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# CHALLENGE TO POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND NATIONAL UNITY IN NIGERIA, 1999-2023

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## ABSTRACT

*The place of altruistic leadership to the stability of a state remains sacrosanct. The progress or the decline of a country has much to do with the kind of leadership it has. A survey of Africa and the level of development she has attained since political freedom from colonial rule, from the middle of the 20th century, up to the 21st century, reveal much on the quality of leadership she has. In Nigeria, for instance, with myriads of challenges bordering on nation building – in the form of development, insecurity, ethno-religious and economic upheavals, deficient in political leadership has remain a sore point. The return of civilian rule in Nigeria from 1999, elicited high hope of better governance; this quickly evaporated with abysmal performance of the political class. The alarming increase in security challenges in Nigeria is a further evidence of leadership failure in the country. The essay by means of qualitative method, made a critical analysis of the important role altruistic leadership can play to enhance the unity and development of Nigeria. It made suggestion for the revision of long held concept of leadership in Nigeria. The ideas of alignment of political leadership with an ethno-religious sentiment than on individual capacity need to change. Furthermore, a change of the idea of leadership in Nigeria would go a long way to lessen the acrimony and tensions often associated with leadership emergence in the country.*

**Keywords: Political Leadership, National Unity, Nigeria, Development, Africa.**

## INTRODUCTION

That majority of African states and Nigeria in particular are still grappling with challenges bordering on unity, decades after political freedom and nation-building experiments from former European colonial overlords, speaks volume of the failure of both the process and leadership style in these states. Nigeria has a landmass of 373,000 square miles, with religious diversity comprising African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam and Christianity; and more than 250 ethnic groups (Coleman, 1986:11). For these reasons, she is said to have enormous potentials as well as various challenges to unity. This is in addition to the historical experience of divisive colonial legacy bequeathed on the polity. The Nigeria state, however, has failed to realize her full potentials in terms of economic development and national cohesion majorly due to the failure of the state and its appurtenances to produce a towering national political figure to unite the discordant voices challenging her unity What seems to have emerged over the years from the time of political freedom from Great Britain in 1960, has been more of regional or sectional leaders in their outlook and goals. This has continued despite the

provision of section 133 sub-section (4) (a) (b) of the 1999 Constitution as amended, which states that

> … a candidate of such election shall be deemed to have been duly elected to the office of President if – (a) he has a majority of votes cast at the election; and (b) he has not less than one-quarter of the votes cast at the election in each of at least two-thirds of all the states in the federation and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja; (2011:83)

Hence, the issue of the possibility of having a national political figure emerging in the system, seems to have been tackled by that very constitutional provision. But, it is obvious that, owing to the wrong perception of leadership among Nigerian political class and the electorates, and the manner of how elections in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023 have been conducted, including the voting patterns, it is still a far cry from the ideal. For instance, during the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria, Goodluck Johnathan, a Southerner and a Christian, the presidential candidate of People's Democratic Party (PDP), had overwhelming victory over the candidates of Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), Muhammadu Buhari and Nuhu Ribadu and Ibrahim Shekarau of Action congress of Nigeria (CAN), and All Nigeria People's Party (ANPA), all from the North and Muslims respectively. According to the report of Newswatch Magazine, "Johnathan … swept the pools in the South-South and South-East (2011:10). Newswatch summary of the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria reads:

> …the pattern of the voting in the presidential race showed is that Nigeria has become more divided politically. The division seen this time around has never manifested as much as it did this time in previous elections. States in core Hausa-Fulani states voted for Buhari while the South-South, South-East and South-West voted for Jonathan. North-Central shared its votes between Jonathan and Buhari (2011:22).

Indications tend to show that the voting patterns still revolve around ethnic, religious and geographical considerations. There are instances, however, where this may not be applicable. Nonetheless, it is evident that with emergence of past and current political leaders in Nigeria, the pattern of voting from 1999 to 2023, especially at the national elections, has continue to be dictated more by either ethnic or religious considerations. The current political leadership in Nigeria, under the All Progressive Congress (APC) party, is a typical example. The emergence of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 presidential election came with votes mainly from Western Nigeria, majority of whom are the Yoruba ethnic group, and Northern Nigeria, majority of whom are the Hausa/Fulani group. Through the alliance of these two geopolitical blocks, they succeeded in defeating the former President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, an Ijaw, from the Eastern block. While majority of votes cast from the Eastern and South-South zones of Nigeria, went to the former President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan. With the emergence of Buhari as Nigerian president in 2015, following the defeat of Goodluck Jonathan, the new president at his inaugural address to the nation, was quoted to have stated "I am for all and for no particular group."

