

Plato's Political Leadership and The Question of Relevance in Africa's Politics

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Abstract

This paper argues the thesis that Plato's political philosophy is highly relevant to Africa's politics. Africa's politics is characterized by a lot of crises such as corruption and other social maladies. Some of the so called leaders are not well trained; contrary to Plato's political blue print. Some of African leaders are far from physical and psychological perfection. Acquisition of private property is also a serious issue in Africa's politics. It is against this background that the paper addresses all these contending issues militating against Africa's political system which will of course, affect her quest for development. The paper therefore discusses Plato's political philosophy and its relevance to Africa's politics. The paper concludes that Plato's political philosophy is of vital importance to Africa's politics.

Keywords: Plato's political philosophy; question of relevance; Leadership; Africa's Politics

Introduction

One of the most difficult and perplexing questions in political philosophy is "who should rule?" it must be recalled that virtually all the classical theories have dealt with it, and almost all of them can be classified according to how they attempt to answer this germane question. For instance, in John Locke's opinion, the people should rule themselves, by extension, this means it is purely democracy, for Thomas Hobbes, one man should rule, that is, monarchist. The platonic answer to this very illuminating question is that a specially trained group of intellectuals should rule.

Plato's Political Philosophy

From the outset, it is pertinent to note that Plato's political philosophy anchors on "an ideal state" (a perfect state). In trying to describe the perfect society, Plato was greatly influenced by psychological and biological theories of the time. The psychology of the day need that every

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man is composed of two different ingredients: his body and soul. Thus, what makes an ideal man is a matter of both physical and psychological perfection. By perfection, Plato here means the same as health. To describe such a man, therefore, is to describe men, who are physically and psychologically healthy. A man is physical healthy if he is not suffering from disease; but to determine when he is psychological healthy is somewhat more complicated.

In order to fully comprehend this, Plato maintains that the human soul is divided into three parts – what he calls ‘the rational element’ ‘the spirited element’ ‘the appetitive element’. According to him, the rational element is that part of a man’s soul which enables him to reason, to argue, to deliberate and so forth. On the other hand, ‘the spirited’ element is what makes a man courageous or cowardly and gives him strength of will and the appetitive element consists of his desires and passions, such as the desires for food, drinks, sex and among others. Plato further argues that a man will be psychologically healthy if the three parts of his soul function harmoniously.

Besides Plato argues that an ideal state will be composed of three classes: the ruler to administer it, warrior to defend it, and all other citizens to provide the essentials of life such as food and shelter. Each of these classes corresponds to a division of the individual soul: the ruling class is the rational element of the society, the soldiers are the spirited element; and the other citizens are the appetitive element. Like the ideal individual, the ideal society will be one in which all these elements function harmoniously with the warriors, assisting the rulers to keep the rest of the citizenry, under a benign but, firm control. It will have no conflicts within it and each class by doing what is it best fitted to do will be happy and contented.

Having said this, it is imperative to ask: who shall rule it? Since it is the rulers who ultimately will decide which individuals belong to which class; and it is they who must formulate the laws by which the society functions. Poor leadership will without doubt, lead to poor law; a wrong decision in placing someone in a given class will lead to unhappiness or worse, to rebellion. It is therefore expedient that proper rulers must be chosen if the society is to be ideal.

At this juncture, Plato gives careful directions for choosing rulers, and for making sure, once chosen, they will not work for their own advantage. Firstly, all children should be raised communally, that is by the state until they are about eighteen years of age. It provides reasons for this and the reason is that, at that time, they will be subject to three types of test in order to

determine prospective rulers from those who are to become warriors and artisans. These tests are to take two years. They will be in part physical, in part intellectual, and part moral. He opines that if a man cannot withstand moral temptation, then, he might sacrifice the interest of the society in order to satisfy his own interests. The individuals who pass these tests will be carefully isolated for further training – most of it intellectual. They will be schooled in abstract sciences. They will equally, according to him, study arithmetic, geometry, solid geometry, astronomy and harmonics to prepare them for the abstract thinking necessary for their subsequent study of philosophy.

