

## **Sustainable Leadership, Good Thinking and the Question of Corruption in Developing Nations\***

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### **Abstract**

Globally, development has proven to be a phenomenon that derives from good planning. Be it national or personal development, development connotes understanding ‘what is’, projecting ‘what ought’ and implementing measures or strategies for transiting from ‘what is’ to what ought (or should be). Development implies change or transition from one situation or experience to another. With particular reference to the development of a nation-state, that is national development, development is taken to imply economic, political, technological and infrastructural progression and advancement, among others. Against a theoretical understanding that development is desirable we interrogate the following questions: why is it that some nation-states, like Nigeria, remain perpetually categorized as developing nations? What is it that nations described as developed are doing that the developing nations are not doing? Why do some nations remain perennially underdeveloped or developing while some have come to be identified, in economic literature, among others, as developed. These are questions that should be of concern not only to intellectuals and practitioners in developing nations, but also to every individual across the globe who is interested in human and global development. Against the background of this need for critical reflection on the state of development in developing nations, we shall in this paper examine the interplay between leadership, good thinking and development. In the accompanying section, we deepen our understanding of the nexus between leadership and good thinking. In the third section we establish the relations between good leadership and that kind of development referred to as sustainable development. The section draws particular attention to the problem of corruption which remains a perennially present clog in the wheel of sustainable development in Nigeria. The last and concluding section makes policy recommendations on what governments in developing nations ought to do to escape being perpetually tagged ‘developing’.

**Keywords:** sustainable, leadership, good thinking, corruption, developing nations

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### **I. LEADERSHIP, GOOD THINKING AND GOVERNANCE**

Often broadly associated with administration and governance, leadership is as old as human existence. Human organizations – communities, associations and nation-states, among others – have always found it necessary to put in place some kind of institution or framework for identifying individuals to lead the drive for the attainment of organizational, communal or national goals (Laub, 2018). As noted by Northouse, the phenomenon of leadership is one that has generated a plethora of conceptualizations and theories over the years (Northouse, 2018).

Leadership in some sense refers to a body of people responsible for directing the activities of a group. When leadership is conceived as a body, it makes sense to speak of the national or the Nigerian leadership, for example. Against the background of the understanding of leadership as a body responsible for giving a sense of direction to a group, Chemers (2002) defines leadership in terms of a process of social influence of a person or group of persons via which some other person or group of persons are influenced to accomplish an objective. From the conceptualization of Chemers, it is implied that leadership entails giving members of a group a sense of direction in a way that makes the group more coherent and cohesive.

At this juncture it is apposite to ask the question ‘who is a leader?’ or put differently ‘what qualities distinguish an individual as a leader?’. John C Maxwell informs straightforwardly: ‘A leader is one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way.’ It must be noted, however, that from the early philosophical works of Plato’s Republic till the modern trait theory of leadership efforts have been made to underpin the defining qualities, traits or characteristics of a leader. Literature on leader-non leader distinction identifies the following, among others, as hallmarks of a leader: discipline, foresight, intelligence and courage. In the effort to identify the distinguishing characteristic of a good leader, Jia Lin however cautions: “leadership is a matter of

intelligence, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and discipline ... Reliance on intelligence alone results in rebelliousness. Exercise of humaneness alone results in weakness. Fixation on trust results in folly. Dependence on the strength of courage results in violence. Excessive discipline and sternness in command result in cruelty. When one has all five virtues together, each appropriate to its function, then one can be a leader” (SunTzu, 2003).

Critical reflections on theories and conceptions of leadership reveals an assumed or underlying phenomenon: thinking. A good leader is most importantly a good thinker or a critical reasoner. A good thinker sees beyond the present, understands the past and plans into the future. A good thinker not only puts the past or history into proper perspective, but also objectively comprehends the present as a condition for articulating roadmaps for future engagements and developments. Good thinking or critical thinking is therefore a prerequisite for leadership (Oke and Amodu, 2019). Inherent in every conception of leadership is some kind of positive expectation: development, growth or progress among others. Thus, a good leader is expected to think through situations and articulate processes or mechanisms for engendering development.

