
POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIAN GOVERNANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The plethora of maladies plaguing the Nigerian political landscape derives considerably from the poor disposition of political leadership to the cardinal democratic requirement of accountability. This stems primarily from a faulty electoral body that is also not accountable to the people. Products of this system are not conscious of public accountability, as they owe allegiance to powerful political godfathers and not the electorate. This cycle of unaccountability has conspired to frustrate long-term development in the country. Issues of misappropriation and embezzlement that have subsisted as cankerworms to the development process are products of a political orientation that disdains public accountability. In order to ensure development in the present and guarantee it in the long-term there must be a committed compliance to the tenets of accountability by political leadership and a proactive demand for accountability by the people.

INTRODUCTION

The plethora of maladies plaguing the Nigerian political, social and economic landscape derive considerably from the poor disposition of political leadership to the cardinal democratic principle of accountability in public governance (Osaretin,2009,Achebe, 1985,Shima, 2004). Sorkaa (2003:1) argues in a similar manner that;

...the widespread underdevelopment epitomized by all forms of deprivations, poverty and iniquities is mainly a derivative from governance that is devoid of ethics and accountability.

It is difficult to argue to the contrary that development problems of Nigeria relate directly to the state and its agencies due to the prominent visibility of the state in Nigeria. Also, discourse and analysis focused on the accountability variable is informed by the deterministic role of existing political culture in guiding and directing political behavior (Uganden 2006:194). The implication of this position is that imbibed political values, tenets and culture go a long way in explaining prevailing political tendencies and behaviour. The underlying political culture in Nigeria is tied to a history that includes negative influences of colonial heritage and military rule which have conspired to create a state which is strong in its reprisal function but weak in terms of meeting the material and social needs of the people (Sorkaa, 2003,Olowu etal,1995). Politics practiced in the country is also characterized by personal rule, politics of exclusion, prolonged stay in office and hostility to pluralism (Sorkaa, 2003). Accountability issues are therefore situated within the context of this history and character of the Nigerian state.

Political accountability is significant for development prospects both immediate and in the long term as the state can only spearhead and support development with the inculcation of the right posture and culture of stewardship which requires accountability. In Nigeria,

the privatization of the state by its agents is almost the sole factor responsible for lack of accountability both of political office holders as well as the public bureaucracy. This paper argues and submits that the tendency by public officials to regard and handle state business like private empires explains the lack of accountability that creates ample room for corruption, misappropriation and embezzlement that undermines development especially long-term development. Lack of accountability undermines long-term development in the sense that the decisions and actions of government in the present constitute the infrastructure or foundation on which subsequent decisions and actions of government are based. In other words, decisions and actions go into the building of a political culture with profound consequences for future development prospects. Also the failure of projects and contracts due to corruption inhibits consistency in growth and progress; e.g. corruption and unaccountable behavior have frustrated industrialization by obstructing infrastructural development. Nigeria, after nearly fifty years of independence is still strangled by infrastructural problems of roads, power and water in spite of huge budgetary yearly allocations to these areas.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Conceptual discourse here concentrates on the three key terms in the topic. These are; political accountability, governance and long-term development. A close examination of the three concepts provides an intellectual platform on which to build our analysis.

POLITICAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A useful perspective from which to approach an understanding of political accountability is the idea of sovereignty. Political philosophers have submitted that sovereignty of the state ultimately lies with the people (Osaretin, 2009, Shima, 2004). The government as an agent of the state exists as a product of the Hobbesian and Lockean social contract to protect and safeguard values universal to the people. Elected representatives and public officials, (the bureaucracy) are only delegated the power to rule on behalf of the people (Adamolekun, 1980). Political accountability is therefore the accountability of the government comprising civil servants and politicians to the public and to legislative bodies such as congress or parliament.

