



Spotlight on the Virtuous Leader in The Light of Plato's Philosophy: An Evaluation of African Leadership

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Abstract: *Poor leadership in Africa is mentioned by many scholars as the main reason for most African countries lagging behind in terms of social, political and economic development. This article provides an overview of how African leaders behave in their role as leaders and the impact of their behavior towards development and success in their respective countries demonstrating that, corruption and other misconduct is a normal way of life to many of the African leaders and that they are not held accountable for their misconduct while it is the citizens who suffer the consequence of the misdeeds of these leaders. This being a serious problem, the author of this article suggests platonic philosophy of leadership as a guiding light for the current and future African leaders as a learning point for that matter. African leaders should change their minds and focus on serving their citizens, promoting justice and truth in their respective countries. By doing this, they are set to become virtuous and wise enough to help the African continent achieve greater heights.*

This article thus evaluates African political leaders, both those who have completed their leadership roles and those who are still in leadership positions. So as to understand the impact of their leadership quality and suggesting ways to improve character of future leaders of Africa. In order to do this, the article employs hermeneutic and analytic methods so as to identify the problem and to interpret the platonic philosophy as a way of solving the problem of poor leadership in Africa.

Key Words: *Virtuous Leader, Plato's Philosophy on Leadership, African Leadership.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1 General Overview of Leadership

The concept of good leader and bad leader is presupposed by a proper understanding of the meaning of a leader. In other words, what is leadership? Different authors provide their understanding of leadership. Most of them relate leadership to the personality in the sense of good character. Others claim leadership to be a process, that is to say, the style a leader adopts to make sense of his or her leadership. Drawing from Weber's and Dahl's concept of power, some authors explain leadership as a concept closer to that of power, thus, power [leadership] is the ability to get someone to do something they wouldn't otherwise do. This approach seems to lock leadership into mobilizing a group or community to achieve a purpose; it can be understood as a result approach [Grint, 2010]. Some define leadership by considering a position of someone with authority; this is understood as a position approach towards the concept of leadership. Given the four approaches to the concept of leadership, namely personality, process, result based, and position based approaches, the author of this work concurs with the personal based approach on the concept of leadership. Therefore, to be a good leader means to have developed a good character built in ones personality in guiding others. Based on this understanding, many leaders in this world especially those in Africa as demonstrated in this article fail to meet such criteria of a good leader [Grint, 2010].

1.2 Plato's views on Leadership

In the republic, Plato focuses his view on leadership through a discussion on civic and political life in the Polis, the Grecian city-state. Apart from focusing on the meaning of justice, Plato believes that 'conflicting interests of different parts of society can be harmonized. The best, rational and righteous, political order, which he proposes, leads to a harmonious unity of society and allows each of its parts to flourish, but not at the expense of others. 'He also develops a framework on the nature of leadership in an ideal state[Cusher,2021]. Plato maintains a virtue-based eudemonistic conception of ethics. That is to say, happiness or well-being is the highest aim of moral thought and conduct, and the



virtues are the requisite skills and dispositions needed to attain good leadership [Cusher, 2021]. The following are the criteria that Plato proposes as a measurement towards a leader who is more virtuous.

1.2.1 Lover of Wisdom

Plato was dissatisfied with rulers who lacked knowledge and moral strength to act according to the common good, in other words; rulers motivated by self-interest were not strong leaders. Plato proposes instead that, states should be governed by philosophers and be lovers of wisdom, “A Philosopher King is a ruler who possesses a love of wisdom, as well as intelligence, reliability, and a willingness to live a simple life.” [Cusher, 2021] Leadership is a duty of Philosopher Kings who acquire the techniques and skills for the art of ruling.

An ideal State, Plato says, ‘can never grow into a reality’ until ‘philosophers become rulers in this world, or until those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers [Cusher, 2021]. Only Philosophers are morally and intellectually suited to govern and lead. This is because from a moral point of view they are interested in and have a passion for truth and learning, while showing no interest in the temptations of gaining power for the sake of power because intellectually they are able to attain knowledge on the ideal forms of virtue, beauty, and the good [Cusher, 2021].

1.2.2 Philosophers as Leaders

Virtue and the good are key to Plato’s view on leadership as an art of ruling. Leaders can attain four cardinal virtues such as Prudence [for wisdom], Justice [for fairness], Temperance [for moderation/restraint] as well as Courage [for fortitude/resilience]. In the Republic, Plato’s description of the five types of leaders offers a new perspective on leadership selection and development using the moral psychology of both virtuous and non-virtuous leaders. The “good” refers to the ultimate goal of attaining knowledge, because actions that are “just” add utility and value for others [Cusher, 2021].

