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The Place of Ethics and Accountability on Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract:

This paper explains how ethics and accountability are vital to good governance and the development of any country. It is the thrust of the paper that good governance requires ethical foundation and that government officials must not only be responsible and responsive to the masses, but, more importantly, they must be accountable for their actions and inactions. Nigeria is blessed with abundant natural and economic resources, as well as human resources, but she is also endowed with greedy, selfish and corrupt leaders. We must begin to see corruption not as a sickness but as a symptom of a sickness which is moral decadence in the society. This is why this paper seeks to tackle the problem of corruption from the source, because moral problem requires moral solution. This explains why various measures taken so far to solve the menace of corruption and underdevelopment have not yielded the desired results in Nigeria. This paper therefore endeavours to show the relationship between ethics and accountability in relation to good governance and development. The paper adopts secondary method of gathering data and philosophical analysis.

Keywords: Ethics, accountability, corruption, good governance and representative

1. Introduction

The problem of underdevelopment facing most of the countries in Africa, Nigerian in particular, is basically and essentially ethical and moral. It is therefore the ethical and moral issues that have affected (and still affecting) her in transcending the oil-based political economy. Thus in the life of any nation or society, there is bound to be a period where it will arrive at a crossroad which fundamentally calls for a moral decision and choice. The time is now, considering the various efforts and campaigns for development and the state of development is a country like Nigeria. Arriving at this crossroad however, brings a dilemma in taking decisions and making choice which will bring effectiveness in the country's role in its people's ethics and moral standards.

It is a common sense view that Nigeria is abundantly blessed with human, economic and natural resources. It is also a fact that Nigeria is one of the least developed countries in the world today. Politicians after politicians, at the death of one regime and the other, tell Nigerians that there is no reason or justification for poverty, sickness and other artificial evils that is associated with underdevelopment in the country. Ogoma (2014: 4) presented Nigerian scenario philosophically thus:

Nigeria is richly endowed with human resources.....premise 1

Nigeria is richly blessed with natural resources.....premise 2

Therefore, Nigeria is an underdeveloped country....conclusion.

This argument is illogical, yet the two premises and the conclusion are true. Why the argument is invalid is simply because the country is morally and spiritually sick. It is in a morally corrupt country that human and natural endowments do not translate into development. In other words, the presence of human and economic resources in a country does not mean that the country will automatically be developed, especially where there is a high level of moral debasement and perverse behaviour such as we witness in Nigeria then and now. A society where the leaders and the citizen are corrupt and the leaders are not accountable to the people for their actions is not likely to witness any meaningful development. The essence of governance is the protection of the lives and property of the citizens and the promotion of their well-being. This can only be achieved in a corrupt-free and morally upright society which, of course, Nigeria is not fortunate to be. And, unless ethics is accorded a pride of place in the polity of Nigeria, and until Nigerians begin to make their leaders (servants) accountable and responsible, the much-talked-about Vision 20-20-20 may fizzle out like other developmental plans.

2. What Is Ethics?

The word ethics emanates from two Greek words, “ethikos” and it means to be moral and “ethos” which means character formation and development. According to Omoregbe (1993: 4), Ethics is that branch of Philosophy that deals with the morality of human actions; or as the branch of philosophy which studies the norms of human behaviour. Frankena (1995: 4) defines Ethics as: “a branch of Philosophy: it is a moral philosophy or philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems and moral judgments.” Solomon and Greene (1999: 1) define Ethics broadly as the “study of values, rules and justifications.” Ethics can also be defined as that area or branch of philosophy that has to do with the investigation, assessment and evaluation of the morality human actions in relation with respect to the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness, justness or unjustness. Ozumba (2001: 4) writes thus:

Ethics is that branch of philosophy known as moral philosophy or philosophical thinking about morality. It includes moral problems and moral judgments. Ethics therefore deals with judgment as to the rightness or wrongness, virtuous or vicious, desirability or undesirability, approval or disapproval of our actions

These and other definitions of ethics seem to agree that when we are talking about ethics, we are talking about the morality of human conducts and actions. Ethics, therefore, does not seek to study the morality of supernatural beings or the actions of other animals. Fasoro (2004: 86) emphasises this when he opines that ethics or morality is “human-dependent or conditioned.” Ethics is essentially a human affair.

Ethics is broadly divided into Meta-ethics and Normative. Meta-ethics deals with the meanings of ethical terms such as; good, bad, wrong, right, justice, injustice, equality, fairness, ought, and so on. It seeks to clarify these terms and evaluate them. Normative ethics on the other hand deals with the norms and standards of human behaviour and actions. It has to do with why some actions are deemed to be moral while others are not. According to Fasoro (2004: 84), normative ethics is concerned with those things we OUGHT to do or approve as morally commendable, and those which we OUGHT NOT to do and are morally condemnable. Normative ethics shall be our focus in this paper.

