CLOSING THE LEADERSHIP LACUNA IN AFRICA: INTERROGATING THE PERFORMANCE OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE NIGERIAN STATE

IDIKE, ADELINE NNENNA (Ph.D)  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA

ABSTRACT
This paper is built on the premise that there is a leadership lacuna in Africa, accentuated by the exit of the legendary Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The paper uses the performance of political leadership in Nigeria, to examine the scorecard of political leadership in Africa. The specific objectives of the paper were to: (i) examine how the performance of political leadership in Nigeria has created a leadership lacuna in Africa and (ii) make recommendations on how the performance of political leadership in Nigeria can lead to the closing of the leadership lacuna. The methodology for the study is logical argumentation. The theoretical framework is the elite theoretical framework. Findings of the study indicate that the substandard performance of political leadership in Nigeria has negatively impacted on political leadership in Africa. The most populous country in Africa (Nigeria), the paper recommends, must see the emergence of the needed new class of African leaders as a challenge. The Nigerian elite must see this as a national challenge. The paper further recommends in this regard that Nigeria’s government should reform and reequip Nigeria’s educational system. In addition, Nigerians must make democracy work. Democracy in Nigeria, the paper concludes, must crystallize into leadership for results.

KEYWORDS: Leadership Lacuna, Africa, Political Leadership, the Nigerian State

INTRODUCTION
Ever since the rise and demise of the legendary Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela as the foremost African leader of the 20th and 21st century, Africa has been seemingly incapable of producing a comparable political leader. Mandela’s leadership example indeed, transcended continental boundaries. According to Igwe (2010:120), the fact that besides Nelson Mandela, no African leader bears any rating today as a model whose conduct and examples may be emulated, stands out as a tall claim that leaders are yet to emerge in Africa. Igwe (2010:11) had earlier contended that the character of Africa’s unique heritage shelved it away from being in any way a primitive version of developed countries and secondly, that colonialism and neocolonialism which followed were unacceptable impediments to Africa’s economic and political emancipation. The extent to which leadership in Africa appreciates the existence of a unique African heritage forms
part of the issues in the leadership crisis in Africa. Furthermore, several decades after colonialism, why has there remained a dearth of cerebral leaders in Africa? Several decades of blaming neocolonialism also is beginning to appear defeatist. As the search for answers to Africa’s leadership issues continues, Ademoye (2013) posits that given the phenomenal social, economic, and technological progress other nations and peoples have made, to radically lift their peoples out of abject poverty and negate the sense of inferiority complex often ascribed to peoples and nations who fail to solve simple existential problems that other nations are solving, and given the failure of most African nations, especially Nigeria, to solve simple, elementary and basic social problems, it is obvious that the most important question for Africa in the 21st century would be whether or not there is an African leadership capacity, that is capable of lifting Africa out of abject poverty, which the continent has sunk into and which has become a badge of inferiority for Africa among world peoples.

This paper is an effort in joining the current debates for the emergence of more Mandela-type of leaders from Africa - completely selfless leaders. The paper uses the performance of political leadership in Nigeria, to examine the scorecard of political leadership in Africa. The specific objectives of the paper are to: (i) examine how the performance of political leadership in Nigeria has created a leadership lacuna in Africa and (ii) make recommendations on how the performance of political leadership in Nigeria can lead to the closing of the leadership lacuna in Africa. The methodology for the study is logical argumentation. The theoretical framework is the elite theory.