McCandless (2008) defines public or political accountability as "the obligation of authorities to explain publicly, fully and fairly, before and after the fact, how they are carrying out responsibilities that affect the public in important ways". This view apparently equates accountability to transparency which Orngu (2006:5) defines as the openness guiding or regulating decisions and actions of government officials. He introduces a fundamental role for the people in his definition of accountability as essentially meaning holding officials especially public and elected ones, responsible for their actions and or inactions and thereby checkmating corruption and corrupt or sharp practices (Orngu, 2006:4). It is instructive to note that public officials are held responsible for their actions as a way of checking corrupt practices. Indeed Orngu is quite categorical in his opinion that accountability is the panacea to corruption. This paper shares and embraces this view in that true stewardship requires faithfulness. Where there is faithfulness, there must certainly be accountability and no corruption and inevitably good governance which is hinged on the two variables of accountability and transparency (Orngu, 2006:5, Ojo 2004, Sarker 2009). Political accountability also involves

the idea of "holding to account" which means obtaining timely explanations from public authorities and validating them for fairness and completeness. In other words it means exacting the needed public explanations and auditing them. (McCandless, 2008, Ujo, 2009). In his blog on the citizens circle for accountability (accountability circle .org) McCandless argues that it is the responsibility of the authorities to explain publicly, fully and fairly what they intend and why they intend it. The essence of public accountability is not after the fact published financial statements but full and fair public explanation before the fact that allows citizens and their elected representatives to act sensibly to commend, alter or halt the intentions. In striving to obtain accountability in states countries adopt various mechanisms which to Sarker 2009 follow the liberal democratic tradition and comprise legislative instruments, executive means, judicial and quasi-judicial processes, official rules, codes of conduct, official hierarchies, public hearings, interest groups, media scrutiny and so on.

GOVERNANCE

Agere (2000) examines definitions of governance by the World Bank, the UNDP, the Commonwealth and the OECD and indicates areas of emphasis which are all relevant to our discourse. The World Bank sees "governance as a way in which power is exercised in the management of the economic and social resources of a country notably with a view to development". This definition outlines three aspects of governance as one, the type of political regime, two the process by which authority is exercised in the management of economic and social resources with a view to development and three, capacity of governments to formulate policies and have them effectively implemented. Particularly for Nigeria, it is instructive and noteworthy that governance encompasses issues of functional capacity in policy formulation and implementation for results.

The other definitions although similar to that of the World Bank qualify governance with the adjective of 'good' which is more implied than explicit in the World Bank's definition. The Commonwealth for instance identifies indices of good governance as including, "... rule of law and independence of the judiciary, just and honest government, fundamental human rights, including equal rights and opportunities for all citizens regardless of race, colour, creed or political belief". Of particular interest to the arguments in this paper is the good governance indicator of rule of law. This presupposes that institutions and persons involved in managing economic and social resources of a country do so according to prescribed procedure, order and rules. A rule of thumb observance of this requirement invariably produces transparency and accountability which have been earlier on acknowledged as indispensable components of good governance. The definition by the UNDP according to Agere (2000) is similar to that of the Commonwealth but places greater emphasis on sustainable human development and elimination of poverty. He credits this position to the UN Report of 1998. Governance, or good governance should in this line of thought or reasoning be positively of consequence for sustainable human development and poverty eradication. Good governance implies therefore that policy choices and options do not compromise the interest and opportunities of posterity.

Agere also examines the submission by the organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which emphasizes participatory development, human rights and democratization (the legitimacy of government and policy arms of governments) and

transparency of decision-making. To the OECD therefore, good governance has non-negotiable components of governmental legitimacy and transparency in decision-making. Legitimacy of a democratic government derives from the manner and process of its constitution. In this regard a free and fair election where the people's votes are counted and made to count is a bedrock and foundational infrastructure for accountability and good governance. In reality it amounts to a misplacement of order to demand accountability of an illegitimate government. The first thing is to ensure electoral accountability and legitimacy of government before demanding and obtaining accountability in governance. From an examination of the preceding definitions and submissions Agere 2000 sums up good governance as the opposite of poor governance and outlines what he terms poor governance. Amongst others these include:

- Failure to make a clear distinction between what is public and private, hence a tendency to divert public resources for private gain.
- Excessively narrow-based or non-transparent decision-making processes.
- Lack of a code of conduct in managing the affairs of the state.
- Failure to establish a predictable framework of law, government behavior and the rule of law.

Governance therefore, as can be deduced and inferred from the submissions of the various definitions examined here is the management of public resources in a transparent and participatory manner with the goal of creating and sustaining development.

LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT

In conceiving an understanding of this multi-worded concept, two issues are of concern. These are sustainability and continuity; sustainable development has to do with environmentally friendly development options that do not create adverse conditions that will jeopardize opportunities for future generations. Continuity here implies that sequential progress has to be maintained in order to attain development in the long-term. This means that specific initial development goals and plans need necessarily be attained as a ground on which to base subsequent goals and plans of development. For instance, where a sector is targeted in a specific plan, the outlined goal must be attained in order to allow for logical progress. Nigeria's industrialization efforts experience frustration engendered by lack of infrastructural development equally frustrated in turn by lack of appropriate implementation.

THE PROBLEM OF ELECTORAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN NIGERIA

The foundation for accountability in public governance is the electoral process as elections in democratic system confer a "mandate" on elected officials by the electorate to manage the public resources on their behalf (Egwemi, 2009, Shima, 2004). Without free and fair elections the right to demand and obtain accountability in the most significant and important manner is denied the true holders of a state's sovereignty. Even in advanced democracies periodic elections remain the most portent way to obtain accountability with the people reserving the power to kick out non-performers.

Electoral accountability in Nigeria's democracy has largely subsisted as a mirage given the often shameless and open perpetration of malpractices both in the preparation and actual conduct with active support of governmental apparatuses. Shima (2004) in a discourse of the 2003 general elections identifies some of these malpractices and irregularities as;

hoarding of registration materials, registration of under aged persons, intimidation of opponents, vote buying and even force full collection of ballot boxes by armed men for unknown destinations. Right from the First Republic, ruling political parties in Nigeria have systematically undermined the political process to secure electoral advantages. Iroanusi (2006) cites the case of privatization of the state by the First Republic NPC whose leadership used the Native Authority laws concerning maintenance of peace to prevent parties other than it from holding political rallies. Instead of employing the right methods of achieving victory at the polls such as sufficient and proper party organization, well drawn manifestoes, presentation of saleable candidates and effective campaign, political parties in Nigeria prefer malpractice, rigging and violence. This disposition to cheat has persisted as typical of all the republics.

The absence of electoral accountability and transparency produces public officials whose allegiance is not to the people but the political, economic or personal forces that enable their acquisition of power. This situation has created what Srivastava (2010) calls the criminalization of the state. This process of criminalization is achieved through the granting of access to criminals and thugs into public offices. He particularly identifies the legislature where the quality of debate is negatively affected since such individuals lack credibility and capacity to guard the rights of the people against encroachment by an executive that does not believe in the principle of public accountability. Although Srivastava was writing on the politics of India, the picture he presents vividly portrays the Nigerian case. Under the government of Obasanjo, so-called executive legislative harmony was oftentimes made possible by the gullibility of an unqualified and illegitimate National Assembly. This situation also applied to the states in even greater measure.

Lack of accountability is engendered more significantly by electoral-unaccountability with respect to the executive arm of government. It is the foundation and explanation for the almost complete absence of account giving culture by the executive at all the three tiers of government in Nigeria. Lack of electoral accountability is the sole factor that accounts for the predominance of personal rule in Nigeria and the privatization of the state. It is what characterizes politics in Nigeria with personal rule, politics of exclusion, longevity in office and hostility to pluralism (Sorkaa 2003). The electoral process characterized by vote buying, vote rigging and outright violence is incapable of producing a leadership imbued with the spirit of public accountability.

ACCOUNTABILITY CRISES IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC GOVERNANCE

Politics in Nigeria is particularly plagued with historically rooted ills that five decades of sovereign statehood have failed to eradicate. Essentially, most identifiable problems of Nigerian politics predate independence and all have succeeded in reproducing themselves through systematically entrenched and sustained vicious circles. The problem of lack of accountability occupies an unenviable preeminence of place among these problems with its roots in the colonial state. The colonial state as seen by Orngu (2006) lacked transparency and accountability to the Nigerian people. The only vestiges of accountability from it were to the imperial headquarters of London, Paris, Lisbon and elsewhere but certainly not to the people and their institutions. Lack of accountability was logically a consequence of a state constituted by violence, deceit and treachery and not by consent or consensus of citizens. It was an authoritarian, repressive and alienated state

whose governance stood in contrast to the interest of the colonized people and which could have in no way been accountable to the governed.