The question that follows naturally from the above discussion is: what makes an act or an action to be morally bad or good, right or wrong? As usual, opinions are divided among philosophers on this issue, but in all, there are two major schools of thought that provide answers to the question: the Utilitarians and the Non-Consequentialists. According to the principle of utilitarianism, an action is good or bad based on the consequence or result of the action. Thus, if the result of an action leads to the happiness of the majority of the people involved, then the action is good, but bad if it leads to the suffering of the majority and the happiness of the minority. According to Mill:

The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals “utility” or the “greatest happiness principle” holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain, and the privation of pleasure. (Omoregbe: 1993: 235)

The Non-Consequentialists argue that the goodness or badness of an action has nothing to do with the result of that action. For them, what is good remains good even if it does not produce good result. We therefore know the right or good action if we follow the dictates of right reason. These two positions, though opposing, are not contradictory. At the heart of the two schools is man and the interest of man. The Consequentialists are saying that governments should always formulate policies and take actions that will benefit the majority of the citizens but not policies that will favour a few. The Deontologists (non-consequentialists, on the other hand, hold that man must not be treated as a means to an end but as an end in itself. That is, in the process of promoting the happiness of the majority, serious injury must not be done to the interest of the minority.

3. The Concept of Accountability

Accountability is a term that can be defined in various ways. Conventionally, it means that somebody is being held responsible for an action or being made answerable for certain action or inaction. It is the act of calling somebody to give explanation for certain decision or action. The Institute on Governance submits thus:

Accountability is much more than identifying the ‘culprit’ for outcome gone awry. It entails clarifying goals or standard for performance. It encompasses the way organizations and institutions organize themselves according to the appropriate standards. And it comprises the values and behavioral norms of individual. (Abe: 2010: 90)

This definition above is very broad. In politics and governance, accountability has to do with how public men and women are checked against abuse use of office, money, time, power and other resources under their care. Accountability is a mechanism through which people are made answerable for the use of what is committed into their hands, whether they are public or private men and women. Roberson (1993: 3) declares that:

Accountability concerns the process by which those who exercise power; whether as government, as elected representatives or as appointed officials, must be able to show that they have exercised their power and discharge their duties properly.

A more elaborate and pictorial description of the concept of accountability is given by Bevir (2009: 33) thus:

...when people are meant to pursue the will and/or interests of others, they give an account of their actions to those others who are then able to decide whether to reward or censure them for the actions. Accountability therefore conveys the idea that an agent (such as an elected politician or a civil servant) is responsible for acting on behalf of a principal (such as a citizen or government minister, respectively) to whom they should respond and report. The principal is thereby able to hold the agent accountable for his or her actions.

This description agrees to the intention of this paper, and shall guide us in the analysis of the topic under consideration. From this, we define accountability simply as the act of reporting to the necessary and appropriate person/persons or institutions, when, how, why

and what has been done, and sometimes, who. To be accountable is therefore is to be able to give necessary information about an act or resource that has been entrusted under one's control.

4. Political Representation

At this stage of our discussion, the question that should be asked is, if one person can represent another person or a group, what is the exact relationship that exists between the representative and those he represents? What does it mean to be represented by another person? What is he or she authorized to do and, what role should those represented play? It is our view that these are pertinent questions which, unfortunately, many people, especially in the developing countries, including the elite, do not take time to ask and answer when they go to the polling booths on the day of election. We hold that unless these and other questions are asked consciously and answered sincerely, many countries in the third world, may not get the essence of representation right.

Two theories of representation can be identified in the history of political representation; Trustee and Delegate. The delegate theory states that a representative is a passive person. He is expected to refer every matter to his constituency and after a position must have been taken, he presents it to the assembly. His personal feeling and wisdom do not count. Hannah Pitkin (1972: 173) argues that: "it is paramount that we understand that government is representative; not by demonstrating its control over its subjects but just the reverse, by demonstrating that its subjects have control over what it does." A representative merely presents the position of the people he represents to the parliament as it is. He cannot amend this position even if he thinks that there is a fundamental error. If he notices one, even at the point of presenting their interest before the government, the best he can do is to suspend the presentation and return to his people, point out the error, and if it is agreed upon that a change should be effected, then he goes back to present it. This theory has the advantage of making the people's voices count and making their public servants accountable to them. Decision making happens at a slow pace and it is incremental and sometimes comes to a standstill. But the policies produced are usually less prone to gross mistakes and have a better chance of being implemented and the responsibility for mistakes is shared among a wide range of institutions.

