



An Appraisal of Niccolo Machiavelli's Political Philosophy

LEKAN IYADUNNI, S.O. OPAFOLA, V.O. ADEFARASIN
Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Nigeria

Abstract. The paper argues the thesis that morality is a significant concept in politics, and as such, one cannot divorce it from politics, or else, the very essence of politics, will be drained out that is, any act could be performed which can brutalise the citizens. While philosophers have through the ages been trying to show that morality is inseparable from politics, Machiavelli tried to do precisely the opposite. He tried to remove morality from politics and advised rulers to ignore morality if they want to be successful politicians or rulers. It is a well-known fact that morality is the soul of the society hence, any attempt to remove it from politics, will spell doom for that society. This is because, morality plays its pivotal role in any nation's development and advancement. It serves as a strong catalyst for nation's development and progress. It is against this background that the paper strongly argues against Machiavelli's political philosophy and all that it stands for. In order to achieve its intended objectives, the paper discusses meaning and definition of political philosophy, the task of political philosophy, Machiavelli's political philosophy and its criticism. The paper concludes that morality plays pivotal role in politics which will of course, catapults the nation to accelerated development.

Keywords: Niccolo Machiavelli, Political Philosophy, Morality, Governance, Development.

1. Introduction

There is no gainsaying the fact that morality, which is concerned with the question of right and wrong in human behaviour plays vital role in the society. It deals with how men ought to behave and why it is wrong to behave in certain ways and right to behave in certain other ways. In other words, morality studies the reason certain kinds of actions are morally wrong and why others kinds of actions are morally right and commendable. It can also be defined as the science of virtue and vice. We cannot deny the fact that the study of morality is of the utmost importance because of the

question of right and wrong, good and bad in human conduct can't be overemphasized. Human being is so constituted that it is not all kinds of actions that befit his nature and lead to happiness and self-fulfillment. Certain kinds of actions befit his nature, promote his general well-being and lead him to happiness and self-fulfillment. Other kinds of actions on the other hand, are antithetical to his nature and militate against his general well-being, happiness and self-fulfillment.

By extension, to live a moral life is the law of man's own very nature and to throw this law to the winds and behave anyhow can never, in the final analysis, be in man's own interest. Besides, it must be noted that an immoral society is also a sick society. By an immoral society, we mean, a society permeated with corruption, dishonesty, fraud, selfishness, misgovernance and other social maladies that may affect the development of the society. Any sick society needs to be cured and the best cure is through a moral regeneration. Indeed, such a regeneration is imperative if the country is to make any meaningful progress in development. The relevance of this is to serve as a theoretical framework upon which this paper is based or anchored. It has to be reemphasized that morality should not be separated from politics in contradistinction to the position being supported by Niccolo Machiavelli.

2. A Conceptualization of Political Philosophy

According to Popkin, Stroll and Kelly (1956:56), it is difficult to formulate a precise definition of political philosophy, because, it seems to have no special subject matter of its own. Its main tasks are in part, to describe past and existing social organisations, in which respect, it seems to duplicate the findings of economics, political science, anthropology, biology, and sociology; and in parts, to evaluate these organisations, in which respect, it is like ethics. They opine further that it describes the essential features of various types of governments and at the same time,

asks such questions about them as: what is the ultimate justification for the existence of any form of government?

On his part, Gbadebo (2012:4) opines that by political philosophy, is meant a branch of philosophy that analyses the state and related concepts such as political obligations, law, social justice, constitution, etc. it does this through a concerted effort both to make sense of what we do on the one hand, and to prescribe what we ought to do on the other hand. Political philosophy has also been defined as philosophical reflection on how best to arrange our society in terms of political and social practices (Warburton, 1999:2). This also includes, but not limited to the process and establishment of our economic style. It seeks to establish basic principles that will for instance, justify a particular form of state, showing that individuals possess their inalienable rights. It also helps in establishing ideas of how to share the society's resources among its members. This goes a long way to explain and interpret ideas like justice, freedom, authority and democracy and their critical application to the present and social political institution.

