



CRITICAL EVALUATION OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND MORAL CHARACTER IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

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Abstract

Political leadership and moral character consistently remain one of the central determinants and topics of trust in governance, democratic stability and national development in the world today. Leadership failure predicaments in Nigeria have frequently been linked and identified as one major obstacle amidst many others bedeviling Nigeria as a country for long now, which has prevented the country from having and/or experiencing strong political stability, social progress and economic development as a sovereign nation. The study critically examines the actual relationship between political leadership and moral character in Nigerian politics. It evaluates how moral decadence such as dishonesty, corruption, abuse of power, lack of accountability and nepotism have systematically weakened political governance structures and democratic agencies and institutions in Nigeria. This work employs the philosophical method of hermeneutics and evaluation within ethical and socio-political realm to deeply investigate into Nigeria's leadership and moral character with educational formations to ascertain where the Nigerian problem lies, and to know if those ruling or leading Nigeria as leaders are really and actually qualified or capable of leading the nation in the first place, and know if they are equipped with the necessary required human capacity, intellectual, moral and ethical development to lead. The study, therefore, reveals that the crisis of leadership clearly noticeable in Nigeria today is not merely politically and institutionally oriented but also fundamentally moral and ethically oriented. The research further argues how the sidelining or lack of ethical and moral values and virtues among Nigerian political leaders and elites has tremendously contributed to the glaringly systemic public distrust, corruption, underdevelopment, injustice and poor policy-making and implementation well seen and known in the country today. The work concludes by stamping suggestively that sustainable economic, transformational, political and institutional structures in Nigeria without a second thought require moral and ethical leadership highly embedded in public service-oriented mindset, equity, justice, capacity, accountability, fairness and integrity for the betterment of Nigeria and its citizenry as a whole.

Keywords: Nigerian Politics, Moral Character, Political Leadership, Governance, Character Education, Ethics, Corruption



Introduction

The menace of political leadership remains one of the most discussed issues in Nigerian political history till date. Since Nigeria's independence and self-rule and even before then, it has grappled with leadership challenges that have significantly hindered its national development, governance, political consolidation and democratic stability. Notwithstanding the numerous natural and human resources, Nigeria continues to struggle with unemployment, corruption, insecurity, underdevelopment, poverty and infrastructural deficiencies. This has led many contemporary political scholars and thinkers to consistently attribute Nigeria's quagmires to lack of proper and effective political leadership, poor and insensitive governance and not lack of natural and human resources, and this has remained a core impediment to the country's developmental trajectories. In a political country, it is the sole duty of the leaders to determine the right institutions and their quality, to make sure proper policies are made and adequately implemented in order to attract public confidence in governance and in the political spheres.

Consequently, moral character is the ethical qualities expected in human beings that shape their personal conduct, thereby leading them to maintain integrity, justice, fairness, accountability, honesty, empathy, responsibility and compassion in themselves and in public affairs and services and as a leader propagates it and also leads by example. Leadership without moral character often degenerates into a worse form of leadership, which includes but not limited to, intimidation, exploitation, selfishness or selfish rule, disobedience to the rule of law, dismissal of due process, and total abuse of public office and trust, clearly seen in Nigeria of today and for long now. History has been kind enough to point out that throughout the epoch of philosophy, there are so many works ranging from the ancient era to the contemporary period concerning moral character of individuals in the society in which they live. There is an argument about whether good character is the sole key to good actions and behaviors during the ancient philosophical period, especially in matters of leadership and setting examples as required.