However, later during an interview he had in the United States of America in 2016, Buhari asked by a woman journalist, on how he would run an inclusive government. In his response, he stated that those who gave him 5 percent votes would not expect to get as much as those who gave him 75 percent votes. Clearly, the issues raised by the then President Mohammudu Buhari in terms of sharing of government patronages, based on the percentage of votes he received during the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, has much to say of the kind of leadership in Nigeria, which also revolve around the process of leadership emergence. In most cases, the basis on which leadership in Nigeria emerges has more to do with ethnic and religious sentiments, than on individual ability of the leader. In the same vein, the role of Nigeria electorates to the emergence of a political leader has become restrained as the system is configured to assent to the choice of a chosen candidate. Seeing that his election to power was doctored, 'the leader' who emerged from such a system became emboldened to be reckless and less responsive to the yearnings of the people he came to serve. This may help to explain the bias expressed by the then President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, when he talked about 5% and 75% patronages to differentiate groups of royalty to him and their expected benefits. It may also explain the reason for heighten political tensions being experienced in Nigeria, as some people see the president as more of a Northern leader than a national leader. The same scenario has continued to play out even with the current government of President Ahmed Tinubu, where in the appointment of strategic portfolios, the Southwestern region of Nigeria, are given more than other regions, thus, fueling disunity in the country.

The emergence of a nationalist leader in any clime, as was the case in India, in the person of Mahatma Gandhi, after gaining political freedom from British colonial rule in 1947, made a lot of difference even in an ethnic and religious divided society, to bridge the gaps of disharmony through sincere policies and programmes that emphasize on national interest overriding subnational interest. The Nigeria state from the time of political independence on the other hand, has been bereft of such a visionary and a nationalist leader at the federal level, which has translated to failure to unite discordant voices that have continued to strain the stability of the polity. A new concept of leadership is what is being advocated, which will see leadership beyond the confines of group interest and primordial interest, and as an avenue for selfless service to the masses.

**Contextualizing The Terms 'Nation' and 'State' in Nigeria**

Perhaps, part of the challenge militating against the emergence of a true national political leader in Nigeria, could be explained from the perspective of resolving the concepts of 'nations' within a 'state'. Appadoria appropriately notes that there is a barrier to nation-building where there is no consciousness of unity among the people (1968:18). His observation is most apt as it describes the events in Nigeria political history, especially during the colonial era and afterwards. The events were solidified by the divide and rule policy employed by the British colonial government in governing Nigerian peoples; in the form of indirect rule and regional governments, from 1914 to 1960. The shadow unity and the national consciousness which Nigeria nationalists like Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Sir Obafemi Awolowo, Sir Ahmadu Bello and others, manifested during the struggle for political independence in the late 1940s

and 1950s, was a smokescreen as it quickly gave way to sub-national sentiments and interest from 1960s.

Coleman explains that the problem of political leadership in Nigeria was a consequence of "… the small size of the traditional political unit – later perpetuated by the system of indirect rule, [which, was] a contributory factor in the persistence of parochial attitudes and loyalties, which, combined with linguistic diversities, have been obstacles to economic and political integration in Nigeria" (1986:13). Coleman further opines that, apart from the Yoruba and Bini ethnic groups, other groups in the South had no experience of administering large-scale political organizations, which affected the leadership both during nationalist movement as well as aspect of nation-building process in Nigeria (1986:13).

Coleman's views apart from being Euro-centric in conception, is an attempt to justify the policy of the British colonial rule in Nigeria, which led to the handover of political authority to the Hausa/Fulani group at independence in 1960. The British colonial authority on account of the claims of the Hausa-Fulani having had such large political authority in the past, believed they were in a better position to rule other groups, who had "small size of the traditional political unit". But, such claim does not agree with subsequent political historical developments in Nigeria from 1960, characterized by poor leadership and issues of petty religious and ethnic interest. The issue of poor leadership in Nigeria does not seem to have any bearing on group levels of political developments in the past or were the leader comes from, but more on the inability or failure of Nigeria political class to rise above divisive geographic, ethnic and religious sentiments, bequeathed by colonial rule, and see the potentials in the diversity and harness same for growth and development.

