

Evaluating Issues of Accountability, Transparency and Nation-Building

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Abstract

Issues of accountability and transparency are on the front burner because they are at the centre of effective and participatory nation-building. Citizens suspect and consequently withhold legitimacy to governments that are shrouded in secrecy and corruption. Governments supported by citizens are better placed to build nations that can deliver the dividends of democracy. For a government to be accountable and transparent, citizens must go beyond choosing their leaders at periodic elections to actually participating in the governance processes. Civil society groups must be vigilant, vocal and ready to demand good governance at every stage. This paper focused attention on conditions that are necessary for the emergence of accountable and transparent governance in efforts aimed at nation-building, including effective participation in policy formulation and their implementation. The paper concluded that accountability, and transparency can be guaranteed only when and if leaders adhere to the rule of law and are discouraged to continue in the shameful and anti-democratic practices of nepotism and cronyism that undermine nation-building.

Key words: Accountability, transparency, citizen participation and nation-building

Introduction

*...a modern state without rule of law or
accountability is capable of enormous despotism*
Francis Fukuyama

Accountability, transparency and a properly structured political system are necessary conditions for successful modern statecraft and nation-building. Nations that are accountable and make decisions on the basis of what is good for the common interest have a chance to develop in an orderly and sustained manner. If ordinary citizens cannot hold their leaders—especially at the local levels accountable, then representative government becomes a complete mirage. Citizens owe their government civic obligations, while elected and appointed officials correspondingly owe their citizens a binding obligation to be accountable to them and transparent in their actions and inactions. Once citizens pay their taxes, obey constituted authority and duly comply with other legitimate social obligations, they have a right; in fact, a duty to demand accountability and good governance from their leaders. In the age of globalisation, nations that lack transparency and accountability in governance are most likely to lapse into social agitations and political instability as is the case in many African countries. Transparency and accountability are anchored on personal integrity and full disclosure by elected representatives of the people. Unfortunately, some development scholars now believe that democratisation in developing countries has become an elite affair; and as has become obvious, the so-called elite classes are emerging as “enemies of democracy” upon which they ironically ride to political power (Atake and Dodo, 2010: 15).

To Naim (2017), “power is like money: having it increases the chances of having even more of it...the self-perpetuating cycle of concentration of power and wealth can be considered a central driver of human history” (p.9). Power itself necessitates some form of definition to appreciate its overriding importance in human affairs—dating back to primordial times, right up to Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and the modern political philosophers. For instance, Aristotle

defines power, alongside wealth, territory and alliances, as precursors to the pursuit of personal happiness and influence in society. There is a general chorus of agreement that individuals and groups desperately acquire power to consolidate their spheres of influence as a philosophical truth and existential fact of life. 14th Century Italian political philosopher, Niccolo Machiavelli in his highly contentious classic, *The Prince*, submits that acquisition of territory and political power “is in truth very natural and common, and men always do so when they can.” (<http://www.constitution.org/mac/prince03.htm>). In his *Leviathan*, English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, accuses all human beings of the natural inclination to acquire power unto their death! (<http://www.bartleby.com/34/5/11.htm1>). Not to be outdone, German atheist and social thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche declared in his 1885 treatise: “Whenever I found a living thing, there found I Will to Power; and even in the will of the servant found I the will to be master” (<http://nietzsche.thefreelibrary.com/Thus-Spake-Zarathustra/36--1>).

Power is an aphrodisiac indeed and it is central to resource allocation and dispensation of favour by the holder! There is irrefutable evidence to prove that societies that place premium on good governance and prudent management of scarce resources attain stable political systems and rapid economic development that create prosperity for their peoples. The history of social engineering does not present us with credible examples of societies that attained nation-building without running open and transparent governments. Closed societies in which leaders insulated themselves from their people and sequestered their country's commonwealth to themselves constitute the largest cesspool of underdeveloped nations today—mostly in Africa. Accountability and transparency thrive better in societies where leaders submit and dedicate themselves to preserving the rule of law and giving sacrificial services to their people—especially those without a voice in the socio-political and economic management of their societies. In her article for Transparency International Helpdesk entitled, *Literature Review: Accountability and Corruption*, Marie Chene identifies 'horizontal' 'vertical' and 'diagonal' accountability mechanisms as effective instruments for tackling cases of corruption. She describes *horizontal* accountability as checks and balances on public agencies such as the courts, audit and security agencies. *Vertical* accountability, according to her, refers to the media establishment and civil society groups holding public officials accountable for their actions; while *diagonal* accountability refers to efforts aimed at plugging leakages through which public funds that could be invested into nation-building are mindlessly frittered away by corrupt and insensitive leaders and sundry state officials (Chene, 2015).

