

POOR LEADERSHIP AS A CHALLENGE TO CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT: A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper employs the philosophical method of analysis to interrogate the phenomenon of poor leadership as a critical impediment to Nigeria's contemporary development. It begins by clarifying key concepts - "leadership," and "development" - within their socio-political and ethical contexts. The study then dissects the nature of leadership failure through normative and critical lenses, highlighting contradictions between leadership ideals and the prevailing reality in Nigeria. Drawing on political philosophy, particularly on the ideas of justice, responsibility, and the social contract, the paper argues that leadership deficits stem from ethical lapses, institutional decay, and a disconnection from the common good all fueled by corruption. It further examines the implications of this dysfunction for national development, especially in governance, economic stability, and social cohesion. Ultimately, the paper proposes that resolving Nigeria's developmental challenges requires not only political reform but also a reorientation of leadership towards virtue ethics, civic responsibility, and transformative governance tailored to local contexts and the Nigerian political needs.

Keywords: Poor leadership, Development, Contemporary Nigeria

1. Introduction

Leadership determines the direction and progress of any society, just as a driver's conduct determines the safety of a journey. Nigeria's persistent leadership crisis—manifested in corruption, lack of accountability, weak institutions, and poor governance—has continued to undermine national development despite the country's abundant human and natural resources. Although colonialism contributed to these challenges, more than six decades after independence, ineffective leadership remains a major obstacle to governance, national unity, and socio-economic progress.

Scholars such as Uroko¹, Ezekwu², and Gberevbie et al,³ argue that historical, religious, and institutional factors, coupled with poor accountability and weak policy implementation,

have deepened Nigeria's developmental challenges. Conversely, ethical and transformational leadership founded on intellectual capacity, accountability, and innovation is essential for sustainable development. This study therefore examines the roots and consequences of Nigeria's leadership crisis and proposes pathways for improving governance and national development.

2. Leadership and Development: Conceptual Clarifications and Delineations

As Bolden observed, leadership has fascinated scholars from Plato and Socrates to contemporary management theorists, yet it remains one of the most difficult concepts to define because it is shaped by personal experience and theoretical orientation.⁴ Stogdill similarly argued that there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are scholars who have attempted to define it.⁵ Bolden attributes this difficulty to the subjective nature of leadership, while Grint identifies disagreements over process, position, philosophy, and the role of coercion in leadership.⁶⁻⁸ Kellerman further contends that leadership is not inherently moral, as leaders may exhibit both virtuous and unethical traits,⁹ a position echoed in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Within the context of this study, leadership is understood as the ability to guide people towards shared goals through ability, consent, and mutual trust rather than coercion, a view consistent with Rousseau's *General Will*¹¹ and African philosophies such as Asouzu's *Ibanyidanda*¹², Kanu's *Igwebuike*¹³, and *Ubuntu*. In democratic governance, Plato maintained that effective leadership requires competent and ethical rulers, arguing that philosopher-kings were best suited to govern because of their wisdom, moderation, and commitment to the common good.¹⁴

Development, like leadership, has no universally accepted definition. It extends beyond economic growth to encompass human, political, and social transformation. Frankema describes development as a process of change over time,¹⁶ while Amartya Sen views it as the expansion of human freedoms through the removal of poverty, insecurity, poor governance, and other barriers.¹⁷ Although Sen's conception has been criticised for its potential to encourage excessive individualism,¹⁸ Myrdal conceives development as the upward movement of the entire social system,¹⁹ and Hugo Slim emphasises that genuine development transcends economic growth, depends on just relationships, and must remain culturally and socially appropriate to achieve sustainable progress.²⁰⁻²¹

3. The Philosophical Foundations of Leadership

The ethical dimensions of leadership are paramount in assessing the prevailing political climate in Nigeria, where a significant disconnection exists between moral principles and governance, between justice and expediency in Statecraft. This gap has resulted in leadership that often prioritises personal gain over the common good, subsequently exacerbating the nation's developmental challenges. As noted by Atolagbe: “politics without morality produces unethical leadership,”²² underscoring the necessity for ethical

considerations to guide political processes. The integration of traditional moral values into contemporary governance could foster a more accountable leadership model, enriching the societal fabric from which political actors emerge. Moreover, the interplay between religion and politics highlights the potential for cultural frameworks to reinforce ethical governance, although it remains a contentious relationship, Ezekwu *et al.*, expressed.