Specifically, from the era of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Immanuel Kant, one of the major arguments that took over the era is that the main key to get people to behave the actually way they ought to is to inculcate good character in them. Socrates stated that an unexamined life is not worth living in his moral teachings, hence, portraying that morality is a very essential attribute of human beings and leaders of the state should imbibe it for effectiveness in leadership. Thus, the teaching and inculcation of moral character education into the citizens and those who would be leaders tomorrow is very pertinent and imperative to be able to instill leadership skills such that good governance and honest and compassionate leadership can be adequately and properly inculcated and developed via character education for the good and betterment of the society. Plato emphasized in his masterpiece *The Republic* that rulers should be trained to possess leadership skills of wisdom and virtue because for him, leadership without virtue invites total corruption and can destroy the state in no distant time. Character is seen as a good moral distinctive behaviors or characteristics that make people different from each other which could be either positive or negative, but in this context we shall use the term as a positive term to explain good moral behaviors and actions of people especially as leaders in a nation like Nigeria.

Furthermore, leadership, known as a group of individuals, rulers or leaders of a particular political entity is responsible in the management, guiding, influencing, controlling as well as directing the



political life and affairs of a particular society or country. Its functions extend to committed protection and guarding of the citizens as well as the sovereign protection of the geographical entity or territory politically apportioned to them during the state creation, to mention but a few. Immanuel Kant, navigating this worrisome issue, argues that ethical actions must be grounded in whatever the leader does as their sole duty and a leader should maintain a universal moral principle in line of his duties. This simply means that political leaders have moral responsibility and obligations towards the citizens of the state by virtue of their office. But Nigeria in this case seems to be a different scenario altogether which is a very terrible and painful situation as a sovereign nation among the committee of nations globally. This work therefore critically examines the nexus and systematic connections between political leadership and moral character in Nigerian politics, by carefully focusing on the role of moral failures among Nigerian politicians and political leaders and how it has terribly contributed to the governance menace and crisis seen in Nigeria today.

Political Leadership and Moral Character in Nigerian Society

Nigeria has had a long, painful and excruciating history of disguised political democratic leadership in the country at different periods starting from her time of independence in 1st October, 1960, but looking at it today, little or nothing has actually changed and it is clearly glaring to the eyes without much cognitive stress. Consequently, the pertinent question remains what is actually the problem with Nigerian? Looking at it critically, it seems that ignorance, greed and selfishness have been in control of the many leaders that has been governing and leading the country in one time or the other. Being ignorant of the requisite knowledge and skills of leadership through poor and half-baked education and moral character training as required in leadership matters obviously breeds lack of selfless service and pursuit of the good of every citizen in the country by those that govern.

Consequently, from the historical point of view, the years 1914, the late 1950s, and early 1960s are remarkable and very important years in Nigerian history. This particular year of 1914 is known as the amalgamation year, the year when the Southern and Northern protectorate of Nigeria was forcefully amalgamated without the citizens' consent by Britain through the instrumentality of Sir Frederick Lord Lugard, a British man, while 1960 was the year Nigeria got her independence and became a Republic in 1963. A critical reassessment at the history of ideas philosophically and otherwise would reveal the importance of character and moral character in leadership in the matter of good reasoning and thinking to good human leadership for the good of all. In this stance, Hoffmann argues in the matter of human political leadership and character behaviour that Nigeria's corruption problem reflects a broad crisis of ethical leadership. She contends that anti-corruption efforts have often been weakened by political interference, selective enforcement, and inconsistent commitment among leaders. She maintains that corruption persists because of weak ethical leadership, politicized anti-corruption efforts, and limited accountability. She then recommends strengthening integrity, supporting ethical role-models, and building institutions that reward honest leadership and hold public official accountable.¹ In this way, Hoffmann critically emphasizes on the real importance of integrity in leadership, ethical role-models in character, and holistic institutional reform to be able to rebuild public trust in government and build a better society for all.



