



Machiavellism and Political Power in Nigeria: Implications to the Nation's Political System

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Abstract. This work accentuated that Machiavellism, 'a political philosophy that emphasizes the pursuit and maintenance of power as the primary objective of political leaders with total exclusion of morality,' has dominated the spheres of politics in Nigeria. Politics all over the world is a game expected to be played by the rule and with some degrees of decorum among politicians who are the key actors. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Nigeria, where politics is rather seen as a do or die affair. The standard of good politics is seen to be abandoned and politicians have assumed a dangerous dimension in their struggle for power with total disregard for morality. The research aimed at examining the influence of Machiavellian morality of power control in the State and the effect of the struggle for control of political power in Nigerian political system. Using analytical, historical and comparative approaches and the services of secondary sources of data collection, the work discovered that trust and morality have been eroded in the political system, which has given room to corruption, nepotism, authoritarianism, instability and conflict in the Nation's political system, given its embrace of Machiavellian political views. The authors recommended that, upholding of the rule and supremacy of the law, respect for Fundamental Human Rights and dignity, will create a healthy political system; and where separation of powers, free and fair elections, will be of help to the democratic practices in Nigeria. Therefore, a more inclusive, transparent and accountable approach to governance can help build trust, legitimacy, and stability in Nigeria.

Keywords: Machiavellism, Political Power, Political System, Nigeria, Morality

1. Introduction

Political power all over the world is been played with some standard of decorum and the politicians

playing it tend to abide by the policy and standard of the game. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics* (1099b:30), said: "the end or goal of politics is the best of ends; and the main concern of politics is to engender a certain character in the citizens and to make them good and disposed to perform noble actions." This view is quite different in Nigeria political system. Here, the politics is not seen as that which provides the best of ends but rather, it is seen as a "do or die" affair and a means of exploitation of the common wealth. The roles of good political power have been abandoned and its practice assumed a dangerous dimension. No wonder politics and its practices in Nigerian is seen as a dirty game.

In recent times, politics has been made up by thuggery, arson, murder, kidnapping, maiming and torturing of political opponents, falsehood, rigging of election, buying of votes with money, intimidation of voters and lots more. Politicians and those seeking for political positions in Nigeria use some of these methods to get power and retain it at all cost. They remain unruffled as they adopt these measures whether fair or foul; because they see these practices as nothing but politics. The basic question is, can the present political leaders and the political practice today be admired for molding man's moral, social, religious and political life? The answer to this question, forms part of the details this research hopes to provide.

This paper in what follows, will appraise and evaluate how Machiavellian political philosophy is in control of political power in Nigeria and its implications to the political system. The work in turn will make some recommendations and suggestions for further studies to help reposition Nigerian political landscape and move Nigeria forward in a better political environment.

2. Conceptual Framework

Under this sub-heading, the research will delineate few salient concepts that formed the nexus of this work, which are Machiavellism, political power and political system

2.1 Machiavellism

On the meaning of Machiavellism, Grazia posited that it is associated with realism in both foreign and domestic politics and with the view that those who lead governments must prioritize the stability of the regime over ethical concern (67).

Omogrebe commenting on this said, “the essential thing in politics which is the ultimate goal of politics, according to Machiavelli is grab political power and retain it. Any means, foul or good, moral or immoral can be used to achieve this goal” (38).

Another side of Machiavellism is that it advocates that moral principles should be eschewed in politics and warned rulers not to encourage what is called “Christian Virtue.” These Christian virtues are: patience, meekness, mercy, humility, self-denial, compassion and forgiveness (Omogrebe 65). So Machiavellism is a political and social philosophy that emphasizes pragmatism, realism and the pursuit of power. It has remained a thought provoking and influential philosophy shaping international politics.

In all, Machiavellism teaches that a ruler, leader or political power holder needs no moral soundness, religious, honest, compassionate and humane attributes. But rather he should always remain watchful, examine the condition and then know when to apply moral, immoral, humane or cruel means in attaining his political quest.

2.2 Political Power

The issue of political power is all around us both visible and invisible. It is seen in every day social relations, in people’s ideologies and their actions. When someone seeks power, power affects the process; but when he wields power, power is the man. Political power is not only a complex concept but also it is the core essence of a society. When power evolves, it affects the core essence of the society. Some scholars identified power as single concept and they have presented political power as identified with its exercise, domination, subject dispositions, freedom or empowerment. In all these concepts, the most prevailing concept of power is to preserve the powerful by domination or power over those with less power or the powerless (Subrata 101).