3. The Task of Political Philosophy

Without mincing words, the central task of political philosophy is to prescribe how an ideal state ought to be organized. Given this reality, it is expedient to draw our attention to Machiavelli's political philosophy. The point we want to emphasize here is that his political philosophy is fraught with problems and challenges which this paper seeks to address. This question now is this: can a society be governed rightly or correctly without paying attention to morality? Is it always the case that the end justifies the means? Is this not fallacious, erroneous and misleading? Okolo (1993:1) affirms that political philosophy evaluates ideal forms of social life and group behaviour, how men or group ought to live or behave in pursuit of common goals or ideal life. Moreover, Falaiye (2012:129) affirms that the central issues of political philosophy may be divided into the following areas:

- What is the relationship between the individual and the society?
- Can the existence of government or state be justified?
- What abstract principles should guide the operation of government, regarding its aims and limits of its authority?
- What sort of constitution, political institutions and legal system should a given government have?
- What practical public policies should apply to specialized areas, such as the police,

defense and international relations, economics, public finance and welfare?

All these are well addressed in political philosophy through its philosophical tools.

4. Niccolo Machiavelli's Political Philosophy

Having discussed in some details what political philosophy is all about, and the concept of morality, it is necessary to delve into his political philosophy. This will be fully analyzed and x-rayed in order to have proper understanding of his view. This will also serve as a strong catalyst in order to be able to have an in-depth knowledge on the trenchant criticisms or intellectual stones thrown at his political philosophy.

Machiavelli, the man whose name has become synonymous with evil, he was a staunch supporter of the republican forces in Renaissance Florence. His chief enemy was the power-hungry Medici family. Nevertheless, towards the end of his career, he wrote *The Prince*, a startling handbook for totalitarian government, and dedicated it to his political opponent, Lorenzo de Medici. Ever since, critics have been divided in their opinion of Machiavelli's purpose. Spinoza and Rousseau insisted that *The Prince* was a satire on despotism and that Machiavelli remained loyal to his earlier republican faith. Other critics portray him as a great cynic and opportunist who really believed that the end justifies the means. But the bitter political truths he poured into his book, will continue to plague man as long as man remains a political animal (Machiavelli, 1963:VIII). There is no list of great books or of books that have most influenced men's minds on which Machiavelli's *The Prince* does not appear. *The Prince* marks an important step in the history of western man; a step towards the modern world, with its complexities and conflicts; a step towards the nakedness of modern man deprived of the shields of illusion. *The Prince* is quite simply, one of the great books of our heritage.

The question may then arise: who was Machiavelli? Niccolo Machiavelli was born on May 3, 1469 in the city and republic of Florence. Irele (1998:36) states that Niccolo Machiavelli was an Italian political thinker, and his political thinking revolves around the basic problem that confronted Italy at that time. He was a learned man, indeed a renaissance man who was encyclopedic in terms of learning. He was highly versed in classical studies, history, literature, etc., and all these show in his writings. He stressed further that the fundamental principle of his political thought is that private morality should not intrude into public affairs. His better known (and notorious) work, *The*

Prince was written as a piece of advice to rulers on how to deal with state matters. The point of Machiavelli is that the ruler should divorce private morality from public morality. Further, he believes that Christian morality cannot properly be used in the affairs of the state because, it preaches certain tenets that are incongruent with the public realms. He has a deep-seated pessimism about human nature. He thinks that man is baseless, corrupt, mindless, etc. He argues on the basis of these, that the ruler should possess the virtue of a masculine character and should have the warlike qualities of courage fortitude, devotion and the pursuit of success and glory.

Again, he is for the rule of one man because this will prevent diffusion of power, in other words, power should be concentrated in one man who can use it for maintaining peace and stability in the state. Now, before we go further, the poignant question is: how reasonable, workable and plausible is this? Did he ever think of the dire consequences of such an action? After all, there is this popular aphorism that says power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Is this democratic? Is this not autocratic, totalitarian, and dictatorship?