The attainment of political independence did little more than change the skin of leaders as the same orientation persisted. This orientation Orngu (2006) argues alienates leadership from the led, produces a system that absolutely lacks accountability and transparency, is oppressive and can hardly lack corruption. Deriving from this unwholesome orientation, First Republic politicians failed to demonstrate any real interest in transforming the state from a coercive force to a veritable instrument for national development in the general interests (Ake 2001, Orngu 2006).

Military rule that came on the heels of the collapse for the First Republic was a virulent system to popular accountability by its very essence. For instance, the military governors under Gowon had no pretensions of citizenry obligation with regards to accountability neither did Gowon exert it from them. This attitude stemmed from their monopoly over instruments of coercion and the resulting capacity to enfeeble any opposition (Orngu 2006). With absolute control of force and contempt for civilian population, the military regimes succeeded in privatizing the state and used it for personal aggrandizement (Sorkaa 2003). Military regimes were also in with what Orngu (2006) terms "arrogance of power" by which Abacha for instance created the enabling environment for the transformation and deformation of Nigeria into a criminalized state. The enormity of loot recovered from Abacha and his associates sufficiently proves the extent to which power was abused due to an arrogant and unaccountable posture.

The return to democracy in 1999 did little to alter this negative orientation. Prof. J.I. Elaigwu in a welcome address to the IGSR Annual Distinguished lecture 2001 lamented the exhibition of Messianic arrogance and residual militarism by the presidency in a supposed democratic setting. Of course, the Obasanjo administration degenerated into a civilian dictatorship that totally undermined the democratic system it was supposed to be. Series of actions and character disposition on the part of the former president exists to support this position. While in office, Obasanjo ruled not like a democrat but like a tyrant with undisguised contempt and disdain for the rule of law; he was tyrannical, arrogant, egoistical, almost imperious in his leadership style with the assumption that the nation belonged to him alone (Obijiofor 2007, Sonala O. (2008). Both Sonala (2008) and Ganite (2008) report the fact of Obasanjo being his own petroleum minister for eight years, within this period, he sold choice oil blocks to his friends cronies and family members with impurity, without accountable due process. He also treated Petroleum Trust Development Fund as though it was his private trust fund for the benefit of those he favoured.

Other unaccountable acts as cited by Ganite (2008) include the lack of transparent manner of sale of Ajaokuta Steel Company to his son and his partners Global Infrastructure Holding Limited (GIHL). Ganite's position is supported by the Sunday Sun of February 24, 2008 p.5. Also, the squandering of 10 billion US Dollars in the power sector by his administration stands as a testimony to his disdain of accountability. Deriving mainly from his failure to be above board, Obasanjo failed in governance. Although he made anti-corruption and accountability in government the emphasis of his administration, corruption, ineptitude and chicanery continued unabated to the end of his

administration. His EFCC which had witnessed a few successes became politicized and used for witch-hunting during the tail-end of his administration Chigbo (2009). Obasanjo's style of leadership provided fertile soil for the growth of all kinds of political and social ills including, kid napping and numerous murders. The state under him was highly commercialized and privatized with the Anambra crises providing a sordid illustration of the enthronement of the exceptions to the rule especially the super-sized role of god fathers (Orngu 2006).

The current administration which should have brought in a breath of fresh air does not unfortunately appear to have a clear direction. It declared a commitment to due process but this is yet to be tested as lethargy seems to characterize the administration. This was made no better by the constitutional crises that Yar Adua's undocumented absence from power generated. With Vice President, the administration appears just about to start with only few months to the end of its tenure.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND LONG TERM DEVELOPMENT

It has already been argued that the crises of development in Nigeria are engendered by a leadership insensitive to accountability to the electorate to whom power really belongs. Orngu (2006) aptly captures the unenviable state of affairs in the country as "sealed in an envelope of escalating mass poverty, decimating diseases, pervasive ignorance, apathy and corruption". Of course corruption is not exclusive to leadership as the canker has pervaded the entire fabric of the nation, however official tolerance and condoning of corrupt acts as well as active participation creates a sustainable framework for it to thrive.