2. BAD LEADERSHIP: THE UNDERLYING FACTORS :

2.1 Lack of Commitment to Service to People

Leadership is about service to people, hence any leader whose ideas and actions [conducts] does not reflect the purpose to serve people is already a bad leader. For example different African leaders who involve themselves in embezzlement of public funds have publicly shown that their purpose is in personal interest and not the society. For example more than eleven million dollars was reported missing from the Gambia’s state following the departure of long-time leader Yahaya Jammeh, who clung to power for nearly two months after losing the presidential election [Coalition, 2019]. Also Sani Abacha the Nigerian leader from 1993 to 1998, who reportedly looted somewhere between one billion to five billion dollars from the country using fake funding requests. In 2014 the United States [US] justice department said it had frozen more than four hundred and fifty million dollars of Abacha’s stolen assets. These reports are the signs of a leader whose mission is not to serve the people but his own interests. Such a high level of stealing public funds is a result of selfishness and self-service by misusing public resources [BBC News, 2017].

2.2 Autocratic tendencies by Leaders

A leader who does not like to be criticized even though he/she is wrong and who does not like to be told the truth, is a leader who has a tendency to hold absolute power. In this kind of leadership, followers fail to be transparent and free to express their ideas of what is happening and what to be done in the governance structures. This leads to a large number of citizens to hate a leader while a leader thinks that citizens obey and love them. Even the educated are afraid to speak their mind because they fear for their lives and the lives of their families will be in danger. For example Idi Amin Dada the former and late President of Uganda with the rank of field marshal, after eight years in power left Uganda a legacy of bloodletting, killing and economic mismanagement. Parliament was dissolved; no elections were held during his presidency, secret Police [in plain clothes] used to walk around to see if the citizens were saying anything bad about him or about his governance. President Idi Amin exercised absolute power of life and death, the Courts and the Press being subjugated to the whims of the executive [Keatley, 2003].

2.3 Rationalizing Poor or Unethical Conduct

This feature is manifested when the leader defends other leaders who do evil deeds under their leadership. He/she may either defend them directly in public or does not take legal measures or stay silent while the leader is clearly guilty of the deeds. In this kind of situation it becomes very difficult for the citizens to participate fully in different social, political and economic activities that bring development to their country. For example in Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni has never taken any legal actions against Lt. Gen Muhoozi, the Special Forces command, of an elite military unit, who is accused of the abduction and torture of Robert Kyagulanyi the opposition Political Party leader during



the election cycle in January 2021. Bruce Afran, a United States [US] based lawyer who drew up the new complaint on behalf of Robert Kyagulanyi stated in his words ‘Our request is for President Yoweri Museveni’s son to be charged. Muhoozi Kainerugaba is the commander of the Special Forces command, the unit that President Museveni himself identified as one of those involved in the abduction and as such is responsible for their actions’. Although President Museveni himself identified the evil deeds of General [Gen] Muhoozi Kainerugaba, he never took any legal nor constitutional action against the deeds of his son. Even after Gen Muhoozi Kainerugaba stepped down from his former position, President Yoweri Museveni went ahead to reappoint him as the new commander of the Special Force Command[BBC News,2017]. All These illustrations and examples show vividly how bad leaders do not care about unethical conduct of those loyal to them.

2.4 Lack of Flexibility

To be flexible means to be active and adoptive with how situations change. In other wards it is a character that helps a leader to accept challenges and adapt to any possible and good solutions, even if proposed by other people, but many African leaders are seen to be very rigid in their governance approach. Lack of flexibility is manifested when the leader will do anything to remain in power[power monger] For example Mobutu Sese Seko the former and late President of Zaire[now the Democratic Republic of Congo[DRC] from 1965 to 1997, ran a murderous regime which brutally suppressed members of the opposition. All these despotic actions were intended to sustain him in power. This state of affairs is a clear manifestation that, President Mobutu Sese seko was not ready to accept to leave power nor was he flexible in his governance approach [Mulunda, 2022].

All these mentioned examples in this part of the article vividly demonstrate poor or unethical conduct of bad leadership especially in Africa.