Ebohon and Obakhedo (2012:13), cited in Idike (2014) explain that the term elitism is the belief or attitude used to describe a situation in which power is concentrated in the hands of a limited number of people with special privileges and responsibilities in the hope that this arrangement will benefit humanity or themselves. The central theme of elitism is predicated on the axiom that all societies are split into two; namely: the haves; and have not or the elite and the masses; the governor and the governed, etc. This formulation was expounded by the 20th Century Italian thinkers, Pareto (1935) and Mosca (1939). Therefore, the concept of elite denotes a select group of people with intellect, wealth, influence, power, prestige, authority, education, specialized training or experience, or other distinctive attributes, who determine how the society should be ordered and the modus operandi. Indeed, they are those whose views on a matter, are to be taken the most seriously or carry the most weight; whose views and/or actions are most likely to be constructive to society as a whole; or whose extraordinary skills, abilities or wisdom render them specifically fit to govern. They may rely on some identifiable personal attributes, commonly purported by elitist theorists to be characteristic of the elite; namely: rigorous study of, or great accomplishment within a particular field; a long track record of competence in a demanding field; an extensive history of dedication and effort in service to a specific discipline or a high degree of training or wisdom within a particular field (Ebohon and Obakhedo, 2012:13).

**OPERATIONALIZATION OF KEY CONCEPTS**

**Leadership**

Leadership in this study refers to that position of influence that progressively guides a given group of people from lower standards of living to generally acceptable higher standards. Its principal attributes are vision and courage. Its effectiveness is judged by the acclaim and approval it receives from others.
Leadership Lacuna
Embedded in the concept of leadership lacuna in this paper are immense nostalgic tendencies. The concept carries with it, remembrances of the pioneering political activism of Pan African leaders like Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria and Julius Nyerere of Tanzania. The voices of these African statesmen then indicated the direction of African political thinking and political action. There was also the phenomenal black American leader, Martin Luther King Jnr, who more than any other black American, contributed to the abrogation of racial segregation as public policy in the United States of America. In this line of legendary African leaders followed Dr Nelson Mandela, the anti-apartheid South African hero, who subsequently became President of South Africa. With the recent death of Mandela however, it seems as if there is now a lacuna on the leadership scene for Africans.

Political Leadership
Political leadership is the lighthouse that directs the activities of the rulers and the ruled in every society. It is about what politicians do as leaders and the impact of the activities of politicians upon the society. Political leadership influences the activities of government. It is also a function of governance. It is that leadership strand that places political action above all other human actions. At a continental level therefore, political leadership becomes the galvanizing force for progress and prosperity.

THE LEADERSHIP LACUNA IN AFRICA: A CONCISE LITERATURE REVIEW
Asobie (2008:2) argues that the condition of contemporary Africa is deplorable and unacceptable, that the solution does not lie in transactional leadership: that is leadership for advocacy. It lies in transformational leadership also known as leadership for results; that African leaders are preoccupied with winning and retaining power. They are enamored with “taking charge”, being in control, and then using the power to serve themselves and deal with their enemies. Ukwaba (2002:29) adds that governments in developing countries including Nigeria have tended to be pre-occupied with power and its material perquisites. According to Ifesinachi (2011:11), what has to be addressed in African states is the problem of political leadership. A leadership capable of fostering a sense of national unity through the effective and efficient management of the state apparatus in such a way that (the state apparatus) reflects a relatively high level of autonomy from the class struggles.

Igwe (2010:120) for instance, highlights that African leaders whose beginnings seemed promising were never allowed to strive to maturity. The issue of who failed to allow the promises of these budding leaders to reach the stage of maturity is critically part of the leadership question in Africa. In general terms, Igwe (2010) blames the deplorable state of affairs in Africa on corruption and opines that leadership in Africa must endeavour to come to terms with facts concerning corruption and to spot the need for its outright eradication. According to Abonyi (2010:28), the extent of corruption in Africa is alarming. Leaders operationally are those who influence the behaviour of those under them and once the leadership is corrupt, those under them have no qualms in following the example of their corrupt leadership.

Ebegbulem (2012:221) also adds that it is not disputable that Africa is the poorest continent in the world and the richest in terms of natural resources. Today the image of this blessed continent is battered by corruption and leadership crisis. Corruption has tragically devastated African societies and made millions of people destitute. The tentacles of corruption has reached everywhere in the African continent. From the offices of presidents and prime ministers to the smallest administrative unit of government, corruption is found everywhere. Crucial to this crisis
of corruption engulfing the African continent is the problem of purposeful leadership that could act as architect and engineer of progressive change and development (Ebegbulem 2012:221).

