

THE PHILOSOPHER - KING: AN IMPERATIVE FOR AMELIORATING NIGERIA'S LEADERSHIP CRISIS

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Abstract

The concept of the philosopher-king is one of the philosophical legacies from the past. Like some other legacies, the depth and application of the concept have not been fully explored. In line with the assertion that philosophy should interface with her context to improve the quality of human life and create a better environment, this article is a contribution to the way forward for Nigeria and it is weaved around the concept of the philosopher-king. At a time when the nation is at the crossroad, and under a leadership that has become a great burden on the nation, it is apposite to reflect on the concept as a means of contributing to the discussions on leadership in the nation. The thrust of the article is that having many more of the leaders of the nation as philosopher-leaders is imperative for the leadership crisis of the nation. It should be noted that philosopher-leader is used interchangeably with philosopher-king. Essentially, the article reflects on the concept of philosopher-king, and makes suggestions for the development of the concept.

KEYWORDS: Philosopher-king, Imperative, Leadership, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

A basic assertion that can be made about Nigeria is that it is a country of ironies and paradoxes. Whereas Nigerians shine in virtually every field of human endeavors, the nation is suffering from underdevelopment. Whereas God has blessed her with abundant human and natural resources, she is one of the poor nations of the world. This irony and contradiction have been a great concern to many and the subject of discussions. It can be affirmed that the most basic singular cause of the ironic contradiction of the nation is lack of good leadership. In other words, leadership is the major missing link in the actualization of the potentiality of the nation.

Against the backdrop of the above, the paper advocates for philosopher-leaders as an imperative for ameliorating the crisis of leadership in the nation. The paper reflects on the significance of leadership, examines the concept of philosopher-king and suggests ideas for a greater manifestation of the concept.

SIGNIFICANCE OF LEADERSHIP

The significance of leadership cannot be overemphasized. Reflecting this emphasis, Sunday Gbadegesin Olawale comments on the influence of leadership thus: “At every level of human relationship, leadership is very essential. Most often, leaders dictate the direction an organization or society will take.... Every nation that has ever made it would have got dedicated and discipline (d) leaders, whereas, every corrupt society is usually led by greedy, callous and uncompassionate leaders.... Yes, the influence of leadership is prodigious.”¹ Similarly, I affirm on the significance of leadership thus:

Leadership is a very significant concept. Certainly leadership makes a great difference in every organization or group. It can be affirmed that the success and achievements of a group to a large extent will be proportional to its leadership. Good leadership is one of the greatest needs of all times. This is even more so now when the present chaotic state of the world is taken into consideration. Never has the world been in dire need of good leadership as now.²

The significance of leadership underscored above is the major reason why many people opine that the basic problem of Nigeria is the problem of leadership. Articulating the ironic and paradoxical reality of the nation, for example, Olawale asserts:

Definitely, something is fundamentally wrong with Nigeria. We have all it takes to make a great, prosperous, technologically advanced nation. Still we are reputed for backwardness. We are endowed with abundant and precious human resources.... (Also), our country is endowed with inestimable material resources and still about ninety-five percent of the people live far below The sanity, order and human sanctity that characterize many developed and even African nations are foreign to our own vocabulary.³

In an apparent answer to what is fundamentally wrong, Olawale opines: “All along, there has been one identifiable potent factor that constitute(s) our undoing – that is, leadership problem. It is leadership that determines many things in the society, and when leaders are bad, things must fall apart. In fact, it is not our economy or civil service, or social service or police that is really defective, but our leadership.”⁴ With reference to the Twitter ban, Abimbola Adhlakun, observes:

Until recently, I had believed that the biggest threat to Nigeria’s corporate existence was hunger. Following the shenanigans of the past week the regime of Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd.) banned Twitter because his feathers ruffled, I concluded

that the trouble with Nigeria is that our leaders are a collective of anti-social elites who have lost faith in the country's prospects.... They do not put effort into building up the nation. Even worse, this unimaginative leadership class frequently and mindlessly pulls down the organic initiative Nigerians pull together to expand their chances of survival.⁵

Unarguably, if the situation of the nation will change, it has to begin from leadership. This is the rationale for the proposal that the philosopher-king as a leadership model should be embraced by many more leaders to actualize the birthing of a new nation.

