

Leadership and Challenges of Nationhood in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This study is focused on leadership and the challenges of nationhood in Nigeria. Leadership is seen as a practical skill that involves the ability of an individual or organization to lead or guide others to organize or direct their efforts towards the achievement of desired goals. Nigeria as a nation has experienced various leaders from independence till date, some democratically elected while others emerged through coups. These leaders have all contributed immensely towards building Nigeria either positively or negatively. The objective of this study is to examine the challenges Nigeria as a nation is confronted with as a result of those years of leadership. The study predominantly utilized secondary data and elite theory in its analysis to posit that the challenges facing Nigeria is enormous ranging from poverty, insecurity, corruption etc. Findings revealed that Nigeria has lost track in its attempt at becoming a strong, formidable and developed nation. However, all hope is not lost. Thus the study recommends that those in leadership or aspiring to be leaders should be committed to their responsibilities by practically doing what they say as well as living by example if Nigeria is to transform to one of the most developed nation in the world.

Keywords: Nigeria, Leadership, Issues, Challenges, Development

Introduction

Leadership is a global phenomenon and a very crucial factor in the development of any nation. A purposeful and people oriented leadership is essential in the galvanization and mobilization of both human and material resources needed to move a nation forward (Ovwasa, 2019). Thus the orientation of a leader towards the well-being of the citizens and invariably the development of the nation is very critical in the growth and development of such a nation. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, is indisputably one of the most richly endowed countries in the continent. It boasts of immense resources (human and material) such as crude, gas bitumen, limestone, coal etc. which provide opportunity for steady national development (Oyakorotu, 2008).

However, alongside these massive strategic endowment has been the search for a quality leadership since independence. Unfortunately, the search for a purposeful, people oriented and quality leadership to help her get out of the woods has not yielded the desired results. According



to Shanum (2013), the progress of a nation depends on the standard of its leadership and how it can be brought to bear on the welfare of its citizenry. Similarly, Korikiye, (2009) posits that all the challenges bedeviling Nigeria is as a result of poor/ bad, incompetent, visionless and un-resourceful leadership that we've had across all levels of government over the years that has kept our nation at its lowest ebb regardless of all her potentials.

According to the Global Coalition for Africa (GCA) (cited in Hope Sr. 1999), leadership has many dimensions, but the dimension of political leadership is believed to be of greatest significance since it determines the development of other forms of leadership. Therefore, the key principles here relate to legitimate leadership that is freely chosen or elected by the people, with some regard for honesty, integrity, competence, commitment, accountability, responsibility, and so on. In addition, it advised that a mechanism of sanction and control by neutral and independent institutions should be put in place to serve as checks, and that leaders are expected to declare their assets before taking office and upon leaving office.

However, it is this type of leadership that is missing in Africa generally and Nigeria in particular. Rather, our nation parades arrays of leaders who personalize power and are supported by officials in civil service and political appointees that are based on patron-client networks. According to Sirleaf (1996), the quality of leadership in Africa nose-dived generally from the early 1970s. The resultant effect politically was the rise of leaders driven by partisanship, tribal allegiance, nepotism and generally degenerating into high level concentration of power and outright dictatorship.

Therefore, the relationship between leadership and nation building is intricate and inseparable in both theoretical and practical sense as good leadership enhances and reflects on a nation through good governance leading to quality nation building that results in national development. It is the contention of this study that all other factors are derivative of the leadership factor. It therefore posits that systemic corruption, relative deprivation, socio-economic conditions and human insecurity would not have been a bone of contention had there been good and purposeful leadership in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Leadership

Leadership is the exercise of power or influence in social activities such as groups, organizations, communities or nations. According to Ebukelo (2000) leadership is the ability to counsel, to manage conflicts, to inspire loyalty and to make subordinates remain on their jobs. Olugbade (1987) views leadership as both a research and a practical skill encompassing the ability of an individual or organization to 'lead' or guide other individuals, teams, or entire organizations. It can also be understood as a pattern of behavior or a personal quality. As regards a pattern of behavior, leadership is seen as the influence exerted by an individual or group over a





large body to organize or direct its efforts towards the achievement of desired goal. As a personal attitude, leadership refers to the character traits which enable a leader to exert influence over others. Thus, leadership is equated with charisma which is the personal charm or power to lead.

