

The Ethical and Moral Imperative of Free, Credible and Peaceful Elections: Role of Religious Leaders and Faith Communities

By

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I congratulate the Community Life Project for putting together this Forum to reflect on the imperative of free, credible and peaceful elections, and the critical role religious leaders and faith communities must play in making this happen. I commend the organisers for this initiative and I pray that our discussions here today along with similar initiatives that are ongoing in our country, may indeed contribute towards mobilizing all stakeholders to commit themselves to achieving free, credible, (and especially violence free) general elections in only a couple of weeks from now.

The Ethical and Moral Imperatives of Credible Elections is a very critical topic that is calling for attention in our society today, as indeed many who are engaged in contemporary Nigerian politics do not seem to realize that there are ethical and moral dimensions to political conduct. Many Nigerians today do not seem to realize that almost all political, economic and legal issues that we are confronted with in our society today are also moral and ethical issues that should engage the human conscience. With regard to the conduct of elections in our society for example, many Nigerians who camouflage as religious people, do not seem to realize that the looting of national, state or local government treasury for the purpose of buying party chiefs; the intimidation, killing and maiming of opponents and the destruction of their property; multiple registration and multiple voting; substitution of candidates' names, diversion of electoral materials, selling of voters cards, stashing of and outright stealing of voter boxes, falsification of figures; declaration of false results; and the favouring of one candidate against another by agents of the law; corrupt deals and judicial malpractices at the election tribunals, etc., are not simply electoral offences or an assault on universally accepted democratic principles. Many Nigerian Christians and Muslims do not seem to realise that these are not just electoral malpractices but over and above all they are a violation of the elementary ethical and moral principles of Truth and Justice, Equity and Fairness, Honesty and Integrity, Respect for the Sanctity of Life and the Dignity of every human being, which all our religions profess.

Such violation of moral and ethical principles is known by Christians as ACTS OF SIN AND INIQUITY or DAMNABLE WORKS OF DARKNESS. No one who engages in any of the above electoral offences can lay claim to any measure of religiosity or spirituality. Such unscrupulous persons, who have no qualms of conscience, are truly not religious people. Such unscrupulous politicians, political godfathers, party agents and party thugs, constitute an evil force in the society which all religious authorities must denounce in no equivocal terms, and which agents of the law must expose and sanction appropriately, in accordance with our extant laws, if we are ever to make progress as a people or find peace, security and stability as a nation.

See relevant Scripture passages in the appendix...

On June 15 to 17, 2007, the Protestant Academy in Loccum, Germany, had cause to host a Workshop that brought together stakeholders from Nigeria and Germany to brainstorm on the Nigerian problematic. Under the rather curious theme, "Nigeria: Too Rich for Dignity and the Law?" and coming shortly after the flawed 2007 general elections in Nigeria, the Workshop was an occasion to focus attention on the contradictions of the Nigerian State, and attempt to draw up recommendations on the way forward.

At this Conference held in Loccum, one Heinrich Bergstresser, a German participant who had spent many years researching on Nigeria, observed that Nigerians are an extremely creative and constructive people, but that there is in the country what he called "*a destructive undercurrent*" that accounts for the *fragile balance* which has been the fate of the country since its Independence from the British. What according to this speaker is missing is "some *initial spark* that would turn the fragile balance closer towards the first stage of nation building." Unfortunately, whatever this "initial spark" may be, it has remained elusive, and in my opinion the widespread acrimony and banditry that often attend our national elections, do tend to render the "fragile balance" of our country even more precariously fragile with each succeeding election.

Many of our country men and women continue to approach politics with a killer's torch. Political party primaries at State and Federal levels have often been an exercise in high level brigandage, in which the infrastructures of state are used to intimidate the opposition, and looted resources of state are distributed openly to buy the allegiance of congress delegates, and as could be expected, the results have often gone in favour of the highest bidder. There is widespread lack of truth and justice and a prevailing culture of fraud in the political mechanisms and processes nearly across the board. The cumulative result is an increasingly high number of litigations in our courts, arising principally from party primaries, and a preponderance of anger and frustration among aspirants to political office.

