**A Reflection on Plato’s Notion of Politics and Nigeria Political Model**

**Abonyi Hyginus Ebuka**

**(hyginussixtus@gmail.com)**

***Abstract***

*Philosophy, right from its inception in antiquity, has always been a source of ideas, and inspiration for the transformation of society. In attempt to solve societal problems, philosophers ask critical questions and suggest rational answers to them just like some fundamental theories postulated by great thinkers in the past had been usefully applied to solve contemporary problems. Hence, using analytic method, this work makes vivid through criticism from the light of Plato’s notion on politic, the reason why Nigeria is where she is and even in worst state of degenerating and decaying in all levels caused by wrong administration of her political system. The people can only live a good life if and only if the state is in good hands; those who hold common good at heart.*

**Keywords**: **democracy, politics, philosopher king, Aristocracy**

1. **Introduction**

Justice being the epicenter of Plato’s political though, made it the first great theoretical examination of Politics and its practices. Plato in search of what is the ultimate truth explores the questions of the best and best practicable forms of government and the proper way to evaluate forms of government such as democracy and oligarchy.  In Plato’s book *Republic,* his notion of politics is at the center of his masterpiece and it is a singular but most fundamental question: What is justice?

For Plato, the question is really simple: How can we build a city on the foundation of justice? This question derives from Plato’s belief that justice is a virtue that appropriates the common good from which all citizens can benefit. Justice in this sense, in both Plato and Solon, translates into fairness which simply means, giving what is due and what is proportionate to those who deserve them by merit.

There is no state that needs the fundamental question of how to achieve the best political model and development than Nigeria. Democracy which operates on the principle of justice and which Abraham Lincoln defines as the government of the people, by the people and for the people, has shown in Nigeria to be the opposite of what we think democracy to be. However, this makes it pertinent to question how good is democratic practice in Nigeria as a system of governance and in other to identify the problem with Nigeria political model, this article reflects on Plato’s notion of Politics and Nigeria Political system.

1. **Plato’s criticism of democracy**

It is generally believed today that democracy, “government of the people by the people and for the people,” is the best and only fully justifiable political system. The distinct features of democracy are freedom, justice and equality. Democracy can be described as the rule of the free people who govern themselves, either directly or through their representatives, in their own interest. Why does Plato not consider democracy the best form of government? In the Republic he criticizes the direct and unchecked democracy of his time precisely because of its leading features.[[1]](#endnote-2)

Firstly, although freedom is for Plato a true value, democracy involves the danger of excessive freedom, of doing as one likes, which leads to anarchy. Secondly, equality, related to the belief that everyone has the right and equal capacity to rule, brings to politics all kinds of power-seeking individuals, motivated by personal gain rather than public good. Democracy is thus highly corruptible. It opens gates to demagogues, potential dictators, and can thus lead to tyranny. Hence, Plato’s main charge against the democracy he knows from the ancient Greek political practice is that it is unstable, leading from anarchy to tyranny, and that it lacks leaders with proper skill and morals.

Democracy depends on chance and must be mixed with competent leadership.[[2]](#endnote-3) If ruling a state is a craft, indeed statecraft, Plato argues, then politics needs expert rulers, and they cannot come to it merely by accident, but must be carefully selected and prepared in the course of extensive training. Making political decisions requires good judgment. Politics needs competence, at least in the form of today’s civil servants. Who then should the experts be and why? Why does Plato in the Republic decide to hand the steering wheel of the state to philosophers?

Plato, through the character of Socrates, gives an analogy related to democracy: he asks us to imagine a ship whose owner surpasses all those on the ship in height and strength, but is slightly deaf; his vision is similarly impaired and his knowledge of navigation is just as bad. He then asks us to imagine the sailors, all of which are arguing about who should have control of the helm while none of them have studied navigation. The sailors don't even know that there is such a thing as the craft of navigation. All the sailors try to convince the owner to give control of the ship over to them, and whoever convinces him becomes the navigator or captain. They manipulate and trick the owner into giving over the helm. The true captain, the one with the knowledge of navigation is seen as a useless stargazer and never becomes the helmsman. The true captain represents a philosopher-king, who knows the forms of justice and goodness.[[3]](#endnote-4)

**Plato’s division of functions in the state**

There are three classes of people within the society corresponding to three elements within the individual. Each kind has its appropriate role to play within the state.

