

# The Exercise of Power in Nigeria's Democracy: A Moral Examination

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## Abstract

It was Lord Acton who once said that "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely". The full import of this statement seems to find expression in most third world democracies of which Nigeria is a case in point. Most political office holders in the course of exercising their "state sanctioned" powers often tend to abuse the rights and privileges the office confers on them and sometimes with impunity. Paradoxically, they violate the same laws they swore to uphold and in the process introduce moral problems to the body polity. This work is an attempt at showing that these anomalies or aberration of power abuse is incongruent with the spirit of democracy and that the moral burden for a viable democracy rest on the people.

**Keywords:** Power, Nigeria, Democracy, Morality, Abuse, Rule, Law

## 1. Introduction

Democracy may not be a perfect system of government. But it is nevertheless accepted as one of the finest of all forms of government because it creates room for liberty and equality before the law and a smooth process of power transition via the ballot boxes. Democracy is also admirable because of its provision for respect to the rule of law and the entrenchment of justice and fairness. Hence, the ontology of democracy does not permit unruly behaviour amongst her practitioners such as is common in monarchy because of the provision for the respect of the rule of law. Following these, any abuse of power by the actors of democracy such as political office holders becomes an aberration of the spirit of democracy. Rebeck (2000) was right on point when she noted that:

Almost everyone in public life, whatever his or her inclination, tells us that there are no alternatives. We have to accept cutbacks to social programs, massive inequities between rich and poor, unbridled greed in the private, we are told, because there is nothing else (p.2).

It is indeed a misnomer and an aberration such as we have amongst most third world political office holders who flagrantly abuse the power the constitution confers on them by either stretching its limits or reducing its scope by their conducts and attitudinal posture. This power abuse is often time motivated by passions that are unethical such as ego boosting, pride and arrogance, greed, corruption and ignorance.

This paper intends to show the nexus between the abuse of power in a democracy and the resultant moral consequence it will have on the society. The paper will further establish the truth that democracy abhors any behaviour that erode or circumvent its tenets. Let us now turn our focus to understanding what is meant by the concept of power.

## 2. Understanding the Concept of Power

When Lord Acton stated that power corrupts, he understood the force and content of power whether spiritual, managerial, political or physical power. Scientist for example, understands kinetic energy as power to work or do things. Thus, power has a lot of influence and ability attached to it that is capable of producing results and making things to happen.

In the sphere of the society especially in civil society, power is a concept that is always paired with authority. They seem to be used most times interchangeably and this has generated a lot of confusion because both concepts are ontologically not the same. Hence, the exercise of power must of necessity have the backing of authority which guarantees legitimate achievement of the desired goal for which power was exercised. The constitution of the land provides grounds from which power can be exercise backed up by authority to execute. This is why the law enforcement agencies act as arbitrators between power and authority. Hence Barbet (2001) states that:

Rulers of states however are generally thought to be in authority, and this notion of authority suggests that they have the power of coercion. If we do not do what we are told we are liable to be punished (p 246).

Even though the concepts of power and authority are intimately linked together to the point of causing confusion, especially when viewed from the angle of sovereignty, we can still dissect the two concepts by focusing on their nature. Irele (1998) advised that we go about this by “avoiding identifying the two concepts together and the other is to sever them from each other totally” (p. 75).

Power often denotes the coercive method employed by those not entitled to our obedience; but authority is not identifiable by coercive method only. An armed robber for example may accost one and coerce him to surrender his property. The robber thus has power but he lacks authority. From this analogy, Irele (1998) holds further that:

Authority is usually backed by laws which give the person exercising authority some form of legitimate power to carry out the function he is performing .... Authority in the political spheres occurs when there is willing compliance, and a power to command and enforce obedience (p. 76).

Now everybody has the power or ability to issue a command, but not everyone is authorized or entitled to have his commands carried out. It is from this perspective that we must understand Jean Bodin’s idea of sovereignty as the absolute or supreme power of a state to command. Raphael (1976) tries to put this definition in its proper form thus:

Does Bodin mean by ‘absolute Power’ the ability to issue effective commands, i.e. the ability to have one’s commands carried out? This would be power, properly speaking. Or does he mean the entitlement or right to issue commands and to have them obeyed? This would be authority (p. 67).

To further exemplify authority and power, the distinction between *de facto* and *de jure* authority is imperative. A person exercises power *de facto* when he relies on coercion as the major instrument to ensure compliance to commands. While a *de jure* authority is a kind that carries legitimacy in the exercise of power. This power falls under extractive power as opined by Esikot (2010), which means “a person’s ability to use others capacities to serve his own purpose or simply put, the “power over” others (p. 124). The moral dimension of power arises from the need for it to be exercise rightly. Such moral exercise abhors abuse of power and other related vices. Most of our reference to power in this work will follow from this understanding. Let us now briefly elucidates the meaning of democracy.

