

# INTERROGATING THE PARADOX AND CONJECTURES OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE DEFICIT IN AFRICA

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## **Abstract**

This paper examined leadership and governance crisis in contemporary Africa, and its attendant consequences on state development. Leadership failure has been the bane of African states since post-independence, decades ago. Lack of ideology and absence of leadership with transformative attitude has been one of several reasons why governance is receding on the continent. The impact of leadership in promoting good governance and development of a state and a strong linkage between political leadership and good governance is what define transformative and responsive government that cares for welfare of the citizenry. However, with few exceptions in some African states, citizens have continued to bear the burden of leadership failure. The key objective of this paper is to examine the major impacts of leadership on good governance. While the paper acknowledges the efforts of some of these political leaders to transform their states, the fact however, remains that the means of executing these noble transformative goals are in a “state of vacillation”. The study adopted elite theory as its theoretical framework and relied on secondary source of information for its data. The paper found that the recycling of poor leadership has continued to dash all hopes of achieving growth and development in Africa and recommends that stakeholders in these countries must devise new approaches to leadership recruitment; while the political leadership must strive to promote probity, accountability and good governance.

**Keywords:** African states; Development; Governance, Leadership; Poverty

## **Introduction**

The nexus between leadership and good governance cannot be underestimated as it is crucial for the establishment of a stable and egalitarian society. Therefore, good governance usually explains the extent to which political leadership has met the yearnings and aspirations of the citizenry. Aside the leadership question, scholars have taken governance failure as a critical part to understanding development crisis ravaging African continent. However, leadership failure and crisis of governance have become a sour taste for 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa. While many scholars and analysts have squarely located the leadership and crisis of governance in Africa in their contact with colonialism, nevertheless, a different outcome in other continents that passed through similar colonial experience raises doubt about its utilitarian value (Okolie, 2010).

There is no gainsaying that some African leaders do not care about the welfare of their citizens, as their inept and other forms of mal-administration quickly manifest immediately they assume office. With few exceptions, their regimes have been notable for oppression, corruption, social disorganization, dearth of development project and growing poverty (Ake, 1996). In some African states, political parties merely exist, but do not contribute towards economic policies that could positively impact on the well-being of the people, unlike what obtains in developed democracies like the United Kingdom and United States of America, where political parties play crucial roles in government policies. Examples abound in some African countries such as those of Presidents Eyadema of Togo, and Paul Biya of Cameroon to mention few, who have amended the constitution in their respective countries to elongate their stay in power. In Nigeria, where many of the electorate have become disillusioned with democratic governance, the political elites now take their turn to assume power, which in effect, has not practically changed the awful approach to governance in the country. Similarly, governance failure has further created opportunity for military putsch in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. It is therefore indisputable that the root cause of governance failure in Africa lies in the leadership conundrum which requires “sub-optimal understanding” as well as understanding of the meaning of leadership” (Fletcher Forum, 2017).

Essentially, many African states such as Nigerian, Cote d'Ivoire and Sudan are ethnically and religiously divided, while the failure of leadership to address the fragmentation has led to civil war. Thus, in attempt to analyze history of leadership and democratization

processes especially in third world countries, (Ake 1985, 2000:37), argues that the state was a vortex of struggles for power and resources, and politics was reduced to a zero-sum game in which the winners took everything and the losers also lost everything. Similarly, power has been personalized, and abused very often, while also reducing politics to the “single-minded pursuit to capture state power”. Nevertheless, purposeful leadership and good governance still abound in countries like Cape-Verde, Botswana, Namibia, Mauritius and Rwanda, which Transparency International has identified to be less corrupt on the African continent. It is in view of the foregoing that this study interrogates the paradox and conjectures of political leadership and governance deficit in Africa.

