

ROBERT NOZICK CONCEPT OF THE STATE AND NIGERIAN STATE: A REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

Many individuals and groups have made claims that Nigeria is the most populous black nation on earth blessed with both human and natural resources, and also the giant of Africa. But in Nigeria today, the reverse seems to be the case in terms of abuses on human rights, undue influences of government over her citizenry, resulting to inequality, hunger, poverty, servitude, subjection, lack of good governance and development. This plays out a scene where there has been issues of miscarriage of justice, lack of respect, insecurity, lack of freedom and the state capture by the government officials in Nigeria. Thus, this paper examines Robert Nozick's concept of the state, with a view to guaranteeing equality, justice and development in the Nigerian state. It reflects on Nozick's philosophy and Nigerian state, for the promotion of human rights, better governance and development. Through the method of analysis the issues of discussion will be clarified and better understood. The paper finds that undue influences of the state on the citizens, issues of poverty and inequality, are detrimental to the individual and societal development and growth. Hence, the works suggests Nozick's philosophy as a panacea to problem of human rights abuses, poverty, inequality, and development in Nigeria.

Keywords: State, Individual, Poverty, Inequality, Justice, and Development.

INTRODUCTION

An inclusive development has been a panacea to challenges of poverty and inequality in any society. Presently in Nigeria issues of inequality and poverty have been a very big challenge to development, whereby some government officials have been directly or indirectly involved in counter-development of the state. Thus, George-Anokwuru and Inimino (2024) argue that income inequality increases the incidence of poverty in Nigeria, which is caused by a culture of rent-seeking and corruption, and political elites who are disconnected from the daily problems of the people. Accordingly, some scholars buttressed that "Nigerian development and the actualization of the National Development plans have been hindered by bad leadership" (Deedam, Akpe, & Emeto, 2019). From the above, one may observe that the bane of development in Nigeria includes corruption, bad governance and leadership, which ensued to poverty, inequality, hunger, insecurity, human rights abuse, lack of freedom and development.

Meanwhile, all these have been explained through the economic and technocratic point of view (Chukwrah, Nwachukwu, Nnamani, & Okeke, 2020, Abang 2025, Isa, Adamu, & Jibril, 2025), hence the need to look at it through the existential and philosophical lens in order to proffer solution to the problems. Let us examine Robert Nozick's philosophy as a framework for

addressing issues of counter development in Nigeria as relates to poverty, inequality, injustice and human rights abuses.

ROBERT NOZICK'S CONCEPT OF THE STATE

Robert Nozick was an American and Harvard Professor of Philosophy, who was born on 16 November 1938 and died on 23 January 2002. He was born in Brooklyn to Russian immigrants, and Nozick studied in Columbia College and Princeton where he got his PhD in 1963 (O'Grady, 2002). He was later influenced by the ideas of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Friedrich Hayek among others. According to Nozick because of the legitimate nature of the state as an authority, it will be against the freedom and rights of individuals, since the government rules on the people will impact and entails the use of force and imposition.

Thus, Robert Nozick (1974) believes that in the state of nature individuals have rights but they have challenges in protecting their rights. In order to protect their rights, citizens form a 'mutual-protection associations' or 'private defense agencies', that transformed to a 'single protective monopoly' as a result of mergers, rational self-interest and market pressures in a geographical area overtimes. Through this process a minimal state was naturally conceived, where there are rights to liberty, life and property without coercion, and a justified moral form of government. Nozick in the second paragraph of the preface of his work *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974, ix) corroborates this;

Our main conclusions about the state are that a minimal state, limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on, is justified; that any more extensive state will violate persons' rights not to be forced to do certain things, and is unjustified; and that minimal state is inspiring as well as right. Two noteworthy implications are that the state may not use its coercive apparatus for the purpose of getting some citizens to aid others, or in order to prohibit activities to people for their own good or protection.

From the above, the state functions as a "Night-Watchman" who has a duty to protect every individual in the society against force, fraud, theft, and helps to enforce any contract. If the state goes beyond this function it is violating individual rights. Also, Nozick (1974) advocates for absolute rights of individuals especially rights to life, liberty and property, and nobody has to go against these rights even the state.

Accordingly, Nozick in order to justify his minimal state talked about the entitlement theory of justice. Here, the minimal state is justified through the three principles of justice such as; justice in acquisition, justice in transfer, and justice in rectification. For Nozick (1974) any 'distribution of holdings' in the society is just if and only if everyone in such society is entitled to whatever he/she (they) has. Thus, he summarizes;

One general outlines of the theory of justice in holdings are that the holdings of a person are just if he is entitled to them by the principles of justice in acquisition and transfer, or by the principle of rectification of justice (as specified by the first two principles). If each person's holdings are just, then the total set (distribution) of holdings is just (Nozick 1974, p.153).

