

Democracy and the Crisis of Accountability in the Public Service in Nigeria

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issues relating to Nigerian politics and the crisis of accountability which has become all pervading. The political terrain has been polluted and the general picture is that it is now a terrain for quick ascendancy to power and privileges and not a means of service. Service component of politics in Nigeria has been relegated to the background. The paper also examined the genesis of political recklessness in Nigeria with its attendant manifestations. It also x-rayed the dimensions of accountability. The issue of corruption was identified as the strongest display of lack of accountability in Nigerian politics.

Keywords: Democracy; accountability; public service; Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Democracy in Nigeria is relatively new when compared with the older democracies of the world. Historically, the current Nigerian democracy may be termed the 3rd democratic experiment, since what would have been the 3rd was aborted in 1993. Nigeria at the moment is a democracy and our politics is based on the assumption or principle that the elected representatives are responsible and accountable to the public that elected them. This accountability according to [7] is enforced by the elections and those who do not deliver are thrown out. Vital has also noted that the anti-incumbency factor has become almost an axiom in Indian politics. That is what it ought to be, as practiced also in Western and other democracies. Unfortunately, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. It is almost impossible to throw out a non-performer because the incumbent uses all imaginable and unimaginable means to entrench himself. Added to this is the new political process of selection or name writing. A situation where election results are predetermined or where there are elections, the actual voting pattern does not correlate with the final scores is the outcome of the newfound political ingenuity!!

It is necessary to begin by explaining the three key words or concepts used in this paper: Democracy is a political system in which the people in a country rule through any form of government they choose to establish. In modern democracies, supreme authority is exercised for the most part by representatives elected by popular suffrage. The representative may be supplanted by the electorate according to legal procedures or recall or referendum, and they are responsible to the electorate. Simply put therefore, democracy is the rule by the people. It is the primary principle by which government and governmental systems have sought to justify their existence.

The crisis of accountability has to do with the recognition of the fact that accountability in Nigeria has been challenged to a crisis point. The crisis is now exerting an adverse impact on the national polity and a resolution of the crisis should definitely have a relieving impact on the national politics in Nigeria. Accountability therefore, implies that the government is accountable to her citizens.

Accountability has to do with the institutionalizing of the system of checks and balances in order to check excesses or abuse. Public service has to do with the business of government at all levels including all that preoccupies the politicians, elected and appointed officials, the elite leadership, the intelligentsia, the armed forces and other law enforcement agencies and not just the civil service or the parastatals [1]. Accountability is an all encompassing concept which has to do with the full and faithful discharge of assignment, responsibility, covenant or trust. This is considered central in all social relations, whether between individual or between servants of the state and government or between public servants and the people they are meant to serve.

Accountability in politics means that a political party or candidate who makes promises in elections must be able to deliver on the promises [7]. Failure to deliver amounts to disappointing the electorate who in turn have the moral obligation to ask for the recall of the elected officer. Unfortunately, again this has not been successfully carried out in Nigeria. In most democracies, when the electorate declares a vote of no confidence in the elected candidate, or his/her recall is called for, the candidate so affected resigns. Even in cases where there is overwhelming evidence of ineptitude or corruption, the recalcitrant politician in Nigeria sits tight. Generally, accountability can be measured in several areas or public service spanning through illegal enrichment, corruption, abuse of power, lack of transparency, false declaration, non implementation of laudable policies and programmes.

2. General Political Recklessness in the Public Service

Since the history of modern Nigeria, there have been very few politicians who were truly nationalists or patriots. Most of the political actors have always exhibited a self seeking agenda or programme. In other words, a good number of politicians, past and present, came to political limelight with the sole aim of what they get from the system not what they will contribute to improve the system. According to [1], the so called fathers of the nation replaced the Colonialists, and in most cases behaved worse than the worst Colonialist. The younger ones and those below, including political upstarts, naturally took a cue from the atypical leaders. The new political arrivals soon developed a wild culture of elitism, which soon divided the society into the arrived and the masses. The political elites or political heavyweights soon acquired expensive mentalities, life styles and tastes.