Nation-building has evidently failed woefully in most African states because the leadership classes have consistently failed to fashion out both the philosophical and ideological basis for governance. In a typical African country, the governance process is usually based on what the leader thinks is good for the populace and the pecuniary interest to be derived from such selfish decisions. German thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche once described the state as “the coldest of all cold monsters.” What Fukuyama (2012) describes as “sharp class distinctions that excluded large numbers of people...from political participation,” (p. 20), is largely responsible for the near total absence of accountability and transparency in governance in Third World countries today. Developing societies are usually caught up in the crossfire of class, tribal and ethnic cleavages because ordinary people tend to lose confidence in the stated good intentions of their leaders and the state is correspondingly delegitimised for failing to deliver on the rosy promises of participatory democracy. As Naim (2017) suggests, citizens “consent to the power of the state because it is supposed to guarantee the minimum level of stability and predictability...to lead fulfilling lives” (p. 228). While the primordial state was entirely fixated on the survival of the ruler and preservation of political power, the modern democratic state, at least, pretends to use the rule of law and accountability in governance to limit its powers by subordinating its operational structure to the commonweal that pulsates with more actors, more voices and diverse ideas. This paper focuses attention on conditions that are necessary for the emergence of accountable and transparent governance in efforts aimed at nation-building,

Prerequisites for Accountability, Transparency and Nation Building

Accountability and transparency are seriously undermined when legitimate state institutions are subordinated to the whims and caprices of the political strongman who 'knows everything' the people need. What most dictators forget is that being in unabridged command of instruments of coercion and state bureaucracy do not confer uncensored authority on them to manipulate the modern democratic state. Owing allegiance to primordial kinfolk system in place of modern legitimate state institutions is the bane of the modern African state today. As Fukuyama (2012) submits: "poor countries are poor not because they lack resources, but because they lack effective political institutions" that can galvanise their people to participate in effective nation-building and spread the benefits of democracy to the greatest number of citizens. Under-represented and marginalised citizens are right to vociferously lament the "unresponsive bureaucracy, corrupt politicians and the unprincipled nature of politics," in the so-called representative democracy they are compelled to endure in this part of the world; but taking practical action to restore participatory governance has become such an uphill task and a dangerous adventure that very few agitators are courageous enough to undertake. Ask the self-styled *Revolution Now* exponent, Omoyele Sowore about the personal cost of a misguided social crusade in a democratic dictatorship. The sad end to Sowore's solo example shows that Nigeria and other Third World countries have not matured up to a point where rag-tag civil action would become a poor substitute to statutory political parties, the media and rigidly controlled state authority. Naim (2017) notes that "...revolutions are too costly, their outcome is too uncertain, and progress is not their guaranteed result (p.242).

Social Consciousness

The rising anger against institutionalised state authority is anchored on increased social consciousness about the need for accountability and transparency in the political space. The *angst* we are witnessing today in Nigeria and many parts of Africa is largely predicated on the fact that the so-called "dividends of democracy"—especially the economic wellbeing of most citizens—have been ignored by dubiously-motivated politicians who employ what Fukuyama labels as 'patrimonialism'—favouring friends and family—as a choice system of governance in multi-ethnic societies. The recent assault on erstwhile Deputy Senate President in far-away Germany is a pointer to what could happen to leaders perceived by the citizens as insensitive to their plight. Although some of the Deputy Senate President's attackers accused him of not fully identifying with their agitation for a sovereign State of Biafra; others pointedly told the Distinguished Senator to 'go home and fix Nigeria' (Eze, 2019). The implication of the statement is that he, like other globe-trotting Nigerian leaders, were enjoying life in nations that are ruled on the basis of accountability and transparency. Despite largely superficial efforts to legitimise elite dictatorships through manipulated electoral processes, the people understand and see through the absence of accountability and transparency in such manufactured periodic 'democratic' motions without movement that they are compelled to endure. It is this 'democratic recession' or deficit that has understandably generated tension and sadly given birth to the rising phenomena of cult gang wars, communal clashes, banditry, killer herdsmen (women) and farmers' clashes, terrorism and outright rebellion against legitimate state authority (e.g. Boko Haram, Indigenous People of Biafra, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, *O'dua* Peoples' Congress) in Nigeria.

The main reason populist anger has not yet germinated into full-scale mass revolt against the elite class is because of the ethnic cleavages that divide Nigerians along kinship lines. For instance, those Nigerians who agitate for more freedoms and allocation of more recourse to their zones refer to their defined territories as 'ethnic nationalities' or outright 'nations'. Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) posit that the roots of discontent in repressive societies lie in their poverty (p. 2); a strong point that explains why most wars have been fought on the basis of resource deprivation vaguely disguised as 'denial of personal or group freedom.'