From the above, Nozick believes that; to appropriate something is just if it does not put others into disadvantages (justice in acquisition), a distribution can be just if it comes from another just distribution by voluntary exchange without fraud or by force (justice in transfer), and if holdings were unjustly transferred or acquired (by force, fraud, theft) there is need to correct the injustice, retribute, and restore to a just society. So for Nozick (1974) any distribution of property will be just if it comes from a “just acquisition, transfer or a rectification of past injustices”. One can observe that Nozick endorses a state whose duty is to strictly protect the rights of individuals, ensure voluntary relationship and interaction. Let us examine the state of Nigerian Nation.

THE STATE OF NIGERIAN NATION

Nigeria as a nation is richly blessed with massive geographical area and various natural resources such as crude oil, natural gas, gold, coal, bauxite, and market ability for economic development (Ikyase & Okeke, 2017). It also has human resources that needs to be developed to effect positive changes in her socioeconomic development (Isa et al., 2024). But with all these blessings and wealth, Nigerian citizens suffer and wallow in abject poverty and inequality (Abang, 2025). Bemoaning the situation, Piwuna at a press conference observes that “ordinary citizens of our country have become the victims of prolonged political manipulations and economic exploitation by the ruling class and their foreign sponsors” (Erunke, 2025, p.1).

As a result of the above there has been insecurity in various parts of the country. The activities of Bokoharam, bandits and Fulani herdsmen has negatively affected the social and economic life of Nigerians (Emmanuel, Ilesanmi, Alimba, & Awodoyin, 2025, Haruna & Ezirim, 2023) Further, the activities of the kidnappers, unknown gunmen and organ harvesters has continued to ravage the life and activities of Nigerian citizens (Adeyanju, Nwogwugwu, & Adewumi, 2025, Ugwuoke, 2023). On the issue of infrastructure and development, we experience counter-development in Nigeria, where there is infrastructural decay and structural failures (Akindele, Okanlawon, & Oluesi, 2023, Rufus & Bufumoh, 2017). It might interest one to know that there are places one visited a decade ago and there was a good road, school blocks, electricity, hospitals and pipe-borne water, but if one goes back there the facilities are no longer in a good shape or functional. Also, Nigeria’s infrastructure has been grossly inadequate to lead to any development. Many individuals, communities and society lack basic amenities such as electricity, good roads, pipe-borne water, good and adequate housing, hospital and education facilities.

The worst nightmare is the issue of state capture in Nigeria by her leaders, which exalts systemic corruption that favour politicians and their cronies, to the detriment of common good. Toyin Falola (2022, p.3) aptly captures the scenario thus;

In Africa, generally, and Nigeria specifically, another reason for the bastardization of institutions is the powerful people in control. African leaders are yet to evolve from the philosophy of control by all means possible or necessary to shared leadership, which has become the hallmark of good governance in contemporary times... So, for the African bureaucrats, when the organizations and institutions are seized by whatever means possible, it would enable them to carry out their uncivil intentions on helpless majority...For example the country’s security institutions have been under the control of the elites, which accounts for

why they deployed security operatives to intimidate young Nigerians who were demonstrating their grievances during the popular #EndSARS protest.

Here, the Nigerian political elites manipulate and influence state laws, institutions and policies to favour their selfish interest. For instance, on the 29th May 2023 on the swearing in occasion of President Tinubu of Nigeria, he removed fuel subsidy without setting up the necessary mechanisms to cushion the effect on the people. When he saw the consequences he brought in some palliatives to reduce the effect on the people such as CNG buses, minimum wage, wage award, promises of economic development and prosperity etc, until now most of these promises has not been actualized and Nigerians are yet to see the benefits of the removal of fuel subsidy (Muhammad, 2024, Abdulyakeen & Mumuni, 2024). As if that is not enough the President embarked on a tax reform, which was implemented on 1st January 2026 (Akewushola, 2025) and is yet to be harmonized at the detriment of poor citizen who are been taxed without commensurate benefits from government.

All these have been the drive of poverty and inequality experienced by Nigerians. As a result of this, an average and poor Nigerian citizens have lost hope in their judiciary, legislators and even the executives, since they cannot go to court and win a favourable judgement without bias, expect a people centered policies and laws, and even good governance. Accordingly, Asogwa, Asogwa, & Ugwuanyi, (2022) observe that the “executive whittled down the legislative power of the legislators through the padding of the budget...the executive arm of government captures the security sectors by assigning a humongous amount of money to the sector...members of the electoral commission continue to be appointed by the presidency”. Thus, this breeds corruption and affects the quality of leadership and governance to the detriment of Nigerian development and growth. One of the greatest concern about the Nigerian state is that the politicians especially the members of National Assembly and 31 Governors now sing another national anthem in Nigeria “On Your Mandate We Shall Stand President Tinubu” whenever they gather in a meeting with the President (Adewale, 2026, Oyedokun, 2024). One may ask, how this set of people can provide good governance and a democratic dividend to the people.

