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Political opportunism and crisis of governance in Nigeria: Implications for sustainable statecraft and development

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Abstract

This paper examines the nexus between political opportunism and crisis of governance in contemporary Nigeria, with a view to underscoring its implications for sustainable statecraft and development. By way of qualitative analysis of secondary sources, predicated on the Marxian Political Economy approach, the paper posits that the phenomenon of political opportunism among the Nigerian political elites derives its origin, essence and impetus from the organic context of the country's socio-economic architecture. The paper further posits that political opportunism implies negatively for sustainable statecraft and development in Nigeria. The paper submits that political opportunism is a veritable cause of governance cum development crisis in Nigeria and makes a case for its remediation by way of radical de-structuring and re-construction of the Nigerian political economy.

Keywords: Political opportunism; Governance; Political economy; Prebendalism; Sustainable statecraft; Sustainable development

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1. Introduction

The complexion of politics in any polity is, to a large extent, determined by the character of the dominant political elite in that context. But the character of the dominant political elite is invariably conditioned by the organic material and existential conditions under which they acquire their basic political orientations. These conditions particularly refer to the prevailing socio-economic order and the totality of socio-political imperatives arising there-from (cf. Ake, 1981; Okoli, 2009).

The Nigeria political terrain is a peculiar context. The peculiarity of this terrain is best appreciated from the standpoint of the pattern of politicking that obtains thereof. Perhaps, the simplest way to describe this pattern of politicking is to say that it applies itself to the philosophy of 'everything goes'. It would, therefore, seem that the underlying principle of politicking in Nigeria over the years has been Machiavellianism, whereby 'the end justified the means'. Hence, politics in Nigeria has become a rather perplexing phenomenon, entailing all manner of moral cum ethical permissiveness and unscrupulousness (Okoli and Otegwu, 2010; Okoli and Ali, 2014).

The typical average Nigerian politician is a desperate *homo politikus*, who would stop at nothing in his quest to power. For him, politics is a supreme investment; an end in itself that must be pursued at all cost, risking all hazards (Iyayi, 2004). In seeking power for its sake, albeit ultimately for self-aggrandizement, the politician applies himself to little or no civil etiquette, standards or procedures. He has no regards for progressive principles and values; and so he conducts himself with utter sense of crass opportunism. How does this tendency correlate with the operational context of politics (the character of the state and economy) in Nigeria? How does it manifest among the dominant political elites? What implications does it hold for governance and development? And what is the way forward? These are the crucial questions that this paper would seek to address.

2. Theoretical premise: The material context of political opportunism in Nigeria

The problematique of political opportunism in Nigeria would be better understood if situated within the organic context in which the conduct of politics takes place (Gonidec, 1981). The context in question is a prebendal state with 'larger than thou' personae (Okoli, 2009). The Nigerian state plays a dominant role in the national life in the face of the underdevelopment of private capitalist enterprise (Unobe, 2003; Animashaun, 2010, p.5). Being a major facilitator of the capitalist development process, the Nigerian state has assumed the role of a major owner of the means of production. Buoyed by the 'oil boom' of the early 1970s, the state effectively assumed a rather domineering influence and posture in all facets of the national political economy (cf. Jega and Ibeanu, 2007, p.30). This made the state not only the biggest spender of resources but also the largest employer of labor as well as the paramount guarantor of social and economic security. As observed by Joseph (1991:56), the 'oil boom' of the 1970s accentuated "the centrality of the state as the locus of the struggle for resources for personal advancement and group security." In this context, state power becomes an instrument of private capital accumulation. According to Ake:

[T]he state is everywhere and its power appears boundless. There is hardly any aspect of life in which the state does not exercise power and control. That makes the capture of state power singularly important (1996, p.23).