Furthermore, these hitherto unknown individuals tend to gain recognition through the acquisition of meaningless honours and titles (both traditional and academic). They are meaningless, because these titles do not really portray the recipient. Some have acquired honorary doctorate degrees and are addressed 'doctor' yet they can hardly express themselves. Some others have acquired chains of traditional titles, since in the Nigerian political terrain, you are not accorded much recognition except you have a title, be it chief or doctor. These 'political elites' within a short time of gaining political power or position begin to collect a retinue around themselves of everything including houses, cars, wives and concubines, some also acquire their personal security outfit, well armed; while others pay extra for keeping a number of policemen who ordinarily should be protecting the masses. These politicians ride in convoys of tinted glasses fitted with sirens and headlights fully beaming!!

As to be expected some of these political actors expenditure level is far beyond what their legitimate or legal income can accommodate. In order therefore to maintain the new life style, they device all conceivable means to get money to service the new found status and style. Naturally, evils like favouritism, prejudice, bigotry, corruption, take the centre stage. Instead of being agents of positive social change these 'political elites' become ruthless predators on the society or establishment they are supposed to serve or lead.

Sycophancy is gradually elevated to the highest height in the Nigerian political arena. There is now the emergence of political hero worshipers and cronies of the political class. They are political parasites that are ready to do anything under the sun to promote the causes of their political mentors even in the face of glaring ineptitude and poor performance of their political fathers. These political sycophants work extremely hard to convince their political benefactor that they are divinely chosen and that without them, the organization or the country is finished. Image laundering has suddenly become a new way of life in Nigeria's political setup. Consequently, while these public officers occupy whatever position, which was only bestowed on them on trust, they do all that is within their power to be there for as long as possible. In this same vein, those who are not there yet, do all they can to get there.

Lack of accountability, especially the corruption aspect of it has arisen not necessarily only from greed, but from mindset as well. This has to do with the psychological underpinning of misinterpreting one's official position. The political leaders have a perverted perception of power. A good number of them do not know the limits of their power. They forget that the public is the owner of what they are superintending over and that the public is watching. The crisis of accountability therefore in Nigeria has its roots in the political elite acting out their perverted perception of power.

3. Dimensions of Accountability

Accountability as a concept according to [3] is more than simply transparency. He asserted that it is a necessary component for outsider scrutiny of how an individual or corporate body plans and conducts its activities. [2, 4] viewed accountability as an individual or corporate body answering to a constituency or requiring some substantive standard against which to make a judgement. In other words, accountability implies that the government is accountable to her citizens. Accountability is noticed more by its absence, that is, the failure of the government or an agent of government or an elected or appointed officer to discharge official trust as given. [6] has put forward a simple definition of accountability as the process in which A answers to B (where Z has been prescribed by A and accepted by B). It has to do with responsiveness and being answerable to somebody or the people.

Lack of accountability manifests itself in a number of ways, for example, uncompleted projects. Nigerian physical environment is dotted with abandoned projects; some are as old as the first republic and non-functioning industrial establishments. This may explain why Nigeria, the 6th biggest world producer of oil and having four lame doc refineries, cannot meet domestic demands for petroleum products. The steel sector has also suffered severe knocks from political recklessness. A country with two major iron and steel industries and 4 inland rolling mills cannot produce 10% of domestic iron needs. Nigeria has the 2nd largest bitumen deposits in the world; yet up to 2010, exploitation has not commenced. Nigeria instead spends billions of dollars to import bitumen annually.

Lack of accountability also manifests itself in other areas like poor quality jobs executed and certificate of completion issued; political antagonism/venetta and discrimination. Funds are denied or withheld to some areas because of their perceived lack of political goodwill towards the government in power. As a result, location of industries, tertiary and health institutions are denied deserving communities. In addition, political office holders name institutions and establishments after themselves. The latest dimension is that some serving public officers now own and run universities and huge public funds are spent to fund their private programmes like burial of parents and relations.