Plato's idea of Philosopher-king, also comes to play here. As indicated by Plato, the ruling class who is to oversee the state should be widely knowledgeable and abreast with philosophy. His ideal state is presided by the philosopher king who gets constant education up to 50 years of age especially in the field of philosophy. A philosopher studies human life and nature and can face the problems with arguments. Government is an art that is effectively approached via rationality better than courage and appetite. Administration in Plato's ideal state entails reason and intelligence. Plato believes that a philosopher king is a genuine statesman, and he would provide everyone with what is due to them. Plato asserted further that absolute monarchy is not tyranny because the rule of the philosopher king is on the basis of reason and not on appetite. He serves all his subjects on equal footings.²³ The major take-away from the foregoing is that Plato wanted leadership and citizenship built on Epistocracy, that is, a rule or society based or pillared on knowledge and Education. The Nigerian example is indicting. It is leadership failure to turn Nigeria into a knowledge hub, despite its vast human and natural resources that has made people especially Nigerian youth, see Education as a scam, for instance. In Nigeria, from all observable indications, Education is often not seen as a leeway to societal development or development of the human person in Nigeria. Even the budget allocation to Education every fiscal year, says it all. People believe that crime, indolence and other vile activities can lead to success and truly but sadly so. Little wonder, Internet fraud, kidnapping, banditry and Social Media abuse that illicit contents in the name of fame and monetisation are on the increase. Technologically, Nigeria is nowhere among the nations thriving on innovation, science and technology say UAE, Singapore, Estonia, to mention few. Nigerian leaders are rather embroiled in forgery scandals of their certificates. From Buhari, to Tinubu, to Sheriff Oborevori (the Governor of Delta State who recently decamped to APC), and a host of Nigerian politicians, former ministers, many in the Civil service, lecturers in tertiary institutions, forgery of certificates has become the order of the day. Antics and issues like these cannot produce genuine leaders nor an epistocratic society. True leadership defines reality for its followers. It motivates them to seek for purpose, in order to find meaning and achieve success in various ways. This is a hallmark of purposeful and charismatic leadership. Thus, examining the philosophical foundations of leadership not only critiques existing practices but also proposes a moral renaissance essential for Nigeria's advancement.

4. Overview of Leadership Challenge in Nigeria and Its Impact on Development

Throughout Nigeria's history, the interplay between leadership and development has underscored the complexities inherent in governance. The nation's leadership landscape, characterised by a mix of military and democratic regimes, has often prioritised personal

gain over public service, resulting in pervasive corruption and ineffective policies that hinder sustainable development.

The challenge of leadership in Nigeria are enormous. Leadership challenges in Nigeria have been a central factor impeding the country's development since independence. The core issues revolve around ineffective, corrupt, and self-serving leadership that has failed to harness Nigeria's abundant human and natural resources for socio-economic progress. There are several leadership challenges in Nigeria, but this study focuses on two fueling the whole others. The two include:

4.1 Corruption and Self-Interest:

Nigeria's leadership crisis is characterised by corruption, lack of vision, and the prioritisation of personal interests over national development. According to F.C. Onodugo, Nigeria's greatest challenge since independence has been the absence of credible leadership despite its abundant human and material resources.²⁴ Corruption, tribalism, and religious sentiments have weakened accountability and entrenched poor governance, resulting in political instability, insecurity, and economic decline. Successive administrations—from the First Republic, military regimes under Gowon, Babangida, and Abacha, to the civilian governments of Shehu Shagari, Obasanjo, Jonathan, Buhari, and Tinubu—have all faced allegations of corruption and ineffective governance. Consequently, Nigeria's leadership deficit has persisted across political dispensations, making credible and accountable leadership indispensable for sustainable national development.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) observed that corruption significantly undermined Nigeria's economy, particularly during Buhari's administration (2015–2023), warning that failure to address it could reduce the country's GDP by as much as 37% by 2030.²⁵ Akpata projected that this would translate into a loss of nearly \$2,000 per person by 2030,²⁶ while PwC's empirical analysis, drawing on IMF and Transparency International data, linked corruption directly to slower economic growth and weaker governance.^{27–30} A. S. Nevin further estimated substantial economic losses since 1999, using Ghana, Colombia, and Malaysia as comparison countries.³¹ Overall, the report concluded that corruption has weakened governance, investment, public finance, and human capital, underscoring the urgent need for credible leadership in Nigeria.³²

4.2 Lack of Leadership Competence and Vision:

Many Nigerian leaders have assumed office with limited experience or ideological commitment, resulting in poor governance, policy inconsistency, and weak institutions. El-Rufai described Tinubu's administration as the worst in Nigeria's history, reflecting widespread public dissatisfaction.³³ More broadly, successive governments since independence have been associated with corruption and ineffective leadership, differing mainly in degree. E. J. Ogechukwu attributes part of the crisis to *Gerontocracy* and *Infirmary*, arguing that ageing and unhealthy leaders have prioritised political survival over national development.³⁴ Consequently, Nigeria's persistent leadership deficit has

continued to undermine governance and national progress.

Other repercussions of this leadership challenge include the following:

(a) Persistent Underdevelopment: Despite being richly endowed with human and natural resources, Nigeria remains underdeveloped due to poor leadership that fails to translate resources into tangible socio-economic benefits.

