



Criticism as a Forerunner of Good Governance: A Philosophical Reflection

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ABSTRACT

Criticism is one form of participation in governance that is mostly frowned at and often routinely ignored by political leaders. This mentality displays it insignificant as it seems not to enhance good governance. The case in point is the Nigerian government. However, the position of this paper is that the touchstone of good governance for any society starts from allowing and listening to criticisms, and in turn learning from them. It is of the view that praises alone are not sufficient to actualize good governance; that criticism is a valuable source of information for decision making; and that dictatorship of governance cannot testify good governance because it does not allow criticisms from the governed. This work therefore, discusses how criticism may be valid in boosting good governance in our society.

Keywords: *Government, criticism, information, dictatorship, good governance, philosophy, leadership, participation, corruption, decision making.*

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INTRODUCTION

It is very common to see that many nations in the world today are divided with different perspectives about the policies undertaken by their governments. In various fields of governance, some criticize the government policies while some support them. In practice, it is so realistic that blind praises and overwhelming support of people do not help much (if any) in maintaining efficient governance. Instead, the steering forces of people's criticisms that keep checks on governance modify it. But the problem with governance today is that those in charge (the leaders) never want to be criticized and even when such occurred, they would not listen learn from it. This ugly trend has posed a big challenge in attesting for good governance in Nigeria and beyond. Experience shows that good governance cannot manifest in any institution or society without the administrator or the leader sharing the other's ordeal, and the inner most feelings of the people. The credibility of governance is centered on some key concepts-public dialogues, listening and learning from critics. When the leader and the led share their experiences especially from the led (including their criticisms) and the leader is able to listen and understand, he will make meaning out of it and implement actions that will be good for the entire society. According to Gumede in his lecture note, "dialogue allows citizens to learn from each other and thus helps society to develop... the quality of dialogue that citizens engage in among themselves and with the agencies of the state, and together form society's values and priorities" [1]. This quality of governance gives the citizens the strength to deliberate directly the matters that affect them. Freedom of expression and discussion are very crucial in stating out the economic and social needs, and which among the needs should be the priority. Good governance prevails only when the greater numbers of people are within the reach of their needs and without which there might be criticism.

Criticism though has its own downside, but it is still one form of participation that sounds so visible. As a matter of fact, this paper submits that criticism is an essential element of good governance "in that it can lead to a review of unpopular decisions and it can influence the tenure of future decisions" [1]. Criticism should be encouraged in all our endeavors more especially when one is in position of any governance. It is a valuable source of information for decision making. Thus, among all elements and features of good governance, criticism is not exceptional. It is one of the motivating factors for good governance.

The Sense of Good Governance

Not quite long (precisely from 1990s onwards), the concept of good governance was globally recognized but different notions about the concept make it difficult to have a unified meaning. Although, there are different meanings of good governance, it is generally associated with economic, political and social ambitions. It is a process whereby citizens are allowed to participate in public affairs and management of public resources within the jurisdiction of the rule of law and the sustainability of human rights. However, the World Bank in 1992 gave the meaning of good governance as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development". For further elaboration, the same World Bank in [2] gave another report (Governance: The World Bank's Experience) stating that:

Good governance is epitomized by predictable, open, and enlightened policymaking (that is transparent processes); a bureaucracy imbued with a professional ethos; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions, and a strong civil society participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law.

The approach of such governance by the World Bank seems so technical but would be great if actualized, as a sound objective of good governance, the smooth running of economic and socio-political activities will enhance social order. This means, in accordance with Sharma, Sadama, & Kaur [3] that:

Good governance establishes the rule of law, enforces contracts and agreement between the individuals. Maintain law and order, guarantees security to the people, economizes on cost and resources protect the government and properly delivers services to the society. It also determines an optimal size of the government and makes best possible use of government resources.

