

POLITICS: A CASE FOR CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

This impression focused on the concept of politics and the erroneous views of many practitioners of Christianity who believe that politics in the Nigerian and African perspective is a dirty practice or concept, meant for dirty people. According to this school of thought, politicians engage in obnoxious practices in efforts to succeed. In this regard, the concept of politics, meaning, characteristics, the Nigerian political experience, a determination of who a Christian is, the concept of participation and a justification for Christian participation in politics are considered to re-indoctrinate the erroneous view.

Key words: Politics, Concept, Christian, Constitution and Participation.

INTRODUCTION:

Politics is a concept that enjoys universal application because it is particularly inevitable as a result of the complexity of society. In all areas of life there is one form of politicking or another.

It is however disheartening to note the erroneous outcry about the dirtiness of politics by many Christians in the African continent, particularly in Nigeria. In Nigeria, many Christians believe that politics is not compactable with the tenets of Christianity and any attempt for a Christian to participate in it is an invitation to a sinful lifestyle. This school of thought believes that politics encourages stealing of public funds for personal aggrandizement, which is popularly termed as embezzlement of public funds in Nigeria. It argues also that politicians in the African context engage in several fetish practices like being members of a cabal or secret society to gain popularity. Indeed, several instances abound where human sacrifices have been reportedly made, all in an attempt to gain political power. Again there have been reports of assassination or its attempt on persons considered to be major threat to the success of several politicians- it is often in an effort to outsmart opponents. This, according to this school of thought is contrary to the principles of Christianity which emphasizes meekness, patience, brotherly-love, kindness, self control and living the lifestyle of Christ, among other characteristics.

But this author is of the opinion that regardless of the weaknesses occasioned by the practice of politics by nations of the world, there is no valid justification for Christians not to participate in its process because for a corruption-free society and efficient and effective use of resources for socio-economic and political growth, Christians ought not to shy away from politics. The gains of politics in this perspective cannot be over-emphasized.

In order to ensure clarity in this regard, this discussion will examine the concept of politics, explain some cardinal words and attempt a justification for Christian participation in politics.

The Concept of Politics

There are several concepts that have been developed overtime for specific areas of human endeavour. The popularity of a concept depends to a large extent on its usefulness, relevance and the extent to which it fulfils set goals and objectives. For example, jurisprudence is a concept in law that connotes the principles and procedures in the law. In science, the expression, surgery indicates a branch of medical science that treats diseases and injuries by operation of the human body. Even in Christianity, the Holy Bible contains many concepts that indicate several procedures or circumstances that are condition-precedent to the actualization of the tenets of Christianity; for example, salvation is a sacred concept that represents a life that has been delivered from the influence of sin by the confession and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The list of these concepts is inexhaustible.

Similarly, politics is a unique concept that explains the procedure and activities that ensures the acquisition and maintenance of power and authority. In a narrow sense it relates to processes to the actualization of political power and authority. In a broad sense, it relates both to the processes of actualizing political power and authority and other spheres of life, for example, in religion, business, economy, academics, etc.

The basis or need for this impression is that it is meant to correct the erroneous or fallacious belief of the average Nigerian and African Christian about the concept of politics. In the African setting, people see politics as 'a dirty game meant to be practiced by dirty people'; the need to re-

indoctrinate or properly inform them on the essential need for Christians to actively participate in politics, especially in African nations that have been debilitated by mal-administration is therefore of vital importance.

What is Politics?

Politics is a very simple word in pronunciation but quite complex in practical situations. In ordinary language parlance, politics is the process whereby politicians contest for electoral positions through political parties and are elected for fixed terms in office. This definition or explanation of politics is short-lived because it is not strictly a concept for politicians. It is also not in all politics-situations that the activities of political parties are required. For example, there are instances where members of a voluntary organization vie for positions- this is done on the platform of politics, but it is not particularly partisan. The definition is also short-lived because it is not all-encompassing. It does not take into account the informal aspects of politics as seen in families, peer groups, organizations, etc.

The Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) explains politics as ideas and activities relating to gaining and using power in a country, city, etc. Lasco (2010) examines politics as the art or science of influencing people on a civic or individual level, when there are more than two people involved. He went further to state that the concept is derived from the Greek word *politicos* meaning *of, for, or relating to citizens*. Again, Bijugayu (2009) says that defining a concept like politics is onerous thereby aligning with our earlier position of the cumbersome nature of the concept of politics. He argues however that politics may be seen as the making, preserving and amending of general social rules. To him, this form of definition to a large extent encompasses conflicting definitions of the concept. Be that as it may, the concept concerns the processes and procedures as regards acquisition and maintenance of authority and power.

Characteristics of Politics

In an attempt to disabuse our minds about the wrong impression that 'politics is a dirty game', it is important to know that the concept has specific characteristics. In the words of Bain (2008), there is a distinction between good and bad politics. Bad politics is factionalism, manipulation

and Machiavellianism. It is power-based, using power to get our way, exercising power to overcome the legitimate interests of others without due process or debate. It is the politics we are used to- the politics that has given politics a bad reputation.

Good politics is more important to human nature. It is about collectively discerning the good, finding the right direction for our societies and discovering ways to harmoniously deploy our combined attributes and resources to reach our goals. It is in the context of the good politics that we are of the strong opinion that Christians ought to participate in politics. Good politics in which Christians should participate is based on respect for the weak and the desire for wholeness. It is sanctioned with forthrightness, and truthfulness. It is arguable that good politics is scarce, but it exists. The following are characteristics of politics.

1. Diversity

Politics is diverse in that it involves personalities from all works of life. Diversity according to Bain (2008) is at least in the sense of heterogeneity (i.e., distinguishable difference with any entity) is a necessary precondition for politics. This characteristic of politics makes it a concept for resolution of tension, crises and differences as it is capable of building bridges of tolerance since adherents will learn to reason together. A concept that encourages resolution of differences and manages diversity is competent to host Christians.

2. Pluralism

Pluralism is an idea in politics that recognises strength, hope and success in diversity. It encourages flexibility- stepping aside the 'I' for 'we' or 'us'; this means selflessness which is a strong virtue in Christianity.

3. Pragmatism

The pragmatic nature of politics means that it is practical in concept. It is about the implementation and derivation of solutions. This is also a positive virtue that is Christian-encouraging. Apart from the above characters of politics, it is also dialectic in nature.

The Nigerian Political Experience

Nigeria became a unit in 1914 and recently (2014), elaborate plans were made to celebrate the centenary age of the nation, which prides itself as the most populated nation in Africa. The nation became an independent political unit in 1960 and commenced its political strides as a parliamentary system of governance with a Ceremonial President and a Prime Minister. However, in 1966, the Nigerian military staged a *coup d' etat* which led to the assassination of the Prime Minister and other principal members of his cabinet. Aibe (1985) reports that the coup was influenced by the high level of corruption of politicians at the helm of affairs which prompted the reaction of the military. According to Gayovwi (2009) the advent of the military bastardized the political structure, crippled the economy and induced incivility. Thus, social vices like corruption, election rigging, vandalism, child labour/trafficking, etc are on the increase in the Nigerian political framework.

1. Corruption

Corruption is an epidemic because it is wide spread in the Nigerian polity. Whawo (2008) explained corruption as being debased in character and infected with evil, depraved, perverted and wicked.

Several Commissions like the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices and other related crimes Commission (ICPC) were established to fight the menace of corruption. These Commissions have helped to sanitize the Nigerian political system to an extent. Thus, some personalities elected into positions of authority who thought such privileges were opportunities of looting the public treasury have been exposed, convicted and sentenced and their bank accounts of loots frozen. According to Chonoko (2014) one of such personalities, part of whose loot was traced to his house, has had his loots frozen in the United Kingdom.

2. Election Rigging

Election rigging connotes the manipulation of election results or figures to favour the manipulators. The last general election was beset with several incidences of rigging which led to the nullification of several election results. The Women Consortium of Nigeria (2001) believes that women and children or youths are usually the tools for

rigging. Thus, Gayovwi (2009) advocated for the introduction of civic education in the curriculum of public institutions to ensure a re-orientation of citizen's right from their childhood.