Within the framework of politics, it makes sense to speak of political leadership. We conceive political leadership as that body of individuals responsible for directing the activities of a nation towards the actualization of national goals or aspirations. Political leadership entails political thinking: thinking about national goals; reasoning about policies that will drive national goals; and, rationally implementing strategies and mechanisms for implementing national philosophies or ideologies. In other words, political leadership is inextricably interwoven with governance.

Governance technically implies all the processes of governing or leading.. When taken as a corollary to political leadership or the leadership of a nation, governance implies all the processes of governing or leading a nation: elections, policy formulation and articulation, interpretation of the constitution and the process of adjudication, among others. As defined by the World Bank Governance refers to the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country’s economic and social resources for development (World Bank, 1991). Good leadership is then a prerequisite for good governance. Invariably, good thinking is *sine qua non* for good leadership or good governance.

## **II. LEADERSHIP, CORRUPTION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE**

Often referred to as the “Giant of Africa”, the present-day Nigeria is one of the former British colonies in Africa. Since independence in 1960, Nigeria has continued to experience a crisis of political leadership. The leadership problem in Nigeria has generated so much tomes to the extent that Nigeria is fast becoming an easy referent for bad leadership, mal-administration and crass wastefulness.

From the political instability birthed during the first decade of independence, through a series of successive military coup d’état, to the contemporary stories of commercial kidnappings and politically motivated crisis, Nigeria is continually in the global news network for largely the wrong reasons. Several critiques of the Nigerian society have identified the problem with Nigeria as that of the failure of leadership – or that of a deficit of good leadership (Achebe, 1983). Various terminologies have been coined and deployed to refer to the Nigerian experience with governance and bad leadership: “the Nigerian Project”, “the Nigerian Question” and “the Nigerian Factor”, among others.

One recurring phenomenon that has come to be associated with the problem of leadership in Nigeria is the question of corruption. The perennial culture of bad leadership in Nigeria is inseparable from a history of corruption. More than any other phenomenon corruption accounts, perhaps, for a large percentage of the reasons for the failure of leadership in Nigeria (Ahmed, K., 2016). Simply put, corruption is an abuse of power or authority. Technically conceived, corruption is “a form of dishonesty or criminal activity undertaken by a person or organization entrusted with a position of authority, often to acquire illicit benefit, or, abuse of entrusted power for one's private gain” (Wikipedia).

That form of corruption describable as governmental or political corruption, remains the bane of leadership in the political history of Nigeria. By political corruption, we refer to a situation in which a political office holder or public servant acts in an official capacity for personal or personal gains. Thus, corruption is not only selfish but also destructive of collective dreams and aspirations. Acts of corruption – bribery, embezzlement and prebendalism, among others – are symptomatic of bad leadership and bad thinking. A nation is developed to the extent to which it possesses a thinking leadership. Good governance, and invariably development, is far from a nation that is in deficit of good thinkers as leaders.

An analytical look at the history of corruption in Nigeria vis-à-vis the anti-corruption efforts of successive governments indicates that the black African country may still be years away from experiencing sustainable development. At the nascence of the independence of Nigeria, precisely on the 15th of January 1966, a handful of young Nigerian soldiers overthrew the then political leadership of Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa and President Nnamdi Azikwe on account of alleged widespread corruption in the public sector. The

allegations of corruption were later established by the General Aguyi Ironsi government which uncovered massive looting of public funds in the Nigeria Railway Corporation, Nigeria Ports Authority and the Nigeria Airways, among others. Nigerians jubilated on the news of the military take-over.

Enter the General Yakubu Gowon counter coup of the same year, July 1966. The corrective agenda of the January 15 1966 coup was aborted. Corruption deepened and the phenomenon 'elephant projects' characterized journalistic reports of abuse of public funds by government officials.

Now in an attempt to further address the continued problem of political corruption among the leadership in Nigeria, General Murtala Mohammed toppled the Government of General Yakubu Gowon in July 1975. The Murtala-led regime set up several anti-corruption panels and probes at the federal and state tiers: the Federal Assets Investigation Panel of 1975 and the Belgore Commission of Inquiry, among others. The Murtala administration succeeded in dismissing several corrupt top military officers and recovering billions of looted and misappropriated public funds.

