

PUBLIC POLICY MASTER CLASS

WITH



The Nexus: Accountability and Good Governance

Whatever happened to the Occupy Nigeria movement and the strikes over the removal of subsidy on petroleum products in January 2012? People gathered, raised their voices, downed their tools and some days later, the labour leaders cut a deal and called the protests off. Those who lost their lives might have done so in vain. Over two years later, the issues remain and no one appears to be asking why? In my article of 15 May 2014, I argue that we are the government and it therefore behooves us as citizens to demand accountability from our leaders. The current administration, under President Goodluck Jonathan, has highlighted good governance as one of the cardinal areas of its Transformation Agenda and since good governance depends solidly on accountability a discussion on the nexus is well timed.

We acknowledge the efforts of the current administration in real sector development, particularly in the promotion of agriculture; the evolution of a robust, dynamic and modern financial services sector; the privatization of power assets for increased efficiency in the sector; the pursuit of industrialization to improve our competitive advantage and the creation of Nigerian Mortgage Refinancing Company to deepen house ownership in the country, amongst many other areas of evident improvement. However, a review of recent events detract from the achievements of government and raise many questions that should be answered for the sake of accountability. Permit a caveat at this point: this piece is not an attempt to bash the government of the day but to highlight areas for improvement using examples that we can all relate to.

How does accountability or the lack thereof affect governance?

The missing crude oil funds saga earlier this year left many wondering about the accountability of our government. Most incredible was that the Central Bank of Nigeria, Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget Office and NNPC could not agree on revenue realized from crude oil sales. This saga also revealed that whilst Nigerians remain under the impression that kerosene is not a subsidized product in this country and continue to pay full price on the commodity, the NNPC claimed to have made payments towards kerosene subsidy of over 8.49 billion US dollars during the period. Furthermore, the fuzzy mathematics of strategic alliance agreements and crude oil swaps which mask quantities and trade terms amidst limited monitoring and audits do very little to engender confidence in the NNPC. Who determines when to remit proceeds to the government and what accounts to credit? What penalty is in place to deter corrupt practices or sanction erring executives? What measures are in place to ensure that the Auditor-General's Office and all other related parties adequately audit the activities of government?

The abduction of an unknown number of school girls from the Chibok community in Borno State on 15th April 2014 begs many unanswered questions. Weeks into the incident, the government was unable to confirm the actual number of girls that were originally taken or had managed to flee their abductors. Today the figures are still conflicting. For almost three weeks, the government did not acknowledge the crises until international media raised the alarm. In contrast to this occurrence in Nigeria, when hurricane Sandy occurred



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in the United States of America, the president joined a top Republican critic within two weeks, to visit the victims. Sadly, the political rally in Kano got our leader's attention the day after the abduction and only 90 days and 11 parent-deaths after the incident, was Malala able to persuade President Jonathan to meet with the parents of these abducted school girls. Whilst there may have been compelling reasons for not visiting Chibok, it is my opinion that the delay in meeting with the people of Chibok took away immensely from the four hours that the President eventually spent at the villa with the families on day 99 of the abduction. Had our governments (state and federal) swung into action immediately, the situation would have been very different. The abductors would not have gone far, the parents would have been comforted, perhaps some of the 11 would have been spared and Nigerians would have had faith that something is being done to rescue the girls. How should our government react in times of crisis? What is the responsibility of government towards its citizens? What strategy do we have in place to deal with current and future insurgency? Why should the voice of foreigners be more persuasive than the voice of the people who elected the government?

The use of public infrastructure for political promotion detracts from its efficacy. The Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) is supposed to provide an unbiased opinion of the news on a daily basis. However, this is scarcely the case as one must watch other news stations such as Channels TV and CNN, as well as read newspapers just to deduce the truth and catch the whole news. Being on the editorial board of a media network myself, I understand that perspectives from various quarters shape the news. However, the NTA is for all Nigerians and not simply the ruling party. The government is made up of various political parties and as such, the views and perspectives of all quarters must

be heard and aired. NTA should not be used as a weapon in the hands of the government to distort facts. The police and the army are also culpable in this misuse of state machinery for personal and political agenda. Upon viewing footage from elections in Ekiti, I wondered how anyone still made it to the polls to vote as the presence of the police and army were grievously overwhelming. The Maiduguri airport was said to have been closed for security reasons, yet the same was reopening by the Federal Government to allow Ali Modu Sheriff to land his private jet for political purposes.