### 3. Understanding Democracy

Democracy is heralded today as the best system of government because of its many appealing qualities. Worthy of note is the aspect that hands over power to the majority through an election. This is her greatest strength.

Democracy was first practiced in the Greek city state of Athens and Abraham Lincoln popularized it when he defined it as “government of the people, for the people and by the people”. Aristotle was the very first theorist of democracy in the Western world and he understood that the democratic system could not survive except under conditions of equality. According to Rebock (2000) democracy is seen as “a community of people dedicated to the common good” (p. 9).

The etymology of the word democracy which is *demos* and *kratei* meaning “the people rule” exposes the spirit behind Democracy. This spirit recognizes equality before the law and a considerable degree of freedom. Following this understanding Barrow (1982) posited that:

The essence of Athenian democracy, then, which has carried over into our popular use of the term, was that the people make their own decisions in matters of government, as opposed to being bound by precedent or priest, or having them made for them by some minority group or individual (p.130).

Democracy is thus conceived of as involving social justice, government accountability, and human freedoms. Certainly, liberal democracy involves the procedural minimum for contesting for political office and policy choices, popular participation in elections and other elements of political decision making, as well as the accountability of elected public officials under the rule of law. All these must take place within a culture in which fundamental human rights and political freedoms are guaranteed.

Democracy has a spirit which is deeper in its essence. This spirit permeates the substance of democracy and makes it the preferred system of government. Perhaps this accounts for why the *springs* swept through several Arabian countries like a wild fire despite the foothold of dictatorship and monarchy there. What the early Greeks practiced could be called limited democracy because it excluded the rights of women, slaves, resident aliens, artisans and so on. However, Locke in his *Two Treaties of Government* published in 1690 advanced the course of democracy and his ideas saw to the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of man (1789). Christian (2009) avers that the structure of the American governments owes its fundamental assumptions to Locke; and these include:

The separation of powers, the obligations of government and the rights of

citizens to withdraw support from incompetent or corrupt government, the separation of church and state, religious liberty, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and the right to private property. The Bill of Rights of the American constitution is essentially the list of rights that Locke spent his life fighting for (356).

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Essentially it seems then that democratic system of government holds the ace that creates “system of order” with regards to politics. In a political field other than democracy, anything may be permissible. But this cannot be the case in a democracy because it creates room for equality and freedom, respect for the rule of law, majority rule, and minority rights. Following this truth therefore, we should not expect ultra vires behaviours from those that occupy political office in a democracy because they represent the people in trust and are empowered by them. We cannot also expect political office holders to act contrary to the spirit of democracy as the rules are clear and ought to be followed by all. Unfortunately, the exercise of power in Nigerian democracy leaves much to be desired. Let us now examine this trend.

#### **4. The Exercise of Power by Nigeria’s Political Office Holders**

Right from 1960 – 1961 when Nigeria gained her independence and became a Republic, we can summarize the story of her history as topsy-turvy. Needless to go into the frequent coup’d’ tat that she has witnessed which intermittently truncates her democratic process. But let us begin from 1999 till date because the transition to democracy from that period seems to have been sustained. Looking back at how Nigeria’s democracy has fared from that period gives one the impression that her political office holders have not been democratically impressive. Since this work is not an empirical study that will require taking statistics and building hypothesis, we shall where necessary make reference to some occurrences in her body polity that will enable us to conjecture into the extent of power abuse by Nigeria’s political office holders.

One very common visible attitude about Nigeria’s political office holders is their penchant and attachment to power. This has propelled all kinds of tinkering with the constitution. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo attempted to smuggle in a clause in the constitution that will have given him a third term in office even though somehow it didn’t work. The current Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan openly declared he will serve for one term, but currently his body chemistry depicts that may not be the case again as we see political surrogates and sycophants canvassing for his second term in office. There are strong indications of his desire to continue in office contrary to his initial avowed commitment to a single term. The same observations are true of other political office holders who have either maimed, killed or do some other unthinkable things in a bid to secure their hold on power. They view power as a birth right and most political office holders come to regard themselves as power personified. The Irony here is that the desire to prolong their hold on to power is not commensurate to their achievement in office and almost all political office holders elected or appointed from top to the bottom rung of the ladder bothers themselves so much about power elongation rather than a commitment to good and qualitative governance while in office. This water tight hold onto power may not only be peculiar to Nigeria’s political office holders alone, though it appears their passion for it is unparalleled. Nicholo Machiavelli (1961) once shared the same sentiment albeit controversially when he wrote:

The means justifies the end and that there is no morality in politics. Nothing is evil, everything is good to attain and keep power to one self (p. 36)