However, a number of past Nigeria political class actually believed in parochial sub-national sentiment and boldly said so – which seem to have further aborted the emergence of a nationalist political leader in Nigeria at the time. In the process, the failure to rise above primordial ties arising from wrong perception and conceptualization of leadership based on ethnic, religious and geography colouration, has not only hindered the emergence of a good leader in Nigeria, but seem to have further serve the interest of the political class. The realization of the political class that their continual relevance in the polity is attached to playing the cards of divisive ethnic-cum-religious fault-lines seem to have subsisted in Nigeria long after gaining independence. Obviously, the emergence of a national political leader should have no link to ethnic, religious and geographical sentiments as the performance of a leader does not limit itself to such boundaries.

Arising from the perceived interest of the political class, Nigeria according to one of the foremost nationalist, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, is a "mere geographical expression". The same view was expressed by Mallam Tafawa Belewa in 1947, who later became the Prime Minister at independence in 1960, that,

> Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper, and that it was "still far from being considered as one country, much less to think of it as being united (Osadalor, 1998:37).

Going by the above statements of some Nigeria leaders at the time, it was not surprising that not many people from other groups, other than the group the leader comes from, would see them as national leaders.

In the area of socialization among Nigerian citizenry, the colonial power by emphasizing more on the differences of the people by the policy of separation of indigenes and non-indigenes supported the new housing policy in the core northern parts of Nigeria. This was what gave rise to the creation of Sabon-Gari (strangers) quarters in Kano, where differences based on ethnicity and religion were emphasized (Nnoli, 1980:3-4). Beyond the antics of colonial rule in Nigeria which was obvious, the Nigerian political leaders in some of their statements and policies became supporters in sowing seeds of division. For instance, from 1953, the Northern Nigerian government under Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, the priemer of Northern region of Nigeria, instituted the northernization policy which discriminated against Nigerians who were not from northern Nigeria. This policy led to the employment of Nigerian from other regions only on contract basis.

Thus, there was no real unity among the emergent Nigeria state, on both political and social relations. El Mahdi, the former President of Sudan, summed this historical experience in Africa as a result of:

> The nation-state, along with the democratic system of government are both relatively newly acquired experiences. They sit uncomfortably astride societies, which have not experienced fusion into a nation for a long period. They continue to see religion, tribe, ethnicity, and other ascriptive factors, as the cement of common identity (2000:7).

As it were, the historical experiences of most African countries and Nigeria in particular, tend to show the ignoble role played by some of their leaders towards entrenching of sub-national consciousness and behaviours, which obviously had dire implications to the development of their country. And these differences including the politics underlying them have continued to widen the gap of unity among the people of Nigeria. It has also contributed to the low level of development in Nigeria as a lot of energy is being channeled on building bridges among the people. The political leaders who have been entrusted with the management of the affairs of Nigeria, from 1999-2023, unfortunately have not been able to address the issue of unity in the midst of diversity as a number of them seem to be gaining from the system. The increase of dischantment in government policies being witnessed in Nigeria currently is an evidence of failure of leadership in the country, and that of the system on which leadership is built. The situation is further compounded by the challenge of human insecurity in Nigeria, as those who felt that their interests are not being well represented tend to resort to sub-national behaviours that further compound the security challenge. Thus, the issue of increase in distrust of leadership and the challenges of unity in Nigeria development from 1999 to 2023, can be summed up as an indication of failure of both the process of electing political leadership and the leaders themselves.

**Challenge of Sub-National Perception of Leadership in Nigeria**

Though, there could be no concrete evidence to show that the election of a leader from a particular geography, ethnic or religious group, has a correlation to his performance, or the economic, social and security wellbeing of the group (he/she) is from, ignorance of this fact has persisted in Nigeria. This may explain partly the reason why the process of selecting, appointing and electing a leader in Nigeria, has become a huge challenge. It may also explain why the polity, often heated up with ethnic, religious and groups sentiments, has failed to rise to the occasion of electing a well acceptable political leader in Nigeria, since political independence in 1960. Hence, Yusufu Bala Usman was right in his observation that,

> The institutional machinery for the exercise of power and its basis in occupational groups, social strata and social classes and their concrete economic and political interests are not perceived with this shallow outlook (2008:3).

