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Leadership and Government Development Policies in Nigeria Since Independence: Challenges and Prospects in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article on the role of leadership in government development status and policies since independence in Nigeria investigates leadership, governance, and provides an overview of key development policies in Nigeria. The paper conceptualised leadership and national development. The paper uses secondary sources of data collection and was analysed. The Finding shows that the nature of the Nigerian state evolved a predatory political class that was concerned with power struggle, consolidation, alignment and realignment in the context of hegemonic control. The political elite is not a productive class, but relies on the control of state structures to access economic rewards. The paper provided a way forward that the political leaders, governance practitioners in both the public and private sectors and other stakeholders need to rededicate themselves by embracing some core ethical values and norms which are essential to nation building, political stability, progress and development. The paper concluded that in the 21st century, Nigeria faces both daunting challenges and transformative opportunities. The emergence of a more informed citizenry, technological innovation, and global partnerships offers new avenues for inclusive growth.

Keywords: Leadership, government, development, policy, challenges, prospects

Introduction

Governance in Nigeria was conceived to advance development and improve the well-being of its citizens. Effective leadership remains integral to fostering participatory democracy, ensuring the delivery of basic services, and driving socio-economic growth. However, Nigeria's leadership has faced persistent challenges that have limited its developmental potential. Rooted in colonial origins, the state was shaped by foreign bourgeois interests that organised the economy under global capitalist control. As James and Lutz (2019) note, Nigeria's inaugural elections occurred amid ethnic tensions, with major groups vying for political supremacy. After independence in 1960, capitalism was indigenised as local elites joined the global capitalist system, yet economic structures remained skewed to uphold the dominance of external capital.

Emergent post-independence leadership operated within a context of dependency and neo-colonialism. Nigeria's early political class, functioning under the British parliamentary model,

governed through a federal system that allowed regions to pursue locally relevant policies. Leaders such as Awolowo, Bello, and Azikiwe, who were both visionary and charismatic, effectively mobilised public support for policy initiatives (Dele, 2004). Nonetheless, political parties' ethnic and ideological foundations became central to governance and economic management. This configuration, while endowing early leaders with legitimacy and mass mobilisation, also entrenched regionalism and set the stage for later instability.

Nigeria has alternated between military and civilian regimes, with military rule dominating much of its post-independence history until the restoration of democracy in 1999 (Nwobi, 2018). Despite over two decades of uninterrupted civilian governance, the country continues to grapple with a multiplicity of challenges, including colonial legacies, political instability, economic constraints, insecurity, climate change, and rising poverty. According to the World Bank (2024), the proportion of Nigerians living in poverty surged from 40.1% in 2018 to 56% in 2024. The

population of poor Nigerians grew by 14 million within just one year, from 115 million in 2023 to 129 million in 2024, highlighting the depth of the country's socio-economic crisis.

Inflationary pressures have further compounded these challenges, with the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) recording an increase in the inflation rate from 21.91% in 2023 to 34.19% by June 2024 (NBS, 2023; NBS, 2024). Additionally, approximately 133 million Nigerians suffer from multidimensional poverty, facing limited healthcare access, poor educational opportunities, inadequate living standards, and heightened environmental risks (NBS, 2023). These realities, coupled with persistent policy inconsistencies, weak institutions, and elite-driven governance, have significantly undermined Nigeria's development outcomes. Consequently, this study explores Nigeria's development policy landscape, conceptualises leadership variables, and proposes strategic pathways for strengthening policy design and implementation across all tiers of government.

Conceptual Clarifications

Concept of Leadership

The leadership question is fundamentally anchored in the interaction between structural conditions and behavioural dynamics, as well as the dialectical relationship between individuals and institutions. Within the state, leadership roles are performed by actors who formulate, implement and interpret laws that govern and regulate existing social institutions. From a behavioural perspective, leadership analysis focuses on the influence of personality traits, attitudes and value systems on political governance (Dele, 2004).