CONCEPT OF PHILOSOPHER-KING

The concept of philosopher-king is the idea that when philosophers rule, the best form of government results. In Plato's view, this ideal kind of state would be realized when the philosopher-king governs with knowledge of the truth. Expatiating, Melissa Lane opines:

The key to the notion of the 'philosopher king' is that the philosopher is the only person who can be trusted to rule well. Philosophers are both morally and intellectually suited to rule: morally because it is in their nature to love truth and learning so much that they are free from the greed and lust that tempts others to abuse power and intellectually because they alone can gain full knowledge of reality, which in Books V through VII of the *Republic* is argued to culminate in knowledge of the forms of Virtue, Beauty, and, above all, the Good. The city can foster such knowledge by putting aspiring philosophers through a demanding education, and the philosophers will use their knowledge of goodness and virtue to help other citizens achieve these so far as possible.⁶

In a similar vein, Samuel Enoch Stumpf writes:

The ruler, said Plato, should be the one who has been fully educated, one who has come to understand the difference between the visible world and the intelligible world, between the realm of opinion and the realm of knowledge, between appearance and reality. The philosopher-king is one whose education, in short, has led him up step by step through the ascending degrees of knowledge of the Divided Line until at last he has a knowledge of the Good, that synoptic vision of the interrelation of all truths to each other.⁷

This implies that philosopher-kings are "genuine rulers and philosophers who, knowing the Platonic Forms or Ideas, thus become experts about ends and values"⁸ Plato popularized the concept in his classic, *The Republic*. "Plato argued that 'unless philosophers rule as kings or those who are now called kings and princes become genuine philosophers...there will be no respite from evil for humanity.'⁹ Similarly, Brown opines that in response to the decadence of his society, Plato was convinced that "The only hope lay in developing a 'correct philosophy' and creating a new society governed by philosopher-rulers who appreciated philosophy."¹⁰ A similar conviction lies behind the proposal of philosopher-leaders as a solution to the leadership challenge of Nigeria.

Consequently, Plato's education was aimed at producing such leaders as Tsannoff's comment underscores: "The system of education outlined in *The Republic* has the same purpose, the perpetuation of state authority in the guardian class of sages. The program of studies is designed to discover, to elicit, and to develop superior ability, and, by a process of progressive selection, to assign the best intelligent persons to the highest offices."¹¹ Tsannoff

adds that “Plato could see hopes for the social progress of men only along this course of rational direction.”¹² Pirie affirms that the Academy was founded for training just leaders, which are indispensable for having a just state where each member will maintain its appropriate domain.¹³ Thus the emphasis of the concept is on knowledge, competence and expertise. The emphasis on the rational powers which characterized the ancient philosophers is prominent in Plato’s concept. The import of Plato’s words is that those who rule should imbibe the spirit of philosophy.

Philip of Macedon was referred to as a philosopher-king. “This was due to his disposition as a king and his attitude to philosophy and philosophers. Thus it can be said that he maintained a synthesis of philosophy and leadership, which is combining the streams of two worlds. Especially in Africa, the synthesis of philosophy and leadership is one of the greatest needs of our generation.”¹⁴ Other examples of philosopher-kings include Alexander the Great and Marcus Aurelius.

An analysis of Philip of Macedon and a reflection on the concept reveal at least four attributes of a philosopher-leader.

1. A Leader with a Sound Academic Background

Undoubtedly, one’s academic background is a factor for his/her disposition, attitudes and perspectives. While the possession of a good university degree is not an automatic ticket that one would be a good leader, education has leveraging effects on one’s performance. However, it should be added that sound academic background should be coupled with periodic training and perennial personal development which will complement the academic background, further give the philosopher-leader an edge and enhance his/her performance. For instance, during the 2nd Republic, it was generally well known that Chief Obafemi Awolowo was the best candidate among the presidential candidates. When he died later in 1987, Chief Emeka Ojukwu described him as “The best President Nigeria never had.” His education was a major factor in this outstanding distinction.

It may be argued that President Goodluck Jonathan did not bring his academic background to bear so much on his leadership in the light of the drift of the country under his leadership. However, his disposition in conceding defeat as a sitting president which has been widely acclaimed can be linked with the academic profile. Unarguably, that decision which has saved the nation much destruction of lives and properties is one of the best decisions in the nation’s political history. An important aspect of sound academics is having a philosophy of leadership.