Implementing the good polices as so far analyzed by the institution of governance, will effectively guarantee the citizens to an ideal state. It is a state where the minds of all will aim to achieve a particular goal. Good governance therefore can as well on this note be defined as “legitimate accountable and effective ways of obtaining and using public power and resources in the pursuit of widely accepted social goals” [4]. While Rose-Ackerman [5] is of the view that good governance encompasses “all kinds of institutional structures that promote both good substantive outcomes and public legitimacy”. From all ramifications, it means that the concept of good governance is not partial.

Notwithstanding, the sense of good governance is not all that a straight jacketed chorus of perfect governance as skeptics have begun to query the efficacy of governance work. Some questions are still triggering in search of alternative that will be far better than good governance. Some of the questions are: is good governance necessary? Can governance be improved? Are developing countries ready for good governance? Can a governance agenda be harmful? Besides, it is quite understandable that while nations, civil societies or institutions are emphasizing and clamoring for good governance, corruption does not seem to have receded from growing.

Instead of good governance, Grindle [6] proposes a kind of new paradigm shift towards what is called “good enough governance”. The smallest degree of government performance and civic engagement that is good enough to bring development. Good enough governance is set to have mean “that interventions thought to contribute to the ends of economic and political development need to be questioned, prioritized, and made relevant to the conditions of individual countries” [6]. Grindle’s argument so far remains that the concepts of “good governance” enhances so many “good” things that will be difficult to achieve. The government officials and development practitioners may only engage themselves in trying to “continue to confront long list of things that must be done’ to achieve good governance, with little guidance about how to pick and choose among them as priorities” [6]. Grindle argues further by maintaining that in search of achieving good governance, poor countries may likely be overwhelmed. Also the concept does not indicate how different institutions and the major principles can achieve same goals. And finally, the concept does not provide a proper guide on how major issues of political economy and power relations can be achieved. Similarly, Keefer [7] has earlier pointed out that the problem associated with the concept is that it has broad definitions. The broadness is such an extension of studying the concept of governance and every questions relating to how sets of people govern themselves since this might cover all as aspects of political sciences.

However, the driving force of both “good governance” and good enough governance” is centered on how to capture all societies with the quality of government institutions that has an utmost importance for the well being of its citizen. Nevertheless, focus here is on the concept of good governance. It all started from the ancient time. Good governance has intellectually been on the forefront for achieving an ideal state. Plato in his contribution for good governance postulates that philosopher kings should be in governance. Socrates in addition emphasizes justices, equality and equity as fundamental of ideal state. Socrates as cited in Vyas-Doorgapersad and Aktan [8] states that:

The paradigmatic society which stands behind every historical society is hierarchical, but social classes have a marginal permeability; there are no slaves, no discrimination between men and women. The men and women are both to be taught the same things, so they are both able to be used for the same things.

This is an aspect of good governance. It is quite clear that good governance has long been considered key to actualizing the utmost political, social and economic development, and human well-being. Empirical studies confirm also that good governance has strong positive effects on people as greater number of people experience life satisfaction.

Consequently, good governance has several major properties or features to include: participatory, consistent with the rule of law, transparent, responsive, consensus-oriented, equitable and inclusive, effective and efficient, and accountable

[9 &10]. Nonetheless to state that there are still some critical challenges that surround the properties of good governance issues like corruption and lack of implementation of the above properties by political systems are the core challenges that would destroy good governance.

Accordingly, good governance in any society becomes a process. It cannot automatically be achieved as it has to be planned and managed. Managing governance therefore, involves techniques as political leaders and all those in governance should endeavor to cope with public. Issues and possible criticisms that may come across as that would also cultivate to good governance.

