

PLATO AND THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION: AN EVALUATION OF PHILOSOPHER – KING WITHIN THE NIGERIAN POLITICAL STRUCTURE

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Abstract

Man has been described by the philosopher Plato as an ‘*ens politicus*’ meaning that politics permeates every of his activity. He is also an “*ens socialis*” in the description of Aristotle of Stagira. His relationship with others of his ilk in the society is determined by the laws made for the orderly arrangement and peaceful co-existence of the members by the care givers in the society. As a result of this, Thomas Aquinas sees law as the ordinance of reason by he who has the care of the community for the common good. In this work the onus is to x-ray the political situation of things in Nigeria in line with Plato’s recommendation of the means for achieving worthwhile leadership with the aim of appraising what we have on ground and proffering solutions out of the existing political quagmire in which we have been enmeshed for long.

Introduction

Odimegwu (2002:5) has it that:

Virtually all human endeavors, be it in the home, corporate, religious and national settings, leadership is the pivot. Every leader has a primary jurisdiction. To the family head, it is his immediate environment. To the politician, it is those who voted him into office as a reaction of acceptance over his unfolding to the people his manifest of what he will do. For the clergy, it is his parishioners that look up to him for moral and spiritual guidance.

The great minds of ages have established that the greatest problem of humanity is that of leadership despite the technological, scientific and economic advancement in the global context. In line with this, Albert Einstein avers that the society will die easier because of bad politics than because of bad physics.

Among such great minds of ages was Plato who was the most intimate friend and devoted disciple of Socrates, born around 427 BC, of a wealthy family in Athens. Plato’s Aristocratic background made him despise democracy, and as, such in his famous work, *The Republic* which he wrote at a time when his city-state, Athens, was in crises and in great moral decadence, having lost the Peloponnesian war (431-404) to Sparta, he proposed a social-political philosophy where he made an attempt to lay down fundamental principles for the creation and sustenance of a strong and virile state based on justice

It is in light of the above that we seek to posit in this paper a critical evaluation of Plato’s philosopher-king within the Nigeria political structure. In other words, we are going to examine his social-political philosophy and see whether there are ideas in it that can elucidate the leadership problems confronting the Nigeria and seek how to resolve them. This is in line with the words of Achebe (1983) that the problems facing Nigeria as a nation are as a result of failure of leadership. But before delving into the leadership questions in Nigeria, it is necessary to make certain what leadership is all about

Meaning of Leadership

The definition of leadership is as diverse as the myriad of books and articles written on the construct. This is because each writer has defined leadership from a different perspective. However, no matter the angle from which the definition of leadership is viewed, scholars will generally agree that a leader is one who exerts unusual influence and considerable power.

Olusoji (2002:4) observed that “leadership in its simplest form can be depicted as the ability to inspire, direct, motivate, and encourage others positively to targeted end. Also leadership is about rising up to the occasion by organizing and adequately coordinating the resources of time, relationship, skills, expertise and finances to achieve a goal for the common good of all.” Leadership is the ability to lead others and not necessarily availability to lead because certain qualities are normally expected of any person who wishes to attain a leadership position “even though availability might at times lead to leadership position, it is not leadership itself.”

According to Mcfarland, (1969:167) “a leader is one who makes things happen that would not happen otherwise.” This in other word means, that a leader should possess the power or influence of transforming something common into something precious. In the view of Gardner (1978:132) the task of leaders is to help societies:

Understand the problems that all must face to aid in the setting of goals and priorities, to work with others in finding paths to those goals chosen, maintaining public moral and motivation and nurturing a workable level of public unity.

Following from the foregoing, it can be deduced that the concept of leadership is complex and dynamic, hence, it connotes assignment, effectiveness, responsibility, accountability, vision, character, productivity, persuasion and realization of targeted goals. In this work, therefore, a leader refers to persons who occupy important positions in the formal polity such as presidents, prime ministers, governors legislators, party officials, local government chairmen, council members, the local chiefs and of course, the family leaders.