As a matter of fact, it is not as if immensely critical ideas on how to engender fundamental changes in the material conditions of Africa have not continued to be created and released. The continuing curious situation borders on how these ideas have never galvanized African political leaders into unquestionably concrete actions. One of such immensely creative outputs for Africa’s rebirth was Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. It appears however as if the effect on African leaders, of Walter Rodney’s classic on African underdevelopment has been conspiratorial complacency. If Europe underdeveloped Africa, Europe also knows how to redevelop her! This looks like the worldview of the African leadership conspirators. Harding, Hill and Strickland (2009: xviii) however highlight that what Rodney set out to do was without romanticizing pre-colonial Africa, to place it in the context of human development across the globe; trace its real historical relationships to the colonizing forces of Europe and suggest the path for Africa’s movement toward a new life for its people and a new role in the re-shaping of the world. However, it is now 42 years after Rodney’s epic work was originally published, yet Africa’s envisaged new role in the re-shaping of the world is yet to crystallize. The principal reason for this negative state of affairs it must be pointed out; is the unpromising performance of political leadership in Africa.

There was also the immensely influential contribution by Chinweizu, entitled *The West and the Rest of Us*, created in the change, growth and development-inducing tradition of Rodney. The essence of these seminal academic outputs was to challenge Africans to take a new pride of place in global affairs. It was expected that the new leaders of Africa would be some equally disturbed members of the generation of Rodney and Chinweizu. It has however turned out that the only classic academic contribution that the new leaders are enamoured with is Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Actually, the complete rendition of Achebe’s work is to the effect that; Things Fall Apart: the Center Cannot Hold. To the contemporary African leader therefore, the center cannot hold! Why then would anybody attempt to hold it? Egbegulem (2012:221) further adds:

> The independence of African states from colonial rule from the middle part of the 20th century signaled strong prospects and hope for a better and prosperous continent. Today that hope is dashed by bad leadership and corruption. That, after decades of independence, Africa is still home to majority of the world’s poor irrespective of the availability of both human and material resources is an embarrassment. The continent is unarguably one of the most fertile regions of the world and the richest continent on earth in terms of natural resources, but today, the image of the world’s most resource rich continent has been damaged by corruption and inept leadership. The corruption level of many African leaders in Africa is beyond imagination. The continent’s resources are personalized at the expense of the people. Using Nigeria as a case study, we see that abject poverty, inadequate health facilities and unemployment pervade the land and these are borne out of the failure on the part of leadership, and corruption.
EXAMINING THE NIGERIAN MYSTERY: INTERROGATING POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE NIGERIAN STATE
According to Ebegbulem (2012:221):

In Nigeria, we see corruption and inept leadership as a fact of life. It has been argued in many fora that the main problem that has bedeviled Nigeria is poor leadership and corruption. These two have been generally identified as the root causes of Nigeria’s socio-economic and political problems. Nigeria’s leadership is characterized by such negative features as lack of direction, neglect and drift, fraud and insensitivity to the plight of the citizens. It is no longer news that while the poor in Nigeria are languishing in abject poverty and hunger, squalor, disease and destitution, Nigerian leaders are only after working out strategies on how to enrich and perpetuate themselves in office. The major problem that the country is facing today is the insincerity and insensitivity of her leaders to the needs of the ordinary people whom they have been elected to serve.