The euphoria of the successes of the Murtala-led anti-corruption war was however short-lived with his assassination six months into his assumption of office. Following the assassination of General Murtala, the mantle of political leadership fell on General Olusegun Obasanjo, who like General Yakubu Gowon, did not pursue the anti-corruption war with the same zeal as his predecessor. Obasanjo however ended the military domination of the leadership space since 15th January 1966 with the handover of power to civilian authorities in 1979.

As if the return of power to civilians symbolize some kind of return of corruption on an even higher proportion, the ensuing civilian rule of President Sheu Shagari in 1979 saw the resurgence of gratification, embezzlement and crass cronyism at unimaginable proportions. The Umaru Dikko 4 billion Naira rice importation saga readily comes to mind. The large scale political corruption that characterized the Shagari-led government birthed the era of putting government buildings on flames to destroy implicatory records and documented evidence of corrupt practices (Okonkwo, 2007).

In a supposed quest to birth good governance and instill discipline and cultivation of integrity in the leadership space in Nigeria, General Muhammed Buhari overthrew the widely acknowledged corrupt civilian government of President Sheu Shagari on the 31st of December, 1983. No sooner than the Muhammed Buhari administration settled down that the government began to demonstrate a lack of respect for human rights. In its attempt to fight corruption headlong, several erstwhile governors and public office holders were tried and prosecuted with little or no regards for human rights.

The history of bad leadership and political corruption in Nigeria will not be complete without reference to the General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (IBB) administration. Following a bloodless palace coup on 27th of August, 1985, General Ibrahim Babangida overthrew the leadership of the Buhari-Idiagbon junta on allegations of human rights abuses. For thirteen years Nigeria witnessed corruption in high and low places with unprecedented effrontery (Okonkwo, 2007). During the Babangida years corruption almost became the norm rather than the abnormal. With the euphemistic expression 'if you can't beat them, join them', almost every sector of public administration in Nigeria became infected with the economic virus called corruption during the IBB years.

Following intense local and international outcry against the corrupt leadership and maladministration of the Babangida military government, General Ibrahim Babangida reluctantly 'stepped aside' for a *contraptive* leadership referred to as an Interim National Government (ING) on 26th August 1993. An act of corruption in itself, the political contraption ING did not last above three months as General Sani Abacha swept aside the *contrapted* leadership and took over the reins of political leadership on 17th November 1993. The administration of Sani Abacha saw nepotism, cronyism and wanton prebendalism at play in the governance space in Nigeria like never before. The immediate families, friends and cronies of General Sani Abacha looted the public treasury in an atmosphere best described as broad day thievery.

With the sudden death of Abacha in June 1998 – following a heart attack, General Abdul Salami assumed political leadership and roadmapped the return of power to a democratically elected government in May, 1999. The emergent civilian government of General Olusegun Obasanjo eventually spent the next eight years deepening corrupt practices.

While responsible for setting up anti-graft agencies; the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (in 2000) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (in 2002), the Obasanjo administration also got enmeshed in a series of leadership abuse: the KBR and Siemens bribery scandals; the \$6 billion (Bonny) liquefied natural gas contract scandal, and the controversial presidential library donations. Obasanjo will be ill remembered for attempting to corrupt the leadership space by attempting a 'third term agenda'. The bid by Obasanjo for a third term of four years as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria resulted in the looting of the collective patrimony to 'settle' perceived opponents of the third term agenda.

The corruption of the leadership space in Nigeria went on unabated with the ensuing Yar'adua-Jonathan administration, between 2007 and 2010. Yar'adua did little with respect to tackling headlong known corruption cases of the preceding administration of Obasanjo. As a result of the need to protect the interest of his

political cronies, and also perhaps as a result of continued ill health – the leadership of Yar’dua turned blind eyes to the high-profile cases of corruption of the trio of Governors Ibori, Igbinnedion and Odili. The trajectory of corruption in Nigeria leadership space reached a feverish peak with the Jonathan administration, between 2010 – 2015: non-remittance of \$20 billion by the NNPC; questionable award of security contracts to Niger Delta militants; and, the Malibu Oil scandal.