These days political parties are dangerously split into warring factions, poisoning the polity and heightening the tension in the land. And as election approaches there is threat of a major break down in law and order, as many incidents of violence involving loss of precious lives and destruction of property, have already been recorded in different parts of the country. Many in the Nigerian political elite club do prepare for elections as if for war. As part of their preparation for elections, they import shiploads of arms and ammunitions large enough to prosecute a civil war, and they recruit poor and hapless Nigerian youth as foot soldiers, to the consternation of the generality of our people and the international community. For a cross section of professional politicians, elections are indeed a do-or-die affair, and desperation is the name of the game. Is this not what we are witnessing all over the place today?

It is instructive that one of those present with me in Germany in the year 2007, at the Workshop referred to above, was Professor Attahiru Jega, the former Chairman of INEC. In

his paper presentation he described the succession of Nigerian leaders in the following words: *“With very few exceptions, our crop of so-called leaders has essentially been self-serving rulers, some even despots... They lack vision, focus, selflessness and even enlightened self-interest. Most of our so-called leaders are unimaginably corrupt; they are greedy, they are vindictive, they are callous and in many fundamental respects, senseless and even reckless... There is perhaps no other country in the world where power corrupts and absolute power corrupts as absolutely as in Nigeria.”*

Twelve whole years after such a damning moral judgment on the Nigerian political elite, the situation is not much different. We can argue that it is in fact even worse. True, Nigerians of integrity and credibility have little chance in contemporary Nigerian politics, as greedy merchants of power, contract chasers, mediocre functionaries, ethnic irredentists, religious bigots and common criminals, have often taken control of the political machinery and captured the Nigerian state, forcing the men and women of reason and conscience to disengage. Many knowledgeable and principled Nigerians – who in saner climes should assume the responsibility of leadership at all levels - can often not make sense out of the elite madness and corporate death-wish that we witness in our society today, and so they have become cynical, apathetic, despondent and resentful. Our society is today plagued by pathological greed for money and mindless lust for power. Our national security is criminally undermined by high level corruption and crass indiscipline at all levels.

It was St. Augustine, the 4th Century Philosopher and Mystic who declared that *“a State or a government that does not function according to the rules of justice would be nothing but a bunch of thieves or a gang of robbers!”* Such governments are now referred to as “rogue regimes.” A rogue government, an illegitimate government or a government with a stolen mandate can only hasten, rather than reverse our descent into anarchy, for as Proverbs 29:2 says: when the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice, but when the wicked rule, the people groan,” and in verse 18 it says: where there is no vision – where there is no leadership integrity, the people perish.

If the next round of elections turn out to be another exercise in elite brigandage, then as a people we are doomed: In the best case scenario, the level of anger in the land will increase; our courts and tribunals will be flooded with litigations that would render government practically dysfunctional; much more sophisticated weapons may find their way into the hands of thugs and criminally minded people; and the plight of the generality of people will be worse than we have ever seen before. In the worst case scenario, violence will erupt in many flash-points across the country such as to render the country so ungovernable that the ongoing terrorist insurgency in the North East, the herdsmen violence across a number of states, and the incidents of violent attacks during recent party primaries and campaign rallies, etc., may be only a dress rehearsal for an eventual total breakdown of law and order. At this point we can quickly shout “God forbid,” but we recognize the wisdom in the saying that unless a people change their course, they would end up where they are headed.

Free, fair and credible elections are an element of social morality, an ingredient of the rule of law and an imperative of good governance, stability, peace and progress. If therefore the

forthcoming general elections turn out to be another exercise in elite brigandage, then the political elite and their co-conspirators in INEC, in the security agencies, in the BAR and the BENCH, and in the religious communities, must be held responsible for the crime of under-developing the people of Nigeria at this point in history. Failure to execute the remaining stages of our electioneering processes with all civility and justice, and with utmost commitment to peace and the security of lives and property, will result in an increase in the level of anger in the land.

