

# **NIGERIAN POLITICS: THE NEED FOR AFRICAN MORALITY**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examined the need for morality in Nigerian politics. One intricate aspect of every society is politics. Traditional philosophy has defined politics as a venture that seeks to create an enabling environment for social cooperation, social order, justice, progress and development. It is meant to create balance in the society and bring about the betterment of the people. It is supposed to be an ethical activity that would ensure the good of the social system. However, the political scenario in Nigeria over the past decades has been a story that lacks moral content. It is a political situation that has made many to describe Nigerian politics as that of “winner takes it well”. It has therefore become pertinent to examine the need for morality in Nigerian politics, hence this study. The paper adopts the qualitative research design and relied solely on secondary sources. It was found from the study that various factors such as corruption, greed, ethnicity and apathy have been responsible for the ugly political story of the country. The paper therefore recommended that all who engage in politics should do so with the common good at heart. The study surmised that the fortunes of Nigeria can only be restored if politics is played with morality.

**Keywords:** African ethical system, African morality, Change mantra, Need, and Nigerian Politics

## **Introduction**

The political atmosphere over the past decades leaves much to be desired. Happenings especially since political independence in 1960 show that it has remained like the proverbial crawling baby struggling for too long to stand. Among the many reasons advanced by political spectators and well meaning commentators is that which borders on the drastic separation between politics and morality in Nigeria today. This explains why scholars have taken a great deal of time to write convincingly on the consequences of Machiavellianism on Nigerian politics. By deifying the Machiavellian principle which gives morality no room in the business of politics, the political circus has become an arena where every other thing reigns except morality. Various authors have decried this Machiavellian

political scenario. For instance, O.O. Adegboyega in his “Politics and the Nigerian Situation”, Terfa K. Anjov and Dorothy Nguemo A. in their work “Ethics and Democracy in Nigeria (1999-2011)”, Chen Yanpei in his “Morality and Political Discourse” and Israel Ekpo in his “Democracy and the Need for Political Ethics in Nigeria” have all decried the ugly political situation in Nigeria. However, these scholars did not directly link the quagmire to the dearth of morality. This gap has been filled by this study.

The presupposition above poses questions which have shaped this discourse, namely: Is there any relationship between politics and morality at all? If yes, does politics in Nigeria show any evidence of such relationship? If not, what are the counter-effects of this lacking relationship? How can this relationship be forged and good governance guaranteed? Analyzing these issues, the paper adopts the qualitative research design and relied solely on secondary sources comprising books, journals, periodicals and the internet. Thereafter, the expository and evaluative methods are used for analysis. This study is significant as it borders on the sensitive theme of politics and good leadership without which there can be no meaningful development. Before delving into the demands of this paper, it is useful to establish some clarifications for this discourse so as to demystify the knotty concepts.

### **Clarification of Basic Concepts**

**Politics:** The etymology of the word politics comes from the Greek word, *politika*. The meaning of the root term relates to the citizens, civic, civil and belonging to the state (Christopher F. Bueno 51). Deriving from this root, Nkeonye Otakpor defines politics as “the science of the organization and administration of the state; the activity or profession of engaging in political affairs” (4). For Iniobong S. Udoidem, “politics is the art of acquiring power for the purpose of sharing resources.... And by extension, it is the activity by which public officials are chosen and political policies promoted” (63). These definitions all convey a positive understanding of the concept of politics, contrary to its conception among many Nigerians as “a dirty game which no good and honest person should be involved in because the politicians are always seen as greedy, mendacious and corrupt and one with very low moral standard” (Israel Ekpo 129).

**Morality:** Morality is a common concept but has no easy definition. Etymologically, morality is derived from the Latin word, *moralis* which could translate to either custom or habit (Terfa K. Anjov and Dorothy A. Nguemo 172). Similarly, Amaechi Udefi avers that it is “originally derived from the Latin word, *mor* or *mores*, which means the customs and conventions of any social group or community” (5). In line with this root, G.A. Bennaars defines morality as “any set of norms or standards that define, guide and regulate good or acceptable behaviour among human beings living together in society” (13). In essence, morality is keenly related with ideas regarding what is right and what is wrong and how right and wrong behaviour should be punished or rewarded. It has the advantage of questioning or appraising peoples’ actions with concomitant consequences.

### **The Connection between Politics and Morality**

There are basically two positions on the connection between politics and religion. While one position holds that there is an intricate connection between them, the second position sees no relationship between them. These two opposing camps have been rendered by Okorie O. Okomba as “the Aristotelian and Machiavellian camps respectively” (55). Okomba holds that

*For Aristotle, the hallmark of human actions including politics is the pursuit of moral virtue which in turn will guarantee common happiness for the individual and the society at large. Contrary to Aristotle, Machiavelli considers the idea of morality in politics as unnecessary since both human nature and mechanism of politics do not warrant it (56).*

This discourse subscribes to the view of Aristotle that there is a nexus between politics and morality as both are aimed at the regulation of human society and behaviour respectively. Okomba corroborates this position when he writes that “both morality and politics help to regulate and direct human behaviour.... As a regulator, morality is concerned with interpersonal relation and interactions between person and group.... Whereas, politics regulates relations between groups, different socio-political organizations and the state, with the control of the state power as focus” (56). The connection between morality and politics is situated in the individual. When the individual moves from private life to public life, the necessary relation between morality and politics is spotlighted.