The two-term civilian leadership of former Military Head of State, President Muhamadu Buhari has also come under intense national and international criticisms for allegedly deploying the anti-graft agencies – the ICPC and the EFCC – for witch-hunting of political opponents. Though the Buhari leadership eventually sacked its Secretary to the Federal Government Babachir Lawal, Buhari in 2016 came under attack for treating the Babachir Lawal N200 million grass-cutting contract scandal with kid gloves.

Now, we turn attention to the questions we set to interrogate. The above discursive outline of Nigeria’s trajectory of corruption and leadership accounts for the nation’s timeline with retrogression and underdevelopment, as noted by Ogbeidi (2012) for example. From independence till present, it has been stories and cases of corrupt leadership: military takeovers of power for selfish motives; prebendal misappropriation and allocation of collective patrimonies; deconstruction of stealing as ‘not corruption’; wanton demonstration of greed and avarice across all known lines (geo-political, religious and tribal); and unashamed debasement of human values and time-tested leadership virtues of integrity, probity and accountability.

Most developing nations remain forever ‘developing’ as they carry the burden of a uniform trajectory with corruption and bad leadership. Nations categorized as ‘developed’ remain developed because they have evolved and sustained over the years a culture of good leadership which appreciates and rewards selfless service. Unless developing nations change their narratives with bad leadership, analysts will continue to categorize Nigeria, and other developing nations, as *developing* in decades to come.

### **III. THE DESIDERATUM: GOOD THINKING AND SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP**

The Nigerian experience with bad leadership and corruption is not promotive of development. Development is a phenomenon that derives from the cultivation of a critical attitude of the mind. An uncritical mind cannot be productive of developmental ideas and ideals. In line with the saying ‘you cannot give what you do not possess’, the leadership space in Nigeria lacks the critical mass of *thinking* leaders who are able to appreciate the nexus between political power, good leadership and development.

Same applies for the political followership in Nigeria. When a people are unthinking and uncritical of bad leadership, that leadership subsists. Thus, an unthinking political followership gives support to bad or unsustainable leadership. Good governance for example cannot be expected to be delivered to an electorate that has been compromised with pre-election ‘gifts’ (of monies and inducements, also known in the Nigeria political parlance as ‘stomach infrastructure’). In essence critical followership is *sine qua non* for good and sustainable leadership.

Thus, for Nigeria to experience sustainable development, she must first address the question of sustainable leadership. By sustainable leadership we mean that kind of leadership that is founded on the principle of sustainable thinking: a leadership that recognizes the place of cultivating a critical attitude of the mind as a condition for engendering that kind of development that promotes the interest of present generations without jeopardizing the interest of future generations. The absence of that critical mass of sustainable thinkers *cum* leaders in the Nigerian political space accounts, largely, for the underdevelopment of Nigeria since independence.

In essence for Nigeria to surmount its perennial trajectory with corruption and bad leadership, she must embrace the ethos of sustainable leadership. Institutionalizing sustainable leadership requires collective will and determination to see to the emergence of leaders who appreciate the connect between providing leadership not only for the benefit of the present but also for the interest of the future; leaders who appreciate the importance of political power as a tool for transformation and social change; and, most importantly leaders who are critical thinkers.

A good-thinking leadership will appreciate that corruption is antithetical to development. Corrupt practices - bribery, fraud, and misappropriation of public funds, among others, are the products of poor, unguarded and perverted thought processes (of greed and avarice) which are cogs and clogs on the wheel of development. No nation develops beyond the thinking capacity of its leaders. The intellectual strength of the leadership of a nation is co-terminus with its development potentials. A thinking nation plans. A non-thinking leadership is a liability; plan-less, whimsical and capricious.

A thinking leadership will care less about personal aggrandizement but care more about selfless service, integrity and accountability. Sustainable development requires sustainable leadership. Sustainable leadership is itself a product of good thinking. Suffices to conclude that for Nigeria to surmount the phenomenon of corrupt leadership, and establish a culture of sustainable leadership - a condition for meaningful development - she must rethink and rejig her leadership space.

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