The Nigerian situation is however even at this point not irredeemable. We read in 2 Chronicles 7:14 "If the people who are called by my name, humble themselves, and pray and seek my presence and turn from their wicked ways, I myself will hear from heaven and forgive their sins and restore their land." Nigerians are not a different breed of human beings from citizens elsewhere such as in Singapore or Malaysia, South Africa or Ghana. Many of us do not believe that Nigeria is so difficult to organize and lead unto peaceful co-existence, political stability and economic prosperity. Yet, if this country of over 180 Million people must make any headway, if the progressive decay in the polity must be halted, if the decent into anarchy in Nigeria must be averted, if in the words of Heinrich Bergstresser the fragile balance must be tilted towards the first stage of nation building, then it cannot be business as usual.

If today the Nigerian people – including politicians, INEC officials, judges, lawyers and law enforcement agents, experience the much-needed conversion and toe the line of sanity and integrity, we may yet pull back from the brink of the disaster that stares us in the face. The desired change will come about only when the various stakeholders in the Nigerian project, including religious leaders and faith communities, staunchly reject the ignominious status-quo that throws up for leadership positions men and women of base character and dubious wealth. The desired change will definitely not happen without the agencies of state, whose principal responsibility it is to ensure compliance with the rules of engagement. If these critical sectors do not undergo a major ethical and moral transformation in the discharge of their duties, then as a people we are doomed. If in the course of the forthcoming elections and such future exercises, custodians and agents of the law could be bribed, bought over, rented or arm-twisted by unscrupulous and desperate politicians, to violate the integrity of the electoral process as easily as has been the case in the past, then there is little chance of a better Nigeria emerging soon.

We need a shift in our leadership orientation that will be anchored on a new culture of patriotism and responsibility in governance, and sustained by transparency and accountability, where politicians, public office holders, civil servants, security agents, religious leaders, civil society groups and the members of the public, will engage the political process with the highest ethical and moral standards and the most noble democratic principles. We need a major reform of the various security and law enforcement agencies and the retraining and reorientation of their officers and men, so that they may begin to be more accountable to the generality of the Nigerian people - in whom resides our national sovereignty – rather than continue to see themselves as only accountable to and protective of the interests of the ruling elite at any particular time.

Indeed the generality of Nigerians have an enormous task ahead. Those of us who have had to put up with a succession of punitive overlords in the corridors of power will not arrive at

the Promised Land without some effort on our part. We must wake up from our slumber and reaffirm our belief in the sovereign power of the people. The leadership of religious organisations must resist the temptation to engage in open partisan politics, but instead they must maintain dignified neutrality in their public pronouncements. They must break out of their accustomed reactive disposition; become more proactive, engaging the leadership more constructively, demanding the highest standards of probity and accountability from public officers, helping to build a new culture of service, and nurturing a new character of governance for the Nigerian nation.

We require a paradigm shift. And this paradigm shift must begin with our ensuring the sanctity of the electoral processes and the character and conduct of elections, as no illegitimate government can superintend the moral and ethical revolution that Nigeria today desperately needs. Yes, the redemption of Nigerian society must be anchored on such high ethical and moral standards that should ordinarily be championed, nurtured and inculcated by religious leaders and faith communities, in a country like ours that is often acclaimed as one of the most religious in the world. Nigerians indeed like to see themselves as very religious, and our environment is overwhelmed and awash with outward religious activities – prayer vigils, street crusades, screaming bill-boards, numerous preaching sessions on Radio and TV, and hundreds of thousands going on religious pilgrimages each year.

In recent years, ware houses have been turned to prayer houses, and even government offices, boardrooms and banking halls are easily transformed to sanctuaries for daily devotion. But the scandal of contemporary Nigerian religiosity is that in the Nigerian public square, we can hardly see any dividends from this flourishing religious firmament. The same people who have become prayer merchants, who are constantly engaged in prayer vigils and preaching crusades, do not seem to be able to sanctify their corrupt and degenerate political, economic and social environment. Instead Christians and Muslims are daily implicated in acts of petty and grand corruption, in the contravention of the rule of law, in acts of executive lawlessness, in examination malpractice, in tax evasion, in contract irregularities, in swearing to false affidavits, in the violation of traffic regulations, and in sundry electoral malpractices, including the prosecution of election related violence.

