari Idiagbon regime. During his regime, Babangida annulled the June 12, 1993 presidential election which had been won by Moshood Abiola. With that annulment of an election which was considered the freest election in the country,

Babangida truncated a transition programme which was at the verge of completion. Thereafter, Babangida remained in power until August 26, 1993, when he was compelled by the high tension in the polity to step aside. The interim national government (ING) which Babangida handed over to was headed by Ernest Shonekan, who Abacha literally pushed aside in less than three months exactly 82 days after assumption of duty (Akinjide et al eds, 2002:226).

Abacha tried in vain, just like his predecessor to replace himself as a civilian president of Nigeria. After Abacha died mysteriously on June 8, 1998, he was replaced by General Abdulsalami Abubakar. Abdulsalami quickly organized the transition programme which ushered in Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigeria's civilian president on May 29, 1999. At the expiration of his first tenure, he came back for a second tenure, courtesy of an election which many Nigerians simply described as a process of selection. After a failed third term bid, Obasanjo conducted the elections of 2007, which ushered in Yar'Adua as Nigeria's president.

The story of General Sani Abacha is still fresh on the minds of Nigerians. He claimed the reins of government as head of state from Ernest Shonekan on the 17th of November, 1993 and mismanaged the economy of oil rich Nigeria, enriching himself, his relatives and close associates. He either killed or imprisoned perceived political opponents which included journalists, labour leaders and human-rights activists. He left Nigerian economy in shambles when he died on the 8th of June, 1998. In fact, the fact that Abacha's death was highly jubilated across the country, tells the long tale about his bad leadership.

The crux of the problem in Africa is that of bad leadership. True democracy is yet to exist in most African nations. In crude terms, democracy is generally believed to be the best system of government. The word 'democracy' has a lot of meanings but in the modern world it is used to refer to a system of government in which the ultimate authority in political affairs rightfully belongs to the people. Abraham Lincoln, a former United States President, defined it as the 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. It is a system of

government in which the major decisions of government depend, directly or indirectly, on the freely-given consent of the adult majority of the governed.

In most African nations, however, true democracy does not exist. Hence, all the major familiar features of a voluntary association, which a government should be, are virtually absent in the type of leadership exercised in African nations. These include a functional principle of separation of powers, free and fair elections, freedom of expression (especially press freedom) , majority rule and minority rights and, above all, the rule of law (Unegbe, 1994:21).

The principle of separation of powers implies the independence of the major arms of government – the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. This principle provides the grounds for the proper functioning of the principle of ‘check and balances’ (Lloyd, 1964). But in most nations of Africa (including where democracy is claimed to be practiced), the principle of separation of powers does not actually function.

True democracy demands that, periodically, free and fair elections are held to give the governed the opportunity to hand over the mantle of leadership to fresh leaders. Contrarily, in many nations of Africa, elections hardly hold when due. For instance, since her independence in 1960, the Congo Democratic Republic had its first general election in 2006. In some African nations, the incumbent leadership does not allow the elections to take place as dictated by the Constitution (if any exists). Some African leaders outlaw political parties in order to prevent elections. For instance, in 1981, Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings established the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) and outlawed all political parties in Ghana. This experience is an exemplification of the saying that where annual elections end, there slavery begins. In some other nations of Africa, where the elections hold, the incumbent leadership uses its power of incumbency to rig them, either in its favour in order to retain power or in the favour of loyalists and relatives of top government functionaries. To this end, some political analysts are of the opinion that what exists in many African nations as elections are merely ‘selections’.

Another bad phenomenon in leadership in Africa is the sit-tight syndrome where leaders try to perpetuate their stay in power. There is a growing trend of power retention by African leaders - both military heads of state and civilian presidents. There appears to be, among them, an unquenching quest for power after power. Whoever clinches the mantle of leadership – in a military regime or civil government – tries to use all available means to prolong his stay in power. Some would rather die on sit than leave office honourably. A few instances here will do. Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo died on seat after ruling Togo for nearly forty years. Mathieu Kerekou of Benin Republic came into power in 1972 and in 1975, established a one party state ruled by the Benin People’s Revolutionary Party (PRPB). Kerekou ruled the small West African country for 30 years within 34 years before handing over to Boni Yayi, a former banker and a political novice. Nigerian leaders are not left out in this sit-tight-in-power syndrome. For example, Yakubu Gowon’s procrastination in handing over power to a civilian government is usually mentioned as one of the factors which aroused the coup-plot against his government by Murtala Muhammed and Olusegun Obasanjo on July 29, 1975. Many Nigerians also believe that it was the unwillingness to relinquish power, more than anything else that was responsible for Babangida’s annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential election which considered the freest and fairest election ever conducted in the country (Ukwuoma, 2007:22). Babangida also executed the ‘hidden agenda’ through which he intended to realize his self-succession bid. Sani Abacha, when he nursed the same dream, pursued it openly.