According to Berkowitz and Bier, character is the complex set of psychological characteristics that enable an individual to act as a moral agent. In other words, character is multifaceted. It is psychological. It relates to moral functioning.² This shows that character in leadership is very important and should not be compromised by any means as well as indispensable. In addition, Lickona, in his own argument, sees character as having three phase hence, he outlined them by opining thus:

The first phase is moral knowing, which includes moral awareness and moral reasoning, and deciding the right course of action. The second phase is moral feeling, which is a concern about doing the right thing. Moral feeling consists of conscience, self-esteem, empathy, and humility. The third phase is moral action, which means acting with competence and will.³

For many years now, there has been a growing concentration concerning the moral aspects of education as a result of moral decadence and impunity in our societies today. It is pertinent to know that moral education involves the close guidance and teaching of good behaviors, virtues, characters, and values among other things to all people, especially the young in the society of today. Moral virtue and value teachings in schools and among youths in polytechnics, colleges and universities would immensely aid in providing them with a calculated sense of philosophical acumen, decorum, logical reasoning and interpretations, orderliness, good listening skills, compassionate personality trait, respect in general especially to elderly ones, human relationship management, politeness, corruption free minds, citizens oriented policies as leaders, and lawfulness etc in their dealings with others and the society at large.

Furthermore, morals and morality penetrate every aspect of human life no matter how it is conceived or envisaged. Corruption is a vice in politics which is attributed to moral decadence of the individuals involved. Hence, Idowu et al clearly opine that poor political leadership, corruption, and weak accountability have prevented democratic governance from producing sustainable national development. For them, political leaders should demonstrate honesty, competence, and commitment to the public interest if democracy is to improve citizens' welfare.⁴ This portrays that corruption, which is embedded in moral decadence, drastically weakens good and accountable political leadership from performing optimally in their governmental duties and functions in the interest of all and for the wellbeing of the state. Successful leadership obviously will not be possible if a good sense of morals is not present and/or inculcated in the citizenry in the society. One way of instilling moral virtues and character consciousness in individuals is by moral education in both formal and informal forms of training and learning with a more special emphasis on character for its importance cannot be overemphasized. In this case, Chemers clearly opined that:

Leadership research can be reduced to focusing on the functions that leaders must perform to be successful. ... leaders must produce an image that arouses trust in followers, develops relationships with subordinates that enable subordinate to move toward individual and collective goal attainment, and uses their knowledge, skills and material resources to accomplish the group's mission. But for a leader to instill trust in followers and develop relationship that enables subordinates to move toward goal attainment, a leader requires character.⁵



Following the above therefore, it has been widely acclaimed that character is the most important attribute of a good leadership. This simply means that a good leader must possess certain character traits responsible for good leadership in society for the good of all. Consequently, it becomes very obvious that any formal or informal and/or any form of education devoid of moral character is counter-productive, and may not be judged as sound or reasonable education in all ramifications. A good political leader requires the character and good virtues of equity, fairness and justice, which undeniably has a strong root to sound moral character training and education globally. In addition, Kenekukwu lends his voice on this by arguing that ethics should be central to political leadership. He contended that honesty, justice, integrity, responsibly, and selfless service are indispensable virtues for public office holders. Ethical leadership is indispensable to Nigerian politics, and lasting reform requires strong institutions, effective laws, active civic participation alongside personal moral character.⁶ Oni et al. argue in their own point of view that effective political leadership must be grounded in integrity, accountability, transparency, and respect for democratic institutions. Nigeria's democratic challenges stem not only from weak institutions but also from leadership characterized by corruption, patronage, abuse of power, and limited accountability.⁷

More so, moral character education involves a conscious attempt to model and re-model, guide, and teach young people good manners, behavior, and how to reason appropriately with critical thinking acumen and in the right manner, to aid them towards a good and accurate judgment in whatever they do in life, because tomorrow they would become the leaders of the society in which they live. Thus, providing the youths with basic academic knowledge and skills are good but not good enough in molding them to better individuals tomorrow for their good and the good of the society. In this case, Ajayi and Fashagba contended that Nigerian politics is often shaped by personal ambition, ethnic and religious loyalties, and patronage networks rather than competence and moral character. For them, these leadership patterns weaken democratic institutions, encourage corruption, and reduce public confidence in government.⁸ Good character development should be paramount in the human society today for a better future for all especially the young ones who are said to be the leaders of tomorrow. As stated above, there is an urgent need for moral and good character formation and education in our society today because academic achievements alone do not determine educational progress and achievements of individuals these days as well as political, social and economic development of a society. This as well is in line with the human religious instructions that when righteous, just or good-moral-character individual(s) rule or lead the land, the people rejoice, because obviously they will be better-off than they were earlier with a Leviathan and/or an authoritative, insensitive leader.

