

Political Realism and its Implications on Nigeria's Political Practice

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ABSTRACT

Right from time immemorial, human beings have been concerned with the quest for power in order to dominate, subjugate, exploit, extort, dehumanize and oppress others. If they fail to achieve these in a peaceful means, they will resort to mischievous practices. That is why power has been abused, misused and misapplied by the leaders in Nigeria's political practice. The results of this misapplication of powers are retrogression and shortfall in infrastructural and human capital development. It is because of this, that this paper takes a look at political realism which emphasizes that human beings by nature are selfish and power seeking animals who would always do things that would benefit them to know if this presupposition is justifiable or not. The paper therefore concludes that human beings by nature are altruistic; that egocentrism is caused by man's desire to acquire what he should not acquire, do what he should not do and go where he should not go.

INTRODUCTION

The major aim of power is to influence or control somebody. When somebody wields power over you, automatically that person controls or influences you to act according to his dictates. Anybody who has power uses that his power to ensure that his aims and interests are protected despite the negative effects it may have on others and their resistance and unwillingness. The power of an individual or institution according to Simon Blackburn is:

The ability to achieve something, whether by right or by control or influence. Power is the ability to mobilize economic, social, or political forces in order to achieve a result. It can be measured by the probability of that result being achieved in the face of various kinds of obstacle or opposition. It is not essential to this definition that the result be consciously intended by the powerful agent: power may be exercised unknowingly, although of course it is frequently deliberate.¹

Human beings are power hungry, all his actions are aimed at power accumulation and that is why the desire for power is the most firmly established of all human desires. It is because of this that he imposes his will on others in order to dominate them. The dictum "with God all things are possible" has been equated with the political dictum "with power all things are possible."²

Power encapsulates both the ability to command-to exact obedience to one's orders and to make or influence decisions that affect directly or indirectly the welfare of others as well as one's own fate. When we consider that politics is a struggle for power, we then recall that it centres around who shall determine public policy and what the policy shall be-what taxes shall be levied and how the burden is to be distributed, whether government shall build industrial Estates in all the local government areas or not etc.³ The question now is, what is the cause of this general inclination of all mankind to perpetually and restlessly desire for power after power which ceases in death? Thomas Hobbes answers that the cause is not that a man hopes always for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to or that he cannot be content with a moderate power but it is simply because he cannot assure the power and means to live well which he has in the present without the acquisition of more.⁴

This man's desire to acquire more leads to man's inhumanity to his fellow man and conflict. When two persons desire the same thing which will be impossible for both of them to enjoy, they will become enemies and in the way to their end will try by all means to destroy or subdue one another.⁵ In order to make the destruction or subdue of one another possible, there will be quarrel. This quarrel has three

principles causes which according to Hobbes include competition, diffidence and glory. Competition makes men to invade for gain, diffidence for safety and glory for reputation.⁶ Men desire for power in order to gain, to be safe and to have reputation. They are ready to do anything in order to have this power. An analysis of the writings of great social and political theorists from Plato and Aristotle through Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes to Pareto and Weber would no doubt reveal power as the central concept around which attempts to explain politics have revolved.⁷ From a practical point of view, it seems that the one who wields political power holds sway over everyone and everything else in society. Thus it is the politicians that control policies on education, health, family, defence, research, entertainment, the economy, peace and war, and even religion.⁸ This desire to control and influence is what every politician pursues and that is why political realism sees power as the primary end of every political action.⁹

POLITICAL REALISM: WHAT IS IT?

Political realism sees every political actor as a power seeking and self interested person. This implies that the game of politics is played with the aim of satisfying one's own interest and acquiring power. The assumption of political realism is that power is (or ought to be) the primary end of political action, whether in the domestic or international arena. In the domestic arena, political realism sees the politicians as always striving to maximize their power while on the international stage, the nation states are seen as the primary agents that maximize or ought to maximize their power.¹⁰ Realism is also known as political realism.¹¹ Our major concern in this work is political realism in domestic politics or domestic arena, that is the pursuit of power by the politicians of the Nigerian government for their own selfish interest. We are not interested in political realism in the international politics; that is the view that the principal actors in the international arena are states which are concerned with their own security, act in pursuit of their own national interests, and struggle for power.¹² According to Mark Philp:

Realism in political theory purports to be more centrally concerned with what should be done now, with the complex of compromising choices that have to be faced in the real world, fully appreciating the dynamics of power and the necessity for compromise on objectives and

interests. And in approaching that question, realism rejects the view that we can somehow get the values straight first and then simply apply them in the real world.¹³

Political realism cannot be discussed without making references to Thucydides, Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes. Thucydides is said to be a political realist because he stresses so much on the set of premises that define the realist tradition. These include: state actors, egoism, anarchy, power, security and morality.¹⁴ His work titled *History of the Peloponnesian War* is not a work on international relations or political philosophy but in this work, he argues that the strong should rule the weak, as they have the power to do so.¹⁵ Also, there is a realist perspective in the way Thucydides explains the cause of the Peloponnesian War, and also in the famous "Melian Dialogue", in the statement made by the Athenian envoys.¹⁶ Realism is also said to be expressed in the Athenians first speech recorded in the *History*. That speech is said to have been given at the debate that took place in Sparta before the war.¹⁷ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states again that:

Human nature is a starting point for classical political realism. Realists view human beings as inherently egoistic and self-interested to the extent that self-interest overcomes moral principles. At the debate in Sparta, described in Book 1 of Thucydides' *History*, the Athenians affirm the priority of self interest over morality. They say that considerations of right and wrong have "never turned people aside from the opportunities of aggrandizement offered by superior strength (Chap.1 Par. 76).¹⁸

Niccolo Machiavelli is also a radical political realist and his political realism can be applied to both domestic and international politics. Machiavelli separated morality from politics; he sees politics as a game which every political actor who wants to win must not bring morality into it. He advises leaders to use any means whether moral or immoral to acquire and retain political power. For him, morality has no place in active politics. If it means killing to get what one wants, he advises that one should kill. When one gets it, people will be praising him, no one would like to know how you get it or the method that you used, it is the end that matters. Machiavelli says in *The Prince* that: Contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and

who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles. You must understand, therefore, that there are two ways of fighting: by law or by force. The first way is natural to men, and the second to beasts. But as the first way often proves inadequate, one must need to have recourse to the second.¹⁹

Machiavelli offers an extreme example of a double standard of morals, one for the ruler and another for the private citizen. The first is judged by success in keeping and increasing his power. The second is by the strength which his conduct imparts to the social group. Since the ruler is outside the group, or at least in a very special relation to it, he is above the morality to be enforced within the group.²⁰

Thomas Hobbes in his own view sees man as a power seeking animal. Before going into detail, it is necessary to understand that the idealist perspective which is based on classical political philosophy conceives humans as beings that are capable of controlling their desires through reason and are altruistic beings. Not only that but that they are rational and moral agents that can distinguish between right and wrong and make moral choices. According to them, man by nature is a social being.²¹ Hobbes castigates these views and says that human beings are neither social nor moral but individualistic, always searching for powers after power which can only be stopped by death. Hobbes sees man as a being who is by nature selfish; he is moved to action not by his intellect or reason, but by his appetites, desires and passion.²² It is this clear-cut individualism which makes Hobbes' philosophy the most revolutionary theory of the age.²³ The summary of the explanation above is that:

Political realism in essence reduces to the political-ethical principle that might is right. The theory has a long history, being evident in Thucydides' *Peloponnessian War*. It was expanded on by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, and others such as Thomas Hobbes, Spinoza, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau followed (the theory was given great dramatical portray in Shakespeare's *Richard III*). In the late nineteenth century, it underwent a new incarnation in the form of social Darwinism whose adherents explained social and hence political growth in terms of a struggle in which only the fittest (strongest) cultures or politics would survive. Political realism assumes that interests are to be maintained through the exercise of power and