Olugbade (1987), further posits that elected leaders should be mindful of the side effects of their leadership style on the people they lead so as to avoid any undesirable effects that may derail or affect the democratic process negatively. Bad leadership leads to undesired outcome as it concentrates power and can thus lead to corruption and tyranny, hence the democratic demand that leadership be checked by accountability. It can also create a situation of subservience and difference which may discourage people from participating in issues that concerns them and will result in their failure to take charge of their own destiny.

The concept of leadership should be understood as encompassing a wide range of activities. It applies to the running of social groups and the governing of nations. It may concern the relatively diffuse process of influence in establishing norms of style or opinion; or it may involve specific orders in a chain of command. It includes supervision and statesmanship, routine administration and organization building (Agboola, Lamidi, &Shiyanbade, 2017).

Thus, for Nigeria to develop and take her pride of place as a nation, its destiny lies squarely on the shoulders of its leaders who are expected to develop self-reliant initiatives that will be sustainable over a long-term. Such initiatives will however require both regional and international assistance; but such external assistance should come as a complementary initiative rather than a sole or stand-alone support.

Nationhood

The term 'nation' is a Latin word *natus* which means birth. Burgess (cited in Appadorai 1975) defines a nation as a population with ethnic unity, inhabiting a territory with geographic unity.

In recent times, the term nation has taken a more distinctive political connotation, as it refers to a people who feel united and desire an independent government.

According to Barker (cited in Palmer and Perkins 2010), a nation is a body of men inhabiting a defined territory, who are normally drawn from different races, but possess a common stock of thoughts and feelings acquired and transmitted during the course of a common history; who on the whole and in the main, though more in the past than in the present, include in that common stock a common religious belief; who generally and as a rule use a common language as the vehicle of their thoughts and feelings, also cherish a common will, and accordingly form, or tend to form a separate state for the expression and realization of that will.

Basically, a nation can be defined as a collective group of individuals, that bound together and therefore unified by commonalities like language, ethnicity, habits, behaviors and custom. However, national identities are highly complex and this raises significant questions of what may



actually constitute a nation in practice rather than theory. Nationhood is further seen as a result of the right of individuals to determine the sovereign state to which they would belong and the form of government they want to live in, the principles by which nationalities justify their efforts is what constitute nationhood

Theoretical framework

The study adopts the elite theory as its framework of analysis to the understanding of leadership in society and Nigeria in particular as a nation. According to Geraint Parry(cited in Olaniyi 2013), defines elite as the small minority who play an exceptionally influential part in political and social affairs or a group that wields control over crucial policies in a given society. He further posits that the elites are those that takes decisionthat affects the majority in the society whose power are not subject to control by any other body within the society, and that there are two main classes of elite, that is the governing elite and the non-governing elite.

The theory posits that (i) in every society there are minority of the population which takes major decisions known as political decisions by ruling over the majority. (ii) That those elites include those that occupy political power and regularly influences governmental or political decisions. (iii) That there is circulation of elites over a period of time through the recruitment of new individual members from the lower strata of society or by incorporating new social groups entirely. (iv) That there are changes in the society about the composition or structure of the elites through re-circle, as occasionally, there is the complete replacement of the established elite by a counter-elite.In political science, elite theory is that theory of the state that explains the power relationships in present day society. It talks about the small minority mostly members of the economic elite and policy makers that holds power and makes decision in the society.

However, the central contention of elite theory is its opposition to pluralism, a tradition that assumes that all individuals or the multitude of social groups have equal power and can balance each other out in their contribution to democratic outcomes. In other words, elite theory does not believe in the practicability of the issue of government of the people”. For the elite theorists, it is a farce to talk of a “government by the people” in which everyone will take part in decision making, as the real deal in practice is a government of the minority that protects the selfish interest of the ruling class. Thus, decision making or leadership consists of a small group that protects the wishes, desires, aspirations and yearnings of those minorities whose aims are protected and promoted always.However, the same ruling elites will always posit that they are not anti-masses per se, but as leaders of the various units they have a right to determine the direction of policies in the society which sometimes lead to class struggle since the governed and the governor may clash due to the continuous imposition of their wisheson their subjects without respecting their preferences.