3. Vandalization

Vandalism is a criminal act and all those who engage in it are criminals. It involves wilful or malicious damaging of property, especially public properties. In our neighbourhoods, electricity transformers are vandalised throwing people in darkness. Public classrooms are turned to toilets for defecations. The public drainages are uncleared which often lead to erosion and flooding.

The *Vanguard* (May, 2008) reported that in the past eight years, Nigeria has lost ₦150.5billion to pipeline vandalization and no fewer than 2,550 people have lost their lives. Also, over 12,756 cases of pipeline vandalization have been reported between 2000 and 2007. In the same regard, the *Vanguard* (June 4, 2016) reports that Nigeria is currently losing about \$63. 622 million per barrel equivalent to ₦12. 724 billion per day and ₦381.732 per month.

If we are unaware of all the above stated situations, at least the Jesse fire incident in Ethiope West Local Government of Delta State in Nigeria that claimed many lives is evergreen in our memories (Doifie and Eighemhenrio, 1998).

4. Child Labour/Trafficking

Trafficking means the recruitment and movement of persons, usually children and females, from one destination to another for the purpose of child labour, prostitution and other uncivilized or degrading activities. The *Tell* (May, 2008) opined that Nigeria has 4.7million children of primary school age and 5.3 million of secondary school age group that are currently not in school. This is a reflection of the basterdisation of the Nigerian system by maladministration, particularly the long years of military dictatorship. In furtherance of this, Bokova (2013) of the UNESCO also reported that Nigeria accounts

for a fifth of the world's out-of-school children. About 137million children began primary school in 2011 but at least 34million are likely to drop out before last grade.

A Christian/Christianity

A Christian is an associate of Jesus Christ. The expression means 'little Christ'- that is to say, those who behave or act like Christ did. The behaviour of Christ as recorded, particularly in the synoptic gospels is one of humility, selflessness, sacrifice, not self-seeking, not oppressive, and so on. In short, Philippians 2 explained it all in a concluding summary.

It was the same virtues that were seen in the attitudes of the early Christians that induced the title- Christians, by the people of Antioch where they were first referred to as Christians (see Acts 11: 26).

Becoming a Christian involves accepting Jesus Christ by the confession of sins, oral confession of his lordship, and believing same in one's heart (see Romans 10: 9 and 10). Christianity is a distinguished life style for Christ. It follows therefore that on the platform of Christianity, Factionalists, Manipulators, Machiavellians, and so on are sinners who mutilate the concept of politics.

In my candid opinion, Christians ought to go into politics and influence the aforementioned personalities positively to improve the society.

The Martin Luther led church revolution on October 31, 1517, denominated Christianity from the Roman Catholic Order. Today, pockets of denominations opine that Church (Christians) should not have interaction, associate or participate in politics. It is however interesting that all of these denominations or movements do not reject proceeds from government-scholarship/bursary awards, security, electrical supply, etc. By those actions, are they not

indirectly cooperating with the political government? Worst still, those disregarded in politics are legally empowered to make laws to govern all citizens, including the Christians.

Concept of Participation

Otherwise known as political participation, participation is a principle which is derived from the concept of democracy. Democracy is that concept that is based on the participation of the people and that is why it is famously defined as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. It is a principle that states that sovereignty or the power to make decisions reside with the people and not a cabal or few people. Arnstein (1969) explains political participation as the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.

Fung (2006) suggests that there are three critical questions that must be ascertained in order to determine whether political participation exists in a political framework; thus: who is allowed to participate or represent the people? What is the method of decision-making? And how much authority is granted for participation? What the scholar is saying is that once the answers to the above stated questions are not provided in the context of the total participation of the people, then, there has not been any participation. By implication also, there is no observance of democracy in that system.

Apart from the above stated principle- democracy, the concept of participation is a fundamental rights principle. An example is found in the provision of section 40, 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) which guarantees the right to peaceful assembly and association. Also the provision of section 38 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this also includes the right to belong to any social, religious, economic or academic group and participate freely without any hindrance, in as much as such a group is not sanctioned by the law.