Furthermore, in Plato's view, the study of philosophy is the culmination of their theoretical preparation for the task of ruling, since it will lead them finally to a complete knowledge of the good. The second part of their schooling will be practical: these men will be appointed to administrative posts of a lesser order and constantly observed in the performance of their duties. Anyone who fails to achieve competence in any of the above subjects will be dismissed as a potential ruler. After all the tests have been passed, the rulers will take part in the active administration of the society. But in order to avoid any chance of their placing their private interests over the public welfare, they will not be allowed to have private families or to possess private property or wealth. Plato feels that family interests and the desire for riches are the two great obstacles to unbiased and impartial leadership.

It is thus clear to the rulers that they are there in government to serve and not to enrich themselves. Plato takes corruption so seriously that in the **laws** he decrees death penalty for the embezzlement of public funds by government officials. This kind of law, I want to believe is long overdue in Africa where corruption by government officials and leaders is like a cankerworm eating up the entire nation.

Above all, Plato declares that, ruling is a skill just as medicine is a skill. In order to rule properly, one has to be trained for it, just as in order to practise medicine properly, one has to be trained for it; just as in order to practise medicine properly one requires special instruction. To allow an untrained person a voice in the direction of the government is a foolish, in Plato's eyes, as to allow an untrained person to give advice for the proper conduct of a surgical operation (Richard Popkin, 1977:60). In the same vein, the state in his view is like a ship. Not everybody can be the captain of a ship; not everybody can control a ship. Only those who have undergone-

special training in navigation and discipline can be captains in ships and direct ships. Similarly, only those who have undergone the special training and education (in philosophy) can rule a state. (Joseph Omoreghe 1990:103) In addition, rulers should be selected from the general run of the people through rigorous education. Such rulers should have the aptitudes and stuff of a ruler. (Dipo Irele, 1998:19)

In the “**Republic**” Plato insists that the philosopher who has passed through his long and laborious training and attained the vision of the forms must not simply remain detached from earthly cares on that summit of contemplation, but, must come down, and play the part which he alone can play in the life of the state because he alone knows the truth must take on the burden of ruling for the good of his fellows and the whole social organism (Amstrong, 1981:57).

Plato believes that his ideal state would be stable, harmonious and justice would prevail there. He believes also that the guardians since they are the philosophers would rule in the interest of the whole society hence, his aphorism: **there will be no end to the trouble of the states, till philosophers become kings in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers can truly become philosophers and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands.**

The Relevance of Plato's Philosophy to African Politics

Having carefully analysed Plato's political philosophy, it behoves on me to state its relevance to African politics. Plato is a towering figure intellectual. He gives western thoughts a new shape. His works have ramifications in all areas of philosophy to the extent that one notable philosopher, Whitehead says that subsequent works in philosophy after Plato are just footnotes of his work. Though, one may not agree with this statement, yet, the truth remains that his work leaves on an indelible mark on the whole broad area of philosophy and he has bequeathed to political thought, a legacy which is still much with us. I shall now briefly delve into the relevance of Plato's political philosophy. Nigeria, we shall recall got independence in 1960, yet, she has not developed. If she has embraced Plato's political blueprint, I am sure that she would have fully developed and joined comity of nations.