Defining political power, a prominent political theorist, Charles presents the context of political power as mobilization of the need for organized political action. It is a kind of “the personality types to be adjusted and adopted in social living” (115). He emphasized that “power” is first a phenomenon of group cohesion and aggregation, a child of group necessity or utility, a function of the social relation of men (Charles 121). In this sense, political power can similarly be seen as an inseparable recurrent character of a political community or a political institute, function in order to satisfy its need to do its advantage. So, political power means that an individual or group of people hold authority in a nation’s government. With this power, they can do good or evil things because they have authority over people. We have many examples of power in government which involves the power to tax, raise army, make laws and regulate businesses.

Therefore, political power is the ability of persons, groups and institutions to influence and control the behaviour of other people, shape policies and make decisions that can impact the society.

2.3 Political System

A political system refers to the structure, institutions, and processes that govern a society or state. It encompasses the mechanisms for making decisions, exercising power, and allocating resources. Political systems are of different types which includes: Democracy, Monarchy, Authoritarianism, Totalitarianism, Oligarchy, and Theocracy (Ebestein 545).

Moreover, in political science, political system is the form of political organization that can be observed, recognized, or otherwise declared by a society or State (Odey 49). So, it is seen as process for making official government decisions.

According to David Easton, “a political system can be designated as the interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society” (David 79). So, it is referred broadly to the process by which laws are made and public resources allocated in a society, and the relationships among those involved in making decisions (Dobratz 112). Furthermore, it is seen as a set of different institution established politically, to ensure the free and fair distribution of resources within a given society (Ebestein 157). These systems are formed with certain objectives, like determining who will be leaders, their roles and critical responsibilities. One of the major characteristics of political system is that it enjoys the monopoly of using legitimate force to control citizens and the affairs. It also has the power to propose and implement policies that are beneficial to its people (Francis 529).

3. Machiavellism on Morality and Political Power: An Essay

Morality is concerned with rightness or wrongness of behaviour. Morality also deals with character or actions judged as being good, evil, right or wrong. Certain actions could generally be judged by people as morally wrong or seen as morally good (Ejizu 115).

Writing on morality and politics, Niccolo Machiavelli affirmed that, “a ruler should base his actions on how situations present itself not basically strictly on whether the action should be considered good or bad” (116). A ruler in the process of getting power could use evil means to achieve his goal. His work on “Prince” and “Discourses” showed equally the qualities for which he has been specially known as the use of immoral means for political purpose and the ideology that politics depends mainly on power. He noted that a ruler did not necessarily have all the good virtues but should certainly appear to have them, he further noted that if a ruler has these good virtues and lived accordingly, he would find them ruining him but when he only appears to have them, they would save him and render him services (Machiavelli 116).

In the same vein, a ruler cannot observe all those things which men consider reputation or integrity. The reason for this is that for the ruler to maintain his state, he is sometimes forced to act in defiance of good faith, kindness, religion and among others (Machiavelli 135). Moreover, Machiavelli rejected the demands that a ruler is supposed to be the embodiment of human virtues, he advised by warning the rulers not to heed to the question of whether his action would be called virtuous. In acquisition of power, a ruler ought to do whatever that is needful to the condition in which he finds himself and may lead to success (Machiavelli 125).

Furthermore, for Machiavelli, a successful ruler is one who would be able to acquire, maintain, consolidate and increase power. The survival and preservation of the common wealth was his fundamental concern. He prudently calculated what would be the consequences of political actions that would be an achievement for the national safety. A ruler in a state had to be judged by an independent criterion, the morality of success, which was majorly for the protection of citizens guaranteeing their well-being, expansion of territory and a zealous safeguarding of the interest of the nation. He noted that politics is ultimately and finally constant struggle for power and domination. In Machiavelli’s view, politics had to be judged by its own rules and norms so that states can survive. Machiavelli pointed out that in writing about the rules of politics, he was

projecting the real truth and not leaving anything to imagination (Machiavelli 156).