Thus, the Nigerian State truly typifies a mind boggling mystery. It is a state that is monumentally endowed with human and material resources, yet it has continued to play at the bottom rung of the ladder of global players. The Nigerian State had waged against itself, a 30 months civil war between 1967 and 1970. Four and half decades after, the same animosities that led to the civil war are still prevalent in the Nigerian State. As a matter of fact, a post-civil war series of crisis that have culminated into the current Boko Haram terrorism and insurgency, show that the pre-civil war nation-building discontents in the Nigerian State, are still parts of the socio-political issues in Nigeria. The wider implication of the continuing nation-building crisis in Nigeria is that the rest of the global community has continued to look down on the African continent. Nigeria is by far the most populous African country with 170 million people. These 170 million are indigenously black African, without a significant white or foreign settler community. One out of every five Africans is a Nigerian. Moreover, one out of every four black men in the world is a Nigerian (Aribisala, 2013). The issue of substandard performance of political leadership in Nigeria therefore is indicative of substandard performance by political leadership in Africa. It is indicative of the failure of the elite in Africa to rise to the occasion of saving the continent from the menace of rampaging deprivation. The Nigerian mystery is further reflected in Aribisala (2013) as follows:

The country has been at the forefront of international peace-keeping efforts. Indeed, it is the largest “exporter of peace” in Africa and the fourth largest worldwide. Nigeria is the fourth largest Troop Contributing Country to UN peace-support operations; surpassed only by Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. No African country comes any way near Nigeria’s record. The Nigerian military and police have participated in peace-keeping operations under the auspices of the United Nations in such places as Lebanon, Somalia, Croatia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Sao Tome and Principe, Guinea Bissau and Darfur. Over 250,000 members of the
Nigerian armed forces have participated in UN-sponsored missions worldwide. Having been involved in 40 of the 55 peacekeeping missions of the UN, Nigeria has now participated in 73 percent of all UN peacekeeping operations. As a matter of fact, Nigeria single-handedly initiated the ECOMOG (ECOWAS Monitoring Group) deployed for peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone from 1989 to 2002. The burden of those peace operations was borne largely by Nigeria.

It therefore continues to border on the mysterious that actually, globally recognized statesmen of African continental importance; have never truly emerged from Nigeria. Achebe (1983:3-4) posits: I believe that Nigeria is a nation favoured by Providence. I believe there are individuals as well as nations who, on account of peculiar gifts and circumstances, are commandeered by history to facilitate mankind’s advancement. Nigeria is such a nation. The vast human and material wealth with which she is endowed bestows on her a role in Africa and the world which no one else can assume or fulfill. The fear that should nightly haunt our leaders (but does not) is that they may already have betrayed irretrievably, Nigeria’s high destiny. These leaders are classifiable as Nigeria’s leadership elite.

According to Odey (1995:127), if a typical Nigerian politician (a member of Nigeria’s political elite) wants to become great, he will climb the glamorous ladder of greatness by drawing out his programmes in glittering rhetoric. He will set up a cloudy political atmosphere and surround himself with political bandits and law enforcement agents, whom he had converted into partisan watch-dogs, to protect his interests and misdeeds. He will convert the print and electronic media into personal megaphones and use them to sing his own praises to the business world as a first-class patriot. He will divert government fund into personal bank account and steal big words from the archives of famous politicians to cover up his down-right deceit. Two decades after the despairing description of the typical Nigerian politician by Odey (1995), the character of the typical Nigerian politician has remained monumentally unaltered. It is this decadent character of the Nigerian politician that negatively affects Nigeria’s overall international performance. Aribisala (2013) further posits:

The tragedy of Nigeria is that it has failed to live up to expectation and to the actualization of its potentials. As a result, what should belong to Nigeria by right become subject to debate. Countries which have neither Nigeria's stature nor its credentials become preferred to Nigeria. This is what has happened with regard to the question of a permanent seat for Nigeria as Africa's representative in the United Nations Security Council. Nigeria's expression of interest in the post should have foreclosed debate on the issue in Africa. Instead, mini-countries like Kenya and Senegal, without Nigeria's clout and resources, still express an interest even after Nigeria has staked its claim. Unless and until Nigeria takes itself seriously by addressing its domestic economic and political shortcomings, it cannot expect to receive the kind of recognition it deserves in the larger international community.
Ebegbulem (2012:221) further adds:

Today, at the national, state and local government levels, the Nigerian people have as their leaders, a hardcore, small, selfish, money-minded few individuals, who wage political and economic war against the vast masses of exploited and oppressed people. The democracy embraced by Nigerians in 1999 has produced leaders who have blighted the lives of Nigerians who now wallow in poverty, illiteracy, hunger and unemployment. These leaders are corrupt and have criminally mismanaged the country’s resources. Corruption and ineffective leadership have impacted negatively on Nigeria’s democratic stability and her economic development. The Nigerian legislature is a product of political corruption as men and women elected into the two legislative chambers got there through election rigging.

To address Nigeria’s domestic economic and political shortcomings requires strong political leadership which in turn requires statesmen with strong moral fiber. Such Nigerian / African statesmen would invariably become African exports to the global political governance arena.

**CLOSING REMARKS: WHAT MUST BE DONE**

It has been demonstrated in this study that the substandard performance of political leadership in the Nigerian State has negatively impacted on political leadership in Africa. According to Igwe (2010:120), Africa requires leaders who by virtue of their learning have come to realize that wealth and power are transitory and that the legacy of true achievement lies with what changes one is capable of bringing about to impact on peoples lives and for which they may be fondly remembered. The most populous country in Africa (Nigeria) must see the emergence of this level of leadership in Africa as a historical challenge. Nigeria is the 7th largest country in the world by population, but is projected by the United Nations to become the third largest country by the turn of the century (Aribisala, 2013). To close the leadership lacuna in Africa entails daunting challenges to the Nigerian State. The Nigerian elite must see this as a national challenge.

As a matter of fact, for the Nigerian State to rise to its rightful leadership position in Africa, this paper shares with Offiong and Chikwem (2011:29), the views that first, and perhaps most important, Nigeria’s government should reform and reequip Nigeria’s educational system. The role of education in capacity building and social reformation cannot be overemphasized. A reformed and reequipped educational system in Nigeria must lead the learner to the realization that wealth and power are transitory and that the legacy of true achievement lies with what changes one is capable of bringing about to impact on peoples lives and for which they may be fondly remembered (Igwe, 2010). In addition, Nigerians must make democracy work. Democracy in Nigeria must crystallize into leadership for results. Truly, democratically elected leaders are better positioned to become phenomenal political leaders. Africa needs new leaders in the mold of Dr Nelson Mandela and political reincarnations of Martin Luther King, Junior on African soil - leaders who personify collective dreams and aspirations. Findings of this study indeed support the thesis that the Nigerian State is favoured by Providence to engender such strategic leadership in Africa.
REFERENCES
Abonyi, N.N. (2010): “Africans’ Contributions to their Socio-Economic and Political woes”
International Journal of Studies in the Humanities 7(8) 24-36
http://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/122801-the-crisis-of-leadership-in-africa-
what-awolowo-would-say-by-adeolu-ademoyo.html. Accessed, 02/06/14
Available at http://www.nigeriadevelopmentandfinanceforum.org. Accessed, 02/06/14
Lecture Delivered at University of Nigeria, Nsukka
Chinweizu (1975): The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Slavers and the African
Elite. New York: Random House
International Journal of Business and Social Science 3(11) 221-227
Journal of Social Sciences. 8(1) 10-32
Underdeveloped Africa. Abuja: Panaf Publishing
Nigeria”. Forthcoming.
Ifesinachi, K. (2011): “Theoretical Perspectives on the State, Nation, Ethnicity and Nationalism
in Africa – Reconsidered” International Journal of Modern Political Economy 2(1)
1-13
Publishers.
Implications for Nigeria’s socio-Economic Development and International Relations”
International Journal of Modern Political Economy 2(1) 14-34
Nsukka: Chuka Educational Publishers