Leadership may be conceptualised as a process through which an individual consistently exerts greater influence than others in directing group behaviour towards the attainment of collective goals (Anekwe, 2020). In the political sphere, leadership entails decision-making regarding social policies and the allocation of public resources, as exercised by authorised representatives of the state. These conceptualisations suggest that leadership is intrinsically linked to the capacity to allocate scarce resources, a function that ultimately defines the locus of power within a political system. More broadly, leadership involves the ability to influence the behaviour of others within a group or organisation, set collective goals, chart pathways towards their achievement, and establish shared norms that guide group conduct (Anekwe, 2020).

Leadership is also inseparable from the exercise of social power. By exerting significant influence on individual behaviour, organisational productivity, adaptation to work environments and morale, leadership cannot be meaningfully examined in isolation from power relations within society (Nwagboso & Duke, 2012). Omolayo (2006) metaphorically describes leadership as the essential oil that ensures the smooth functioning of the machinery of government, emphasising its decisive role in determining national success or failure. In this regard, Orji and Ekpo (2010) identify key attributes of effective leadership to include transparency, accountability, honesty and diplomacy. Fundamentally, a leader may be understood as an individual who guides a group towards the achievement of clearly defined objectives.

National Development

Fundamentally, National development refers to the ability of a nation to improve the lives of its citizens. Measures of improvement may be material, such as an increase in the gross domestic product, or social, such as literacy rates and availability of healthcare and other social amenities. Governments draw up national development plans and policies based on the perceived needs of their citizens. Many include an emphasis on reducing poverty, affordable and available housing and community development (Chinedo, ud). National development is therefore the ability of a country or countries to improve the social welfare of the people e.g. by providing social amenities like quality education, potable water, electricity, transportation infrastructure, medical care, etc.

Overview of Key Developmental Policies

This section examines Nigeria's development policies, highlighting diverse national plans introduced by successive leaders to promote economic growth.

The First National Development Plan (1962-1968)

The plan was adopted after the attainment of Independence in 1960, the national government of Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa decided to continue with the tradition of having a development plan after the colonial era. The plan was inaugurated with the aim of buttressing economic growth, and truncate the dependence on external ascendancy for the development of the nation. The objectives of the plan are to increase the country's growth domestic product, to achieve sustainable development and employment, to bring the equitable distribution of income, to improve the standard of living, and maintain financial stability. While the cornerstone of the plan focused on human resources, industry, infrastructure, natural resources, balance of payment, agriculture, transportation, electric power, health, and education. The plan quantitative targets are the growth rate, private consumption, government consumption, public sector investment, private investment, savings, and import surplus. The nature of the first plan was impressive and compendious, but the political cataclysm in the country which resulted in a civil war made the plan to become almost redundant.

The Second National Development Plan (1970-1974)

This was launched during the General Yakubu Gowon administration immediately after the end of the civil war. The plan focused on the rudimentary nature and principles of social justice, equity, and peaceful coexistence, in anticipation to have a unified Nigeria with a sense of self-reliance and strong mutual respect. The objectives of the plan are to reconstruct facilities damaged as a result of the civil war, rejuvenate and resettlement of persons displaced by the war, establishment of efficient economic infrastructure, creation effective administration services especially in the new states, Job creation, improvement in rural and urban areas, and increase in gross domestic product. Despite some improvement in transportation, health, communication, and education. The major hitches of the second development plan are lack of will to perform the task, corruption, lack of financial management, and dependency on a mono-cultural oil economy, etc.

Third National Development Plan (1975-1980)

General Murtala Muhammad initiated a comprehensive review of the development plan. Even though his tenure in office was short and later succeeded by General Olusegun Obasanjo. The recapitulation of the third plan was to use the efficient utilization of resources from the oil sector to improve the economy and standard living of the people. The main objectives of the plan are rural electrification, universal free primary education, special agriculture development skills, research and development on livestock and veterinary, urban housing, health services, water supplies, and other social development programs. Despite the fact that there is enough financial robustness to implement the plan, but the commitment and political inclination were almost completely absent. In fact, the administration then was accused of corruption and a lackadaisical attitude towards the implementation of the plan.