Another common feature of Nigeria’s political office holders is embezzlement of public funds and widespread corruption. Democracy as a system of government provides the needed framework for the wellbeing of the people to be taken care of because the people come first. But with respect to Nigeria’s political office holders, the reverse is the case. Here the people come last, and the interest of political office holders comes first. This explains why when in Nigeria one manages to acquire a political office which very often is fraudulently done, in less than six months, that person’s economic status changes automatically in a positive direction because of ill-gotten wealth. This can only be because of outright abuse and recklessness of power that seems to be the norm in the country. The embezzlement is fostered by power drunkenness and the widespread belief that money or wealth is the primary guarantee to a sustained enjoyment of power. As a matter of fact, money is the most important factor in keeping or losing power in Nigeria. Corroborating this view, Okafor in an article edited by Oguejiofor (1998) states in a tone of rage thus:

The object of this paper is to take a look at the operation of law in the Nigeria-political system, a political system whose voice is the voice of democracy but whose hand is the hand of autocracy (p. 74).

Going by Okafor’s submission, one will wonder if there are no agencies to check abuse of power in Nigeria and why there is so much power drunkenness and recklessness. Of course there are the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences

Commission (ICPC), but it seems these agencies are docile in terms of contending with the rot in the system as they ought to.

Though we have had very few prominent political office holders disgraced in and out of office for reasons of embezzlements and financial impropriety like Dimeji Bankole, and Patricia Etteh both former house of representative speakers, but these were mere political smoke screen and only minutely reflects the rot in the system. Bode George (a PDP stalwart) was sent to jail on the grounds of fraud and upon his released, a red carpet reception was held in his honour. Without fear of contradiction, we can assert that it will be extremely difficult to find a political office holder in Nigeria who do not embezzle public funds or engaged in one questionable financial deal or the other.

The quest to acquire power and illegitimate wealth has birth such vices as thuggery and assassinations amongst others. This trend manifest itself the most during electioneering campaigns and the election proper especially when an incumbent is desirous of retaining a particular office in the face of strong opposition. The history of Nigeria's election is replete with a lot of instances of violence and arson that are alleged to have been master minded by politicians and a recent example is the general elections of 2011. In this election, there were reports of thuggery and assassinations that became almost widespread. This trend is not only limited to Nigeria but Africa as a whole as Oburota in Oguejiofor () comments:

Bad governance is Africa's greatest problem. Violence is very much associated with it. Africans suffer everyday in the hands of both (p. 388-389).

In addition, the knack for power has made deceit and false promises indispensable attribute of Nigeria's political office holders with a very insignificant exceptions. Words are cheap it appears to Nigerian politicians as they promise heaven on earth while soliciting for votes (which seldom counts). But as soon as they assume office, it becomes every man for himself. This has led to distrust in the hearts of the electorates and has rubbed off the shine of active participation in democracy because Nigerians are now disillusioned about their rulers, and would-be rulers since it appears they never fulfill their promises. Their motivation for seeking elective office is not to serve humanity in the first place, but to serve their belly.

In view of the above considerations, the abuse of power is inevitable as most Nigerian political office holders do not know the limit of the powers confer on them by the constitution or disregard its provisions with impunity. Occupying a political office does not over rule the place of decency and civility in conduct. They are reckless at driving on the road leading to deliberate breaking of traffic laws and causing pre-mature deaths. They also have a penchant to disregard court orders. Yet a very important application of the rule of the game is the principle that the authority or powers of government should only be expressed in accordance with written, publicly disclosed laws that are established and enforced in accordance with disclosed procedural steps. In Nigerian parlance, it is referred to as 'due process'. To this end, we cannot but agree more with Omoregbe (2008) who contends that:

The law is seen as the limitation on the powers of the King, or of those in authority, and provides for the smooth and just functioning of the society. The principle is a safeguard against both dictatorship and mob rule and therefore it is a safeguard against both authoritarianism and anarchy (p. 29).

The question to be posed here is, are the citizenry really free from authoritarianism and anarchy in the hands of Nigeria's political office holders? The answer is an unequivocal 'no'. This abuse has brought to the fore moral burden that is worth x-raying.

## 5. The Moral burden of abuse of Power in Nigeria's Democracy

The saying "the centre can no longer hold because things have fallen apart" is credited to the renowned novelist Prof. Chinua Achebe and these words are very appropriate to describe what happens when there are flagrant abuses of power by the very custodian of these powers. There will inevitably be a moral breakdown and the weight of the burden will fall back on the masses because they are at the receiving end.

Morality simply put, is the conformity of man's actions with the requirements of what is right. Uduigwomen (2006) defines the moral life simply as:

The life that is conducive to the attainment of peaceful communal co-existence. It is a life of uprightness, probity, honesty, and goodness. It is a life that is devoid of immorality. The moral life is a life that promotes peace, order, oneness, solidarity and single purpose. The moral life is a praise worthy life (p. 138).