Plato and Leadership

Plato (427BCE-348BCE) the disciple of Socrates was born into a well- to- do Aristocratic family. He admired Socrates and became his pupil at the age of twenty. His life ambition was to become a politician, but he became disillusioned and disappointed by the way his master, Socrates was treated by the politicians in Athens that he gave up the idea of becoming a politician. The death of his teacher in the hands of Athenian government and the defeat of Athens deepened his anti-democratic predilections. He could not understand how a man like Socrates, such a good man, such an excellent philosopher and moralist could be put to death by the Athenian authorities. He became convinced that the only remedy for the ills in the society was to educate future politicians to become philosophers so that they will be able to give up the elementary distractions of life and as Baruch de Spinoza later stated in his Ethics “betake themselves to a new quest so as to attain a finer living” both for themselves and the society at large.

In his famous book, *The Republic*, Plato therefore proposed an ideal state. In this his ideal state, Plato attempted to lay down fundamental principles for the creation and sustenance of a strong and virile state based on justice. Justice, according to Plato, obtains when each component of a system performs its function without interfering in the function of others. This is what is referred to today as the principle of subsidiarity of responsibility which much later was developed further by John Locke as the principle/doctrine of the separation of powers. His ideal state or utopia comprises three classes analogous to the three parts of the soul. These are the guardians (rational part), the soldiers (spirited part) and the artisans (appetitive part.)

The guardians have the onus of providing political leadership and are required to master philosophy; the soldiers are responsible for securing the territorial integrity of the state, while the common people or artisans take care of the economic needs of the citizens. Our major focus is on the guardian class or the “philosopher king” in order to identify any proposal that might be beneficial to our quest for good leadership within the Nigerian political structure.

For Plato, a ruler must be suitably qualified both in education, moral and age before taking up any official appointment. They should be such that in them knowledge and wisdom meet together. They were to have dual aspect of philosopher and king. Onyeocha (1996:44-45) quoted Plato’s Republic thus:

I said: until philosopher are kings or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils-no, nor the human race, as I believe – and then only will this our state have a possibility of life and behold the light of day .

Plato believed that the guardians (the ruling class, who must be philosophers) correspond to the rational part of the soul (i.e. Reason) and are able to produce the ideas that can rule the whole state. He therefore recommended a form of communism / communalism for the guardians. They are to live together, and would not own any private property beyond what is absolutely necessary. Plato endorsed gender egalitarianism. Women belong to the ruling class, and they are equal. To produce the next generation of guardians, eugenics combined with casting of lots in pairing men and women for procreation were recommended.

Parents will not be allowed to know their children, and the children will not be permitted to know their parents. Plato thought that the possession of private property and nuclear families among the guardian class is bad, because the purpose of the city is the good of the whole, not the happiness of one class. Both wealth and poverty are harmful, and in Plato’s, ideal state neither will exist.

Plato also believed that the state is like a ship, and that it is not everybody that can be the captain of a ship. Only those who have undergone special training in navigation can be captains in ships and so can direct a ship. He even asked who should be the captain of a ship? Is it the most famous man or the person who knows the science of navigation? To talk of democracy for him therefore, is like talking of everybody coming to direct a ship. It is true that democracy as it was understood by Plato did not mean a representative government as it is understood today, but the active participation of all citizens directly in the government. That is the democracy that one can call participatory type of democracy because every one who has attained a certain age is a participant. Yet the point he made is that only those who have undergone special training and education (in philosophy) can rule a state.