The Trustee theory which is championed by Edmund Burke is diametrically opposed to the delegate theory. According to this theory, a representative is chosen for his wisdom and judgment. A representative happens to know more than the people he represents, and so, he speaks and acts on their behalf without any recourse to them. Writing on the relationship between the people and their representative, Burke [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Representation_(politics)] submits thus:

Their wishes ought to have great weight with him; their opinion, high respect; their business, unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs, and above all, ever, and in all cases, prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man or to any set of men living...Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

The two theories, though are opposing, are not irreconcilable, and our position is that, they both contain some truth. Contrary to the Burkean's stand, electorate do not elect their representatives simply because the people feel that they are 'philosopher kings', but more importantly, because they feel that they are good and honest enough to faithfully represent them. It is equally difficult to see the representatives referring all matters to the electorate to seek their minds. The delegate theory is, therefore, more democratic, but not practicable, at least, in this modern time. The trustee theory, though, more down to earth, neglects the real motive of electing leaders. Our position is that, the representatives can take decision on behalf of their people, especially on matters that require urgent attention but the representatives must always take into consideration what their people back home might say on such issue. When such decisions are taken on behalf of the people, the representative must report to them what he did or said on their behalf. In this way, the representative shows that he is responsible to the people. This is where the issue of accountability becomes important to governance. Whenever a representative takes a decision without or before consulting his people, he owes it as a duty to the people on behalf of whom he has taken such a decision to report to them, after all, he is the people's messenger.

5. Good Governance

Governance is a means or process whereby an entity or a given set of people organize themselves in such a way as to achieve some specific goals, aims and mandates. Governance therefore has to do with how policies are formulated, decisions are made and implemented, resources are explored and distributed and how justice is dispensed in a political community. Ojameruaye (2011) defines governance as:

The process by which governments are elected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and respect of citizens of and the state of the institutions that govern economy and social interactions.

When all these are done in fairly and justly manner, we talk of good governance, but if unfairly and unjustly done, we have bad governance. Bad or good governance can however be seen sometimes as a matter of semantics. Government is just an aspect of governance, and there can be government without governance. Where there are rulers or leaders whose laws and policies are primarily focused of their private benefits at the expense of the public, there is government, or better still, bad governance, According to Agagu (2010: 41):

Good governance goes beyond government. It covers issues such as political parties, legislature, the judiciary, the media, the civil society, as well as how citizens, leaders, and public institutions relate with each other so as to make things happen. Thus, state capacity, responsiveness and accountability constitute crucial elements, while public opinion and democratic sphere are two critical factors in the architecture of good governance.

Obviously, the whole essence of good governance boils down to how government is made to live up to the reasons governments are put in place. Governments are established for the protection of lives and property of its citizens, and for the advancement of the well-

being of the people. When these are done in both quantitative and qualitative manner, and without favour or neglect of some people for no good reasons, we talk of good governance.

6. Ethics, Accountability and Governance in Nigeria

From the discussion above, it is not doubtful that there is a link between ethics, accountability and governance. The Social Contract philosophers like Thomas Hobbes (1651) and John Locke (Irele: 1998) argue that government, even if hypothetically, begins when the citizens enter into a social contract with their political leaders. In a representative government like ours, during the electoral process, the leaders and the led enter into a kind of contract when the politicians embark on electoral campaigns. They sell their manifesto to the electorate, and upon those promises, the electorate go to the polling booths and cast their votes for the politicians. With this, the electorates have fulfilled their own part of the contract. The politicians get into offices on the ticket of the people's mandate. Now, it behooves on the representatives to deliver their electoral promises to the people. For the politicians now to turn their backs on the electorate and renege on their promises, calling those promises 'political gimmicks' raises some moral questions. Keeping promises is a moral issue, and, as Hobbes (1652: 159) would say: "To voluntarily undo what one has voluntarily done, is the real meaning of injustice. Those promises were voluntarily made, to turn against is unethical and immoral. Even, Machiavelli (1961: 56) only grants that concession of politicians (princes) to break their promises to the people only when the reason for making that promise is no longer relevant, but not that promises should be broken at will as it is the case in Nigeria and in most of the third world countries. According to Appadorai (1968: 9-10)

If, as Lord Acton said, the great question for politics is to discover not what governments prescribe but what they ought to prescribe, then, the connexion (*sic*) between ethics and politics is clear. For, on every political issue, the question may be raised whether it is right or wrong. And we may agree with Fox that what is morally wrong can never be politically right, we may say that politics is conditioned by ethics.

Nigeria is one of the countries that operate indirect democracy in the world. At all levels of government in Nigeria, the leaders are elected, and so, they are the representatives of the people. If Mr. A represents town B, he automatically becomes the agent or messenger of the town in the government circle. He presents the interests of the people to the government. Whenever there is any important matter to be discussed and decision to be taken, he comes back to his people. Whatever they agreed upon, he relays back to the government, even if he has a contrary opinion, he allows that of his town to prevail and defend it before the government. From time to time, he returns to his people and give account of his stewardship. The people have the right, and deserve to know what their servant is doing in government. Avenues are to be established where questions are asked and answered, and people should have the opportunity to shower blames are praise on their servant depending on which he deserves, after all, he is a public servant. One implication of having a representative government is that, laws are made and policies are formulated with people's inputs.