The Fourth National Development Plan (1981-1985)

This was the first plan that the civilian government prepared since the intervention of military rule in 1966. The plan was brought by Shehu Shagari's administration with a priority to industry, education, economic infrastructure, manpower development, improvement in real income of average citizens, development of technology, and promotion discipline, attitude to work, and a cleaner environment. The plan was characterized by huge debt servicing as a result of various

loans obtained in the previous years, there was also a rise in import bills and a drastic fall in crude oil export revenue. Eventually, the plan was defective.

The Fifth National Development Plan (1986)

This was proposed during the General Ibrahim Babangida government, and since the fourth national development plan was considered to have performed abysmally, so it becomes necessary to carry meticulous preparation for the fifth national development plan. The objective of the plan was to adjust structural defects in the economy, diversify the economy, revitalize the agricultural sector, promote employment opportunities, improve domestic production of raw-material for local industries, and ameliorate the living standard of the citizens. The fifth national development plan did not materialize in 1986, and the year was taken as one year of economic emergencyperiod and program. It was later incorporated in the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). The two-year SAP brought to an end the five-year planning model in Nigeria. The federal government changed the two-year model to three-year rolling plans.

The Perspective Plan and the Rolling Plan (1990-1998)

This plan was brought to supersede the previous development plans of the country; the idea was proposed when Babangida's administration felt the establishment of 5 years planning model did not actually provide a solution for a deep-rooted problem of the Nigerian economy. The prospective plan will cover a period of 15 - 20 years that will provide an opportunity for a realistic long-term country's problem, and the rolling plan will cover 3 years subject to review every year to ascertain whether the economy is progressing or not. A very idiosyncrasy of the rolling plan was a deliberate attempt to promote employment opportunities, and tackling assorted observable monetary lapses.

The National Economic Directive (1999-2003)

This directive was given when President Obasanjo was elected into office in May 1999. At that time many Nigerians were enraptured with high expectations, as they hope that the democratic government will turn the country into the land of milk and honey. Obasanjo's government introduced a four-year medium-term plan documented as a national economic directive with the aim of building a strong economy. Despite a colossal revenue from the oil boom, the plan failed to achieve most of its articulated objectives such as deregulating the economy, job creation, poverty alleviation, provision of infrastructure, improved healthcare, and education, etc.

National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) (2003-2007)

The efficacy of the Nigerian economy was still below its potential and when the Obasanjo's government was re-elected in 2003, it realized the exigency for comprehensive socio-political, and economic reform of the country since the previous plans did not solve the problems of the Nigerian economy. It was at that juncture the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) was launched, and it appeared to be an ambitious developmental gauge to address the development challenges of the country. The main thrust of NEEDS focused on poverty alleviation, empowering people, wealth creation, improving social service delivery, employment generation, increase economic growth especially in the non-oil sector, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of governance as well as value creation.

Vision 20: 2020 (2007)

This is a transformation policy adopted by the government of Yar'adua as a development planning initiative. The main objectives of the program are to improve the living standard of the citizens and place the country among the top 20 economies in the world by the year 2020. The administration also brought its seven-point agenda which aimed at power and energy, food security, wealth creation, land reforms, transportation, security, and education. Despite some improvements brought by the government of Yar'adua, but due to his illness and demise, the administration was unable to realize it's fully seven-point agenda.

Transformation Agenda (2011-2015)

When the government of Goodluck Jonathan was elected, he did not continue with the seven-point agenda but came up with the transformation agenda. The objectives of the agenda are to reduce poverty, create employment opportunities, encourage agribusiness, promote small and medium enterprises, tackling insecurities, and fighting corruption at all levels of government. The major hurdles of successful transformation agenda comprised of many corruption allegations and insecurity, which are considered to be the main reasons for overthrowing Jonathan's administration in 2015.

The Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (2017-2020)

This was adopted by President Muhammadu Buhari to accelerate development and reinstate growth. When the country entered a recession in 2016 the government developed ERGP to get to grips with factors responsible for the recession. Other objectives of the ERGP include economic transformation, social inclusion, improved human capital, job creation, investing in infrastructure, improving the environment, providing digital-led growth, achieving the utmost welfare for the citizens, ensuring food, and security. With the economic recovery plan, it was projected that by 2020, Nigeria would have made momentous progress towards achieving structural economic change and having a more diversified and inclusive economy. Overall, the plan fails to meet its targeted objectives based on considering the current situation of the Nigerian economy. Even though during the first tenure campaign of Buhari's administration, the president had promised three key point agenda that was tackling the problem of security, fight against corruption, and jobs creation, but those promises were failed to be fulfilled. In fact, there is still an escalation in kidnapping and banditry, widespread hunger and poverty, corruption, and youth unemployment that symbolize the failure of the administration.

The Eight-Point Agenda

President Bola Tinubu is cobbling together a coherent economic plan. The three-year economic revival plan that emerged from his inaugural Federal Executive Council meeting and anchored on an 'Eight-Point Agenda,' is targeted at addressing Nigeria's socioeconomic challenges. Though the plan has not been fleshed out with details, sector-specific targets, and timelines, it suggests that impulsiveness is giving way back to planning, preparation, and consultation. Tinubu told the ministers to deliver the first phase of agenda within three years, reminding them of the prevailing adversity, unemployment, insecurity, and poverty. The highlights of the administration's economic agenda are food security; poverty eradication; growth, job creation; access to capital; inclusion; rule of law; and fighting corruption. It seeks to move away from the frenzied borrowing of the last government, check the unacceptably high jobless rate, achieve economic growth, prosperity for all, and end poverty. The current tax reform bills submitted to the National Assembly that generated a lot of uproar is something that left to be desire.

The Challenges of Leadership in Nigeria

There is no doubt that Nigeria has a leadership crisis. The challenges of leadership in Nigeria are discussed as follows:

The Political Class

The nature of the Nigerian state evolved a predatory political class that was concerned with power struggle, consolidation, alignment and realignment in the context of hegemonic control. The political elite is not a productive class, but rely on the control of state structures to access economic rewards. The over politization of the Nigerian state is also understood in the context of the unmediated struggle for power, influence and patronage. The nature of political contest ensured the emergence of a local governing class without ideological commitment. Rather than pursue political contests within ideological frameworks, politics became a contested terrain for

shallow, self-centered political gains (Dele, 2004). In fact, the Catholic Bishop of Sokoto Diocese Mathew Kukah in his keynote speech at the fourth Amaka Ndoma-Egba memorial lecture, titled: 'Leaders of tomorrow: Creating lasting change in a complex world'. Stressed that Nigerian leaders, both past and present, lack adequate knowledge and preparation to lead a country. He further noted that almost every leader who came to power did so by accident (The Cable Newspaper November 25, 2024).

Corruption

Systemic corruption, characterised by low transparency and accountability, has been identified by the National Planning Commission as a primary cause of development failures in Nigeria (NPC, 2005). This entrenched corruption has far-reaching adverse effects on the country's socio-economic development, impeding growth and leading to the unnecessary complexity of development projects to justify inflated expenditures. Corruption undermines productivity, as inefficiency is rewarded over merit, resulting in frustration and low morale among the populace. When citizens perceive that honest efforts do not yield desirable outcomes, cynicism proliferates, leading to further loss of revenue, economic distortions, and wasted resources. These consequences raise the cost of doing business and diminish service delivery (Udoudo et al., 2022). Moreover, corruption permeates nearly all aspects of Nigerian life, with merit often supplanted by ascription. Administrative inconsistency, contract abandonment, and the influence of political patronage further exacerbate governance challenges (Celestine & Paul, 2022).