* The Producers: Provide necessities of life and all material and economic needs of the state – goods and services. These include such groups as farmers, shoe makers, carpenters and general labourers. It also includes shopkeepers, importers and bankers.
* Second group, The Guardians: They are concerned with the welfare of society as a whole and protect it from both external and internal enemies. But eventually, those trained to be guardians will be divided into two further groups based on their abilities. They correspond to our police and military personnel, as well as other federal agents and administrators that- support and enforce the policies of the rulers.
* Third group, Philosophers**:** The third and the highest group retain this title of the guardians and its members are ultimate rulers of the state. They are selected group, distinguished by their intelligence and philosophical wisdom. Their job is to establish the policies and laws within society. Since the producers are concerned with material acquisition and physical comfort, they correspond to the appetitive part of the soul the philosophers.

 It is a division of society upon the basis of function; the first class rules, the second protects the state, the third provides for its physical needs. Two features stand out in Plato's conception. First, that leadership is in the hands of the intelligent group, the producing class being allowed the least power of any. Modern society often tends to reverse this order and to establish the business group as dominant, as the one which sets the tone and pulls the strings in politics and in the other spheres of life. Second, there are class-distinctions in Plato's republic, based, be it noted, on the principle of function and not on any hereditary principle.

We have today in Nigeria, the viewpoint that any man may begin in a log-cabin and end up as a governor of a state or the president of the nation; this Plato‟s notion is a conception which we must cherish. Nevertheless, Plato's social philosophy supplies a useful check to whatever temptation there may be to carry our contemporary viewpoint to an extreme. For Plato, every individual has a natural orbit which prescribes the boundaries of his career; today in Nigeria, many an individual is rendered unhappy by continually trying to rise to a more commanding position than the one in which he finds himself and so to rise into a sphere beyond his abilities. An apprentice must become a shop keeper, the shop keeper must become a professional man, and the professional man must become a manufacturer or a political chief.

*Only philosopher king is prepared to guide a nation but we see the irony in Nigeria. Hence the Plato’s stand: Unless either philosophers become kings in their countries or those who are now called kings and rulers come to be sufficiently inspired with a genuine desire for wisdom, unless that is to say, political power and philosophy meet together...there can be no rest from troubles... for states, nor yet, as I believe, for all mankind; nor can this commonwealth which we have imagined ever till then see the light of the day and grow to its full stature.[[4]](#endnote-5)*

**Plato’s Philosopher and the Nigeria Politicians**

For Plato, as for Solon, government exists for the benefit of all citizens and all social classes, and must mediate between potentially conflicting interests. Such a mediating force is exercised in the ideal city of the Republic by the philosopher-rulers. They are the guarantors of the political order that is encapsulated in the norm that regulates just relations of persons and classes within the city and is expressed by the phrase: “doing one’s own work and not meddling with what isn’t one’s own”.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Plato’s philosophers, among whom he includes both men and women, are not those who can usually be found today in departments of philosophy and who are described as the “prisoners who take refuge in a temple”.[[6]](#endnote-7) They have superior theoretical knowledge, including the knowledge of the just, noble, good and advantageous, but are not inferior to others in practical matters as well.[[7]](#endnote-8) Their education is illuminated by the idea of the good, and they reflect on such timeless values as justice, beauty, truth, and moderation.[[8]](#endnote-9) Goodness is not merely a theoretical idea for them, but the ultimate state of their mind.