The objectives of the study are:

- (a) To investigate the linkage between leadership and good governance
- (b) To ascertain the effect of poor leadership on governance in Africa

## **Literature Review**

### **Conceptualizing Political leadership and Governance**

Leadership refers to the ability of a leader to give order and ensure compliance without the use of force or coercion at a given time. Leadership in real sense connotes a leader. Hence, a leader is one who leads, plans, organizes, controls, communicates, delegates, and accepts responsibility for reaching societal goals” (Ebegbulem, 2011). In the context of this study, leadership implies public leadership entrusted with authority for the purpose of public service delivery. Research on political leadership is widespread. Given this, Teles (2012), contends that “political leadership is a complex concept with no universal definition and that political scientists usually define leadership according to their own perceptions of the issue depending on the aspects they are more interested in”. Political leadership and good governance work hand in hand to ensure a stable and viable state.

Therefore, the essence of good governance is to establish government of the people, and for the interest of the people. According to Erasmus, (2013:4), the quality of good governance includes a process by which governments are elected, monitored and replaced; the capacity of the government of the day to effectively formulate and implement sound policies and regulatory regimes; and the respect of citizens for the institutions and norms that govern economic, social, political and legal interaction among others. The failure of these values has continued to demoralize people’s faith and belief in democratic governance in Africa. Basically, the nonconformity of African political leadership to democratic values; while also displaying autocratic ideas, as well as persistent incursion of the military in

governance have no doubt become drivers of governance failure in Africa. In the light of this study, political leaders are the primary holders, as well as providers of resources in an established institution or state.

Governance deficit has remained a clog in the wheel of progress in Africa. Africa has the potential to be great but many African states have for years been entangled in endemic poverty, insecurity and ethno-religious conflict. In addition, corruption, incompetency and leadership failure have opened the gate for opportunists leading to renaissance of undemocratic means of changing government in Africa. The concept of governance like leadership, is also difficult to discuss in specific terms. According to Pierre & Peters (2000:7), it is a concept that is notoriously slippery, frequently used by social scientists and practitioners without definition. People often misuse governance and government; while the former is an extension of government, the latter however, is a constituted authority, an established and complex channel through which people articulate their interests; exercise their civil and legal rights, as well as reconciliation of differences.

As the United Nation Development Programme, UNDP (1997a: 9), put forward, it covers “the political, economic, legal, judicial, social and administrative authority and therefore, includes: government, the private sector and the civil society”. Hence, it is clear that governance is the process of running the affairs of a state toward implementing government policies. In actual sense, governance could be authoritarian, despotic or democratic in nature. The World Bank (2014:1), defines “Governance” as consisting of “the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised”. These includes how governments are “selected, monitored and replaced, including their capacity to formulate and implement sound policies, public services, and earn the respect of citizens and institutions that determine economic and social interventions” (Kaufmann, 2010).

The concept of governance however can be seen in two different dimensions: “Good and Bad Governance”. While the former implies effective management of state resources; accountability; rule of law; transparency and equitable allocation of resources; the latter connotes leadership failure; poor policy implementation; corruption; lack of transparency, and above all, weak institutions. Good governance though rare in Africa, can be found in few African states such as Mauritius, Ghana and South Africa. Good governance is an antidote to poverty, peace and development. African countries are currently entangled in crisis of governance due to multidimensional challenges facing the continent. Poverty has continued to rise in African states because of bad governance at both the macro and micro levels.

## **Theoretical framework**

This study used the Elite theory as its guide. The elite theory seeks to describe and analyze the power relationship in contemporary society (Izucke, 2014). The theory argues that the elite constitute the most powerful group of people in any national political system. They can be very few in number, depending on the size of the country. Elite theory can be traced to Robert Michels's (1915), Iron Law of Oligarchy; Vilfredo Pareto's, (1939), Political Elite Circulation, and (Lopes, 2013; Mustapha, 2000). In all cases, elites make up a small portion in the population- perhaps 3-4% at most" (Hossain &More, 2000). Elites can be described as the people who make and shape political, and economic decisions of government to their own advantage. The conviction of this group is that society contains two sets of people, (a) governing, (b) non-governing elite (Mustafa, 2000:324). Linked to the Nigerian situation, this group shares the belief that majority of the people have some inadequacies to think and perform to optimum level. Hence, the society must rely on the wisdom, skill and intelligence of political leaders, and not the majority of the people. Elites are rich, intelligent and mostly, the advantaged members of any political system.