It is also noticeable that the character of an elite changes from time to time and place to place. The stages of development have their decisive impact upon the character of an elite. For instance, if military men constitute the power elite in Nigeria, the same privilege accorded the civilian men will be made available to them in the country. Each owes its peculiar position of privilege to the recognition and esteem accorded to it by the masses. Should a society change its standard of values, for example as the period of military rule give way to the period of civil/democratic rule, a different set of men are given esteem and honors and forms the elite of the nation as obtainable presently.

According to Suenu (2004) politics is synonymous with the elites. In the Nigerian context, the elites are known as the godfathers, the kingmakers and the ones that should govern or chose those to govern. In most cases, they are the strong men that controls politics at different spheres. He asserts further, that in a political environment where the elites are in vogue, they colonize others. By implication, the elites rule and dominatesociety by dictating the direction and process of politics and governance in such society. The elites remain the small group with enormous powers that determines the plight and future of the majority upon which their decision impacts. Therefore, by controlling the political process, the elitesdecide and directs the activities of the people, determine their fate in terms of the kinds of dividends of democracy that can accrue to them and often times plunder their common resources which has been the trend so far in Nigeria. For instance, the Federal Government of Nigeria has placed the nation on Twitter ban without consulting the masses thereby infringing on the rights of Nigerians to free speech and freedom of expression.

The relevance of this theory to this study cannot be overemphasized. It rightly confirms the erroneous belief in the rule by majority, as it is the minority elite that calls the shot in our nation. We can also deduce that the ruling elite majorly promote their own agenda for their selfish interest as against that of the public. Thus our nation need leadership that knows the situation of the country, knows their onions and will be ready to call a spade a spade no matter whose ox is gored. Therefore, Nigerians need to avoid those minority elites that are selfish and search for those leaders that are truly patriotic and will lead the nation according to the yearnings and aspirations of the populace as it will go a long way in redeeming the image of the country and put her on the right track to national development.

The Primacy of Leadership in Nationhood

Leadership is sometimes seen as a natural gift from God, and also the process through which God use to select the best leader who will direct and give instructions to others on how to govern or pilot the affairs of the society (Akpan&Chukwuemeka, 2016). They further posit that leadership exists in various forms and in different institutions like academic, politics, religion, formal and informal associations, government and private institutions etc. That the success of

every organization, state or nation depends largely on the leadership traits and the methods adopted.

In Africa generally and Nigeria in particular, most leaders live for themselves and not for the citizens that they were elected to serve thereby instituting the absence of servant leadership in the country; which is an imperative for good governance and by extension, the delivery of dividends of democracy to the citizens.

According to Obiozor (2015), Nigeria is a nation born in optimism in 1960 at independence but has lived in a state of doubt and uncertainty for over sixty years now. In those years, all kinds of analysis and conclusions had been advanced on issues that are responsible for what has become the challenges of Nigerian nationhood. This is based on the fact that all countries compared to Nigeria in the 1960s have made astronomical progress, developed both relatively stable political and economic systems. When compared with the Third world countries of the 1960s, such as: Singapore, Taiwan, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia; within an interval of thirty years, they all became known as the Asian Tigers. He posited further that Nigeria was and has remained immersed in perennial armed conflicts, small scale insurgencies, cross border terrorism, unrelenting economic crisis, financial corruption, poverty, political instability to mention a few, which today has become the emblem of our nation.

Similarly, Adefarasin (2015) asserts that Nigeria is blessed with both human and natural resources; yet its crystal clear today that her political independence has failed to match with economic independence. That Nigeria has refused to develop and take her rightful place among the comity of nations because of lack of effective leadership. He emphasized further that the majority of the leaders that have emerged in Nigeria after independence have exhibited bad leadership quality. This is because the leaders are not concerned about the development of our country, as corruption, bad democratic principles and mediocrity have become their norms and direct negations of law and order, good governance, economic justice and democracy have also become their hallmark.

He explained further that despite Nigeria's enormous and huge potentialities, she remains underdeveloped, embellished in abject poverty, unemployment with the majority unified; high crime rate and insecurity with its attendant terrorism as well as the nagging issues of favoritism and ethnicity in resource distribution. Regardless of all these vices, the leaders have continued to undermine the development of the nation despite the fact that Nigeria is blessed with abundant natural resources as well as rich human resources.