A philosophy of leadership is the foundation on which one’s leadership stands, the guiding principle of a leader. In practical terms, a philosophy of leadership answers such questions as, ‘Who am I as a leader?’ ‘What is my understanding of leadership?’ ‘What do I want to achieve as a leader?’ It is evident that without a good philosophy of leadership, properly articulated and consciously followed, one cannot go far as a leader. A philosophy of leadership will help a leader to be focused, directional and purposeful. Also, it will enhance a sense of mission in leadership. Furthermore, it will help to maintain a cutting edge in leadership, propelling the leader to go far and to make outstanding contributions.... In conclusion, a philosophy of leadership is a tool for evaluation.¹⁵

2. A leader Who Prides Intellectualism

A philosopher-leader will have an insatiable thirst for knowledge. He/she will place premium on openness, objectivity, fairness, justice, consistency, evidence and coherence in

his/her leadership. A significant dimension of priding intellectualism is the leader's attitude to intellectuals. The ways leaders treat intellectuals generally is worrisome. A disheartening manifestation of the attitude is when even a member of the academia becomes a government functionary or public official. Many a time such becomes a stranger even to members of his own constituency. Truly, as Lord Acton opined, "Power corrupts and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely." It is a truism that one major way for the nation to move forward is for the leadership to have a better disposition to the intellectuals of the nation. As Ahmed A. Mohiddin observed, "A new breed of leadership is needed in Africa."¹⁶ Among others, such leaders will appreciate intellectuals and involve them more in governance.

3. A Leader Who Grooms Future Leaders

In the light of historical development, one of the best decisions Philip of Macedon took was inviting Socrates to the court to be Alexander's tutor. Alexander not only became one of the greatest soldiers in history, his conquest had an ideological basis conceptualized in Hellenism, the spread of Greek culture and influence. It is worthy of note that even when the Romans conquered the Greeks, the Greek culture and influence continued to prevail. This is the rationale for the term, Greco-Roman World.

Leadership preparation is another area we have to improve as a nation. We have had cases of leaders who sought for different offices before the godfathers asked them to occupy some particular posts. Sometimes, it is the game of the highest bidder, not giving much consideration to personal qualities and leadership competence and acumen. Little wonder that many of our political parties are benefit of ideological basis. Some other times, the godfather would want someone he can control. We have had cases when the leader has to literally take advice for major discussions until the godfather is around. There have also been cases where the godson gets to a point he wants to assert himself and usually there would be tension in the state; in the light of our history, supporting an aspiring leader with the view of controlling him or getting money from him is not grooming for leadership but a manifestation of selfishness and political gambling. This is why investment in people is absolutely necessary. With reference to Africa, Olusegun Obasanjo opines, "One of the greatest assets of Africa is its people. Investing in people is the way forward."¹⁷

In this connection, the significance of a conducive atmosphere cannot be overemphasized. According to Bruce Powers, "The environment most conducive to growth is one permeated with purpose, when every action, every structure, every decision, reflects the reason for being. There exists in such a milieu a high degree of congruence between surface characteristics and the essence of the organization."¹⁸ In a similar vein, Ernest O. White opines, "Climate is the internal atmosphere of a group. It is the feeling you have when you are with a particular group. Climate is to a group what personality is to a person."¹⁹ These comments about organizations can also be applied to the nation.

Unfortunately, the climate in Nigeria now is very worrisome. A few examples will suffice. Dapo Akinrefon and Ola Ajayi reported Prof. Isaac Albert thus: "Nigeria is in deep crisis. We are in serious crisis and some people are talking about 2023 when we are not sure Nigeria would make December. The whole world is worried."²⁰ In a similar report, Dayo Olatunji writes: "Former President Olusegun Obasanjo said Nigerians have been overwhelmed with crisis and need to cry to God for a solution."²¹ On the damage of insurgency, Bashir Bello reported: "United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF and European Union, EU on Friday (June 4) said no fewer than 2,295 teachers have lost their lives while 1,400 schools were destroyed in North-East Nigeria since 2009 and as a result of insurgency."²²

Also, warning that concerted efforts should be made by all stakeholders to prevent the disconcerting security challenges in the South-East from becoming a full-blown terrorism, a Sunday Punch Editorial notes: “Daily reports of sporadic attacks on police and state infrastructure and personnel across the region and neighbouring states are disturbing. An investigation by this newspaper estimated that more than 127 police officers and other security personnel were killed, and 25 police stations attacked in the South-East and South-South in the past five months.”²³ Another Punch Editorial reflects on the Twitter ban by the Federal Government thus:

Twenty-two years after exiting military dictatorship, Nigeria is gradually but steadily slipping back into full-scale repression. Stung by the international shame accompanying Twitter’s removal of a repugnant tweet by the President, Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd.), the regime retaliated by suspending the operations of the microblogging site in Nigeria. The ban is rash, undemocratic and anti-investment; it further jeopardises the country’s international reputation, assaults basic rights and worsens the economic adversity. It is, indeed, an unnecessary detraction.²⁴

An objective analysis of the present climate of the nation shows that unless practical steps are taken the nation may experience a major crisis which would be very disastrous. This would impact negatively, not only on leadership preparation, but also on the future of the country itself.