Philosophy, criticism and good governance

There is almost a global yearning for good governance even as there are many obstacles facing the realization of it. Some of the tools and techniques in governance have also put the concept of good governance to the test. And currently because governance has moved from a government of nobility to dictatorship or where the strong rule the weak, to the government by all, where everybody has the right to participate in governance especially in public policy issues, critique in governance is an imperative. In Nigeria and in other parts of the world, criticism is frowned at. It is viewed as hatred on the leaders especially the political officers by seemingly opposition parties. Specifically, in Nigeria, there have been lots of criticisms on government plans and policies. Yet, government in most cases does not allow or tolerate criticisms from the governed. No wonder, in order to silence the citizens from criticisms the Nigerian government recently pronounced hate speech as an act of terrorism capable of destroying not just individuals but the society at large. This prompted a “Hate Speech Bill” in 2019 which was sponsored by Senator Aliyu Sabi Abdullahi. The Bill prescribes stiff penalties for the offences or victims. However, it sounds as if criticism does not make meaning or create any impact on governance. This attracts the questions: why and how can criticism be valid in governance? Is there any way criticism can contribute to good governance? Can political system welcome criticism as part of its good governance philosophy?

Although criticism may be psychologically and effectively recognized, but its political potential is still far from obvious. Participation through criticism (of either constructive criticism, public criticism or confidential criticism) is always taken to be negative as though may be destructive or regressive in governance. It involves a complex reputation as Schemeil [11] observes that such negativity will tantamount the government to suffer from its share of corruption with “its profession of nepotism, clientelism, personalization of power, sycophants, parasites, and foreign speech writers selling their rhetorical skills...”. But then, criticism is considered to be one of the fundamental reactions of citizens especially when they are not satisfied with the decisions and operations of the ruling government. Regardless of the fact that people can complain about everything, including issues beyond their control (like, bad weather), but the most interesting complaints are still those concerned with the well-being of the citizens whether politically, economically or socially. Actually what can be corrected or aimed at achieving good governance remains positive and progressive. According to Gumede [1], “criticisms are one form of participation, and a very visible one at that. ...indeed, criticisms have positive elements in that it can lead to a review of unpopular decisions and it can influence the tenor of future decisions”. It is an essential element of good governance because it keeps governance vibrant and honest by engaging citizens in public discourse and letting government know what the citizens truly think. Any institution with good governance should prefer to govern those who openly share what they think rather than those who keep them in mind. Besides, a leader who always thinks he is right but doesn't get feedback from anyone else can know for sure that what he is doing is not right. Listening and acting on those views will expose precisely what is good and what can be done better. In other words, criticism is a valuable source of information for decision making. Use of information, of course, helps to alter the leader's performance, services, exhibition and event. Though, accepting criticism may be a difficult thing, but it stands as a forerunner of good governance.

In any case, one should not undermine the fact that not all criticisms have the internal focus of achieving good governance (or good result). Experience shows that most at times political oppositions criticize wrongly or destructively. They lay unfounded accusations mainly to tarnish the image of the ruling government. They create platform for critics not for public interest but for selfish interest as political power is a competitive and a zero sum game. This kind of criticism remains skeptical in terms of participation in public policy issues. It is another side of setting back good governance and as such creates confusion between the government and the citizens. The leaders in this case are often insulted as many may believe them. More precisely, Thompson [12] ties the notion of such criticism to scandal:

Scandal (or the threat of scandal) has such significance in the political field because it can destroy (or threaten to destroy) a vital source upon which the power of political representatives depends-namely, their reputation and good name, and the respect accorded to them by other politicians and the public at large. To destroy or damage their reputation is to destroy or damage their credibility, and thereby to weaken or undermine their capacity to persuade or influence the others, to secure a bond of trust and to turn their words into deeds.

This is where criticism has its own downside especially when the power holders are discredited through media accusations against them. “Criticism is very powerful because people assess the government not only on the basis of its actual performance, but also on the basis of its public image” [13]. Reputation as a crucial source of power has a link between the actual governance and the governed as a strong symbolic representation. The effects of this reputation include prestige, honor and the right to be listened to. Brain [14], has it that “reputation inevitably represents a resource for political agents, one that...enables political processes, supports political contestants, and creates political opportunities”. But when the opposition officials (political propagandas) could not succeed from destroying the good governance “then comes the metaphysical idea that reality is malleable and there is no objective standard to prove that the government is wrong” [15].