Advancing further, Chimakonam & Ogar (2015) asserts that there are some people in Nigeria who resent our national importance by calling us the 'Giant of Africa'. For them such perspective is just an ascription, because we are not giants by virtue of the quality of our national institutions and values but simply based on the size of the population and abundance of its



natural resources. For instance, China and India have the largest population in the world, but they are still rising as global players, while Japan on the other hand with lesser population and natural resources became a global economic power house for quite a long time now thus down playing the place of population and resources. Indeed, it is only an effective, strong and functional leadership that can combine both population and abundance of resource to advance Nigeria's progress and development. Unfortunately, Nigeria has not been lucky with such leadership as it has been in one crisis after another from independence till date.

Chikendu (1987) posits that virtually all nations of the world that have made it, did so primarily because of good leadership. Corroborating that view, Agbor (2012) asserts that the United States of America which ranks as one of the world's most developed nation in terms of technology and the living standard of its citizens did not achieve greatness by accident. America was nurtured into greatness by her political leaders from George Washington to the current President Joseph Biden. Similarly, Russia has been transformed to a Superpower thanks to the able leadership of Lenin and Stalin to present day Vladimir Putin thus showing the primacy of leadership in nation building in any society.

According to Achebe (1983), 'the problem with Nigeria is simple and squarely a failure of leadership'. Nigeria at present is still searching for a crop of committed and visionary leaders that are guided by moral standards and personal conscience, a leadership devoid of corruption, greed and selfishness. A leadership that can direct its total energy (human and material resources) to the path of development. However, the absence of this form of leadership has made Nigerians to be in a dogged end with several inadequacies ranging from mismanagement of available resources and misplacement of priorities to socio-economic and political underdevelopment. It is bad leadership that has galvanized in to national poverty, inequality, unemployment, kidnapping and the multitude of vices that plague us today.

Challenges of Leadership in Nigeria

Since independence, Nigeria seems not to be lucky enough to have pragmatic and charismatic leadership that understand the nation's socio-economic and political dynamics; and the intricacies of democratic governance at the different levels of government (Alebiosu, 2017). This is because those problems are increasing on a daily basis. Conversely, Dike (1999) asserts that Nigerian political history if chronicled was blessed with leaders who were seen as sources of inspiration and aspiration to their followers; leaders like Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, and Chief Obafemi Awolowo whose charisma, style of leadership and philosophy drew admiration and respect from Nigerians.

Thus, Achebe (1998) posits that the problem with Nigeria is traceable to poor leadership. He argued further that there is nothing basically wrong with Nigerian character, land, climate, water, air, or anything else; rather the problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to





their responsibilities. Ajayi (2004) asserts that in today's Nigeria, leadership on the aggregate means 'Service to self' as new entrants into position of leadership or those that are joining political parties are seeking for where the chances of sharing in stolen public funds looks rosier, as against searching for answers on how to fix and move our nation forward. Consequent on the above, our challenges as a nation are enormous and include the following:

Poverty – this is widely spread among the population. The World Bank ranked Nigeria as the 13th poorest nation in the world, where over 70 per cent of the population still live below \$1 per day. Furthermore, the recent projection by the World Poverty Clock compiled by Brookings Institute Poverty index shows that Nigeria has overtaken India as the country with the largest number of people living in extreme poverty, with an estimated 87 million Nigerians or around half of the nation's population, thought to be living on less than \$1.90 a day (Adebayo, 2018).

Thus qualifying her as the poverty headquarter of the world despite her enormous resources, and having earned several billions of US dollars from crude oil and gas production over the years. The increasing level of poverty in the country has resulted in the increase in crimes and criminality. Corroborating this position, Simon Shanum (2013) posits that no nation can enjoy lasting peace if her citizens live in abject poverty especially, if the nation is acknowledged as having the ability and substantial means to provide development and guarantee a good standard of living. Unfortunately, that is the sad tale of Nigeria today and, it stems from poor leadership, poor governance, insecurity and poverty in the midst of plenty. In the same vain, efforts aimed at poverty reduction by successive leaders has not yielded much result due to poor implementation strategy and corruption from those charged with the responsibilities. In addition, about half the population of Nigeria do not have access to basic amenities like clean safe water, basic education and primary health care services after over sixty years of independence.