In Nigeria, it is unfortunate that the servant-leaders do not see themselves as such. The people too are not helping matters for they seem to worship them. When the citizens do this they make their leaders feel as if they are kings and forget that they are the people's servants. Excessive praises make leaders vain and arrogant. The part played by the citizens in making their representatives so distanced from them is not small. On this, Agagu (2010: 49) submits thus:

This is worsened by the uninformed and gullible nature of the general citizenry that constitutes the client and part of the environment. The citizens are either complacent, uninformed or lack the resistance or advocacy power that can check the excesses and the attendant maladministration of the policy actors. The result is that national goals or public goods are diverted to personal or specific goals or goods.

No leader anywhere is responsible except the system and the people make them so. Nobody is responsible and accountable until one is made accountable. Only few elite, let alone the common people on the streets know their representatives in Nigeria. Their meeting point is at the polling booths on the day of election. The implication of this is that, the people do not have input in the policy formulation and law making process in Nigeria. This therefore makes the people to be alienated from the process of governing. Governments indirectly pay the price of this alienation, because, some of its policies that could have been lauded by the populace, were not properly brought to the knowledge of the populace in clear term. Example of such policy was the fuel subsidy removal that threw the country into prolonged crisis in 2012. When leaders know that they would be asked to give account of their stewardship in government, they will behave well and live up to expectation. The various ills being perpetrated across all the sectors in Nigeria raise moral and ethical questions. Nigeria has been described as one of the most religious country in the world, but is equally one of the most morally degenerated countries in the world. The embezzlement of public and private funds, the removal of fuel subsidy and all its attendants, political assassination, the Boko Haram insurgency, tribalism, political violence, religious bigotry, etc. all contributed to the under-development of the country. Little wonder then that Omoregbe (1993: VIII) writes that: "An immoral society is also a sick society. Such a society is sick and cannot be in sound order." A society where the citizens are not asking question that are fundamental to their improvement is a docile one, hence, it is sick and cannot witness the desired development.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the discussion so far, it has been established that ethics and accountability are crucial to good governance and development. We have pointed out that that, contrary to the view of some people like Machiavelli (1961), politics and morality are not antithetical, and that both cannot be separated without serious injury to either. In politics, like other disciplines, the end does not justify the means, and so, man should not be treated as a means to an end but as an end in itself. Various anti-corruption bodies such as MAMSER, WAI, WAIC, and recently, ICPC and EFCC, have been set up in Nigeria to fight corruption and indiscipline by different governments, but in most cases, each of the regimes ended up more corrupt than they met the country. One reason why these measures have failed is

because, most of these governments and the members of these bodies are themselves products of immorality. A corrupt lawmaker cannot faithfully legislate against corruption, just as a corrupt judge will be a friend to those charged with corruption. Elected leaders who enjoy the dividend of flawed election can hardly carry out political reforms judiciously. All political problems are moral problems and so require moral and ethical solutions. Corruption, for instance, and, especially, financial corruption, is not a problem in itself but a symptom of a problem. Moral solution is needed, and we concur with Omoregbe (1993: VIII) when he write thus:

For the greatest obstacle to the development of our country is immorality, corruption, dishonesty, fraud, embezzlement of public funds, selfishness, etc. It is only moral regeneration that can cure Nigeria and remove the greatest obstacle obstructing her development.

One way of having moral regeneration is for each of the families that make up the state to return to the act of inculcating morality into the lives of their children. The parents too must be moral, live up to the expectation of their roles at home and live by examples for their children. This is in line with the view of Wiredu (1998: 308) when he opines that:

The theatre of moral upbringing is the home, at parents' feet and within range of kinsmen's inputs. The mechanism is precept, example, and correction. The temporal span of the process is lifelong, for, although upbringing belongs to the beginning of our earthly careers, the need for correction is an unending contingency in the life of mortals.

A government that is really concerned about the moral degeneration in the country should call the moral philosophers and let them brainstorm on how the moral situation in the country can be improved upon. It is equally recommended that the job of accountability of the public leaders should not be left with the government agencies, members of which are not in themselves free from the benefits of corruption. The citizens should cultivate the spirit of asking their leaders questions about their stewardship in government. They should make their leaders know that they are watching them. The knowledge that they are being watched by their people at home will make them to be responsible, for they know that they will give accounts of their actions. Leaders should be respected, but only a responsible leader deserves respect, therefore, leader-worship should be discounted.

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