Criminality is another ugly manifestation of social instability in states that lack accountability and transparency. Recently, one security group fired and killed three members of a rival group and

freed a suspected kidnap kingpin. When re-arrested, the suspect boldly reconstructed what happened and actually confessed that he was, indeed, freed by the security group that was supposed to apprehend him! A corrupt state lacks the moral high ground to checkmate such scandalous inter-agency rivalry.

In our clime, development has been totally narrowed down to economic activities and resource allocation to the privileged parasitic elite class that contributes absolutely nothing to good governance and nation-building. These clearly demarcated class distinctions have blinded the ordinary people from realising that they collectively belong to a 'class' that has long suffered from lack of accountability and transparent governance under the iron grip of the other 'class'. Strict adherence to the rule of law, accountability and commitment to good governance will always be acceptable ways to administer a state over the use of brute force and extended patronage system of governance. Citizens would prefer to be governed by democratic states that are accountable, open, equitable and sensitive to their daily needs in a timely manner. Weak, corrupt and authoritarian societies are not able to deliver the so-called 'dividends of democracy' in a secure environment that enables them to be productive and sociable. Tortuous, systematic and progressive processes of nation-building are the building blocks of stable societies. Most states in Africa are dysfunctional because the legitimacy of their governance structure is usually brought to question on account of lack of accountability and transparency, including rigged elections and cronyism that are open to only family and friends. Accountability, transparency and open democratic spaces are what legitimise governments and lead to effective nation-building. Not base propaganda; not patronage; certainly not despotic rule.

Need for Participatory Governance

While there is no absolute guarantee that democracy, on its own can provide all the necessities of life to ordinary citizens, experience has proved that only a participatory governance structure can legitimise authority in the estimation of the governed. The other thing is the rule of law which is almost synonymous with political accountability and transparency in governance. Realising the need to legitimise corrupted power, our leaders have recently copied Western style "Town Hall Meetings" at which they reel out their superficial "achievements" and take friendly questions from pre-arranged cronies and aids who chorus the official line. Those wishing to ask "hostile" questions are quickly shouted down and labelled as working for the opposition. In some cases, they suffer more horrendous consequences for their brazen acts of impunity. Town Hall Meetings that were originally designed to serve as "participatory fora" for citizens are reduced to hastily convened sessions at which professional sycophants in search of "stomach infrastructure" compose *songs of praise* for the leaders. In some extreme instances, leaders engage in a monologue and depart the scene of such Town Hall Meetings without taking questions in what was supposed to be an interactive forum! On the contrary, free flow of information, exposure of corrupt practices, reduction of bureaucratic red tapes, regular publication of performance indicators and taking action on feedbacks, are some of the ways of ensuring accountability and transparency in nation-building (Johnston, *et al*, 2002).

Regimes that are not transparent in their dealings with citizens are classified as "closed societies" that pander to the narrowly defined interest of the leadership class. Such societies may make pretences at legitimising their dictatorships through periodic sham elections, but such governments can only emerge through what Schedler (2006) labels as "electoral authoritarian regime." Such regimes operate as Mafia-style corporations with established hierarchies of mass deception and oppression. For instance, despite being a democracy on paper, Transparency International (TI), rates post-*glasnost* Russian governance structure as shadowy, regimented, intolerant of opposing views and murderous in extreme cases. For instance, TI ranks Russia as 147 out of 180 countries surveyed on their democracy, transparency and accountability weighing scale. The roots of Russian absolutism date back to its communist past, and before it, the bloody *Bolshevik Revolution* of 1917 that consumed the despotic Tsarist dynasty. Such a patriarchy

society that was invaded and ruled by the Mongols for 250 years could not be expected to develop along Western Liberal models of democracy.

The Chinese have proved that nation-building, though a very daunting task; can be accomplished with a clear vision, single-minded determination, a sense of purpose and sacrificial leadership that is entirely focused on living nobody behind. Although Western history writers erroneously credit the Greeks and their Roman cousins as “precursors of modern accountable government,” it is on record that China and, later India, were central to the development of the modern state. Through laser concentration on aggressive nation-building that is anchored on the suppression of individual rights, China has become a leading global economy, despite the fact that it has vehemently refused to open up its political system to mass participation along the prescriptions of Western Liberal democracy. The prevailing joke today is that we will all soon be made in China—that is—if we are not already “Made in China.”

The other condition that is necessary for successful nation-building is an open communication system that spreads developmental ideas to all citizens, irrespective of their status in society. This means that ordinary citizens must be given unimpeded access that would enable them participate in electing their leaders, especially at the local levels and also have a voice in the making and implementation of policies that directly impact on their daily living conditions (Litvack, n. d.).