Now if we use this standard of morality as a yardstick to judge our political office holders, a lot of them will not pass the test of moral forthrightness. There is no doubt that most of the actions performed by most of these public office holders defile and negate every moral standard of communal co-existence. Thus it follows logically that the abuse of power inevitably creates moral problems. Some of these moral problems translate into outright poverty on the masses, as they suffer denial of basic amenities, lack of proper health care delivery,

unemployment and all kinds of deprivations. This of course shows the interconnectedness of politics with morality. Where a political office holder in exercising his constitutional powers, veered off into behaviours that are immoral, there will be a systemic dysfunction in the body polity. Corruption will be the order of the day and worthwhile values which form the bedrock of every sane civil society will be eroded.

Let us take for instance, our discussion on power above and it is clear that there is none of the issues raised that is not ethical whether embezzlement of public funds or breaking of the law. Now the paradox we are yet to unravel is: are these conducts in consonance with the spirit and letter of democracy? Doubtlessly, such kind of nasty and brutish conducts ought not to be found in a civil society but in a society where law and order have gone on holiday. These goes to show that when we violate certain basic societal norms or break the law by the flagrant abuse of power, it affects the schemata of things and in the process upturn the very foundation on which democracy rests.

This situation raises questions that define to a significant extent the moral burden involve namely: is it right that the people bear the burdens of violation of constitutional provisions or legal/moral demands by political office holders? Is there any justification in expecting or demanding that the citizens be law abiding when the supposed law makers are above the law? How can a system of government bedeviled with such plague be considered democratic? How does the immoral example set by most of these political office holders warrant a moral obligation on the part of the citizenry to obey the laws, follow the constitution and be patriotic to the nation?

There is no gainsaying the fact that the office occupied by political office holders is a trust bestowed on them by the people. There is no doubt also that the immoral actions of the political office holders betray this trust. If the negative behavioural attitude of these persons is to be viewed as indicating new standards, then reciprocity will demand that the citizens also disregard the acceptable norms. The culture of impunity which most of these office holders have introduced becomes enthroned as the moral standard.

Although this response is convenient and appropriate in a sense, yet it does not appear to be the right thing to do. First, by adopting the same culture of impunity and behaving like the political office holders, the citizens deny themselves the moral right and legitimacy to question the activities of these office holders. They forfeit their rights as democratic watchdogs. Secondly, it amounts to fighting evil with evil, and the anarchical society that will eventually metamorphose from such approach is a confirmation that something is fundamental wrong with the approach. Thirdly, the atrocities of this numerical insignificant few becomes a lesser evil and count as good in contrast to the resultant anarchical state. Fourthly, it will amount to a collective agreement to destroy the spirit and essence of democracy. Above all, it is our opinion to think that the obligation of all men to obey the laws and be defenders of what is morally right and democratically acceptable is not obliterated, suspended or nullified by the refusal of an individual or persons to follow the law and do what is right.

Herein lies the moral burden on the society. The burden of defending democratic requirements in Nigerian politics, the burden of saying no to the betrayers of trust and the flagrant abuse of power for selfish reasons. Certainly it is a great burden which can be discharged if the zeal to do so is not compromised. Again, money has always been the instrument for compromise such that when electorates complain about the moral insensitivity of their representatives and turn around to accept Greek gifts by those they complain about, they deny themselves the right to complain and reduced themselves to mere instruments for the accomplishment of some purpose which are done away with soon after the purpose is accomplished.

A popular African proverb says 'when a man's roof leaks, it is not the rain nor the roof that deserves blame, but the house owner who does nothing about it'. It is our opinion that the onus to make democracy work in Nigeria ultimately rest on the people; hence an effective political education is an indispensable tool to achieving these long desired change.

## 6. Conclusion

In concluding this work it is important to reiterate that Nigeria's political office holders do not act according to the rules. Their conduct has dampened the spirit of democracy in its entirety instead of deepening it. This calls for concern because if these trends are not checkmated, and promptly too, it may erode all the worthwhile norms and values that makes for a sane society. It becomes imperative then that the Nigerian state which is seen to be larger than any individual or group of individuals be preserved. Such attempts at the preservation of the state or nation will commence when we acknowledge the fact that despite the apparent progress of democracy, our democracy still elicits a lot of concerns one of which is the consistent abuse of power.

Beyond acknowledgement of these inadequacies, there should be an uncompromising condemnation of all acts that constitute a violation of democratic practice in Nigeria. Such condemnation must not only be verbal but must be backed by the consistent applications of sanctions against erring public officials who are found wanting irrespective of their political personalities and affiliations. Any elections characterized by violence, fraud, manipulation of the electoral process should not only be cancelled, but culprits be made to face the full

wrath of the law without fear or favour. Above all, the masses should be made to understand that the sacrifice they refuse to make today to ensure a viable democratic culture will certainly be made tomorrow at a more exorbitant cost.

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