Consequently, the goals of moral education are mostly and essentially to raise good moral children and youths by teaching them society's core ethical values like fairness, caring, love, compassion, diligence, integrity, good manners etc which will make for a progressive, just, productive, and democratic society with fair play, equity, equality and justice. Aristotle in his idea, introduced the concept of virtue ethics by emphasizing that moral excellence is an important and essential part of public life. He stated that good governance clearly depends on the rulers' virtuous cultivation of good habits like prudence and justice. Note worthily, it is quite noticeable that when the young people grow in good moral standards and character, they aspire to do the right things, do their best and try to lead exemplary lives of purpose that will motivate others for good in the society wherever they found themselves. It is also essential to note that moral education and that of



character education may not really and exactly be the same or synonymous as it looks. Moral education can be said to be the tree and the mother general of character education, while, character education can be said to play the significant role of one of the branches of moral educational tree. Standing on this therefore, Joseph, Pamela and Efron carefully opined that:

The seven worlds of moral education are character education, cultural heritage, caring community, peace education, social action, just community and ethical inquiry. Each of them is an approach to moral education. ... moral education is a coherent endeavour created with purpose and deliberation. Educators in moral worlds believe that they must create a process through which young people can learn to recognize values that represent prosocial behaviours, engage in actions that bring about a better life for others, and appreciate ethical and compassionate conduct.⁹

From the above, we see that moral education play a very vital role and so beneficial in forming good character education which aims at inculcating and promoting the moral values needed in the society. Character education seeks to develop excellence humans with unquestionable moral standards, fulfilling and purposeful life, productive acumen, as well as a fair, compassionate, developing, flourishing, and just society for all. Subsequently, the concept of character can be seen in different ways, like as a psychological or a philosophical concept depending on where one tries to apply it. By the mere fact of seeing the objective of character education as one of the developmental factors of building good characters in children and youths, character then becomes very pertinent in explaining good political leadership as a concept especially in Nigerian society.

Furthermore, character is a very important and essential leadership quality and attribute in the human society. Sarros and Cooper pressing further on this opined that without character, our actions are routing and often meaningless. Character helps identify who we are.¹⁰ According to Barlow, Jordan, and Hendrix, character means, the enduring marks left by life that sets one apart from others. Typically, enduring marks are set early in life by our religious beliefs, parental influences, and a child's early interactions. Character, is also marked throughout our lives as we partake in great divides in our nation's history or solve moral dilemmas throughout our lives.¹¹ From the above, it is obvious that an individual's character largely defines who they really are. Hence, for a moral agent to act positively or negatively hugely depends on their moral character and moral upbringing. With this assertion, character becomes a very strong identifying factor explaining who a person is and what they are capable of doing at any point in time especially as it concerns leadership and/or political leadership in a particular nation or society. Therefore, character is seen as doing the right thing despite or not minding the outside pressures to do the otherwise or do the contrary and the opposite.