3. THE GENERAL DYNAMICS OF LEADERSHIP :

3.1 Examples of Bad Leadership From a Global Perspective

To be a leader is not an easy task, this is manifested throughout the history of humanity. Very few leaders in the history of humanity became successful in the sense of being a good leader. Most of the time, leaders have fallen into scandals and other misconduct during the course of their leadership activities. For example in the 20th century leaders like Adolf Hitler, German leader [1889-1945] made a quest for revenge, conquest and ethnic persecution causing the death of over six million Jews and many more in World War II. Hate, racism, xenophobia and megalomania are but a few words that describe Adolf Hitler’s reign [Steenkamp,2020]. Mao Zedong Chinese leader[1893-1976] is another such example of a bad leader, who murdered millions of ‘wealthy ‘peasants, intellectuals and saboteurs in the early 1950s. In 1966 he launched the ‘great proletarian cultural revolution’ in which millions of civilians were persecuted and suffered public humiliation, arbitrary imprisonment, torture etc. Joseph Stalin[1878-1953] from Soviet Union, the Belgian King Leopold 11[1835-1909], Kim 11-sung [1912-1994] from north Korea, Saddam Hussein[1937-2006] from Iraq and Idi Amin Dada[1925-2003] from Uganda, all left a very bad memory in the world. By implication, all these are bad leaders, having failed to be role models of good leadership[Steenkamp,2020].

3.2 Examples of Bad Leadership on the African Continent

3.2.1 Good and Bad leadership: Brief specifics

In his 1957 inaugural address to the newly independent state of Ghana, former and late founding President Kwame Nkrumah claimed that, corruption is a grave vice that hinders millions of African citizens in attaining freedom and justice[Nkrumah,1961:110] the same state of affairs was observed by former and late founding President of Tanzania Julius Kambalage Nyerere, who stated that: ‘Tanzania should add corruption to it’s list of enemies’. The most cited enemies in this regard were poverty, ignorance and disease, adding corruption to the list as a potential greater enemy to the country. According to President Nyerere, any Government cannot bring development to it’s citizens if the same citizens do not trust their Government. Corruption makes citizens loose trust on their leaders resulting in the failure in the fight against poverty, ignorance and disease. [Nyerere, 1966].

A few decades later, after President Nyerere’s statement on the ideals of leadership, bad leadership tendencies of African leaders became the order of the day on the continent, exactly the way both Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere had predicted. Since independence, leaders in most African newly independent states have been exploiting public resources for self-interest. To a great extent, politics of patronage and paternalism have been at the helm of national affairs, together with this, totalitarian tendencies became the defining feature of most leaders in Africa. All these are examples of bad leadership in Africa[Timamy, 2005]



a) Specific Examples of Bad Leadership in Africa

- **Samuel Doe's Corrupt and Brutal Rule in Liberia:**

In Liberia, Samuel Doe won a presidential election in 1985. This election was denounced as fraudulent by observers; as a result he faced opposition. His leadership was often described as corrupt and brutal, full of favoritism to his tribe. Such misconducts led to the emergence of rebellion against President Samuel Doe in late 1989, eventually leading to his capture and assassination in 1990 [Britannica, 2021].

- **Corruption Scandals Under Mwai Kibaki in Kenya:**

In Kenya, The National Rainbow Coalition [NARC] headed by President Mwai Kibaki in the general election of 2002, NARC under Mwai Kibaki defeated the Kenya National Union [KANU] by promising the electorate that, if elected, it would mount an uncompromising clean-up crusade, a policy which became popular and appraised by the electorate. The NARC emphasized that, abuse of public office for private gain would be met by zero-tolerance. Unfortunately, this rhetoric was not true, because just within a year and four months of attaining power, the NARC Government under Mwai Kibaki was accused of having participated in grave corruption scandals involving hundreds of millions of dollars [Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, 2005]. To make matters worse, instead of the Government addressing the serious corruption allegations pointed out by the High Commissioner the Government just became evasive and defensive, denying any responsibility in all these scandals [Timamy, 2005, 9].

- **Runaway Corruption and Mistreatment of Members of the Opposition in Yoweri Museveni's Uganda:**

In Uganda, the incumbent President, Yoweri Museveni the leader of the National Resistance Movement [NRM] in power since 1986 to date for several years banned political parties in the country. However, in 1995 a new constitution was enacted reintroducing multi-party politics in Uganda [Martin, 2013]. The first multiparty general elections took place in 2006 Yoweri Museveni emerging winner. In the last Presidential election held in 2021, the Electoral Commission [EC] announced President Yoweri Museveni as the winner with 58.64% of the votes. During the campaign cycle, Bobi wine who was a strong opponent of President Yoweri Museveni faced a lot of threats and embarrassment [BBC News, 2021]. Under the leadership of Yoweri Museveni, corruption and mistreatment of members of the opposition in Uganda is widespread and seen as one of the greatest obstacles to the country's economic development as well as to the provision of quality public services. Corruption accelerates in Uganda due to the weak law enforcement which fuels a culture of impunity, particularly by high-ranking officials involved in corruption schemes [Martin, 2013].