It is thus evident that, the identification of political power or leadership position in Nigeria, by the electorates with ethnic or religious sentiment, fueled by political elites do not agree with the realistic operation of politics, nor its interest. Going by the voting patterns of presidential elections in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023, they reveal the influence of primordial attachments on political choice, than on realistic evaluation of the participants. However, the logical implication connected to the behavioural patterns among Nigerian electorates is that, those who cling to this belief seem to be more in number, and *ab initio* they represent the ones who determines elections outcome of leadership position in Nigeria. The observed election behavioural pattern in Nigeria, is bound to evidently continue to undermine the emergence of a national political leader in the country. As a form of duplication, the same process may continue to evolve, until a new conception of leadership is formed, through education and knowledge based decision; to wield the variant forces together, culminating to the emergence of a national leader.

The result of attaching sentiments to leadership position in Nigeria has often led to emergence of compromised leader to position of authority. The occurrence in most cases led to a downward spiral, in unity and development challenges. The periods, 1999 to 2015, in Nigeria was governed by the political party, Peoples Democratic Party, (P.D.P); first under presidents Olusegun Obasanjo, and later under Yar'adua and Goodluck Jonathan. This period witnessed monumental corruption in Nigeria political history. Incidentally, Obasanjo coming to power in 1999, was a case of compromise reached to appease the Yoruba group; who were shortchanged in 1993, following the annulment of the presidential election of that year; believed to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola, a Yoruba man. In the case of Goodluck Jonathan administration, his emergence to power, first as the vice-president in 2009, and later as the president following the death of Yar'adua in 2010, was an attempt to appease the Ijaw-group of the Niger Delta area, from where the bulk of crude oil in Nigeria is derived.

With the return to civilian rule in 1999, the Niger Delta militant fought the Nigeria government then, for resource control in the area. The imbroglio was later settled with laying down of arms by the militants and granting of amnesty. The coming to power of the Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari in 2015, also represent a move to appease the Northern group,

who it was believed were short changed with the sudden death of Shehu Musa Yar'adua in 2010, a Northerner. In all these three scenarios a pattern has been created, leadership position in Nigeria is used to appease those who feel cheated and by so doing the system and the process of leadership emergence were compromised and bastardized leading to bad leadership.

Furthermore, with the sheer breed of 'leaders' in Nigeria, who did not pass through the natural and necessary process of leadership emergence, it breads distrust and deficient in acceptance leading to corruption in the land. In a situation where a political leader emerges through the influence of a political figure (godfather), the basis of trust and loyalty to a political system becomes shaky. The natural consequence will be the manifestation of corruption in the system as the urge to get power and retain same will no more be entrusted in the system, but on the king makers (godfathers). S.C. Igwe for instance, notes that the experience of poor leadership in Africa is such that it has become synonymous with poverty and underdevelopment. He opines that:

> Today due from (sic) [to] Africa leadership Kleptocracy and its lack of sheer good will and empathy towards the ruled, poverty has become widespread all over the continent (2010:12).

He further opines that poverty which is as a result of failed leadership in Africa breeds "… countless forms of criminal activities among Africans as many live well below poverty line" (2010:12).

In the end, whether it was during the tenure of Obasanjo, Jonathan or the current civilian government of Ahmed Tinubu, increase in ethnic, religious sentiments have continued to threaten the unity of Nigeria. The increase in security challenges in Nigeria is a clear indication of the failure of political leadership in the country and, this calls for a reappraisal of the concept on which leadership is built, as it is currently obtained.