Insecurity – the insecurity in Nigeria appears to have overwhelmed the leadership as regards the increasing rate of ethnic/religious conflicts, armed robbery, kidnapping, suicide bombing and insurgency (Alebiosu, 2017). Indeed, the continued state of insecurity is threatening the very fabric of our nationhood, and has created fear and mutual distrust within the citizenry. There is hardly a day that passes without people being killed by unknown gunmen or bandits or herdsmen, and to this, no section of the country is safe from insecurity. Daily news reports are filled with ten to fifteen minute of killings across the country to show the heightened level of insecurity. Millions of Nigerians have been displaced from their homes due to the severity of attacks and are now Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) living in various camps across the country. Many hundreds of school children have spent years, months and days in captivity in their abductors den in the North East and North West of the country beginning with the infamous Chibok school girls of 2014 to the now almost weekly abduction and killing of school children in Kaduna, Niger, Katsina and Zamfara states with government bereft of ideas on how to rescue them from their abductors.





Corruption—this has become so endemic that it is almost a norm in Nigeria today and cuts across both the leaders and the led. Incidences of corruption among the leadership of our nation is growing on a daily basis and cuts across both the national and local levels, public and private spheres with very few exceptions as it continues to ravage the entire strata of our national life. Indeed, corruption is the direct result of weak leadership, poor value and reward system in Nigeria, and when leadership challenges continues un-abated, it will have serious negative consequences on our nation (Galadima, 2004), hence where we stand today as a people. Nigerian office holders from the national to local level seem to be more interested in what they can grab than what they can give to the society as much emphasis is placed on money, wealth and material accumulations than on developmental efforts geared towards alleviating the suffering of the masses (Ololo&Owonibe, 2017). Efforts at fighting corruption by successive government resulted in the establishment of anti-corruption agencies like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC). However, the fight against corruption has not been won, as it continues to permeate all spheres of our nation. Presently, Nigeria ranks 149/180 most corrupt nation in the world based on Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2020 courtesy Transparency International.

Presence of weak population of followers – as much as Nigeria’s problems lies squarely with the leadership, it also revolves around the large population of the led/followers who have over the years refused to hold their leaders accountable. Nigeria is the only country where citizens vote in people who have not accomplished anything positive in their society except for ethnic or religious affiliation. Even where a leader fails to fulfill a single campaign promise, such leader is still voted into office for a second time despite knowing that he lacks the capacity and capability to perform. Therefore, the followership in Nigeria are equally as guilty as the leadership. For Nigeria to develop and stand tall among the comity of nations, the citizens must rise to the occasion of holding their leaders accountable, vote in quality leaders and, vote out un-performing ones without recourse to ethnic and religious sentiments. In addition, those whose names are found to be tainted with corruption should never be given a second chance, as that way we can make meaningful progress.

Conclusion

The paper submits that leadership is a strong factor in the growth and development of any nation, as no nation can flourish and progress under bad leadership. Where and when leadership is right, the led will also follow in their footsteps and it will automatically permeate the society or nation and vice versa. Indeed, nations are built by men and women with the will power and vision to accomplish great things for their people and nation. Nigeria will require youthful dynamic, committed, determined and persistent leaders as well as an enlighten citizens/masses that will vote in credible leaders devoid of sentiments in order to realize her full potentials and the collective vision to launch self in the comity of nations. With good, purposeful leadership and



committed and dedicated followership Nigeria will rise and truly stand tall within the international community.

Recommendations

Based on the issues raised in the paper, the following recommendations are made:

Nigeria needs a new kind of leadership. A crop of leaders that are young, dynamic, creative, energetic, courageous and most importantly de-tribalized. It is the kind of leadership that can take us to growth and development.

Nigerian leaders should walk their talk by leading an exemplary lives devoid of corruption, see the offices they occupy as an opportunity to serve the public and not to be worshipped by the masses.

The new leaders should come up with policies that will lift majority of Nigerians out of poverty and also address the issues of insecurity and corruption.

The citizens should desist from selling their votes, avoid voting people with questionable background, and should above all hold their leaders accountable.

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