This peculiarity of the Nigerian state promotes parasitic politics wherein state power is sought by all and sundry as a means of personal material aggrandizement (Joseph, 1991; Okoli, 2009). Politics in this context, therefore attracts inestimable premium; thus in a bid to capture state power, the political elite, rather than promote opportunities for political competition, tend to limit or vitiate the prospects of same (Okoli, 2008). Politicking thus becomes a matter of warfare by factions of the political elite. In this desperate, Hobbesian struggle, party politics and electioneering become rather perplexing. It is within the ambit of the foregoing that one can plausibly conjecture the excesses of the Nigerian political elite vis-à-vis quest for state power, as evident in the phenomenon of political opportunism. As Ake succinctly opines:

The character of the state rules out a politics of moderation and mandates a politics of lawlessness and extremism for the simple reason that the nature of state makes the capture of state power irresistibly attractive. The winners in the competition for power win everything, the losers lose everything, Nothing can be worse than losing, nothing, better than winning. Thus, everyone seeks power by every means, legal or otherwise and those who already control state power try to keep it by every means. What emerges from this is a politics which does not know legitimacy or legality, only expediency (1996, p. 7).

3. Understanding the nature and logic of political opportunism

Opportunism is an important concept in physical, social and *theo-sophical* sciences. Generally, it means

[T]he conscious policy and politics of taking selfish advantage of circumstances with little regard for principles, or what the consequences are for others. Opportunist actions are expedient actions guided primarily by self-interested motives (Wikipedia, 2014 (a); para 1).

Human opportunism, therefore, implies the tendency to take advantage of situations and/or to exploit circumstances in service of self-interested motive (Glick, 2011). Opportunism among humans is a behavior dedicated to self-preservation, self-gratification and self-advantage. Hence, human opportunists are inclined to:

- Refuse to take a risk, if doing so would reduce influence, support, wealth or popularity, even though taking the risk is consistent with the principles the person or group upholds;
- Take a risk for the purpose of gaining maintaining/influence, support, wealth or popularity, although taking the risk is inconsistent with the principles being espoused;
- Take advantage of an opportunity to increase influence, support, wealth or popularity, although it is not consistent with the principles being upheld;

- Refuse to respond to an opportunity, only because responding to it might forfeit influence, support, wealth and popularity, even though taking the opportunity would in truth be consistent with the principles subscribed to (Wikipedia 2014 (b); Biran, 2011; Luskin, 2012).

Opportunism in human relations is characterized by inconsistencies and compromises of cherished values or principles. The inconsistencies and compromises are usually compelled by self-regarding interests that may not agree with conventional reason or expectation. The underlying logic of opportunism in this regard is expediency dictated by selfish motivation.

Political opportunism refers to the manifestation of opportunistic behavior in politics or political relations. Epistemologically, political opportunism is associated with Niccolo Machiavelli (1469–1527), who expounded an *a*-moral philosophy of statecraft in his seminal book titled *The Prince* (1513). Today, political opportunism has come to be synonymous with Machiavellianism, which recommends unscrupulous politicking and statesmanship, maintaining that ‘the end justifies the means’ (Glick, 2011; Okoli and Ali; 2014; Okoli, 2008).

Properly conceived, political opportunism would, therefore, imply one or a combination of the following:

- A political style of aiming to increase one’s political influence at almost any price, or a political style that involves seizing every and any opportunity to extend political influence, whenever such opportunities arise;
- The practice of abandoning or compromising in reality some important political principles that were previously held, in the process of trying to increase one’s political power and influence;
- A trend of thought or a political tendency, seeking to make political capital out of situations with the aim being that of gaining more influence, prestige or support, instead of truly winning people over to a principled position or improving their political understanding (Wikipedia, 2014 (b), para. 28; Biran, 2011; Luskin, 2012).

A political opportunist is, thus, a self-interested political go-getter who would rather let go or compromise on principles, taking advantage of any expedient opportunities, in his bid to serve his political interests. Ethically, political opportunists are notorious for being self-centered, short-sighted and narrow-minded and erratic on principle. They have the tendency to pursue short-term political gains with the likelihood of long-term failure (Glick; 2011). Strategically, however, political opportunism may be useful in dealing with peculiar political scenarios where expediency and/or flexibility recommend themselves as the ultimate approach. The significance of contemporary political opportunism does not, however, lie in its strategic utility and importance. It rests with the fact that political opportunism has inspired a spate of political abuses that negate the prospects of sustainable statecraft and development in many states of the world. It is in this light that political opportunism is squarely conceived and understood in the present discourse. Thus political opportunism entails lying, deceiving, blackmailing, double-dealing, stealing, killing, destroying, abusing, and doing the like, in the name of politics.