Unemployment

It is no longer new that Nigeria's unemployment is on geometric increase, particularly since the return of democracy in 1999, but what seems to be new is its adverse implication manifested in the current state security dilemma in the country. This is because the state of unemployment in the country has not only forced the youths to streets, but also has compelled them to stage war against the state. Consequently, the non-engagement of the multitude of the country's youths in gainful employment has led to dire collateral consequences, including youth bulge, youth restiveness, and other associated social vices and crimes. The prevalence of these existential situations in the country not only undermines development, but speaks ill of the success of democratic governance in Nigeria (Celestine & Paul, 2022). This is evident in the World Bank report that about 115 million Nigerians in 2023 to 129 million in 2024 have become poorer (World Bank, 2024).

Reforms Proposals

The simultaneity between income and poor governance implies that purely economic prescriptions, taken alone, will not succeed either in promoting growth or in improving government performance. proposals to improve governance by concentrating on economic growth, trade openness, and reductions in inequality beg the question of how weak states could accomplish such fundamental changes. Some features of political systems seem to promote honest and effective government: high levels of economic freedom, parliamentary structure, certain types of electoral institutions, and avoidance of private capture of the state and of state capture of the economy. Some of these statistical associations could be translated into particular policy proposals, but most of them are at a level of abstraction that is not easy to operationalize (Arckerman, 2004).

Weak Institutions and Poor Governance

Weak institutions foreshadow political crises, especially in an ethnically diverse society as Nigeria. The identity-superiority contests that characterize Nigeria societies are anathema to democracy. For instance, the recurring contestation and violence between the ethnic groups in Nigeria not only hinders national integration but impedes the country's democratic progress.

More so, in weakly institutionalized societies where powers are concentrated in the executive branch, the leaders are often unrestrained and may seek to overpower other institutions of government in a bid to ensure a continued stay in office or unfettered access to state resources (Tope, 2022).

Conclusion

Since gaining independence in 1960, Nigeria's developmental trajectory has been profoundly shaped by the quality and character of its leadership. From military regimes to democratic administrations, leadership has influenced policy direction, institutional strength, and the pace of socio-economic progress. While visionary leaders have occasionally driven reform and national unity, systemic challenges such as corruption, weak governance structures, and political instability have often undermined development efforts. In this 21st century, Nigeria faces both daunting challenges and transformative opportunities. The emergence of a more informed citizenry, technological innovation, and global partnerships offers new avenues for inclusive growth. However, realizing these prospects depends on cultivating accountable, transparent, and visionary leadership at all levels of government. To move forward, Nigeria must invest in leadership development, strengthen democratic institutions, and foster a culture of integrity and service. Only through such deliberate efforts can leadership become a true catalyst for sustainable development and national renewal.

Way Forward

Since independence, Nigeria has achieved some isolated successes, yet the country remains far from its potential regarding industrial and economic development. Political leaders, governance practitioners, and stakeholders in both public and private sectors must recommit to core ethical values essential for nation-building, stability, and progress. Combating corruption requires promoting social justice, equity, renewed socialisation, and sustained improvements in living conditions, especially for civil and public servants. These approaches, alongside immediate and impartial prosecution of corrupt individuals and timely audits of government agencies, are vital to reducing corruption's prevalence. Prosecutions should be consistent and not discriminate between ordinary citizens and the privileged, while audits must be conducted promptly to ensure accountability and transparency (Boris, 2021).

Fairness and equity in resource distribution, project implementation, and employment opportunities, regardless of ethnic or political backgrounds, are fundamental for national cohesion. Promoting unity and reconciliation among Nigeria's diverse groups is essential for building a stronger nation, which involves addressing historical grievances and encouraging inclusive participation. By bridging societal divides, the country can bolster its institutions and foster sustainable peace and prosperity. Leadership accountability should be modelled at all levels, with transparency in governance processes to build trust and public engagement. Diversifying the economy, particularly by strengthening the agricultural sector and repairing refineries, can help mitigate the effects of subsidy removal and drive economic recovery. Ultimately, responsive and responsible governance at all levels is imperative for Nigeria's progress.

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