Subsequently, in this vein, leadership and character should not be taken for granted and should not be separated in any way because they both work hand in hand, and obviously, cannot do without the other or simply inseparable. They are strongly intertwined and are meant to glue together in all ramifications. We often expect our good leaders of conscience to be firm in character, which means, they should have a good moral backup to every of their actions and behaviors, hence, those who do not have such should not be allowed to smell the highly placed political offices because it is going to be catastrophic to the wellbeing of the society if the citizens allows them to attain it. Most leaders who are seen as having good moral character have most often been identified by



many as being authentic and wonderful leaders of their people. *Gallup Leadership Institute Summit* puts authentic leadership in the right way in the following words and articulations, authentic leaders know who they are and what they believe in; show consistency between their values, ethical reasoning and actions; develop positive psychological states such as confidence, hope, and resilience in themselves and their associates; and are widely known and respected for their integrity.¹²

The above is clear enough due to the fact that human authenticity is showcased mostly through human characters, behaviours and actions. The continuous interplay between effective leadership and character has pushed many scholars and political thinkers to tackle them in their own different ways of understanding the relationship between the two concepts, hence, according to Josephson in his own viewpoint stated that character is the foundation of effective leadership in that what leaders achieve when they lead will be shared more by the collection of dispositions, habits, attitudes that make up their character than by their education and skills. ...it is a character that determines whether they will effectively use their knowledge and skills.¹³ For him, good and quality leaders must possess certain specified traits like good habits, attitudes, honesty and integrity, zeal and ability to lead and propel, as well as rational and cognitive powers etc, for them to be called good and authentic leaders of the people. That is to say that, a successful leader must possess these qualitative traits and qualities even more to be referred to as a good and wonderful leader in the society.

Consequently, in Nigerian case, Nigerian leaders of old like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Awolowo, M. I. Okpara, Tafawa Balewa, and Ahmadu Bello, immediately after independence were said to have swung into action and performed better politically and otherwise than those who followed after them as well as the present leaders of the country in showcasing character and active learning in leadership skills. Nigeria before and worse still now has been known as a country that is continuously facing line-ups of political leadership and governance problems and different crisis within her territory, hence, the urgent reason for moral formation based on character training and learning in order to serve as a probable and prospective solution to the litany of ills and unquantifiable predicaments bedeviling Nigeria. Nyampa and Oshewolo's stated in their political leadership argument that budget padding, bribery, poor transparency, abuse of oversight powers, and questionable constituency projects reveals significant ethical weaknesses in legislative leadership. For them, moral failures among political leaders reduce legislative effectiveness, weaken democratic accountability, and diminish public confidence in government.¹⁴

Character no doubt, is a very essential leadership trait for authentic, successful, and effective leadership, and it is that which a good successful political leadership in a particular society and country like Nigeria cannot do without if they wish to succeed politically in the real sense. It is quite important to note that the earlier Nigerian leaders mentioned above were not the only leaders at that time, but every one of them known as the key players of the Nigerian project especially at independence played genuine party, regional and ethnic politics but still looks out for a way to make Nigeria better, peaceful, progressive and harmonious for all citizens especially their regions of concern according to the powers vested on them politically. In line of their duty, they played conscientious politics filled with moral character because of their good educational backgrounds



and academic prowess and thorough knowledge of good governance and what exactly leadership is all about for the good of all in society.

More so, these political individuals were well-read in their areas of academic disciplines and applied morality in governance with good conscience for the good of their people, society and country. They sought betterment, unity and progress of their society and country without being too dubious, corrupt, egocentric, selfish or self-centered in their dealings in government, regional and party politics as it is pathetically seen among the Nigerian leaders of today. They were there for their people and for their good and the good of the country at large, which eventually earned them the overwhelming respect and honours they enjoyed back then, and even posthumously still receive today from their people and the country at large. Hence, this is a clear case of moral character and character education expressed in selfless service to their people and country during their time as leaders.

Moreover, notwithstanding their mistakes and flaws in leadership, politics and governance, Nigeria's first set of leaders were able to manage the country and kept it reasonably united and economically vibrant, viable and progressive better than what is seen presently in Nigeria as regards leadership. The present-day Nigerian leaders have helped tremendously to scatter and destroy a forceful union that has been pampered for many years now with reasonable tolerance for peace and progress through their different unreasonable and insensitive negligence, actions and inactions seen clearly every single day. This is purely the real truth, especially when we compare, assess and consider what has been happening in Nigeria and how the country's affairs have been piloted and still being piloted and the type of leaders we have since after them.