4. Manifestations of political opportunism in Nigeria

Political opportunism has become a defining element of the group character of the Nigerian political elites. It has manifested in various forms and patterns over the years. Highlighted below are some critical manifestations of the phenomenon in contemporary Nigerian politics.

4.1. Sub-nationalist primordialism

This refers to the dubious centrifugal predilection of Nigeria's political elite. The average Nigerian politician is imbued with high level of primordial inclination. In his bid to make good his politician ambition in the context of competitive partisan relations, he often resorts to parochial sentiments and patronage. This has found expression in the subterranean politicization of ethnicity, religion, clan, as the case may be (Nnoli, 1986; Okoye, 1996). The problem with this pattern of elite politicking is that it is a recipe for sectional and/or sectarian crisis.

4.2. Corruption and official perfidy

Corruption is, arguably, the worst undoing of public governance and development in Nigeria. It has variously manifested in Nigeria in the fashion of systematic plundering of the national patrimony (Nwoye, 2000), prebendalism (Joseph, 1991), as well as ruination of public integrity structures. There is much pathological tendency to avarice and self-service among the political elites, leading to the 'materialization' of state power (Iyayi, 2004) and aggrandizement of personal regards in public leadership. The insatiable *kleptocracy* of the Nigeria politicians, as exemplified in the reign of corruption and official perfidy, has been a critical factor in the Nigerian governance and development debacle.

4.3. Electoral malfeasance

The excesses of the dominant political elite in Nigeria have found abundant expression in electoral abuse and irregularities. Elections in the country have been historically rigged with reckless abandon. In most instances, they have been 'arranged' in service of the interest of the incumbents, who capitalize on their grip of power to corner the electoral process to their advantage. In some cases, the vested interest of a sitting regime overrides in the entire electioneering dispensation, giving rise to a shylock and dubious political transition or succession. This trend has produced a paradox of democratization in Nigeria whereby years of civil rule have not translated into meaningful and enduring democratic transformation. In this regard, it is can be said that Nigeria's experience of civil rule is not yet democracy; at best, it passes for a sort of civilianism with sundry de-democratizing tendencies (Okoli and Okpaleke, 2014).

4.4. Political buccaneering

This refers to the desperation of members of the political elite who would stop at nothing in their bid to acquire and control state power. Bereft of good sense of moral and ethical regards, some Nigerian politicians

conducts themselves typically like a conscienceless power-drunk, who would rather cheat, kill and destroy in order to gain political advantage. Consequently, politics in Nigeria has been replete with cases of unrestrained violence, political assassinations and thuggery. The advent of the 'bucaneer-godfathers' who would even attempt to unilaterally un-sit a political incumbent (Okoli, 2007; Okoli and Atelhe, 2008) represents a new critical dimension to this trend. Another critical dimension of this problem is the rise of diabolism and cultism in the annals of Nigeria's party politics (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Politicians visit voodoo shrines, the underworld circuits, as well as fetish mediums to prospect for political/partisan fortune. For instance, the former Governor elect of Anambra State, Dr. Chris Ngige was taken to Okija shrine in the state by his political godfather for 'strategic bonding' (Okoli, 2007; Okoli and Atalhe, 2008). This was also the case with the current Governor of Abia State, Chief T.A. Orji, who was cowed to the same Okija shrine to get him swear to total allegiance to his estranged political godfather, Orji Uzor Kalu.