Machiavelli went further to separate the private from the public sphere of morality. Maintaining that the state had a morality of its own - the morality of success. The private individual must at all times display qualities that were in consonance with the highest moral standards (Machiavelli 165). For him, in politics, fair was foul and foul was fair, all depends on circumstances of the time. No general rule was valued, for everything becomes a matter of political expediency. Machiavelli argued that political actions were to conform to high moral standards in times of stability, but however in times of strife, chaos and disorders, principled politics would spell ruin (Machiavelli 189).

Unlike traditional political theory which is of the view that ethical conduct was desirable for it would bring about moral elevation, Machiavelli was too realistic to overlook the irony of the political situation. For Machiavelli, in politics, it was not possible to assess the effect of a virtuous or a wicked act, for it would result in the opposite effect. His rejection of traditional ethics and the quest to find an alternative political ethics that was suitable and appropriate was derived from a firmly held conviction that history moved with abrupt jerks in a frenzied way for him, politics had to be linked with necessities; meaning those factors that compelled individuals to find ingenious solutions. This was possible only if purely political factors were taken into account, excluding others. The attempt of Machiavelli to establish the autonomy of politics was tantamount to a denial of ethical absolutes (Grant 189).

Therefore, Grazia noted that Machiavelli broke with classical theory which had approached the problems of political action with questions of how men could develop their moral potentialities through a life devoted to political office. For Machiavelli, the problem became more, acute, for the issue no longer involve the statesman quest for a moral perfection which by its very moral quality; would benefit the community; it involved instead the political actor which was driven to break the moral law in order to preserve his society (Grazia 113).

4. The Manifestation of Machiavellism in Nigerian Political System

The seed of Machiavellianism planted in Italy in the 15th century grew like the mustard seed and has negatively affected many political systems round the globe and Nigeria is not an exception (Odey 89)

The hallmark of every democratic culture and government is periodic elections. It could be in four,

five or six years respectively depending on the constitutional provisions in any given country. In Nigeria, for example, elections are held every four years and due to the inordinate ambitions and deceits of the political class; it is seen as “a do or die affair” and “a must win.” This is to say that in Nigeria today, we have witnessed a great deal of politics marked with impunity, lawlessness, thuggery and massive rigging of elections. Nigeria as a nation is still struggling to get herself out of the woods politically (Mamadu 142)

Bertrand Russell asserted that, “the aim of politics is to make the lives of individuals as good as possible” (207). However, the above assertion is the opposite in Nigeria’s political sphere, as the politicians have submerged morality to the lowest ebb of the political pyramids. Omoregbe in his work on ethics, noted that, “Nigerians have been made to believe that politics and morality do not go together and that once a person starts politics, he ignores morality” (Omogbe 93). Although it is widely believed that politics is a dirty game, but ideally, it is not, rather the unscrupulous men made it seem or look dirty.

The politicians have perfected the art of rigging, thuggery and other forms of electoral malpractices to the extent that winners emerge even in places where elections did not hold. And the number of votes recorded in some places are higher than the number of registered voters. Little wonder, John Odey in his book, ‘This Madness Called Election’, described it as “electoral coup” and “political charade” (Odey 110).

Furthermore, Odey, lamented that, “Nigeria will not be a home as long as politicians continue to turn political elections into a kind of civil war when young people are denied all decent opportunities and are conscripted into the burgeoning and money-spinning industry of political thuggery, where they kill and maim the so-called political opponents” (Odey 57). Later on, they set up election tribunal even though it has yielded some positive result; it is yet to measure up to the expectation of the masses. But the fundamental question is, how can one expect anything good from it since it was set up by the perpetrators themselves?

5. The Implications of Machiavellism on Nigerian Political System

Machiavellism’s implications for Nigerian political power and system are far-reaching and complex. At its core, Machiavellism advocates for a pragmatic approach to politics, where the end justifies the means, and morality is secondary to maintaining power. In Nigerian political system, this could lead to a focus on short term gains and political survival, but potentially at the expense of the greater good.

On absolutism; Machiavellism promotes the concentration of power in the hands of a single leader or group, which could result in authoritarianism and diminished checks of power which is applicable in the present-day Nigeria as a nation governed in authoritarianism by the present political power (Odey 51).