- **Massive Corrupt Leadership in Nigeria:**

In Nigeria, the state is regarded as corrupt by Nigerian citizens. Leaders in the Government are accused of having misused public resources for their own benefit. Leaders are very rich while the majority of the citizens live in abject poverty. For example Sani Abacha who was a military chief of state from 1993 to 1998 looted the state to the tune of billions of dollars. Olusegun Bosanjo who served as President of Nigeria from 1999 to 2007 became very rich, thus being accused by critics as a corrupt leader [Campbell, 2020]. The same goes for President Buhari, who is also being accused of having failed to combat corruption and Boko Haram attacks as well as incidences of bandits kidnapping for ransom that are on the rise in Nigeria [Nigeria, 2020]. He is also accused by critics of politicizing the anti-corruption fight and the refusal to investigate all these accusations of those loyal to him [Tade, 2021].

- **Corruption Tendencies in Tanzania:**

In the last report updated in 2020 October by ganintegrity.com, it is noted that, corruption is pervasive throughout Tanzanian society, and is a serious problem across all sectors of the country's economy. The most affected sectors are Government procurement, land administration, taxation and customs. Petty corruption in dealing with traffic customs and immigration officers deters investment in the country [Ganintegrity, 2020]. Out of this report, it is seen that, Government leaders play a role in corruption. They are supposed to be accountable for this vice since it is taking place in Government sectors.

The above explanation suggests that, many leaders in Africa are corrupt and have failed to be responsible in avoiding corruption. That has made the vice to increase rapidly in most of the African countries. The effects of corruption are clearly seen in the society, whereby poverty has increased rapidly and failure of economic growth in the society. This situation implies that most African leaders are not virtuous. Thus, the author of this article investigates the problem by using the philosophy of Plato to explain what African leaders can learn from platonic philosophy of leadership. The methods used as earlier mentioned are hermeneutic and analytic methods. With hermeneutic and analytic methods, the author interprets and analyzes the Philosophy of Plato on politics and fronts it as a guiding light for leadership on the African continent as earlier mentioned.



b]. Some of the Celebrated Global and African Leaders

Despite existence of bad leaders, there are some leaders who did well, for example, Nelson Mandela from South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi from India, Martin Luther king Jr. from America, Desmond Tutu from South Africa and Julius Kambarege Nyerere from Tanzania. They left a good legacy behind and memory in the world.

4. RELEVANCE OF THE PLATONIC CONCEPT OF LEADERSHIP TO

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN LEADERS :

The fundamental question to ask ourselves is that, what are some of the implications of Plato's views on leadership to contemporary African leaders?

4.1. The Concept of the Philosopher King

The Philosopher King ought to rule, we can agree that leaders, then and today, must be committed to wisdom and truth seeking. Leaders are individuals who work hard to get to the proverbial bottom of things. They seek evidence and facts to inform their actions and to inform the actions of those around them. This facilitates a basic awareness on their leadership processes [Cusher, 2021]. To be informed is a basic element for a good leader so as to avoid unnecessary errors.

4.2 Valuing Justice

Individuals, who value justice in their interactions with others, while being a just leader, will manage an organization; he or she will be a proponent of just outcomes through an organization's work and mission. The rule of law requires effective laws and institutions but it also requires leadership. That is, courageous acts of independence and integrity, sometimes at a significant personal or professional cost.

4.3. Moderate Approach

Effective leaders are also temperamentally moderate in their approach and show restraint in their actions. They are considerate, yet decisive. Finally, a Platonic-inspired leader seeks to be courageous in his vision and is resilient in the face of uncertainties.

Platonic leaders chart out a way forward while remaining reactive to the challenges that come their way. As Plato said: 'The direction in which education starts, a man will determine his future in life' [Cusher, 2021].

5. CONCLUSION :

Corruption and mistreatment of political oppositions have become intensive in most African states. These two have been demonstrated as among the features of a bad leader. However, the author of this article argues that, platonic philosophy can play as a guide to good leadership. This is due to the way Plato framed the concept of philosopher king as a good leader. Plato's argument is that, a leader ought to be virtuous and wise enough to know right and wrong, good and bad essentially. To be virtuous and wise is not something easy, it is a hard process achieved through training, self-denial and personal commitments in pursuing the truth. Therefore, this is a call to all African leaders and all other leaders in the world, to learn from Plato. African leaders should change their approach and begin to serve their citizens, promote justice and be good examples in terms of good character. If this is done, trust will be built and development advanced in Africa

Further studies and research can be conducted to investigate whether traditional African culture combined with platonic philosophy can help to improve leadership on the entire continent of Africa.

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