Moreover, Omoregbe (2010:59) depicts that *The Prince*, has made him famous because it was in this book that he boldly expressed his immoral views which have now come to be known as Machiavellianism. Western philosophers, have in one way or the other linked politics with morality. This has been the tradition. Morality is used as a check yardstick to the activities of rulers and to condemn certain kinds of political actions. Going completely against this tradition, to remove morality from politics and to grant complete autonomy from any moral restraint, or control. Machiavelli advises the prince (ruler) to ignore morality if he wants to be a successful ruler, for he believes that anyone who is able to maintain himself in power by any means (fair or foul) and ensure the security of the state is in order. The essential thing in politics, that is, the ultimate goal of politics according to him is to grab political power and retain it. Any means fair or foul, moral or immoral can be used to achieve this goal. But, taking this to a philosophical realm, is this not funny? Is this ideal at all? According to him, a ruler should be very prudent, shrewd, practical and swift in his actions. If circumstances demand the use of cruelty or brutality, he should not hesitate to use it. He should be ruthless and fast; let the whole thing be over within the shortest possible time. Again, we want to do a critique on this too. Why should a leader be ruthless? What does he want to achieve by being ruthless? Is ruthless being a good attribute a ruler should possess? In addition, he

said the leader should be ruthless and fast and let the whole thing be over within the shortest possible time. Now, within a shortest possible time is a vague term. Such term, being vague is not allowed in philosophy. This is because no one knows the exact duration. It can be a year, two years or more. Is like saying “I will soon go”? The question is: how soonest is my soon? This is a vague term. Even, come to think of it, the brutality and cruelty within the short period might have very devastating effect on the people and the society.

Another vital thing in his political philosophy is that, which we have already adverted to, is that a ruler does not need to be morally upright, religious, honest, compassionate or humane. But he must pretend to be all these and use this pretense to achieve his purpose when circumstances demand. The question arises again: Is this a hallmark of a good and ideal leader? Why should someone recommend or advocate this: Is this not antithetical to an ideal society?

In the same vein, he also warns a ruler not to embrace such Christian virtues as patience, meekness, mercy, humility, self-denial, compassion, forgiveness, etc. (2010:61). Now, the issue arises again: What does he want to achieve? What type of leader does he want to produce?

Furthermore, a ruler should not always feel bound to keep his promises at all time. A ruler should not be truthful or honest always. He should not let people know his true intentions always. He should be ready to deceive if necessary. A ruler is not bound by any law or morality. He puts the ruler above morality (2010:63–64). Again, is this ideal? Should a ruler possess these “evil attributes”? These and many more call for serious attention.

5. An appraisal

This part is devoted to some trenchant criticism leveled against Machiavelli’s political philosophy. Although some of these criticisms had been explained above, but for clarity sake, we shall now itemize and discuss these criticisms. Let it be clearly stated that once morality is taken away from government, we do not have government anymore. We have a gang of criminals or a gang of thieves with the key to the national treasury in their hands. The truth of the matter is that, it is impossible to separate morality from politics. It is wrong for him to opine that a ruler does not need to be humane. The does not need to be honest or humane; he does not need to be religious or compassionate. But, he must pretend to be all these and make use of this pretense to achieve his aim. Given this, this is abnormal to say the least, why should a leader go in this direction?

Again, Machiavelli's error is in his starting point, his premise. If the premise of an argument is not true, or erroneous, the argument is bound to end up in an erroneous conclusion, thereby making it unsound. His fundamental error lies in his absolutization of power which he erroneously considers as the ultimate goal of politics. The ultimate goal of politics is not grabbing of power, but the rendering of service to the people. The acquisition of power is itself a means, only a means of rendering service to the people. His other error is his view that the end justifies the means; that one can justifiably use and immoral means to bring about a good end. This is morally unacceptable; the end does not justify the means. A good end does not justify an immoral means used in bringing it about. This is not all, Machiavelli's principles are incompatible with democracy.

Similarly, Machiavelli's political ideas have been branded as crude, immoral and highly detestable. The point or hub of his idea can be encapsulated in the aphorism "the end justifies the means".