From the above, one can see how the Nigerian state is handled by her leadership and government. No wonder, there is persistence injustice on some group of people, abuse of human rights, corruption, bad governance, insecurity, violence, over taxation etc, that have ensued to poverty, inequality and counter-development in Nigeria. Let's have a philosophical reflection of the Nigerian situation relying on the philosophy of Robert Nozick.

NOZICK'S CONCEPT OF THE STATE AND THE NIGERIAN SITUATION: A REFLECTION

From the foregoing, one may observe that Robert Nozick's philosophy can help to address some of Nigerian challenges as presented above especially the issue of poverty and inequality in relation to individual and national development and growth. On the issue of state capturing by government officials and insecurity in the country, Nozick's philosophy emphasizes on the minimal interference of the government in the state, who should act as a night-watchman and a protective agency of individual members of the state. Here, the government has the sole responsibility of protecting every individual against any form of attack, violence, theft, and fraud. And in any case

where individuals or groups in the state has any deal or business, it is the duty of the government to enforce such contract, to bring about peaceful coexistence in the society. Juxtaposing this with the current situation in the country today, you will see that in some cases of armed robbery, kidnapping, attack, banditry, or any other form of insecurity there are complicity of state actors and local leaders (Mahmud & Maigari, 2024). Thus, the Nigerian government ought to stand firm in addressing the issues of insecurity in Nigeria, not waiting for USA or Israel to remind them of their duty as a state. Also if they are overwhelmed by these challenges, they should seek for help among the comity of nation in order to protect the individual rights and lives.

On the issues of human rights abuses, inequality and poverty, Nozick's philosophy tries to address it by emphasizing on self-ownership and absolute rights of individuals. Here, individual are responsible for themselves, they own their talents, product of their labour, bodies and no one has right to initiate force or constrain them for anything, even the government has no such right. This will encourage the ownership of lands and securing of resources for investment, without being afraid of the government who will always claim the ownership of land and investment, and can take them away from individual owners. This calls to mind the case of the Minister of FCT Abuja among other state governors who had destroyed people homes, investment and properties as a result of their selfish interest (Tsa, 2026). Imagine if in our country human rights are respected and everyone gets his due without struggling or fighting for ones right. A place one gets admission, job, contract, leadership opportunity, good healthcare and education, among other basics needs of life without hassle, such a country will be productive and known for peace, wealth, and development. Here, everyone will be an end in themselves instead of a means to an end. Thus, Nozick philosophy encourages absolute rights to liberty, property, and life and these guarantees justice, peace, productivity, human dignity, equality and development in the society.

Concerning the issues of injustice, corruption and resource management in Nigeria, where individuals or state representatives have engaged in fraud, theft, and force while acquiring some properties or dealing with the people. Through the principle of rectification Nozick advices that all the victims of injustices must be compensated and proper restitution done. For instance all the victims of tribal politics such as Biafrans (Igbos) and resource control such as Niger Deltans among others in Nigeria must be properly and adequately compensated, to lift them out of poverty and address the issue of inequality. Further, we have had a several selective punishment on the case of corruption, because of ones tribe or political affiliations while others go free. Here, Nozick is advocating that anyone, group or society, that acquired any property or holdings unjustly, must rectify it, hence any corrupt person or official must return his loot, while any resources wrongly allocated must be rectified.

Furthermore, on the issue taxation where Nigerians have mixed feelings on lack of trust and transparency on government and increased financial and economic hardship among individuals of the society. Nozick observes that taxation is a kind of slavery, which is a forced labour that takes part of one's wage. He likened it to seizing hours of someones labour and requesting him to work again. Thus, he believes that taxation is morally unjustifiable and is the same thing to theft and forced labour. Therefore, Nozick encourages a voluntary exchange which supports a free market system where there is economic outcomes, which are caused by free interaction among individual and forced. Here, individuals are encouraged to show love, support, and share with one another whatever they have especially the needy, instead of government forcing them to pay tax. So Robert Nozick (1974) advocates a voluntary act of compassion (duty), not a legal obligation, and one,

groups or state should also endorse this idea to reduce poverty and inequality in our society. Hence, Nigerian government should device another means in managing their resources and redistribution of wealth in order not to hurt her citizen financially and economically. Thus, issues of inequality and poverty could be tackled if the state start addressing the abuse of human rights, minimizing government interference in the state, and rectifying unjust wealth acquisition.

CONCLUSION

Having reflected on Robert Nozick's concept of the state in order to proffer solution to the issues of poverty, inequality, justice and development in the Nigerian state. The paper examined the state of the Nigerian nation and found that there are undue influences of the state on her citizens that brought about poverty, inequality and counter-development. Through the lens of Nozick's philosophy, the paper believes that the issues of poverty, inequality, and counter-development in Nigeria could be addressed by emphasizing on respecting the human rights, minimal state interference by government, rectification of injustices on individuals and voluntary charity. Once, one achieves this in Nigeria, there will be individual and societal development and growth.

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