Nigeria politicians are powerful instincts of acquisition and competition. A great majority of our leaders are sick with the fever of combative possession. They hunger and thirst not after righteousness, nor after honour but after multiplication of endless possessions. Our political and social problem continues as far as individuals consider self interest more than that of the society at large. The carrion cry for good leadership in Nigeria will continue to be a dream unless most of us turn round and place higher premium on the higher status of the society than on individuals.[[9]](#endnote-10)

Any leader who should be qualified to be a good leader is the one who does not have the interest of few so-called important personalities in mind, but the good of the general public. He contributes to social upliftment because the social status of any society grows or declines, depending on the contributions of her citizens to either building up or destroying the social pride. Plato’s wisdom challenges and condemns Nigeria when it insists that men engrossed in the pursuit of money are unfit to rule the state. His entire plan rested on the hope that if guardians rule well and live simply, the economic man will be willing to let them monopolise administration if they let him monopolise luxury.

**The Nigeria Politics**

Rev Fr Emmanuel Ukata describing Nigeria politics in his article “An Evaluation of the Nigerian Oligarchy: Cause, Consequences and Prospect”, recalls Professor M I Onyeocha’s reflection on the political situation of Nigeria where he opined that Nigeria politics is one of acrimony, dissension, division, secularism and political sleight of hand[[10]](#endnote-11). He further says that Nigeria politics has as its permanent feature, the unwholesome and unsavory epilogue of vitiation and vilification for anyone who ever dared to participate in it.[[11]](#endnote-12) The politicians whittle funds or mismanage their noble portfolios, to satisfying their rapacious proclivities, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, as it were, wittily fumed, Democracy just like Plato? “Dem all Crazy; what a crazy demonstration.”[[12]](#endnote-13)

The Nigeria politics which is characterized by Democracy is ruled by cabals who only hold common ideology of holding strongly to political power and advancing the economic interests of the group and the North. Democratic rule has failed in Nigeria just as Plato saw it in a pessimistic sense as the worst form of government. Plato was right when he said that Democracy brings to politics all kinds of power-seeking individuals, motivated by personal gain rather than public good, thus highly corruptible and it opens gates to demagogues, potential dictators, and can thus lead to tyranny.

Democracy in Nigeria has given Nigerians a lot of self-seeking individuals who are only after their self aggrandizement like what Nigeria experience since 2015 about the coming in power of President Mohammed Buhari of All progressive Congress (APC). His administration has become is highly corrupted that it hinders social progress and development in Nigeria. It has led to ethno-religious and communal conflict that have kept Nigeria to its low level in the international political scene and it has also led to insecurity which posses threats to life and man’s freedom and, whatever threatens freedom and life debases man.

**Conclusion**

Nigeria as a country has failed because of the system of government they operate. If Plato’s ideas could be of good help to salvage the present Nigerian political corruption which looks almost intractable. For if our leaders are elected on the bases of education, wisdom rather than wealth, power, ethnicity and our politicians show interest in promoting the benefits of the citizens rather being engrossed in amassing wealth as advocated by Plato for his ideal state, Nigerian political scenario would be better and healthier.

In fact, if Plato’s teaching on governance of state, political participation, harmony, virtue, selfless devotion of the rulers, the fulfillment of assigned duties are put in place in the current Nigerian politics, they can help Nigeria to achieve harmony, political stability, equality, social justice, development and maintenance of our hard-earned democracy.

**Endnotes**

1. Plato, *Republic*, Book VIII, p. 557a-564a. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Plato, *Republic*, Book VIII, p. 501b. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, p. 488. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Plato, *Republic*, Book V, p. 473. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Plato, *Republic*, Book IV, p. 433a-b. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, p. 495a. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, p.484. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, p. 501b. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. Eugene, Anowai. “Plato’s Concept of Democracy and Contemporary Political Scenario in Nigeria”. International Journal of Academic Multidisciplinary Research (IJAMR) ISSN: 2000-006X Vol. 3 Issue 4, April -2019, P. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Cletus, Obasi. “Leadership Issues and The Problem of Security in Nigeria: An appraisal”, Maryland Studies: An International Journal of Philosophy and African Studies, Vol. 16&17, Nov. 2019-2020, P.223 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Paul, Smith. “Crazy Democracy”, in BBC focus on Africa, Vol. 15, no. 2, April-June 2004, p. 2 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)