The Nigeria Immigration Service recruitment which left many dead and many more wounded brings into question our love for power. On 15th March 2014, I recall driving past the national stadium in Abuja around 5pm and seeing multitudes dressed in white shorts and shirts. Later on, I learned that these young people were at the national stadium for a recruitment test into the Nigerian Immigration Service. Over 500,000 job-seekers nationwide had paid an application fee of N1,000 each, yet there was no proper process in place at any of the centres for an exercise of this scale. The Federal Ministry of Interior had embarked on a process that did not involve the Nigeria Immigration Service and had, with a consultant, arranged a sham exercise which resulted in over 18 deaths and scores injured. Despite President Goodluck Jonathan's cancellation and refund order, nothing was done. More saddening of all, was that no official was punished. The Minister kept his job, the erring firm was not prosecuted for the lapses and deaths. We have all moved on and almost forgotten this unfortunate incident. Compare this to South Korea where the Prime Minister Chung Hong-won resigned following a ferry disaster that killed an estimated 300 people on 16th April 2014.

At the recently concluded World Cup in Brazil, the Super Eagles were jostling for an appearance fee in addition to match bonus payments and as such boycotted training sessions all together. Their Ghanaian and Cameroonian counterparts also did similar things to catch the attention of their governments over delayed payments. Notably, the teams that behaved in this manner were African. It saddened many to see that rather than doing all in their capacity to win the trophy, the Super Eagles were most concerned about what was in it for each of the players. In his argument, the captain Joseph Yobo said that the government does not fulfill its pledges and the team could therefore not risk their payments. So many things worry me about this. Why have we reduced national pride to monetary exchange? There are many countries where being on the national team is enough pride, and money is hardly mentioned. Why has our government become so untrustworthy that it takes an international disgrace to settle internal disputes?

The five examples discussed above reveal a disregard for measurement and monitoring systems, flagrant abuse of power, a shortage of sanctions for erring officials, a complete departure from empathizing with citizens, an insensitive disposition to the poor and a particularly absent system of accountability – personal and collective. We continually turn a blind eye to corruption, we operate double standards and we simply undervalue human life. High ranking officials celebrate mediocrity – they publish reports to brag about their achievements when quite often these are accidental and most of their work is left undone. Our doctors embark on strikes without due regard for critically ill patients and emergencies, armed with the knowledge that their salaries will be paid – work or strike. The consequences

of limited accountability are evident in our society today: an increasing divide between the rich and poor, a perpetuating cycle of corruption, deepening decadence and the total distrust of government by citizens.

How can we move forward?

Individual accountability

Each one of us must become accountable. We must be good stewards of all our resources and time. We should not cheat each other or our employers. It is by being responsible and accountable that we can demand the same of our government. Let us remember that we are the government and our leaders are a reflection of society. Therefore, until we consciously submit to doing right, living right and becoming accountable, not much will change in society. In addition to personal accountability, we must place a demand on our leaders to be transparent and accountable to the citizens. We must stop negotiating deals with self interest and must think about national good for change to happen.

State accountability

Our government owes us a duty of accountability. Our leaders are stewards who are called to diligently stir the affairs of our land and ensure that the rights and welfare of citizens are protected. Our government must close the loopholes in our system. They must make things transparent, commit to measuring themselves against the expectations of the people and institute punishments for erring officials. The success of our government depends on the willingness of our leaders to do right, become accountable and commit to taking decisions in the best interest of the majority of the people. Our government must institute performance measurement which goes beyond the rhetoric of achievements but involves a comparison against expectations within a set timeframe.

Collective Action

The 'Bring Back Our Girls' campaigners continue to depict the strength of unity. For over 100 days people have gathered daily in Abuja to demand the release of the Chibok girls in captivity and increased action of government towards the rescuing of these girls. It is remarkable that many of the campaigners are neither from Chibok nor from Borno State, yet the pain of one part of the country is being shared by many whom themselves have never been to Chibok. We must unite in fighting what is wrong and demanding accountability. We must never divorce ourselves from the problems in Chibok or other parts of the country. Like these campaigners, we must be concerned for our fellow citizens and stir the government towards doing right.

In the words of Jim Yong Kim, the President of the World Bank "we need to be fighting poverty in areas where the legal framework for combating corrupt and illicit behavior is imperfect and institutions of public accountability may not function well or even exist at all." If I may add to this, we must fight the poverty that is beyond money, one that is in the minds and hearts of the people. We must fight the deficit (poverty) of accountability in order for good governance.

It is therefore important that citizens hold the state and service providers accountable to deliver on their mandates and thus become responsive to the needs of citizens and all beneficiaries.

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