In the contrary, Dimova [12] argues that the political opposition is a new player on the public criticism map. Therefore, the opposition remains the chief whistle blower and the main mechanism for expressing societal grievances. But it may not all be true as Dimova claims. In many occasions, it is always unclear the cause of their opposition, and the political, social and economic relationship between the ruling government and the opposition party. While wrong criticism of government may still be a hindrance to good governance, Dimova did not consider the possibility of its effect on both the government and the governed. Even though, there might be confusion as in whether it is because the political oppositions are seeking for selfish interest, or because they criticize in order to favor the masses? Yet, since not all political oppositions, but several other types of critics may appear to be related negatively to governance, it is pertinent to conjecture that criticism of all kinds is a harbinger of good governance.

The media which have been the most direct and official channel of accountability and particularly for treatment of governance, pay little attention in receiving public criticism of the government. While the media are officially independent, government still exerts control over the media and thus hinders most of the public opinion especially criticism against government. Fear from the government is that the media can do great harm in its system of operation. But this:

Can also enhance public justice and promote economic and social development. At the most basic level, the press, and free speech in general play a crucial role in communication between citizens themselves and their government. It also has a protective function in a democracy, by giving a voice to the vulnerable, disadvantaged and neglected issues [1].

Dimova [12] in Addendum argues that “media criticism of the government enhances transparency and enables the flow of information”. But most cases, journalists seem to give report from the government’s point of view than public opinion outside the government. Bennett, Regina& Stephen [16] observe that “journalists index the range of viewpoints in the news to the division of power they perceive within various decision-making circles of government”. Journalists are not independent as such to take absolute control of what goes on within the media sector instead, the government (and in particular, the politicians) “dictate the media agenda to the vast literature of the media as an agenda setter” [1]. As government manipulates the major source of public opinion, it becomes difficult for the citizens to make good criticisms. They mostly give room for praises and not criticisms. The media in effect have been customized to limited number of people whereas they media supposed to be maintained as channel of free speech for the general public. These challenges seem to outweigh the fact that criticism has educational merits of sharing information and knowledge. Schultz [17] observes that:

The fourth Estate ideal at its most basic holds that the role of the news media is to act as a conduit of information, ideas and opinion to assist in the good governance of society; to act as a check on the powerful, by reporting, analyzing and criticizing their actions on behalf of the public, which lacks direct access to information or power.

Yet all these are to no avail since the media criticism emerges as a veiled government intervention in political system. It is as if public interest does not exist any longer. The sense of accountability to the public and freedom of speech determine the public environment for good governance.

The conceivable negative impact of criticism lies beneath the government’s authorities as regards their incapacitation of good governance or autocratic rule. Powell and Whitten [18] argue that people living in countries where administrative responsibilities are attached and defined vividly are more likely to assign credit or blame to presidents for economic conditions than those living in places where the governance accountability is vague. Though, many governments around the world take different measures to dissuade and annihilate criticism aimed at them for one reason or the other. Attorney General’s Chambers (2012) argues that criticism may challenge and weaken the authority at governance and constitute a threat to socio-political stability. Dissatisfaction with government may lead to social uprising or political apathy [19, 20]. Lower levels of satisfaction with government are also associated with low political trust and regime support [21, 22]. But

these arguments have neglected all other positives impacts accrued as a result of criticism. All said and done, it is obvious that if there is no criticism, governance will be at lost, and above all, good governance remains a mirage.

CONCLUSION

The study has established that good governance will excel when government authorities welcome criticism as part of their good governance philosophy. Governance itself requires criticism for a number of reasons. A system of free expressions and criticisms protects against false confidence and the inevitable mistakes of the leaders. A leader of good governance is bound to limit his own power, to listen to critics, and to have self-restraint. Thus, criticism offers leaders better insight into public concerns than elections do especially when they listen to public criticism. If the leaders face public criticism, they might have a strong incentive to take action or deal with the problems of the poor and the vulnerable. It enhances transparency and enables the flow of information. Criticism in essence is a forerunner of good governance that helps every field of governance to improve for the well-being of the people and the world at large.

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