that the world is characterized by competing power bases.²⁴

THE IMPLICATIONS OF POLITICAL REALISM ON NIGERIA'S POLITICAL PRACTICE

Politics is derived from the Greek word "*politika*" or "*polis*". Both of them mean the affair of the cities or affairs of state. Ancient Greece was made up of many city states like Trace, Macedon, Crete, Rhodes, Athens, Sparta, Epirus, Delphi et cetera. They were so much interested in how to organize each of the city states so that their affairs would be properly harmonized or coordinated. This is common especially to Athens and that is why George H. Sabine and Thomas L. Thorson state that the pervasiveness of this common life and the value which the Athenians set upon it is apparent upon the face of their institution. Rotation in office, the filling of offices by lot and the enlargement of citizens a share in the government.²⁵ We can now see that politics is also about who we are: are 'we' individual agents in control of our own interests, desires, values, customs, and so on, or are 'we' individuals who are profoundly shaped by the way these things are transmitted at the level of social practice and structure.²⁶ The implication of political realism which emphasizes on power and self interest cannot be exhausted in this paper. The belief that power and self interests should be the focus of a leader has truncated democracy and turned it to a brand of democracy that could be called power tussle democracy. This power tussle democracy has removed morality from the Nigerian democratic practice. Politics is essentially applied ethics since its main concern is how is organize society in such a way as to ensure justice for all the members or the society.²⁷ To talk of removing morality or justice from politics therefore is to talk of doing the impossible. For, once morality is removed from politics, the latter ceases to be politics and turns into the display of naked power and greed, a kind of situation described by Thomas Hobbes as the state or nature.²⁸ Talking of politics in Nigeria, a lot of political activities go on and involve a lot of people. Most of those involved wind up as sectional chieftains, or even as self - seeking opportunists. What one sees is mostly cheap, largely uncoordinated, free - for- all jungle politics of hassle and intrigue.²⁹ This proves the fact that:

In contemporary times Mao Tse Tung stood redoubtable in China, Fidel Castro Stands in Cuba, Charles de Gaulle in France, Francisco

Franco in Spain and Winston Churchill in Britain. In East Africa there was Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana and Ahmed Sekou Toure in Guinea. Who stands for Nigeria as a whole? Is there any individual whose intellectual and ideological activities can be synonymous with the political entity called Nigeria? It seems quite obvious that Nigeria cannot easily turn around and produce a single individual who could truthfully be referred to as paradigmatic for the whole of Nigeria, whose mode of thought or pattern of perception forms a blueprint for others, on the philosophical, political and ideological plane.³⁰

The cause of this is because we are individualistic and that makes us to be always emphasizing on I. Everything we do must be something that will benefit us first before considering others if we wish. The English man in grammatical expression will say you and I, that is "unu na mu" in Igbo language but Nigerians particularly the Igbo people would say 'I and you' meaning 'mu na gi'. This I and you implication of political realism makes it difficult to put much consideration on the affairs of others. That is why Blessing Ifeoma Obuasi states according to Opatata that Igbo man, for instance, does most of what he does based on an individualistic ideology derived from his linguistic values. For instance, in Igbo sentence formations, there is a serious stress on the 'self' as can be seen in the following – 'Mu na gi' = I and you (singular). 'Mu na Unu' = I and you (plural) while the British would rather say 'you and I' and the French 'Toi et moi'.³¹ Even the British themselves take 'I' as a first person pronoun, but since it is not given much stress in their culture, the language does not have it in the first position in her constructions. Consequently, their culture is not 'self' centred.³² We should remember that political realism is neither of Nigerian nor Igbo origin. Why should we be emphasizing on I in everything that we are doing. Political realism is of Western origin and the West places 'you' first before 'I' and that is why the west is more developed than Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. They do things that will benefit others first but in Nigeria, we do things that will benefit us first, and that is why the democracy that we practice in Nigeria today is ethnic democracy.

The problem of ethnic democracy is becoming difficult to deal with and that is why there is a problem any time we want to have a change of government (election). The Hausa People will

do everything possible to produce the president, the Yoruba people will do the same thing while the Igbo people will let the world know that they have not produced a president and that means that they are being marginalized. The reason for this is that we believe that if somebody from your ethnic group is in power, your interest will be protected and you will be at an advantage more than others. We are self interested and self centered in everything that we are doing. Why we have various ethnic based groups in Nigeria like Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Boko Haram, Niger Delta Avenger (NDA) etc is because of ethnic democracy which is caused by selfishness and self centredness. Everything is centred on my own ethnic group. Appointments, contracts and job allocations are centered on my own people and that is what we are suffering today in Nigeria. Remember that the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria says that we the people of Federal Republic of Nigeria have resolved to live as one indivisible and indissoluble sovereign nation.³³ Is that what is or what ought to be? Where are we heading to Nigerians? From the position of domestic political realists:

We have seen from my brief analysis of Nigerian politics that the architects of this country's down fall are the self centred politicians. It is no longer news that while the poor in this country are languishing in hunger, squalor, disease, our leaders are busy looting the nation's treasury, purchasing private jets, refusing court's summons, trotting the globe with the tax payers' money, opening fat accounts with foreign banks; that is why qualified graduates roam the streets in search of employment, our leaders are bent on reserving space for their relatives who are yet to graduate from school. Phrases like "inflated contracts" "kickbacks" and "ten percents" are now watchwords among our public office holders to liquidate the nation's treasury.³⁴

When Winston Churchill told his countrymen who were duly elected to serve with him as leaders of their country that they should be prepared to go through blood, toil, tears and sweat, he wanted them to have it very clear in their heads that leadership is not a lucrative business but a selfless service to one's nation and to one's people.³⁵ He did not give those men and women £5million each as furniture allowance. He did not give each of them fleets of official cars. He did not assign to each of

them 25 special assistants at the expense of the government, he did not give indefinable but money - spinning contract awards to their wives and children. He did not send them to the moon to have their fever cured at the expense of the government wherever they caught cold.³⁶ He did not allow them to send their children overseas or to private schools to read while allowing the children of the masses to be packed in suffocating hostel accommodation like hardened criminals packed in prison cells. Winston Churchill lived up to every letter of that statement and as much brought so much honour to his country.³⁷ Who will bring honour to this country -Nigeria? This is hardly fair. Nigerians are what they are only because their leaders are not what they should be.³⁸ Majority of Nigerian leaders are political realists - self centered leaders, megalomaniac and egocentrics. Nigeria is a country that wants to be like one of the most advanced and developed countries in the world but they are not doing what those people or countries did that made them to be at the level that they are today. If you want to be like somebody, you must behave the way the person behaves, think the way the person thinks and do the things that the person does. You cannot be like somebody by talking. What talk does when it is not backed with action is that it leads to poverty and that is what we are seeing today in Nigeria. Today, Nigeria is ranked low in the committee of democratic nation because of lack of good governance [caused by extreme desire for power and self centeredness]: there is massive corruption, political turbulence, decline in economic productivity and social discontort orchestrated by the activities of ethnic militia. The spate of violence and crimes has created an alarming sense of insecurity, such that people no longer trust on the powers of their government for protection.³⁹ What actually was the intention of Nigerians in transiting to a democratic state? On behalf of Nigerians, Plato states:

Our purpose in founding our state was not to promote the particular happiness of a single class, but so far as possible, of the whole community. Our idea was that we were most likely to find justice in such a community, and similarly injustice in a really badly run community, and in height of our findings be able to decide the question we are trying to answer. We are therefore at the moment trying to construct what we think is a happy community by securing the happiness not of a select minority, but of the whole.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

To avert the problem caused by political realism in the Nigeria's political practice, there should be positive attitudinal change. It is said that it is one's attitude that will determine his altitude. Positive attitude both on the part of the leaders and their subjects will lead to transparency, accountability and decency. We should change from being power politicians or leaders to human politicians or human leaders. Also, patriotic citizens should be enthroned in politics. Citizens who love their country and are willing and ready to defend it should take the mantle of leadership of our country. This will help to put an end to inferiority complex and as well stop our leaders from travelling abroad to deposit embezzled fund for their own selfish interests. Also, travelling to another country to invest instead of one's own country will stop. Finally, morality should be inculcated into politics. The idea of separating morality from politics is unfair and can lead to human suffering. If morality is inculcated into politics, power brokers, aspirants or contestants will not see politics as a do or die affair but as a game and in a game, two things are involved: either you win or lose. Bringing morality into politics will also make our elections to be transparent, credible and devoid of any form of irregularities. Man by nature is not egocentric; egocentrism is caused by man's desire to acquire what he should not acquire, do what he should not do and go where he should not go.

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