Daku (2009) has submitted that majority of leaders in Nigeria increasingly determine their standard of conduct and behavior on the basis of their choices without reference to their community or any higher ideals. He advocates the endorsement by leadership of Kant's moral theory of categorical imperative which implies that a person should perform an act because it is right to do so, with this, performing of the right acts will become easy for leaders who should view accountability as an imperative. This forms a veritable framework on which to develop our society with leadership and authority viewed through the lenses of service, stewardship, transparency and accountability within the context of humility (Orngu 2006). With the prevailing absence of the right orientation to leadership Nigerian leaders are masters instead of servants of the people welding absolute power and are therefore not accountable to the people (Ujo, 2009).

Long-term development is invariably frustrated by negative actions and decisions of government which frustrate and compromise the opportunities for sustainable development with respect to continuity. Unaccountable use of up to 10 billion US Dollars by the Obasanjo administration supposedly in the power sector without visible results necessitated the promise by the Yar'Adua administration to declare emergency in the power sector. An accountable and transparent handling of office would have guaranteed the elimination of the power problem given the enormous sums squandered on nothing. Corruption, misappropriation and embezzlement of public resources are the only explanations for the repeated appearance of particular projects on the yearly budgets of all tiers of government in Nigeria. This manner of behaviour has succeeded in creating

and sustaining underdevelopment as the country remains caught in a vicious circle of retrogression and standstill at best.

Ojo (2004) has argued that what supports the subsistence of this unprogressive state of affairs is absence of effective sanctions since people who engage in corrupt practices are either not caught or when caught get penalties that are lower than the gains from the corrupt practice. Corruption therefore wears its attractive attire and thrives in this atmosphere of lack of accountability as wedge in the wheel of development. It is indeed a grave indictment on all past Nigerian leaders that given 50 years of independence and the enormity of natural resources Nigeria remains caught up in problems of power, roads, fuel shortages, poor health and educational facilities and ravaging poverty deriving from a non-viable and unstable economy. The task of ensuring accountability in order to guarantee long term development therefore rests on the people who must not remain with Orngu's (2006) description of them as apathetic to governance, ignorant, complacent with an elastic tolerance that encourages corruption. They should refrain from hailing, rewarding, and honouring corrupt public officials Ihonvbere cited in Orngu (2006). Instead "the public can as it is its right and duty, in every case of justifiable suspicion, call its servants to strict account, dismiss them, sue them in a law court, or appoint an arbitrator or inspector to scrutinize their conduct as it likes" (Mahatma Gandhi cited in Srivastava 2001).

It is indeed pathetic that due to the gullibility of a few Nigerians, discredited public officials often orchestrate public support that subverts the responsibility of the people in holding leaders to account. Just before the removal of Maurice Iwu as INEC chairman a certain group was in Abuja demanding that he be allowed to continue in office although the misdeeds of the Commission under him remain open secret subversion of Nigeria's striving towards a democratic polity.

Long-term development can therefore be secured only by an astute and proactive insistence on account-giving behavior. Although the veritable methods for ensuring accountability beyond election have already been sabotaged in Nigeria, they can still be dusted and employed. Ujo (2009) states that recall is one method of obtaining accountability from members of a legislative assembly which has however never succeeded as an instrument for removing non performing legislators in Nigeria. Impeachment as another method is employed for witch-hunting while constituency relations only provide avenues for misappropriation of constituency budgetary allocations. This should not however imply that the people are helpless in the face of over powerful political leaders. In recommending for the people of India, Srivastava (2001) advocates active involvement of the people in ensuring a sense of direction. To him, there is no point asking the cause of the problem to also solve it. This is obviously a loss of faith in state created and run institutions for accountability such as the EFCC and ICPC in Nigeria. Civil society organizations and the media occupy a vantage position from which to demand accountability from public officials. While it is noteworthy that some organizations have actually sustained demands for accountability, there is the urgent need for all Nigerians to view public officials as servants and not lords and to therefore demand and obtain accountability from them. Without accountability, development in Nigeria now and in the future will remain a mirage.

CONCLUSION

We have argued and demonstrated that the developmental problems of Nigeria derive from a leadership that lacks accountability and treats public office as private enterprise thereby engendering all kinds of impropriety in office. Given that corrupt public officials benefit from the prevailing system, there is little confidence in the ability of state created institutions to provide solutions. The people must therefore be in the vanguard for demand of accountability from political leadership to guarantee development.

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