In essence, good leadership, however, entails capacity, a sound and focused mind, competence, character and moral behavioural acumen to propel a particular human society to a progressive and proper developmental track, thereby doing everything positively possible to achieve set goals and objectives for the good of the inhabitants of that particular society. For Wale Adebawale, Nigeria has maintained democratic rule since 1999, the quality of political leadership remains a major challenge. He enumerated corruption, weak accountability, poor governance, elite domination, and clientelism as factors that undermine democratic development. He argues that democratic success depends not only on institutions but also on the moral commitment of political leaders to public service.¹⁵ Visionary leaders are said to develop and have moral and ethical values, create and interpret the aims of their vision and missions always and are also imbued with proper philosophy of life. They are seen as people who produce meaningful living for the people, roll-models to the young and youths, and as well refer as the models of a good progressive society in general wherever they are found. Good leaders are known as very courageous, patient, very intelligent and talented, industrious and hardworking, full of integrity, focused, persistent and consistent with a powerful vision which they are very intentional about for the good of their society and the nation they govern. Consequently, for philosophers, leadership is not morally neutral but seriously interconnected to each other. For them, political authority automatically imposes ethical and moral responsibilities on the leaders and they must do everything possible to act accordingly for the betterment of the state. Hence, for effective political leadership embedded with moral character and character education to take root in Nigeria for possible unity, progress and development, leadership must be backed with moral character formation and educational competence and capacity in all ramifications for the good of the citizens and Nigeria at large.



Evaluation and Conclusion

Looking at the research discussions above, one could sincerely state that the problem in Nigeria and with Nigeria today is not brought about by her adoption of democracy as a form of government, but lack of moral and ethical character, intelligence, diligence, good conscience, empathy and compassion, people-oriented and proper political and moral education in the Nigerian political leaders. Leaders are supposedly meant to be wise, well-educated, and moral amidst all virtues. Committed, intelligent, morally educated and selfless leaders are solely needed in Nigeria for her progress and development in all sectors of the economy.

Good politically democratic leadership in any well-organized and properly arranged society should be selfless, character-oriented, enlightened, sensitive and passionate enough to citizens' and country's plights, compassionate, reasonably educated, well-mentored, as well as well-mannered in all ramifications. They should be well disciplined and honest, which is among the most important qualities of good political leadership and must be wanting in trustworthiness and moral character as well as God-fearing as a human creation of the Almighty, the invisible Creator (God). Therefore, there is a need for systematic moral education to be allowed a place in the school's general curriculum and guidelines in Nigeria education ministries and sectors. To achieve this, there must be a conducive environment for an effective moral learning process to take place and well-trained, qualified, moral and academic teachers and guardians adequately employed. A truly democratic Nigeria needs leadership embedded in good intellectual prowess, justice, ethical responsibility and accountability in all ramifications.

Hence, if the above ideals and recommendations is done, Nigeria would definitely find itself once again in the committee of great, progressive and prosperous nations of the world as it was moving earlier during the first republic in the late 1950s and early 1960s before 'things fall apart' as stated in Chinua Achebe's book and continues till date. A blind man cannot lead another blind man and hence, only philosopher kings who are well trained and thereby endowed with unquestionable intellectual prowess, certain acceptable ethical and moral character and skills are to rule the state as stated a great philosopher Plato of the ancient epoch. This is exactly what Nigeria nation should aspire for as it is right now. Those who will govern the country with high level of doggedness, intelligence, integrity, conscientiousness, and influence, to be able to propel and harness the country's human and natural resources to actualize proper sustainable national development in all sectors of the economy without any form of bias and prejudices, tribal sentiments and religious bigotry is indeed what Nigeria needs right now as key leaders, without which, it may be very difficult for Nigeria to reach its aspired and envisioned goals, potentials, and objectives as an independent nation in Africa and in the World at large.

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