The Leadership Question within the Nigerian Political Structure

Philosophy right from its inception in antiquity has always been a source of ideas and inspiration for the transformation of society. This is because philosophy, in its attempt to solve societal problems asks critical questions about human experiences and suggests rational answers to them. In this section therefore, we shall look critically at the leadership question within the Nigeria political structure

The question that immediately comes to mind when one takes a critical look at Nigerian political structure is whether there is an ethical dimension to the political process in contemporary

Nigerian society? The ethical dimension about anything refers to the “rules that when they are observed, will make for order and decency in the overall outlook and the end result of an activity.” In Nigerian political system such ethical dimensions is not in any case invoked. As a matter of fact, leadership problem in Nigerian has reached a climax that one may be compelled to join Wambutda (1991:16) in saying that:

Nigeria is certainly in desperate need of good leadership, for the constant change in the leadership in our history clearly testifies that we are a people groping in the dark, searching and yearning for a more reliable form of government – government which is fair, just, and caring enough to evoke spontaneous patriotism from the citizenry.

To some extent, one may even describe our situation as a complete system collapse whereas some others will argue to the absence of any system at all not to talk of a collapse. Perhaps, contrary to Achebe’s argument(1983) that for Nigeria to truly progress, she must consider as part of her motto such concepts as justice, Nigerians have a sense of justice that runs at par with Thrasymachian conception according to which justice simply means, the interest of the stronger party. Thomas Hobbes himself an advocate of absolute monarchy sees justice as obeying any law that the sovereign makes. Considering these perjured perspectives, one sees not implicit but glaringly clear that leadership in Nigeria is perhaps, pollution of leadership qualities, which does not portray the way of the leader. Corroborating this assertion on leadership in Nigeria, Ehusani (2002:210) wrote:

.... Leadership in many today’s communities in Nigeria is a pollution of leadership qualities.... What we have as leadership is an adulteration of courage and valour and a shameful display of spineless acquiescence. What we have as leadership is an uncharitable display of material arrogance and a distasteful reminder of group exploitation

Some political leaders in Nigeria succeed at will in finding their way to public office of trust, and proceed methodically to strip the public treasury for their own pocket and their cronies, thereby reneging on their manifestoes. Based on this leadership lapses, thinkers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Campbell Shittu Momoh and Obi Nwakamma etc. have at various times in different fora dissected Nigerian distorted evolution into a modern state and located the problem squarely at the feet of the leadership. In fact, Achebe (1983) observed in his little book *The Trouble with Nigerian* published on the eve of Shagari’s second term opens with these words;

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely, a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or anything else. The Nigeria problem is the unwillingness, or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which is the hallmark of true leadership....

The issue is that leadership as a service rather than a status has not yet been realized in Nigeria ever since we gained independence from Britain in October 1, 1960. One wonders why Nigerians should be preparing for a show of shame in the name of celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of her independence from the colonial rule when we have nothing but a bunch of calamities, lack of food, lack of good and safe drinking water, lack of the barest basic amenities, near total blackout from the Power Holding Company of Nigeria and myriads of other problems that has made people see the defunct NEPA as National Embarrassment and Public Annoyance.

A careful examination of the attitude and behavior that many leaders of post-colonial Nigeria shows that many of the civilians, as well as military leaders were and are mired in the pursuit of selfish personal goals at the expense of broader national interest or need. In other words, they were 'instrumental' leaders, or what David Apter(1960) called "consummatory" leaders¹²

The leadership questions within the Nigerian political structure touches on the persons, the issues and the modalities involved in the political process. In the view of Onyecha (1996:58) for a person to be qualified for leadership appointment:

He must be suitably qualified, in age and ability: personal exposure and knowledge of contemporary issues: awareness of the law of the land and preparedness to abide by them, interest in fostering a law-abiding society; awareness of the rights of citizens and disposition to uphold them, sensitivity to the people's needs and disposition to meet them; ability to reassure the people and allay their fears, experience in public service; integrity of life. They must also be God fearing, sincere, fair, just and humane in their dealings with the people; the process itself must aim at nation-building, capacity to weld the people together rather than divide them ... Fostering the democratic principle.