Characteristic of the brutal and obstinate soldier he was, Abacha sought to realize his dream with an unwavering determination: he planned for a ‘two-million-man march’ in support of the self-succession project. During Obasanjo’s Democracy (or was it ‘De more Crazy’), it was the same game-plan. After his more than three years service as a military Head of State and eight years as a President in a democratic government of Nigeria, Obasanjo still sought to continue. The wisdom and courage of the then Senate President, Chief Ken Nnamani actually came into play.

Laurent Kabila of the now Congo Democratic Republic is another instance. Nelson Mandela of South Africa is one African leader whose global respect is predominantly founded on his willing relinquishment of power. Mandela attracts more admiration when it is considered that the power he so willingly relinquished was one he had spent a great chunk of his life to wrestle from very cruel colonial masters. Some African leaders even went further and tried to reduce the mantle of leadership in their countries to a family property. While still in power, they arrange appropriate machinery to be replaced by one of their children when they die. In this way, Joseph Kabila took over leadership from his father, Laurent Kabila, as if the country was a monarchy. In like manner, when Gnassingbe Eyadema died, his son, Foure Eyadema, assumed leadership. This move attracted a great opposition which could have thrown the nation into a serious political crisis save the early intervention of the African Union which insisted on an election. In the election, the young Eyadema still won, albeit amidst accusations of rigging.

The freedom of expression especially that of the press, is crucial in any genuine democratic nation. The press, sometimes referred to as the 'fourth estate' of the realm of government, has the responsibility of communicating to the people, government policies, programmes and decisions. It does this with a view to eliciting the necessary reaction from the people. This response is also relayed to the government. The press leads the people in criticizing government, when necessary; it also mobilizes them in support of government policies and decisions when they are reasonable. In this way, the press functions as a 'watchdog' of society and a 'bridge' between the leadership and the led. The beauty of Democracy lies in the diversity of opinions. To carry out this onerous duty, therefore, the press must be independent or free. But in many African nations, this much-needed freedom is lacking, thus making the press inefficient and ineffective. There are different levels of press suppression in various African nations, depending on the degree of dictatorship practiced therein. In some countries of Africa, the press is completely muzzled, and thereby reduced to a 'toothless bulldog'. Whereas in some others, it is reduced to a machinery for the defense of government policies, programmes and decisions, irrespective of

whether they are worthy or not. By and by, the press in Africa is hindered as a veritable tool for positive change.

The principle of majority rule and minority right emphasizes the essence of democracy by which decisions are based on the opinion of the majority. However, it also holds that the rights of the minority are protected and respected. In many African nations, what exists in this respect is an aberration. This is so because, in contrast with democratic ideals, it is the opinion of the affluent minority that actually rules in many African nations. To make matters worse, besides the fact that majority opinion does not rule, the rights of the constituent members of this majority are trampled upon.

In the tradition of democracy, the rule of law is a matter of utmost importance. The rule of law is the condition in which all members of society, including its rulers, accept the authority of the law. In other words, it is a situation in which people, no matter their positions, political affiliations or religious inclinations, obey their society's laws (Rawls, 1969). The rule of law implies the right to equal protection by the law, the right to equality before the law and the right to fair hearing in a court of law. But in many African nations, the executive arm of government wields excessive power, thereby subordinating the other arms – the legislature and the judiciary. In this way, room is made for some members of the executive to flout the law with impunity. There are many other cases of suppression of the rule of law in Africa. Suffice it to say that the rule of law seems not to exist in many African nations. What is common, however, is a situation of discriminate application of law, where top members of the executive use the legal apparatuses as tools to attack political enemies and protect political allies (Akpan, 1998).

Conclusion

True democracy does not exist in many African nations. By democracy here is not meant the type practiced in many African nations today, where dictatorship is operated under the nomenclature of Democracy. Rather, true democracy means the system of government in which decisions on government laws, policies and programmes are ultimately and genuinely traceable to the opinion of the adult majority of a nation

Agbanusi An Overview of Political ...
(Smith et al, 1999). A democratic society is one in which the principle of separation of powers exists and constitutes a springboard for the very essential independence of the legislature and the judiciary. It is one in which freedom of expression especially that of the press, is allowed to thrive. A democratic society is one in which, though majority rules, the rights of the minority are duly protected. In such a society, the rule of law actually exists because the law is held supreme. Therefore, in so long as African leaders fail to recognize Democracy as the true system of leadership for economic and socio-political advancement, for so long will the masses of the various nations of Africa suffer. African leaders must change and begin to keep to the dictates of the ideals of true Democracy.

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