Justification for Christian Participation

1. The Nigerian Constitution

The Constitution is the grundnorm of the entire Nigerian polity. This being the case, it has superior power and force about all laws and institutions. Even in the African continent, several international laws and conventions have been the fulcrum for international policies and operations. For example, legislation like the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights is a brain-child of the defunct Organisation of Africa Unity (OAU), now African Union (AU).

Justice Udo Udoma, JSC (as he then was) in **Nabiu Rabi V. Attorney-General of Kano State (1980) 8-11 SC 130 at 148 & 149** has posited about the Constitution in the following terms:

My lords, in my opinion, it is the duty of this court to bear constantly in mind the fact that the present Constitution has been proclaimed the supreme law of the land: that it is a written and, organic instrument meant to serve not only the present generation, but several generations yet unborn...

It is from the provisions of the Constitution that all other bodies of law are declared consistent. Anybody of law or institution of government that go contrary to the provisions of the Constitution is declared null and void to the extent of its arbitrariness. This same Constitution guarantees the fundamental rights of all Nigerian citizens, including Christians. Every citizen of Nigeria is guaranteed the right to the freedom of peaceful assembly and association in section 40 of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) in as much as the assembly is not one to disrupt public order and it is not for the commission of a crime. Thus every Nigerian citizen who has particular interest in politics is not prevented by law to associate himself with any group. It is the right of all Nigerian Citizens. If a Christian is obedient to constituted authority, then he ought to participate in the activities that are legally and constitutionally available in as much as their tenets do not offend the Christian faith.

2. Civic Responsibility

Civics is an aspect of human knowledge that is concerned with the rights and duties of citizens. This means that being a Nigerian citizen or African from a particular nation in general, implies public or civic responsibilities. These responsibilities are obligations which every citizen owes as allegiance to his nation. The obligation include the voting of all adult citizens who have attained the majority age of 18years and above in the Nigerian circumstance, reporting of crime, care for the environment and our surroundings, and so on. On the other hand, civics also implies the rights of citizens; these include the provision of basic amenities, security, and so on. In short, any citizen who does not obey these provisions is disobedient to constituted authority. Gayovwi (2009) opined that one of the problems of the Nigerian project is deliberate disobedience to constituted authority. This might not, in his view, be unconnected to several failed promises and mal-administration suffered from political office holders in the past decades. Should Christians however be caught in this web? I do not think so. Christians thus, ought to observe regulations like these at all times.

3. Biblical Injunction

The Bible is the guide, basis and standard for all Christians because it is the inspired word of God. There are several provisions in the Bible that show that Christians ought to participate in politics. In the book of Romans 13: 1ff the Bible says:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against God...

If God does not approve of political government which is derived from politics, He will not have allowed the children of Israel to have a King when they requested for one through Prophet Samuel (see 1 Samuel 8 ff). In summary, Christians have no basis not to participate in politics because via biblical injunction, God established political government by allowing it.

4. The Need to make Politics Corruption-Free

Another reason why Christians ought not to shy away from partisan politics is the crucial need to introduce a brand of politics that is corruption free, trusted and proven by the people. Christians with the ethics of Christianity can achieve this purpose if they brace up to the challenge. Again, the involvement of Christians in politics will encourage transparency and lead to the introduction of good virtues that will impact the populace positively.

5. Evolving Exemplary Leadership

Christians are under strict instruction in the Holy Bible to ‘study to show themselves approved, workmen that need not to be ashamed, but rightly dividing the word of truth’ in 2 Timothy 2:15. This scripture entails the honesty, dutifulness and forth-rightness of Christians while studying the Bible and living according to it. In this regard, the involvement of Christians in politics is vital as it will enhance exemplary leadership.

CONCLUSION:

In summary, we tried to explore a definition of important words in this poser and thereafter embarked on a justification on why Christians should participate in politics. If we say politics is a ‘dirty game meant for dirty people’, does it not take a refined mind to correct a decayed one? If Christians shy away from their responsibility as ‘salt’ of the earth as recorded in Matthew 5:13, then they shall have succeeded in deceiving themselves and invariably offending God, who they profess to serve. This certainly should not be the case.

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