The questions that need to be asked at this juncture is to what extent have Nigerian leaders been able to abide by these ethical rules enumerated above? Have they not replaced the above rules with their direct opposites? Instead of being qualified, have rulers not been selected from those who have already made it in the business and professional life who are unable to cope either intellectually or experimentally with his or her country's citizens? Instead of being aware of the law of the land, abiding by them and fostering a law –abiding community, have leaders in Nigeria not turned out to be law-breakers, leaders in crime, shady deals and scandalous living? Do we operate a rule of law or a rule by law where the leaders see themselves and by extension, compel all Nigerians to see them as the standard and the paradigm off law? Instead of personal integrity of life, has money politics not become a recurring decimal in Nigeria political process? Is this not the reason why Tam David West described it as "chop -chop politics in which politicians of different gads grow fatter and fatter and correspondingly the circumference of their belt become progressively wider and wider." Instead of sincerity of heart, have Nigeria politicians not turned out to be liars? Have they not promised everything but never delivered anything? In situations where they deliver at all it as Adigwe (1992) said they "give purgatory to their friends, hell to their enemies, earth to themselves, and heaven to nobody."

There is no doubt in the fact that the present leadership situation in Nigeria is a complete contradiction of Plato's ideal state prescribed in the *Republic*. As a matter of fact, our Nigerian leaders do not follow the rectitude and the significance of the way of the leader prescribed by Plato and lack the dual aspect of philosopher and king, in whom knowledge and wisdom meet together.

An Evaluation of Plato's Philosopher King Within the Nigerian Political Structure

Nigeria has suffered a great set - back due to political ignorance of our leaders in the game of politics. The best thing now is to evaluate Plato's philosopher king within the Nigerian political structure in order to see whether there are ideals in it that can elucidate the leadership problems confronting the country and how to resolve them.

In the view of Plato, justice could only be found in the city state if and only if the city-state is governed by philosopher kings. This is because it is only the philosopher kings who have knowledge of the best system of government. Plato stressed the point that the elite, who are to rule, must be

exceptionally endowed with rationality. They must be trained in the sciences and in philosophy. The selection of the ruling class must be based on the natural intellectual ability. It should not make much difference whoever possesses this quality. The strenuous training of the “guardians’ in music, gymnastics, science and philosophy is however, not without reason. The rigorous training is meant to free the elite from prejudice and corruption. It is only in this way that they should be in the better position to distinguish what is good from what is bad. The candidates will know then the highest good, what justice is, and the eternal truths. This is aimed at the good of the state and the citizens.

Nigeria is in need of a philosopher king(s), a leader(s) who is/ are versed in knowledge and wisdom. It is a pity and mind boggling that “only two individuals (one ceremonially) who have ruled Nigeria since independence, which was won about 50 years ago, have been thorough university bred graduates. Does it say any thing about our national preoccupation and values? Look around us, and compare our record in this regard with that of our neighbors, even in Africa.”

Nigeria is in need of messiahs and university men but not men who are educated rascals. We must admit that the Nigeria university system has not acquitted itself too brilliantly, in this regard in the past. The earlier philosopher kings start holding political offices in Nigeria the better. This is because no one can give what he does not have. It is high time leaders became qualified both in education and knowledge before given a political appointment in Nigeria society. Criteria for qualification into leadership positions in Nigeria ought to depend on the level of education, knowledge, character and morality of the individual in question. This is necessary because as King who was quoted in Odey (1989) said ‘intelligence is not enough, intelligence plus character that is the goal of education.’ In line with this the watch Tower Bible Tract (1990:181) admonishes that:

When true knowledge is achieved, then the will becomes sincere, when the will is sincere, then the heart is set right and when the heart is set right, then the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, then the family life is regulated, when the family life is regulated, the natural life is orderly, then there is peace in the world.

Leadership, according to Plato is not just a game but an art which demands a high skill of intelligence. It is a craft which requires a penetrating insight into the fundamental principles and other subtleties involved. Just as a medical doctor knows the rules and laws of the art of medicine, so should a good statesman organize political activities through laws if he has the philosophical knowledge. Nigeria is in need of such a true philosopher king who will recognize the value and dignity of life and take this great country endowed with free natural resources to a greater height.