4.5. Unconscionable and visionless politics

Politics in Nigeria, in the main, is not guided by ideology. The ideological bankruptcy of politics in contemporary Nigeria had created a scenario whereby politicians tend to conduct themselves without recourse to principles and ideals (Okoli and Ali, 2014). The consequence of this is politics without focus, mission and conviction. Bereft of any concrete ideological direction, the average Nigerian politician puts up behavior that betrays him as a self-oriented opportunist, who is desperate to making good his ambition at all bargain. This, perhaps, explains the spate of inter- and trans-party defections among Nigerian politicians, particularly in the current democratic dispensation.

In this regard, the case of the former Nigerian Vice President, Alhaji Atiku Abubarkar, becomes instructive. Between 2004 and 2014 running, Atiku has been associated with five instances of party defections, having being a member of People's Democratic Party (PDP), People Democratic Movement (PDM), Action Congress (AC), and All Progressive Party (APP) at various times. This is curious more so when he has defected forth and back his parent party (PDP) on two occasions within the period under review. This crass partisan prostitution is, and can only be possible, in a context where party politics is not guided by both personal and ideological convictions (Okoli and Ali, 2014).

The foregoing observations indicate, among the other things, that political opportunism has become a defining characteristic of contemporary party politics and public governance in Nigeria. More importantly, the phenomenon has engendered a number of complications and repercussions that tend to negate effective governance and development in Nigeria.

5. Nigeria's governance crisis : In the light of the IIAG 2013 report

To situate the problem of governance crisis in Nigeria, it may be instructive to make reference to the current Ibrahim Index of Governance (IIAG). The IIAG was established in 2007 by the Ibrahim MO Foundation. Over time, it has become a veritable resource bank for quantitative data on governance in Africa. Put together in

collaboration with experts from a number of other African institutions, IIAG provides a yearly assessment of governance in every African state (IIAG, 2013, p.3). In the main, the IIAG provides a comprehensive platform for stakeholders to appraise the dispensation of public goods and services, and policy outcomes, in every African state, emphasizing continental, regional, national and thematic governance effects. The data are classified within four categories:

- Safety & rule of law
- Participation & human rights
- Sustainable economic opportunity
- Human development (IIAG, 2013, p.3).

Considered against the afore-mentioned criteria, Nigeria was placed at a rear bottom of IIAG's Africa-wide governance assessment for 2013. This indicates that the country is not faring well in the aspects of public governance so considered. Curious enough, Nigeria is lagging behind some acclaimed poor countries such as Niger Republic, Rwanda and Uganda. Details of the report are as highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. Ibrahim Index of African Governance, 2013 Report

Rank	Country	Score
25 th	Algeria	52.5
39 th	Angola	44.5
13 th	Benin	58.7
2 nd	Botswana	77.6
23 rd	Burkina Faso	53.0
40 th	Burundi	43.8
35 th	Cameroon	47.0
3 rd	Cape Verde	76.7
49 th	Central African Republic	32.7
48 th	Chad	33.0
32 nd	Comoros	47.8
43 rd	Congo	43.0
51 st	Congo, DR	31.3
44 th	Côte d'Ivoire	40.9
30 th	Djibouti	48.2
19 th	Egypt	55.0
45 th	Equatorial Guinea	40.9
50 th	Eritrea	31.9
33 rd	Ethiopia	47.6
24 th	Gabon	52.8
22 nd	Gambia	53.6
7 th	Ghana	66.8
42 nd	Guinea	43.2
46 th	Guinea-Bissau	37.1
21 st	Kenya	53.6
9 th	Lesotho	61.9
29 th	Liberia	50.3

38 th	Libya	45.3
37 th	Madagascar	45.7
16 th	Malawi	56.9
27 th	Mali	50.7
34 th	Mauritania	47.3
1 st	Mauritius	82.9
14 th	Morocco	58.0
20 th	Mozambique	54.8
6 th	Namibia	69.5
28 th	Niger	50.4
41 st	Nigeria	43.4
15 th	Rwanda	57.8
11 th	São Tomé & Príncipe	59.9
10 th	Senegal	61.0
4 th	Seychelles	75.0
31 st	Sierra Leone	48.0
52 nd	Somalia	8.0
5 th	South Africa	71.3
26 th	Swaziland	50.8
17 th	Tanzania	56.9
36 th	Togo	45.8
8 th	Tunisia	66.0
18 th	Uganda	56.0
12 th	Zambia	59.6
47 th	Zimbabwe	35.4