Moreover, morality in Nigerian political power and system takes back seat. The prioritization of political expediency over moral principles may lead to corruption, nepotism and human rights abuses. In Nigeria today, there is the challenge of political instability because of the focus on maintaining power at all costs which created an environment of constant political maneuvering, undermining stability and effective governance in nation (David 43).

The lack of accountability in the governance of Nigeria because of the challenges of lack of strong moral compass, leaders may feel less strong accountable to their constituents, leading to poor governance and unresponsiveness to the need of the people.

Considering Nigeria and the political philosophy of Machiavelli which is prevalent, one can discover the undermining of democratic institutions. Machiavellian tactics can erode trust in democratic institutions, potentially destabilizing the entire system of politics in Nigeria.

Furthermore, looking at Nigeria today, just like in Machiavelli’s Florence, and Italy of his period, it is made of people who exhibit the same attributes that Machiavelli identified in the lives of the people of his time. The present-day Nigeria is filled with politicians who are greedy and selfish that can do all kinds of cruel and violent things in order to get and maintain political power.

The evidences at hand show that the struggle in Nigeria for political power, maneuvering for political positions and fighting over offices or political appointment, have led to many intimidations, kidnapping or killing of political opponents. Some have even entered into sorcery and ritual practices of all kinds in order to secure political positions.

The manifestation of violence and cruelty in Machiavelli’s narrative has brought to the fore the state of things in Florence and Italy within his period, they were facing enormous challenges of how to sustain her statehood that is full of incessant political conflict, violence and cruelty. It was a period of political turbulence, insecurity and chaos, violence and influence. Likewise, Nigeria is today facing some challenges of political development coming from all fronts, which involves the use of violence and cruelty to acquire political power and

to express ethnic or religious grievances. Some evidences have shown the fact that violence and cruelty are part of social and political lifestyle of many politician/political leaders in Nigeria which is the implication of Machiavellian political philosophy.

It is very vital to note that the implications of Machiavellism in Nigerian political power and system are not inevitable. Nigerian citizens can work to fight against the negative effects of Machiavellism by promoting transparency, accountability, and democratic values.

6. Summary and Conclusion

In the modern-day politics, Machiavellism has become a method and manual for the enhancement, preservation and appropriation of political power. The practice of Machiavellism in the political system of Nigeria is no blessing but a big issue. Machiavellism as the political philosophy of Machiavelli has introduced a lot of retrogression in the political, economic, social and religious growth and development of the nation. Machiavellian principles are clearly incompatible with democracy. And adopting the principle will further deteriorate the already bad political atmosphere that exists in Nigeria. Remove morality from democracy and politics, one has also removed democracy itself because democracy and politics presupposed morality, justice, liberty, honesty, fairness, peaceful and decent behaviour, openness of mind, and readiness to step down if one loses.

There must be a redress beginning from the individual to the state at large in the cultivation of purpose and will of the people. Evil practices in politics must not be allowed but exposed and punished and the political leaders in the nation must be careful on how they handle the political issues of the nation. It is necessary for the people to vote for the person that is qualified and not the money making and self-ambitious politicians, because the problem is not in our star as noted by Shakespeare quoted by John Odey, but in ourselves knowing that individuals will eventually form a virtuous state (Odey 69).

Nigerian citizens should work hard to dethrone deceit and brutality, so that they can pave way for morality to take full place in political scene. The Nigerian politicians should know that “the end does not justify the means” as posited by Machiavelli but rather they should know that if the action must be good, the end must also be good and the means for achieving the end will also be good.

7. Recommendations

Based on the research carried out, the following recommendations are hereby put forward:

- i: The Rule and Supremacy of the Law: This implies that nobody should be above the law. There should be no discrimination in the application of the law. Every Nigerian citizen both the leaders and the led should abide by the guiding principles of the Nigerian law, and the law should take its effects on any defaulter no matter his/her political status.
- (ii) Respect for fundamental Human Dignity and Rights: In our nation Nigeria and in matters of politics by the political leaders, they should respect the fundamental Human dignity and rights and also the protection of the inherent value and worth of every human/Citizen. For example, treating individuals with dignity, respect and compassion regardless of their race, ethnic group, gender age, religion, among others.
- (iii) Free and Fair Election: The only democratic way of enthroning a civilian political leader is by election. So in Nigeria, free and fair election should be allowed so that the people can choose leaders that will serve them better and be accountable to the people not by imposition.

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