4. A Leader Who is Intentional about the Future

Related to the truth above, is the issue of foresight and thinking about the future of those who are governed. The training Alexander received laid the foundation for the future ideological influence of the Greeks. This is in line with the leadership law of legacy enunciated by John C. Maxwell. Achievement comes to someone when he/she is able to do great things for him/herself. Success comes when he/she empowers followers to do great things with him/her. Significance comes when one develops leaders to do great things for him/her. A legacy is created when a leader puts his organization in the position to do great things without him. This implies that a leader will be judged by how well his/her people and organization do after him/her.²⁵ It can be affirmed that being intentional about the future is a major way to achieve the law of legacy.

A great leader is concerned more about maintaining enduring structures and leaving a legacy that would benefit the people in the future. This is one of the deficiencies of most of the leaders the nation has had. A manifestation of this deficiency is the exorbitantly ridiculous pension many governors get their lawmakers to make for them after all they have got when in office. And this becomes more disheartening when many would occupy other positions having great financial advantage. The irony of the situation is the context of the pervasive poverty in the land. This also accounts for the recycling syndrome where, individuals who have served as governors become senators or ministers, and even after may be recycled if they are in the “right” party.

Worse still, some leaders even create reversals, wastage and ruin by abandoning projects their predecessors initiated with state money or ideas that would benefit the state in the future. A case in point is the restructuring issue which is the way forward for the nation. The previous administration spent so much on the national conference that produced the document of the restructuring. Now the present administration not only refused to implement the decision but has not seriously discussed the document. Needless to say, the body language

is that the leadership is not interested in the concept, not minding the colossal human and financial investment involved before the administration came on board.

Another example is the perennial debts that are being incurred. Debts mortgage the future of the country and of the coming generations. Nike Popoola and Sam Olatunji reported on the nation's debt thus: "Nigeria's total debt stock rose by N191 billion in the first quarter of this year, according to the Debt Management Office on Wednesday (June 9). The DMO said the debt stock rose to N33.107 trillion as of the end of March 2021 from N32.916 trillion in December 2020."²⁶ And more loans are being obtained. Certainly it is irrational for a leadership not to think seriously about how to pay subsisting loans but be bent on obtaining more loans. Similarly, Providence Adeyinka reported on the percentage of the nation's budget spent on debt servicing thus: "The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria, ICAN, has raised alarm over the impact of Nigeria's rising debt burden as the debt service-to-revenue ratio reaches 70 percent."²⁷ Except we stem the tide, the future of the country is bleak indeed. A very sad dimension of the loans is that the problem of corruption makes it impossible to spend 100% of the loans on the projects intended. This is the same manifestation of budget paddling and contract over bloated costs which have made governance burdensome to the nation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HAVING PHILOSOPHER-LEADERS

1. Improve the Literacy Level

As the paper has underscored, education is a *sine qua non* for having philosopher-leaders. Accordingly, the rate of literacy should be accelerated. The problem of out of school children in their millions must be seriously addressed. Governments at all levels should take practical steps to ensure that the literacy level of the nation is intentionally increased. One way to demonstrate this commitment to increasing the rate of literacy is making primary and secondary education free throughout the nation. Also related are the issues of creating a more enabling environment for learning and providing incentives and motivations for teachers.

2. Improve the Quality of Education

Following improving the rate of literacy is improving the quality of education. This involves increasing the funding of education in the country. Also, it involves ensuring a more stable academic calendar by all the stakeholders of education. The case of the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) strike, in 2020, for instance, which lasted for ten months impacted negatively on the quality of education, a national embarrassment. Many critical minded people have wondered again and again why strike has become the "language" the Federal Government understands. And as our recent experiences have shown sometimes strikes are embarked upon because the government renegaded on agreements reached with university lectures. Again a strike may go on for months before the government will begin dialogue. These are manifestations of anti-intellectualism which the nation should overcome if the nation will produce more philosopher-leaders. Also, improving the quality of education involves addressing the infrastructural decay in many of our institutions and providing additional resources for universities to achieve their purposes.

3. Reduce the Poverty Level

In producing philosopher-leaders, the pervasive poverty in the country should be reduced. Pervasive poverty makes people impervious to the events around them. The struggle for survival would not make many people care about good governance. Also, poverty promotes demagogic leaders as poor people are gullible and demagogic leaders would take

undue advantage of their vulnerability to perpetuate anti-intellectualism in governance, play the people against themselves and do blatantly unreasonable things.