The politics of power requires that you use all means to retain it, hence, any means could be employed. But the question that looms large is: Is morality beyond the realm of politics? Or framed in another way; can we say that morality is not a significant aspect of politics? It is true that politics is about power, but, then, power is not necessarily all that is in politics. The power politics which he so much romanticized led him to advocate any means to achieve it. Yet, morality is a significant aspect of politics. Indeed, morality is a significant concept in politics, and as such, one cannot divorce it from politics or else, the very essence of politics will be drained out, that is, any act could be performed which can brutalize the citizens.

Furthermore, he was a political realist, he saw the whole essence of politics as a game of power, where one side wins and the other loses, and the loser is worse off for entering the political arena without adequate preparation, tactics and strategies. Also, it is wrong for him to recommend tyranny for the society. We want to believe that this is not ideal.

Above all, the balance sheet of his theory is decidedly not firm because the contemporary age frowns at the method he advocates for gaining and maintaining power, for it is believed now by most political theorists that morality plays an important role in the public sphere. The debate still continues about his theory because some have perceived him as the father of political realism, while his foes cast him as a crude, immoral political theorist. However, he could be better seen as an amoral political theorist.

6. Conclusion

A cursory look at the paper discusses in detail what Niccolo Machiavelli's political philosophy entails. One fundamental point that runs through his political philosophy is that the means by which political power is acquired raised some fundamental questions on political consent, political obligation and political morality. His political philosophy cannot be fully comprehensively and holistically discussed, without making reference to his major work, *The Prince*. Here, he claims, inter-alia, that the power is the ultimate goal of politics, however, he neglected, overlooked and downplayed the crucial role that politics plays in the welfare of the people. He opined that any means through which power is acquired, is justified, be, via violence, cruelty and brutality. But the poignant question is: How can a state develop when power is acquired through violence means? He said that the end justifies the means, without paying special attention to the ethical implications and dire consequences of this. The truth of the matter is that there is a link, or synergy between morality and politics. We therefore, submit and subscribe tenaciously to the position or view that politics cannot be separated or divorced from morality. Morality is the "soul" of the society. Hence, to remove morality from politics, as wrongly advocated or clamoured for by him, akin, amounts and tantamounts to removing the soul from the body. In order to ensure peace, which will translate into development and advancement, there is dire and urgent need to bring back morality to governance and that, his political ideology which advocates for dictatorship and absolutism should be discouraged, vehemently opposed and radically rejected.

On a final note, Proverbs 29:2 says: when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but, when the wicked rule, the people mourn. In the same vein, Exodus 18:21 avers that "Look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate bribe, and place such men over the people to be rulers of thousands and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties and rulers of tens. These Biblical references further emphasize the importance of having moral and just leaders at the helm of affairs.

References

- Anthony Okeregbe, Samuel B. Jegede and Dotun Ogunkoya (eds) (2012). *A Study in African Socio-Political Philosophy* Essays in Honour of Prof. Muyiwa Falaiye. Lagos: University of Lagos Press.
- Dipo, Irele (1998), *Introduction to Political Philosophy*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

- Joseph, Omoregbe (2010), *Social Political Philosophy – A Systematic and Historical Study*. Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd.
- Moses Debo Gbadebo (2012), *The Essence of African Socio-Political Philosophy in A Study in African Socio-Political Philosophy*. Essays in Honour of Prof. Muyiwa Falaiye.
- Muyiwa, Falaiye (2002), “Socio-Political Philosophy” in *Philosophy and Logic. A Student Companion*. E. K. Ogundowole (ed).
- Nicollo, Machiavelli (1963), *The Prince*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Okolo, C. B. (1993), *African Social and Political Philosophy, Selected Essays*. Nsukka: Fulladu Publishing Co.
- Richard H. Popkin, Avrum Stroll and Kelly, A. V. (1969), *Philosophy Made Simple*. London: W. H. Allen.
- Warburton, N. (1999), *Philosophy: The Basics*. London: Routledge.