Need for Transparency

Lack of transparency and corruption are ignoble Siamese twins that undermine accountability and nation-building. Transparency in governance makes it easy to track and sanction officials involved in corrupt practices in governance. If elected or appointed officials are not honest and committed to accountable and transparent governance, then nation-building would be seriously undermined at all levels. It is a crying shame that most developing nations wait for global corruption tracking agencies to whip them into line on the transparency index.

Happily, more citizenship and civic groups are becoming conscious of corruption and malfeasance in governance that reporting of such ignoble acts are now on the increase, especially at the local level that touches their lives most. The sad news is that despite the emergence of more pressure groups against corruption, incidences of official sleaze are on the increase in Nigeria, probably due to better monitoring and reporting mechanisms.

Unfortunately, elected and appointed local officials complain of pressures mounted on them to govern through extended patronage and cronyism that favour family, political associates and close friends at the expense of development that favour everybody. Those professional sycophants who *sing songs of praises* for the local government chairman or place congratulatory messages in the media to massage the ego of the governor or president do so in anticipation of their own 'dividends of democracy.' Such people cannot turn around to demand accountability and transparency in governance, because their teeth are already rotten after eating the apple of official sleaze. It is a *Catch 22* situation for elected officials in some cases as those who feel shut out may withdraw support from the leader at the next election.

Nation-building is not limited to good governance or establishing the instruments of development; once the fabric of society is stabilised and made functional, citizens would diligently carry out their civic obligations to the state in anticipation of the much-touted 'dividends of democracy' that enable them to live a good life and contribute their own quota to nation-building. Leaders who are not able to fully mobilise their people to participate in the process of nation-building are not likely to be accountable or transparent in their governance style. It is important that pressure groups that demand accountability and transparency in governance must be protected through the rule of law and not persecuted, prosecuted and thrown into jail on trumped up charges as is the case in many African countries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that greater accountability and transparency would go a long way to usher in good governance that would accelerate nation-building and prosperity for the citizens. Helpdesks need to be established to track where monies budgeted for public services are invested and accounted for by statutory Line Officers. Not just that; it is important that the public is empowered to make input in developmental models that best serve their needs, including close monitoring of expenditure to ensure value for scarce resources. There is also the need for more effective horizontal, vertical and diagonal information flow to keep citizens fully abreast of the way they are being governed. Our submission is that effective nation-building cannot take place until and unless leaders commit themselves to accountable and transparent governance structures that create positive impact on the ordinary citizens. As Atake and Dodo (2010) argue, if there is rule of law, equity of opportunity and equitable sharing of burdens and reward of democracy; ethnic groups will not be desperate about avoiding domination, and premium on power will not be so high. How true!

Ake (1996) describes implementation of policies that impact on nation-building as “bringing public policy in alignment with social needs.” Accountability and transparency would result in a government that is responsive to the masses and responsible to them in the decision-making and nation-building processes. The followers and monitoring agencies must pay close attention to the need to institute checks and balances, and consensus-building which should be largely driven by strong public opinion and a free press.

Accountability and transparency in governance work more effectively where there is what Johnston (n.d.) describes as “political energy...people, interest groups, civil society, the courts, the press, and opposition parties...” that should pressure political leaders to be accountable and transparent in the process of nation-building. Citizens have more than enough grounds to distrust their political class—especially those in power—on account of their corruption, mendacity and crass incompetence in the delivery of the good things of life. Ordinary people are not demanding a slice of the moon from their leaders; they just want their government to be “less hierarchical”, less bureaucratic and be “more nimble, adaptable, and more attuned to the needs and expectations of their members.” They easily lose interest in leaders who not accountable, transparent and pander to the narrowly defined pecuniary interest of a few power elites who place profit over people.

The processes for awarding contracts—ranging from project conception and design, advertisement and procurement must be done in an open and transparent manner to engender public confidence in the system.

In the final analysis, all political activities must be geared towards achieving good governance in the short and medium terms—with emphasis on the long-term goals for them to be meaningful and impactful on the lives of ordinary people. Without accountability and respect for the rights of all citizens, economic development and nation-building will become mere efforts in futility as is the case in many developing countries—especially in Africa. Above all, accountability, transparency can be guaranteed only when and if leaders adhere to the rule of law and are discouraged to continue in the shameful and anti-democratic practices of nepotism and cronyism that undermine nation-building. Naim (2017) declares that “power without control, accountability, and countervailing forces is dangerous and unacceptable.” The ultimate objective is making representative democracy to be more purposeful and responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens through checks and balances that scrutinise and limit the use of unaccountable power that undermine genuine nation-building.

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