First and foremost, I subscribe tenaciously to Plato's view that ruling is a skill that must be learnt. As Falaiye (2012:25-26) avers “it is only in politics and leadership that people spontaneously claim to be qualified”. I shudder at the ideas of some nitwit claiming that he /she

has a revelation to be addressed and accepted as a medical doctor or a lawyer or even a physicist, without training. He goes further to opine that “no one accepts an untrained doctor or lawyer but all would seem to accept untrained leaders /politicians”. In politics, especially in Africa, people put themselves up for leadership positions without training, formal or informal. They simply wake up and contest for high offices, their qualifications – money, ethnic affiliation and or religious affiliation and sometimes the gift of the gard (Ibid: 26). In other parts of the world, leaders either receive formal training in leadership or move progressively along a carefully prepared leadership ladder. In Africa, the situation is different. It is not impossible to move from a ramshackle primary six class in Kaura Namoda to the opulence and splendour of Aso Rock in Abuja or from the prison of in Ado Ekiti (Western Part of Nigeria) to government house in a State capital. In Plato’s view, such amount to injustice as leaders that emerge through this distorted process can only create instability and chaos. Falaiye, (2007:177) underscores this when he says that “nothing prepares a man for rulership in a democratic setting more than the acquisition of the relevant skill”. Henry Kissinger is well known for his ‘shuttle diplomacy’ not by accident. Right from his youth, he made effort to prepare himself; he attended the best schools of diplomacy, and so on. The victories of Napoleon, at Austerlitz, Jena, and Leipzig, and so on, were products of adequate preparation for military leadership right from youth.

Furthermore, Plato was so concerned about morality in politics that he took stringent measures in the **Republic** to encourage and enforce it. He was particularly on his guard against corruption on the part of government officials. He knew very well that if rulers or government officials are corrupt, the state is doomed. Africans, who have had the misfortune of being ruled by corrupt rulers and government officials, have since known this from experience. Plato took stringent measures to avert the corruption of rulers demanding enormous sacrifice and total commitment from them. We are all living witnesses to Africa’s economic crises now as a result of corruption and corrupt practices on the part of our leaders. Little wonder Africa remains undeveloped. According to Obafemi Awolowo “a person cannot live a happy life if he has no modicum and iota of morality in him. Also, no nation has ever attained greatness either by disparaging its conscience or by making a virtue and ideal out of immorality. And any great person or society that neglects morality heads for decadence and perdition”. (Ogunmodede, 1985:237-238)

It is also noteworthy that corruption, though, a pervasive human act and a universal phenomenon, has become a cancer that has particularly eaten deep into the very foundation of the African society. In Africa, it has become endemic and institutionalized. It permeates all aspects of the African life. In fact, corruption “is one of the nagging problems threatening the African society” and it has become an integrated part of our international image. Corruption is also endemic in the African way of doing business. It has stigmatized the image of Africa, weakened her credibility, and reduced the effectiveness of the public institution (Azenabor, 2007:1). As at 2019, Nigeria was ranked 146th out of the 180 countries surveyed, scoring 26 points out of a possible 100. On a scale of zero to 100 in TI’s rating, zero means “Highly Corrupt,” while 100 stands for “Very Clean” hence Nigeria is two steps worse off than she was in 2018 when she scored 27 points to place 144th out of 180 countries. The summation is simply that corruption in the country has worsened. According to the latest ranking, Nigeria is now the second most corrupt country in West Africa with Guinea-Bissau the only country more corrupt than Nigeria in the sub-region. In Africa, only 12 countries are perceived to be more corrupt than Nigeria. They are Zimbabwe, Chad, Eritrea, Burundi, Congo, Guinea Bissau, Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Equatorial Guinea, Sudan, Somalia and South Sudan. Both Somalia and South Sudan were ranked as the most corrupt nations on earth.

Also, Achebe (2012:249) maintains that “corruption in Nigeria has passed the alarming and entered the fatal stage, and Nigeria will die if we continue to pretend that she is only slightly indisposed”. The World Bank recently released numbers indicating that about \$400 billion has been pilfered from Nigeria’s treasury since independence. One needs to stop for a moment to wrap one’s mind around that incredible figure. The amount-\$400 billion-is approximately the gross domestic products of Norway and Sweden. In other words, Nigeria’s corrupt ruling class stole the equivalent of the entire economy of a European country in four decades! This theft of national funds is one of the factors essentially making it impossible for Africa to succeed. This is not all, corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten very deep into the fabric of society at every level in Africa. The Commander, United State of America African Command, General Stephen Townsend attributed the spate of coups in some African Countries to lack of good governance and corruption. Within 18 months, the military seized power in Mali, Chad, Sudan and Burkina Faso. In his words; “Soldiers are undermining democracy in Africa. I cannot tell you why there are so many coups in Africa, I think the continent has enjoyed over 20 years of irregular and