(b) Widespread Poverty and Unemployment: Just like Obilor and Amadi have suggested, leadership failure has contributed to high poverty levels and unemployment, with projections indicating millions falling below the poverty line and unemployment rates reaching alarming levels.

(c) Security and Social Instability: Poor governance and leadership have exacerbated insecurity, crime, terrorism, and communal conflicts, destabilizing the country and deterring investment and development. From Buhari's time to that of Tinubu as incumbent, many companies have left Nigeria, partly due to security and largely due to the lack of ease of doing business plus unfavourable policies. According to *Punch*, in recent years, Nigeria has experienced a growing trend of both multinational and local businesses closing or moving their operations as a result of economic difficulties, currency fluctuations, and escalating operational expenses.³⁵ Talking about investment shutdowns, between 2020-2024 and still counting, over 20 Firms and Organisations have left Nigeria. The following Organisations or Firms have left Nigeria in the last four to five years: Pick and pay, Standard Biscuits Nigeria Ltd, NASCO Fiber Product Ltd, Union Trading Company Nigeria PLC, Deli Foods Nigeria Ltd, Tower Aluminium Nigeria PLC, Framan Industries Ltd, Stone Industries Ltd, Mufex Nigeria Company Ltd, Surest Foam Ltd, Universal Rubber Company Ltd, Mother's Pride Ventures Ltd, Errand Products Nigeria Ltd, Gorgeous Metal Maker Ltd, Unilever Nigeria PLC, Procter & Gamble Nigeria, GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Nigeria Ltd, ShopRite Nigeria, Sanofi-Aventis Nigeria Ltd, Equinox Nigeria, Bolt Food & Jumia Food Nigeria Ltd, Microsoft Nigeria, Total Energies Nigeria (affected by divestment strategies), PZ Cussons Nigeria PLC, Kimberly-Clark Nigeria, Diageo PLC, among others.³⁶ Without investments, Nigeria's economy cannot thrive and poor leadership is the primary reason for companies exiting, as Nigeria's economic fortunes continue to dwindle.

(d) Corruption as a Developmental Bane: Corruption has permeated all levels of governance, undermining public institutions, eroding professional ethics, and stalling development initiatives.

(e) Erosion of National Unity and Civic Responsibility: Leadership challenges have weakened patriotism and national consciousness, leading to fragmented society and lack of collective effort towards development. Nigeria's unity continues to polarise, as political leaders employ the divide and rule tactics.

5. Conclusion

In contemplating the implications of poor leadership on Nigeria's developmental prospects, it is imperative to recognise the intricate relationship between societal values and political conduct. The historical context within which Nigerian leadership operates reveals a persistent cycle of corruption and mismanagement, often perpetuated by those

professing moral and religious values but failing to uphold them in practice.

Based on all that have been discussed in this study so far, here are recommendations and solutions to address poor leadership as a challenge to contemporary Nigeria's development:

1. Strengthen Democratic Institutions

Solution: Enhance the independence of institutions like INEC, EFCC, ICPC, and the judiciary to ensure checks and balances. Recommendation: Government should avoid political interference and ensure transparency in the appointment and functioning of these institutions.

2. Promote Meritocracy over Nepotism

Solution: Ensure public appointments and promotions are based on competence and qualifications. Recommendation: Enforce policies that penalize nepotism and reward performance and accountability.

3. Civic Education and Leadership Training

Solution: Implement nationwide civic education campaigns on leadership ethics and good governance. Recommendation: Introduce leadership development programs in schools and communities to groom future responsible leaders.

4. Youth Inclusion in Governance

Solution: Create platforms for youth participation in politics and decision-making processes. Recommendation: Enforce and expand the Not Too Young To Run law, and provide mentorship and funding for young leaders.

5. Implement Strict Anti-Corruption Measures

Solution: Adopt digital governance tools to reduce corruption and increase transparency in public service. Recommendation: Strengthen whistleblower protections and reward systems to encourage reporting of corrupt practices.

6. Constitutional and Electoral Reforms

Solution: Amend laws to reduce the cost of running for office and improve electoral integrity. Recommendation: Encourage independent candidacy and reduce influence of godfatherism in politics. Cases abound in Nigeria's political history and the recent Rivers State crisis between Wike and Fubara is a clear example of the ugly side of godfatherism.

7. Encourage Participatory Governance

Solution: Create systems for public input in policy-making and project implementation. Recommendation: Local governments should hold regular town hall meetings and publish project reports for public scrutiny.

In conclusion, a critical examination of Nigeria's leadership landscape reveals a pressing need for reform rooted in philosophical understandings of governance tailored to local contexts and the Nigerian developmental needs. Political leadership, ideally carries the notion of a social contract, which must be honoured, between the ruler and the ruled. Ultimately, a robust philosophical foundation that champions local engagement and institutional integrity is essential for addressing the chronic leadership malaise in Nigeria.

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