Thus, the enterprise of politics has no meaning without defining the place of individuals in it. It is the action of these individuals that determine the scope and justification for politics (56). Chen captures the same relationship beautifully in the following words:

*Morality belongs to the individual. The individual acts according to his morals, and through his actions, he affects others and is thus, political. Politics belongs to the public. The public's collective opinions determine policies, and through these policies, the individual is affected. Morality then, seems to connect the individual to politics (1).*

Chen continues by establishing the historical link between politics and morality. According to him, “morality’s involvement in politics can be traced back to the very beginnings of government” (1). In fact, over time in many societies, morality became a yardstick for distinguishing good leaders from bad leaders. A good leader was one with moral rectitude, who upheld the value system of his society, while the bad leader was otherwise.

### **Politics and Morality in Nigeria**

The statement attributed by Godwin Ogabo to a political figure in Nigeria provides a picture of the relationship between politics and morality in Nigeria. He says “there is no morality in governance.... If you want to be moral, go to church” (31). This strong statement attributed to a renowned political player gives a glimpse of the place of morality in Nigerian politics. Nigerian politics shows by all standards that there is no morality in politics. It gives a clear picture of Machiavellian principle at work. Obviously, the discipleship enjoyed by Machiavellianism among Nigerian politicians has produced lamentable outcome, namely, brutality, political assassinations, thuggery, intimidation, blackmail, kidnapping, disregard for the rule of law and the constitution, disruption of due process, witch-hunting, and sabotage among other vices. Olumuyiwa O. Familusi has taken a great deal of time to treat the result of Machiavellianism in Nigerian politics when he says that “... morality has been removed from political activities in the country, hence, the high level of social impasse which has continued to plague the country” (12). He further mourns about the effect of moral bankruptcy in the system by holding that “immoral practices that have characterized the

political landscape in Nigeria are the bane of development and a reason for her bad image in the international community” (12).

Thus, Nigerian politicians have followed Machiavelli in separating morality from politics and in thinking that the best way to be successful in politics is to use immoral means. What this means is that there is a general belief that there is nothing wrong with using immoral means to acquire power and retain it. Ekpo corroborates this when he vehemently states that “in Nigerian politics, the concept of power has no concern for ethical or moral behaviour because moral bankruptcy is rooted in the acquisition of power, for power is all about gain and the capacity to control and dominate and not for the maintenance of law and order and the promotion of common good” (126). Even though this may not be totally the case, there is a high degree of veracity in the assertion.

This immoral state of politics in Nigeria is a dangerous one because “... history has revealed that the prosperity of any nation passes with its moral values. The reason is that sound moral values make a society see beyond the splotch of self-interest, and it is preventive, not corrective” (Hamilton Odunze 85). The aftermath of this condition of things in Nigeria is the reason for the continuous outcry regarding governance.

### **The Need for Morality in Nigerian Politics**

The clarion call for politics to be practiced with morality in Nigeria is a justified one. Seth Kaplan puts this in focus when he pinpoints attitude to morality as the big difference between strong and weak states and observes that “whereas in well-governed countries, people feel obligated to act according to certain minimum ethical standards, in badly governed countries, they do not” (73). The counter-productivity of the seeming separation between politics and morality in Nigeria makes the need for morality a loud one. The one thing that needs to be stressed following many other scholars is the fact that human society cannot thrive without a system of morality. Anele considers this point from the point of view of culture. According to him, humans cannot survive without culture; morality is part of culture, and by implication, humans cannot survive without morality. In his own words he says: “Without morality which...is a crucial part of culture, there is no way human beings could lead meaningful lives and manifest the immense potentialities of their being. Yes, indeed, in the absence of moral principles, life... would be ‘poor, solitary, nasty, brutish and short’” (85). Such a

view only compels one to appreciate the more what role morality can play in the political arena where the destiny of the nation is concerned.

The truth remains that politics as a venture that aims at the good of human society cannot be practiced without guiding regulations. Where these guiding regulations exist, there emerges the moral factor. Every society is expected to appropriate to itself a system of governance that suits its value system. That explains why even though democracy is universal, it has particular application. Hence, many scholars hold that democracy is not a finished product since every society is capable of carving out its democratic style to suit its needs. It is in this light that Richard L. Sklar posits that “democracy ... is a developing idea; its meaning is enriched by the contributions from all cultures and nations” (288). From that standpoint, democracy is not the property of one or another ideological camp; “every country in the world is a veritable laboratory for the discovery of democratic principles and workshop for the construction of democratic machinery” (289). In the array of challenges rocking governance in Africa and Nigeria in particular, it is only worthwhile that politics be practised with keen attention to African ethical value-system. It is within this framework that politics in Nigeria can be sanitized for the good of the citizens.