unconstitutional change of government but in the last year we have seen a number of them, I don't know why all that is but it has to do with lack of good governance and corruption". Indeed, the fact cannot be disputed that corruption as a social ill contributes greatly to Africa's epileptic economic, educational and political development. Given this reality then, is it possible for Africa to develop while corruption flourishes? Why has corruption been a way of life in Africa? Why has corruption and unethical practice become Africa's second nature? Is it possible for Africa to develop and join other developed nations while funds meant for capital projects are being siphoned into private pockets? Why should Africa, despite the potential of human and natural resources, remain "a sleeping giant"? (Adefarasin, 2009:203).

This is not all, according to Plato, leaders are not expected to own private property, no families of their own; no personal money. They are required to be totally committed to the state and the welfare of its citizens, at great personal sacrifice. (Omoregbe, 2007:132) Now a cursory look at African leaders and politicians one will see that reverse is the case. We have a long list of African leaders that have acquired property worth billions of Naira and dollars. In order to lend credence to this, I shall cite few recent cases in Nigeria. "Sunday Punch", February 12, 2017:2 reports that "Ex FCT minister, son to forfeit houses to F.G." the paper reports that two high courts in Abuja have ordered that the immediate past minister of the Federal Capital Territory, **Senator Bala Mohammed**, and his son, **Shamsudeen**, temporarily forfeit 10 properties to the Federal Government. It should be pointed out that the properties are at 7, Gana Street, Mataima, Abuja the capital of Nigeria. Also, "The Nation", Sunday September 18, 2016: 1 says **Patience Jonathan**, (wife of the ex-president of Nigeria) faces fresh probe over #5billion Abuja Hotel. Also, "The Nation" Tuesday, September 13, 2016:1 says **Mrs Diezani Alison Madueke**, former minister of petroleum forfeits #48billion Abuja houses to government. Also, "The Nation", Monday, September 5, 2016, p. 1 says **Alamiyeseigha** (former Governor of Bayelsa State South- South Nigeria) #2.8b Hotel rots away in Abuja. "The Nation", Sunday October 9, 2016:1 says DSS recovers #93.5M, and \$530,087 from three judges. "The Punch", Thursday, November 3, 2016:1 says ex-custom Boss, **Dikko** returns #1bn cash to Federal Government, #2b Abuja mansion seized from comptroller General of custom. "The Nation", Wednesday, September 14, 2016:1 says, Revealed: How \$22.3m hit **Jonathan wife's** account. Finally, "The Punch", Wednesday, February 8, 2017:13 says "ICPC" seizes 62 houses from female officer. Again, the "The Punch", Thursday, February 16, 2017:1 says alleged #108bn fraud: EFCC seizes **Akpabio**

wife's school, "The Punch", Friday, February 17, 2017 p.1 says judge order permanent forfeiture of **Diezain's** \$153m to FG.

As a matter of fact, the list is endless. And given all these, the questions are: Can Nigeria develop? What is the motive behind all these? Can Nigeria do without Plato's political philosophy?

Conclusion

From what has been adumbrated above, it is obvious that the paper has fully discussed the relevance of Plato's political philosophy to African politics. Therefore, the onus is on Nigeria to have a rethink and chart a new course in order for her to develop. My clarion call is that African politicians and leaders should not see politics as a way of acquiring property and amazing of wealth rather, they should see politics as a call for service. Again, whoever is not healthy enough should not venture into politics. Anybody who wants to serve must be intellectually sound and morally upright. In my settled and considered opinion, it is when all these are put in place that we can have an ideal society as being enunciated by Plato.

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