For example, in Nigeria, the elite, have tentacles that cover the "echelons of politics". They are persons who, by virtue of their strategic locations in large or otherwise pivotal organizations and movements, are able to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially" (Higley, 2010). Though electorate can decide which elites' rules, it cannot change the fact that power is always exercised by the elites (Heywood, 2006:80). This has given rise to contradictions and crisis of governance that has bedeviled the Nigerian political system since 1999. Nigerian political elites because of their recognized position, even though they do not dominate political power, yet they are clearly in position to decide when, how and what goes elsewhere in the society, thereby running the Nigerian state as their own property. The implication of this is that, Nigeria is oscillating between democratic stagnancy and governance backwardness, principally because of elite tendencies that are reflective of the pursuit of personal aggrandizement and promotion of egocentrism rather than altruistic policies that are nationalistic and people-centric in nature (Okeke 2014:322).

Elites globally have enormous resources, exercise bureaucratic control, and have access to the executive arm of government. They have the power to influence government's key decisions especially on the economy, defense and foreign policy. Given the extent of their connection and influence, it is certain that the power elite model suggests that elite

groups are structures of exploitation (Heywood, 2006). Heywood view reflects the activities of the elite in contemporary Nigeria, as they are insensitive to the suffering of Nigerians. Even at the local level where the influence and activities of the elites are expected to be less pronounced and minimal, Nigeria's case is different. Since 1999, politics at the local level is dominated by the political elite (known as God fathers). This has made good governance unattainable at the local level. It can be argued that major challenge facing Nigeria today is the reckless pursuit of political power by the political elite, who impose weak, visionless and clueless leaders at all levels of governance. The consequences remain the current decadence of the Nigerian state. The Nigerian situation applies to those of several African states.

### **Methodology**

The study adopted the descriptive research design due to the nature of the topic which seeks to interrogate the impact of leadership on governance crisis in Africa. The study is also analytical in nature as the paper sought to quiz the rationale for the deepening crisis in many African states. Hence, the paper relies secondary source of data such as text books, journals and the internet. The data were also analyzed through content data analysis.

### **Overview of selected cases on Political leadership and Governance in Africa**

Africa has been facing leadership failure and governance deficit since post-colonial independence. Given this, the paper has selected four countries for the purpose of exploring how governance in these selected countries have been shaped by their respective political leadership- Nigeria, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and South Africa.

In Nigeria, it is incontrovertible that the political leadership has mismanaged governance since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. In his book, "The trouble with Nigeria", Chinua Achebe noted that "the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely the failure of leadership". The country became independent in 1960 and out of the country's sixty-four years of independence, the military ruled for about three decades. Since 1999, identity politics, leadership failure and governance deficit have on several occasions resulted into ethno-religious conflict, neglect of the education sector, and worsening health care, while corruption has remained endemic. According to Transparency International (TI), 2024 corruption perception index, Nigeria ranked 140<sup>th</sup> among 180 countries covered by the study, while the World Bank in 2024 revealed that half of Nigerians live below the poverty line of one dollar per day. The country education sector has not fared any better, as the World Economic Forum in 2024, ranked her primary education quality 124<sup>th</sup> out of 127<sup>th</sup>, while its

tertiary education was rated 117<sup>th</sup> out of 137. This shows the level of decadence in the system. It is thus suggested that Nigeria needs a generation of fresh and new leadership to confront the decades of underdevelopment headlong.

In Rwanda, the country is still a one-party state under the incumbent President Paul Kagame of the Rwanda Patriotic Front. It is the lone and leading political party in the country since the end of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. Perhaps, before the emergence of Kagame, and over the past decade, the country lacked transformative leadership, while ethnic identification was so prevalent. Although, the country was considered to be a failed state three decades back, it has nonetheless, achieved a remarkable success both in governance and economy, named the “Rwanda Miracle”. According to the International Economic Indices (IEI 2024), the country’s unemployment rate in 2024 dropped by 4.3 percent and Rwanda witnessed significant reduction in unemployment rate to 14.9 percent. Also, as of 2023 according to the ‘Legatum Prosperity Index 2023’ Rwanda was ranked 111<sup>th</sup> in the World as 98 percent of her children are enrolled in schools. Under Paul Kagame, Rwanda is gearing towards becoming a “middle income country by 2035”. Kagame’s administration has zero tolerance for corruption. The Transparency International, (2024), ranked Rwanda 40<sup>th</sup> among 180<sup>th</sup> countries surveyed. Thus, according to the index, the country leads the way in the East African region. The President’s determination for peaceful coexistence, and enabling environment for investors is on course, as he positioned himself to continue revolutionizing Rwanda.