Key: Rank/52; Score/100; **Source:** 2013 IIAG Country Rankings; MO Ibrahim Foundation

6. Political opportunism: Implications for sustainable statecraft and development

Sustainability of statecraft and development entail a pragmatic approach to administering governance and development in such a manner that guarantees optimal efficiency at the present without vitiating prospects of sustenance, as well as jeopardizing the interest of posterity. Political opportunism has been the bane of progressive statecraft in Nigeria. Statecraft or governance has its essence in the proper use of the legitimate power of the state to advance the course of national progress and wellbeing. Crisis of governance in Nigeria has a lot to do with state failure. This is in view of the fact that:

The state is the primary structure of governance. The nature and character of the state and of its operators, actors and agencies determine the trajectory and quality of governance. Where and when there are negative turning points in the sequence of the use of power and authority, the nation experiences alienation and instability, and sometimes, it experiences extreme trouble and grave danger (Oyovbire, 2007, p.5).

The failure of the Nigerian state as it relates to crisis of governance is largely the making of the political elites. Likewise, the prevalence of crisis of governance and development in Nigeria has a lot to do with the character and dispositions of political leaders (Lawal, Imokhuede and Johnson, 2012). As this paper is wont to argue, the opportunistic character of the political elite in Nigeria has been the worst undoing of public governance and development in the country. Manifesting in terms of corruption, self-service, political violence and the like, the opportunistic tendencies of the Nigerian political elite have vitiated the prospects of good governance and sustainable national development. The outcome of this scenario is manifold and readily evident in all facets of the public sphere in the country. As Onanuga (2014, para.1) observes:

[W]e are all victims of Nigeria's crisis of governance, and we all experience its symptoms. Failed schools, failed hospitals, failed roads, failed security, failed power supply, Boko Haram, Asaru Terrorism, Niger Delta militancy, kidnapping, the varnishing opportunities for our youths, the widening gulf between the rich and the poor, and the worst of all, the receding faith in Nigeria by Nigerians....

The point being emphasized in the foregoing is that the opportunistic character of politicking in Nigeria has created a colossal governance deficit in that context. This, in turn, has led to complications and repercussions that find expression in the rising wave of insecurity, violence and instability in the country. There is no gainsaying the fact that sustainable development cannot be achieved in such a precarious atmosphere.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

The nexus between political opportunism and crisis of governance/governance in Nigeria is functionally correlating. It is such that the prevalence of the former begets conditions that compel the latter. In other words, the prevalence of political opportunism brings about conditions that make crisis of governance/development not only possible but also inevitable.

No question arises as to whether the problem of political opportunism is real or not in Nigeria. It has so abundantly manifested that it can be regarded as a fundamental attribute of politicking and partisan relations in Nigeria (Okoli and Atelhe, 2008). As regards crisis of governance, the manifestation has also been palpable. Accordingly,

That there is crisis of governance Nigeria is real and tangible. It is obvious and clear, even to the deaf and blind as it is to the common and uncommon Nigerians (Oyorbaire, 2007, p.5).

Crisis of governance is a structural pathology that derives from the way and manner the Nigerian polity is constructed at both sub-structural and super-structured levels. The sub-structural component of the Nigerian polity is weak, fragile and artificially configured to produce and reproduce systematic defects. The super-structural components, on the other hand, are systemically and foundationally deficient. Resting on an

under-mature and ill-positioned foundation, the super-structure ineluctably exhibits a great deal of operational dysfunction. In this context, both the edifice and artifice of government become so critically badly positioned to deliver minimally on good governance and development.

What prevail, therefore, are systemic anomalies, such as political opportunism that impede good governance and sustainable development. What is the way forward? The challenge under review is too fundamental that no cosmetic remediation or reformation can solve it. What is required is a radical deconstruction and reconstruction of the entire framework of public governance in such a manner that leverages potentials for transformational statecraft and sustainable development.

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