All these forms of political misbehaviour are very serious breaches of accountability that could lead to poverty, suffering, and depressed economy. These may be responsible for the current high rate of inflation in Nigeria that has been put at 19.5%, plus the high level of criminality. Aspirants to public office must be prepared to be scrutinized by the electorate both before and after leaving office. All political failures should be blacklisted by the court of public opinion.

4. Corruption

Corruption is the unlawful, illegitimate and fraudulent acquisition of status, goods, services, position/privileges; that is, obtaining rights and privileges through methods and procedures that contravene existing laws and accepted procedures. When applied to public life, it means abuse of official trust for selfish and illegitimate personal, group or party gain. Corruption thrives on nutrients such as money, power, fear, insecurity and sex. [1] has noted very strongly that money is the most persuasive means of power and comfort, and that it plays a great role in the endemicity of corruption in Nigeria. The struggle for power in Nigeria has, to a great extent, been achieved through the corrupt use of money. And when these corrupt individuals get to power, corruption is adored and glorified.

Corruption is a negation of the accountability ethic of the public service. When rules are circumvented or double standards are applied with the aim of getting something, be it power, position or privilege, corruption is being perpetuated. A number of public servants and politicians fall into this category. A number of corrupt people know that what they are doing is wrong, but would quickly rationalize their actions especially in the mindset of economic social hardship and ineptitude in the public service.

Corruption continues to flourish in the public service and in the general polity, because generally moral standards here (in Nigeria) are low. This unfortunately is the situation in a number of developing countries. The world's largest democracy, India, is not left out [7]. Morality in public life is invariably the result of two factors. These are: the individual's sense of values and the state of prevailing social values. Individual's sense of value is what we derive or learn from our parents, religion and our teachers. Some values, on the other hand, have to do with the greater social tolerance today of corruption and general feeling, especially among

youth, that there is nothing we can do about it, we first have to live with and accept it as a way of life! Corruption is, therefore, perceived as inevitable in every segment of the society. This would not make corruption a justifiable social behaviour.

5. Societal Expectations from Government/Public Service

Government is seen basically as a 'management consultant'. Government is put in place to do those things the people cannot do cheaper and more easily. Government and their agents will be judged by their management performance according to the contract document; in this case the constitution of the country. Government and its functionaries must maintain liberty, freedom, rule of law, justice to everyone, fundamental human rights and general good governance. Government must be efficient both in the discharge of their duties and in the use of resources. The government must also realize that the people (the masses) are the client and therefore are entitled to:

- a. Courtesy and respect from the 'contractor' (that is, the government and its agents).
- b. Accountability.
- c. Maximum saving in terms of both demand by and expenditure from contractor.
- d. Change the client according to the rules just as the client has the right to change his contractor and management consultant.

6. Benefits of Accountability

1. It can be valued as a check or balance against unrestrained activity that would otherwise harm other social goals, and this goal fits well a system of government and administration that makes liberal use of independent administrative agencies. This unfortunately is not the case in Nigeria. We are yet to mature to the point where these organs of government can take decisions and question government actions and inactions. For most people, it is considered an abomination to bite the finger that feeds you. It is our expectation that our political maturity would strive towards this direction, where government agencies can query any wrong actions by federal government.
2. Independent institutions have a mandate to issue secondary legislation. However, this legislation must be consistent with the constitution and overall philosophy of the country in question.

After 50 years of independence, Nigerian politics ought to have come of age where accountability should be institutionalized in the polity. Unfortunately, accountability in the public service is still a mirage. In spite of the gloomy picture, there is still a ray of hope if the citizenry would have the moral courage to fight this political monster that seems to have held Nigerians hostage for over five decades. There must be a spreading of awareness about the harmful effects of corruption and publicizing of the benefits of accountability both to the individual and the nation. Corruption in public service should be seen and treated as evil and the perpetrators should be stigmatized.

Competing Interests

Author declares that he has no competing interests.

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