Ethiopia with a population of 126,527, 06m according to World meter is the second largest nation in Africa after Nigeria. Although, the country is landlocked, it’s leadership has been struggling to maintain a GDP growth rate between 8 percent and 11 percent for more than a decade; even though crisis in the country has again reversed this gain; while poverty remains a big challenge. According to data released by Trading Economics Global Macro Models (2023), the country’s GDP at the end of 2023 is expected to reach 5.80 percent. Given this, the government has shown more commitment to improve “public service leadership” by lunching initiative towards improving governance.

South Africa is the most developed economy on African continent. However, the country has been facing leadership crisis since late Nelson Mandela relinquished power, thereby slowing the country’s economy growth. This symbolizes how weak and clueless leadership can impact governance. Mandela during his life, time possessed high quality

leadership laced with a visionary ideology which enabled him to translate his mission and vision into a “New South Africa”. Mandela’s path to a new South Africa made him to embrace reconciliation rather than vengeance after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa in 1994. Thabo Mbeki championed the “ideal of Africa Renaissance”. He was however replaced by Jacob Zuma because of his aloofness in domestic politics. The Zuma administration was however found to be personalizing leadership, with high level of corruption and several scandals. Cyril Ramaphosa however has struggled to make governance work in the country. However, his administration has not fared better as leadership and governance in South Africa has failed to complement each other.

South Africa today faces an “existential leadership question”. In 2024, according to the Transparency International, South Africa ranked 82th among 180 countries covered in the corruption perception index. Similarly, in 2015, the Global Information Technology Report 2015, ranked South Africa last in the quality of mathematics and science education, while also close to last 139 out of 143 countries, in terms of the overall quality of its education system. This is not to argue that governance in South Africa is not better when compared with Nigeria or Ethiopia, among the multiethnic states appraised in this study.

### **Political Leadership and Governance deficit in Africa: What went wrong?**

The joy that characterized African political independence dating back to the late 1960s was dampened by leadership crisis in most of these states. It is incontestable that visionary and transformative leaderships are key ingredients of good governance. Botha (n-d) argues that hunger, poverty, disease and lack of development in Africa are in the first instance of political and governance issues. This implies that socio-economic development of a state takes cues from the governance process. Hence, the two are deeply connected which indicates that the two variables must complement each other for good governance to be attained. Many African states including Nigeria, have for decades been suffering from inept and less visionary leadership. This has adversely affected governance in all spheres. The increasing complexities and continuous change in global affairs toward growth and development of a state require ethical and transformative leadership. Given this, Wiseman Nkuhlu asserted that what Africa has to get right in order to claim the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to improve leadership across board (Nkuhlu, 2006).

Fundamentally, leadership and governance in Africa has failed to conform to a performance that is based on good leadership embedded with democratic governance and

economic development. Several African states have been caught in the “failed states trap”. It can thus be suggested that the failure of African economies to expand beyond exportation of one primary product to the foreign market is purely lack of “viable indigenous programme of action” expected to be implemented by the leadership. Hence, poverty, high rate of unemployment, malnutrition and underdevelopment continue unimpeded across the continent. The goal of any responsible leadership should be to ensure optimal utilization of available resources for good governance, as governance would not attain its objective, if it is not supported with effective and transformative leadership.