One factor for the unenviable state the nation has sunk is that successive leadership has promoted pervasive poverty to the point that most people are either willing to do the absurd, the unreasonable or they cannot resist bad, anti-intellectual leaders. A case in point is the last elections in Osun and Ekiti States where brutal force and vote buying were used to win elections respectively. In the case of Osun State the State power apparatus was used to intimidate, harass and embarrass those who were not willing to vote for the party in power. For Ekiti State, the vote buying was so glaring that the election was generally adjudged as incredible.

4. Address the Menace of Corruption

Sequel to reducing the pervasive poverty in the land, the menace of corruption should be seriously tackled, at least to reduce it drastically, if we shall have philosopher-leaders. The truth is, the present structure of our politics makes it virtually impossible for true philosopher-leaders to emerge. For one thing, the cost of participating in the election process is too high. One governor candidate who did not win was reported to have spent over 400 million naira. This politics of “the highest bidder” is one factor that encourages politics of desperation, crudeness and irrationality.

Whereas the menace of corruption affects all areas of national life, its greatest damaging effects are probably in politics. I recall reading Reuben Abati’s, Professor of Political Economics, experience sequel to his attempt to participate in the governorship election in his state. Apart from constant harassment, intimidation, even threat to life he and his team members experienced and of course hundreds of millions of naira he must have spent, he received the shock of his life on the day of the primary election, where the governorship candidate was determined. On the day, the venue of the election was changed, and by the time Prof. Abati finally reached the venue, the decision had been made. Truly, the nation is very sick and one medicine is applying truth and reason in our operations as a people. The irony of the Abati episode is that he had written so much about the problem of the nation professing suggestions at different levels. Thus when there are deliberate efforts to edge such a one out of the governorship race, it is clear that except we reverse the trend, the future of the nation is bleak indeed.

5. Encourage Alternative Ideas

It is an atmosphere that encourages alternative ideas that can enhance philosopher leaders. Generally, leadership in Africa is intolerant of opposition. Sometimes, blackmail, campaign of calumny and distortion of facts are used against those who offer alternative ideas. The throwing away of the baby with the bath water syndrome has made African leaders to jettison good, alternative ideas to the detriment of the state. Many a times the reason is because the leadership would not want their “enemies” to take credit. A constant refrain by African leaders is that anyone who offers a contrary opinion is either sponsored or against the government. Few times such people had been charged with threatening national security or even treason.

While members of the winning party would form the majority of the cabinet, the interest of the state should encourage a more inclusive government where there are gifted, capable people from other parties or those without party affiliations. Even though he had his limitations, in the recent history of the nation, Chief Obasanjo approximated this ideal when he was President and the nation was better for it under his leadership. It is unreasonable to keep people who are either incapable and/or have outlived their usefulness in government just

because they are party faithful. Also, it is tantamount to waste of talents and ultimately a disservice to the nation.

6. Promote Good Governance

Finally, having philosopher-leaders requires promotion of good governance. The essence of government is the development of the nation and the promotion of the welfare of the people. Any government that fails to achieve these goals has discredited itself. Again, this is a problem for many African nations. Generally, most African leaders only pay lip service to good governance has its defining characteristics.

Evaluating the present administration by the parameters, for example, shows a colossal failure. On the rule of law, the administration has disobeyed court orders once and again. The failure to achieve success in the security challenge of the nation, has made the security situation of the nation far worse than before the administration took over. It would be recalled that the security problem was one of the three cardinal reasons why the government was voted into power. Implicitly, the administration has become a great disappointment to millions of Nigerians who had great expectations for the leadership prior to 2015. The general feeling is that the nation is entrapped by the administration. Descriptively, the nation is a comedy of errors and a theatre of the absurd hoping for minimal damages before the nation would be rescued from the “Buhari governance trap.” This will lead to the greater harnessing of the resources of the nation and the actualization of her potential greatness. Thus the dignity of the citizens would be enhanced, the nation’s rating would be improved in world, the quality of human life would increase and there would be a more conducive atmosphere in the nation.

CONCLUSION

Unarguably, a critical evaluation of the nation reveals that this period is one of the lowest in the history of the nation. To avert a possible catastrophe, the nation must revisit the issue of leadership. The paper has advocated the concept of philosopher-leader as an alternative to reverse the present downward trend of the nation, save the nation from possible catastrophe and move the nation forward. Subsequently, there would be a greater harnessing of the enormous human and natural resources.

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