At this juncture, we would like to use Plato’s “Allegory of the cave” which illustrated what the nature of the society would be, to compare with political life in Nigeria ever since independence in 1st October 1960. The so called Nigeria leaders ever since this time are at the dark side of the cave and as such, in conflict with the eternal truths. They are emotionally motivated by self gratification. They are intoxicated by power which some of them ruthlessly acquired and ruthlessly kept. They are really in darkness and as such, exploit the poor and the least favored.

But in spite of all these, we believe that the saviors of this corrupt society would be the philosopher kings. The philosopher kings are the liberated ones. Ezebuilo (2005:12-13) wrote about the philosopher kings thus:

They know what justice, truth and good are; they are not selfish. As such, they would govern according to the rule of the law. In spite of their profound knowledge of the eternal truth, they should return to the cave, for the purpose of bringing knowledge to those who cannot distinguish their

right from their left. From this point, one could attest that the city state could not be governed by low class citizenry.

It is worthy of note that Nigeria leadership problems started in 1960 when the colonial power, manipulated the transfer of powers to an obscure set of Nigerians perhaps based on the “cynical belief that they do not have the intellectual stamina and will to dismantle the skewed economic and administrative arrangements bequeathed the country by the departing British administrators” This is the view of Achebe (1983). What needs to be urgently done now is to replace this ignorant and selfish leaders with true philosopher kings and Nigerian universities and philosophers must play a role analogous to Plato in Athens, and king- markers of the traditional monarchical system of the past. They should spread in advance, general enlightenment and a desire for excellence in the entire constituency of the nation, including those who will aspire to national leadership. Youths should be prepared intellectually and morally now for future leadership positions. This was exactly the aim of Plato’s academy at Athens where the future leaders were trained in the art of philosophy to enable them carry out their leadership functions well.

Nigeria is really in need of university men. However, this does not suggest that the university is the only fountain of enlightenment and excellence. But just as Achebe, puts it “not to have had more than two university men or women in 50 years as presidents of this country our traditional people would have sought the offices of Afa divination to explain that.”

At this junction one can say without any fear of contradiction that the solution to the nagging Nigeria leadership problem was long proffered by Plato in his “*Republic*.” Nigeria as a country will progress only when true philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers. We can only attain this project in our society by restructuring our educational policy. This entails in the formation of a good philosophy of education. It implies setting our priorities right. We have to keep in sight the set aims of Nigeria education as contained in Nigeria Policy on Education document (p.7) which include “the building of (1) a free and dynamic society (2) a just and egalitarian society (3) a united, strong and reliant nation (4) a great and dynamic economy and (5) a land of bright and full opportunities for all citizens.”

Conclusion

One will always wonder whether our poor-quality leadership is not a reflection of poor quality followership. This is on the ground that the mediocre leaders we have been complaining about are Nigerians; they were not brought from other countries to rule us. The submission is that if we look critically at ourselves in the mirror, we will see the failures and foibles of our decadent leadership reflected back to us in different degrees, depending on the extent to which we manifest the bestial attributes of our leaders. Indeed we are all guilty to some degrees.

Now, philosophy which is the source of ideas and inspiration for the transformation of society has a very pertinent role to play in this country. Nigeria is in need of philosophy of education that is capable of producing the kind of leaders and followers needed for her development.

We are not advocating the same kind of communism that Plato advocated for, but what we are saying is that our representative democratic leaders ought to be qualified both in academic experience, moral and other qualities mentioned above before being allowed to take up a leadership position. In other words, they should all possess the dual aspects of philosopher and king before they will seek and be given political appointments since no one can give what he does not have. The best way to attain this is through a complete and unbridled implementation of Justice Uwais Federal panel’s electoral reforms and recommendations.

It is also necessary that philosophy as a course will be taught right from the primary and secondary schools. There is also need to ensure that philosophy becomes a mandatory course of study in all the Universities in the Northern part of the country where for years it has been cleverly skipped from the academic curricula.

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