### **Other factors holding the continent back from Good governance**

#### **Weak economy:**

Economic challenges facing most of these states and incapacity of leadership to revive their economies has continued to derail their development. For instance, since 1999, when democratic governance returned to the country, Nigerians have continued to be disenchanted with the essence of liberal democracy in Nigeria. Thus, Africa has long been saddled with poor, even malevolent leadership, predatory kleptocrats, military-installed autocrats, such as leaders who use power as an end itself rather than his words, ‘one result, after almost five decades of African independence, is a paucity of good governance (Rothberg, 2004). It has been argued elsewhere that in spite of the mantra “Africa Rising” that spread over the continent in the last decade, it is indisputable to argue that African countries, perhaps with few exemptions, are currently overwhelmed with leadership deficit

#### **Recurrent ethno-religious conflict especially in plural states:**

Many African countries especially the multiethnic states have for decades been plagued with politics of identity, and ethnic conflict. Examples abound in Cote d’Ivoire (2002-2011), the concurrent ethnic tension in Ethiopia and the Rwanda genocide of 1994 between Tutsi and Hutus ethnic before the emergence of Paul Kagame as the President. This situation has badly affected governance in many ways and significantly breeds a “governance culture of Clientelism” based on divisive identities. In contemporary Africa, ethno-religious conflict has continued to vibrate especially in heterogeneous societies due to lack of forethought and effective leadership.

Rampant corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of modern African society. As stated earlier, in 2024, Nigeria was ranked 140<sup>th</sup> among 180<sup>th</sup> countries in the international perception index, Ethiopia in 2024 was according to the Transparency

International 'ranked 99<sup>th</sup> among 180<sup>th</sup> countries in the index. Seychelles was ranked first in Africa, and 18<sup>th</sup> globally, followed by Cape Verde, 35<sup>th</sup>, worldwide, Botswana 43<sup>rd</sup>, as well as Rwanda 43<sup>rd</sup>, Namibia 49<sup>th</sup> as the least corrupt countries. Sudan, however, according to the index was the most corrupt country in the continent. The situation has been compounded by weak institutions and low political-will in most of these states to curtail the endemic corruption afflicting them, as African leaders are found of self-enrichment when they assume office. This development has impacted African states' development and growth in various dimension in comparison to the rest of the world. Although, some analysts have argued that corruption should not be seeing as a "fundamental cause of poor leadership, but the failure of these leaders to confront the cycle of corruption headlong is indisputably one of the most obvious "indictment of leadership failure".

### **External control and influence:**

African countries' reliance on foreign aid has continued to give international donors such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank the leverage to influence their policy formulations. These institutions usually demand policy changes such as, devaluation, removal of subsidies, reduction in State educational funding and withdrawal of state intervention in agriculture. Citizens have continued to feel the impact of these harsh policies in countries where these donor institutions have signed agreements with the host country. Some of these states especially, Nigeria are currently grappling with the fall-out of currency devaluation and withdrawal of subsidies.

Similarly, some African leadership problems also revolve around the personalized nature of rule; the failure of the state to advance and protect human rights; and extreme centralization of power in the hands of a few. This, in, effect created decades of states control of the economy, and consequently, deepened endemic corruption; while inducing most of these leaders to cling to political power.

In summary, this study has thus identified the crude manner in leadership recruitment, stay-put syndrome and erosion of constitutionalism, corruption, external control through granting of Aids, personalized nature of rules among others as part of the reasons for bad governance and the attendant consequences explained above.

## **Conclusion**

This study has argued that considering multidimensional challenges facing African countries such as securing the country; eradication of poverty; corruption, as well as restoring public confidence in leadership and governance, the political leadership should be upright, seizing the machinery of governance, and driving it to address the challenge of governance on the continent.

## **Recommendations**

- i. Political leaders should demonstrate the courage to taking holistic decision for development rather than using instrument of state for self-accumulation, and elongation of power.
- ii. There should be decisive political action to tackle corruption. Hence, it is imperative for African leaders to allow citizens free access to information concerning governance.
- iii. Political leadership should engage in holistic reform by institutionalizing transparency, accountability and good governance. This should be done by the country's executive through engaging in institutional reforms, establishing stiff penalties against kick-backs and gratification, toward enthroning quality governance.
- iv. Government should work toward establishing symbiotic relationship between the people and the government. Deepening trust and unyielding spirit and patriotism will indisputably create opportunity toward establishing strong institutions of governance.

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