**Exemplary Political Leadership: Its Impact on National Unity and Development**

Security has been rightly said, is not the absence of conflict but, the ability of the state and its security agencies to proactively manage and contain such threatening situations. Nigeria political development has been marred by the absence of true dynamic, altruistic servant leadership. Historical evidence has shown, however, that the unity of any nation and her prosperity lies more on the kind of leadership it has more than anything else. The case of United States of America during the 18th century, specifically after the America civil war of 1776, following the defeat of the Southern slave owners, was ably managed by President Abraham Lincoln, in granting amnesty to the Southern rebels and the Emancipation Proclamation Edict. By his wise and able leadership which he manifested, he was able to quickly absorb the Southern rebels states back to the union, and by so doing, became one of the greatest leaders of American history.

Singapore is one of the Asian Tigers; countries who were at the same page with Nigeria in the 1960s, in terms of development. But, with the emergence of Lee Kuan Yew as Singaporean president, he was able to raise the antenna of development and peace in the country through

exhibition of altruistic, exemplary, dynamic servant leadership. This shows that the place of a leader in a country's development, can never be over emphasized. A servant-leader, sees the whole nation not from the prism of religion, ethnicity or group interest, but as his whole constituency. Unfortunately, most African states and Nigeria in particular, have been bereft of such altruistic leadership.

However, such leadership qualities were seen in the life and character of the late South African president, Nelson Mandela. After his release from jail, from the Robin Island prison of South Africa, in 1994, as the leader of African National Congress (ANC), and the government in power, he exhibited great leadership qualities of selflessness, and tolerance in carrying both the white and black South Africans along, without any serious political altercation in the country at the time.

No doubt, the process and manner of his emergence contributed to the qualities of leadership exhibited by Nelson Mandela. The character of servant-leader which Nelson Mandela exhibited is clearly in contradiction to what most African leaders are known for; where personal and group interest seems to tower over and above national interest. The manifestations of such behaviours by a number of African leaders have contributed to the heating up of the polity and the challenges of unity they are facing. S.C. Igwe further notes that the character of leadership in Africa is devoid of responsibilities to the demands of true leadership (2010:12).

Perhaps the warning of the historian, J.F. Ade-Ajayi, on the problem of instability in Nigeria is most timely and appropriate at this time of Nigeria development. He opines that,

> Perhaps, one reason why there is so much violence, aggression and instability in our day to day life is that we have so little consciousness of a time perspective. We act and react as if there is only today, no yesterday, no tomorrow. We seem to care so little about the past; we have no enduring heroes and we respect no precedents. Not surprisingly, we hardly ever consider what kind of a future we are building for our children and our children's children. We lack statesmen with any sense of history. Politics of the moment dominates our life, leaving no room for evaluating achievement or appreciating merit. We, therefore, recognize no permanent values or yardstick of achievement to hold up as models for our youths. The nation suffers which has no sense of history. Its values remain superficial and ephemeral unless imbued with a deep sense of continuity and a perception of success and achievement that transcends acquisition of temporary power or transient wealth. Such a nation cannot achieve a sense of purpose or direction or stability, and without them the future is bleak (2008:63).

The above statements of Ade-Ajayi, on the lessons of history to leadership and political stability in Nigeria, is most apt and succinct; as there is a nexus to the problem of

political stability in a state when the consciousness of the past is blurred. The failure on the part of the political class as well as the populace, to learn from the past has thus, led to a confused leadership. The appreciation of history is what guides to learn from the enduring values of our past heroes, which makes for future projections and hope. However, where this is lacking the people continues to dwell on the peripheral without development, which is one of the enduring qualities of leadership and, which history is at home with.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is obvious that the kind of leadership that has emerged in Nigeria since 1999 to 2023 in particular, is inversely proportional to the political and economic stability and development that the country has witnessed. There is a Christian adage that says, 'a leader's sin is a leading sin'. The leader of a country mirrors the goals and aspirations of the country. But unfortunately, most of the 'leaders' that have emerged in Nigeria were not based on altruistic values, but on religious, ethnic and group consideration. That Nigeria has had more political and military leaders coming from the Northern part of the country than any other area since independent, has not in reality translated to a better economic prosperity or political stability there. In fact, the reverse seems to be the case because, the effect of poor or bad leadership knows no ethnic, religious or group boundary. The understanding of this historical fact among the Nigerian citizenry would in effect help to change not only the perception on which leadership revolves but, the process of choosing a leader based on dynamic and altruistic values than on ethno-religious sentiments which inspires hope, trust and nationalism in the life of a people.

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