Governance was a sacred duty in traditional societies. Those who occupied the leadership ranks were people of integrity. Even though the system was hereditary, there were occasions in which heirs who failed to be role models were deprived of their privileges. This is the point Tutu seems to establish regarding traditional governance when he posits that “... the choice of a political leader is based not solely on the circumstance of birth, but involves other criteria, such as the character or other personal qualities” (37). It only confirms Ushe’s submission that “... leaders had to possess certain qualities that were acceptable to the people as characteristics of good leadership” (8). As a leader, one was supposed to be an epitome of justice in the administration of the goods of the community. Among other virtues, moral rectitude was supposed to be a shining quality of the leadership ranks. That explains why there were always checks and balances for those who failed to portray these virtues. In fact, leadership was to follow an existing value-system. Within this value-system was the ethical framework. Hence, values such as the respect for human life, the promotion of social justice, the common good and the like were key areas of asserting effective governance. All of these values could only reign supreme when politics was carried out with

moral hindsight. Consciousness of the moral codes of the society is key to understanding the position of the community on right and wrong.

The African ethical system gives an idea of the values that are prized in human relationship. These values will find more significance in the political sphere since as Wendy McElroy has noted, “politics involves the duties that human beings owe to each other” (17). African morality is a “social, non-individualistic morality”. This kind of morality is held as enjoined by social life itself. There is thus a preoccupation with human well-being in the African moral thought and practice. “The African moral system puts the ethic of responsibility above the ethic of individual right, even though the latter are also given due recognition” (Awoniyi 8).

These ethics of responsibility and individual rights are some of the missing ingredients in Nigerian politics that Victor Ojakorotu and Fidelis Allen note when they comment: “Given the state of democracy and available data, it seems that politicians at the federal, state and local government levels are more concerned about their personal interests than those of citizens” (152). In this ambience, Mohamed I. Chambas is right to have noted that “the cardinal goal of politics, leadership and morality is to ensure the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens, to improve the lives of the peoples” (19). This assertion fits the basic need of governance to pursue the common good. Where governance focuses on the common good, all other shortcomings as are the case with the Nigerian system will disappear. The notion of the common good features prominently in the African ethical system and is related to the value of communality which characterizes the African worldview. Kwame Gyekye confirms this thus: “The notion of the common good is conceptually affiliated to the notion of community and, thus, to the notion of human society as such” (83).

Attaining the common good requires a system that is well coordinated. This is where the need for credible and morally upright leaders emerges. It is the conviction of many people that custodians of societal authority have the power to make or mar it. This is the situation with Nigeria. The challenge has been that of producing morally reliable leaders that would make it possible for the nation to enjoy the fruits of good governance. Ephraim Ikegbu, Solomon Kingsley and Sunday Duru acknowledge this challenge within the African context when they write: “Africa needs leaders with adequate moral stamina and charisma, who will tackle the menace of corruption – leaders who will enhance transformation, steer the course of economic progress, improve the standard of living of the hoi polloi,

and precipitate economic and technological progress” (48). One can understand why it is projected in most quarters that “the political leader who must deliver good governance knows that he must still govern from a high moral ground from where he leads from the front as an exemplar of high moral standards, without which a government will be soulless and unconscionable” (Chambas 8).

After all said and done, the moral imperative to move Nigeria’s democratic culture forward places an urgent demand on one and all, for “with effective introduction of ethical renewal among Nigerians, the chances of attaining ethical democracy are assured” (Kaplan 61). All available ethical apparatuses need to be applied to politics in Nigeria to raise governance to higher pedestals.

It is worth noting that political dispensations after Independence in 1960 have always emphasized the need for ethical revolution in the body polity of Nigeria. This revolution has worn different garbs like War Against Indiscipline (WAI), Rebranding, Transformation Agenda (TA) and recently, the Change mantra. The philosophies behind the pursuit of all these programmes by various dispensations are lurked behind the need for moral regeneration in Nigeria. This is to show that morality is an indispensable ingredient for politics which leads to national development.

## **Conclusion**

A critical look at the Nigerian political landscape shows that there has been no concerted struggle to make the moral element take roots in governance. Suffice it to say that, for governance in Nigeria to make any headway that will bring meaningful development, there is need to allow morality a place in the political system. This application should be allowed to trail from the very beginnings of how the government is constituted. Those who assume leadership positions ought to be people of character who are elected by a smooth electoral process that is free of fraud and other immoral practices. Politics that is devoid of morality as has been witnessed in Nigeria in the past years cannot bring about meaningful development. There should therefore a decisive effort to integrate studies in morality in all levels of education in Nigeria so as to instill moral training in would-be leaders and future political actors of the country.

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