We must all take responsibility for what becomes of our country. Each one of us must undergo a conversion experience, and we religious leaders and faith communities need to wake up and do what we must within our spheres of influence, to help change the people's perception of politics and governance and the processes and procedures for orderly change of government in the modern world. Nigerians need to be taught a fresh new lesson on leadership as service of the people, not some kind of conquest and enslavement of the people. We need a fresh new perception of politics as the noble art of negotiating the stewardship of a society along the ethical and moral parameters of truth, justice, equality, transparency and accountability, not an exercise in high level brigandage.

Religious leaders must play a critical role in this much needed re-orientation of our people. Our Sacred Scriptures have all the ethical and moral codes needed to teach the required lessons and spearhead the desired change of orientation. Nigerians make a lot of noise in the name of religion, but their lives often betray a near-total lack of the sense of the fear of God, the sense of right and wrong, the strong desire for and commitment to the virtuous life

and hatred for sin, commitment to the common good, care and concern for the poor, discipline or self-control, self-sacrifice, chastity, modesty, frugality and the aversion for violence that are traditionally associated with truly religious people. It does not matter whether it is Christianity or Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism, religiosity used to be closely associated with the practice of virtue and the cultivation and promotion of a life of discipline, frugality and sacrifice. It is incredible how in this country we have found a way of practicing and promoting a kind of pop religion that is devoid of the above critical elements of true religiosity. No wonder the widespread rot in the land.

But the ethical and moral teachings of our various religions remain intact as could be found in the Hebrew and Christian Bible, the Muslim Qur'an and *Hadith*, and the Hindu Gita. It is not difficult to see that the practical lives of many so called religious people in this society run contrary to the best teachings of their professed religions. No one doubts for example that the high ethical standards and strict moral teachings of Jesus Christ and his early disciples as contained in the books of the New Testament will bring about a just and peaceful society, if we could only imbibe them and live by them. But to what extent are these high ethical standards and strict moral teachings being adequately taught to adherents today? Perhaps part of the challenge before us is how to first rid our society of the con-men and women, the rogue preachers and murderous fanatics, as well as the elite prostitutes of power, who parade themselves as religious leaders and teachers, proliferating superstition, promoting corruption, spreading hatred and propagating violence, rather than teaching their followers the core values of the religion they profess.

Next, religious leaders and faith communities need to constantly advocate for, and help the various institutions of state put in place new arrangements that would ensure that the paths to public service are not as smooth and attractive as they are now for rogues, thieves and brigands; and that the gains of office are not as rewarding as they are today for men and women of easy virtue who have no business in leadership, but who are simply gunning for the keys of the national, state or local government treasury. The desired change will come about only when the various stakeholders in the Nigerian society, including religious leaders and faith communities, staunchly reject the ignominious status-quo that throws up for leadership positions men and women of base character and dubious wealth.

Time is running out for the Nigerian leaders and people. With the widespread disengagement, bitterness and resentment in the land, and with a violent culture already entrenching itself in several parts of the country, there are ominous signs in the horizon of an impending popular revolt, or what is sometimes called the revenge of the poor. For indeed as presently constituted, the superstructure we have in place in Nigeria is only a pack of cards that will soon come crashing down. But if today the Nigerian people – including Christian and Muslim politicians experience the much-needed conversion and toe the line of sanity and integrity, we may yet pull back from the brink of disaster. There appears to me to be only one way out of the mess of the moment: the way of ethical and moral revolution, which naturally must be spearheaded by religious leaders, for it is better to light a candle than forever curse the darkness!

APPENDIX

Scripture Passages on Ethics in Politics:

Exodus 18:21

Select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—

Exodus 20:16 - You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

Exodus 23:1 - Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.

Exodus 23:7 - Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.

Deuteronomy 16:19-20

Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

Deuteronomy 25:15-16

You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.

Leviticus 19:11 - Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another.

Proverbs 6:16-20

There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

Proverbs 10:9 - The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

Proverbs 11:1,3

The LORD abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight. The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

Proverbs 12:17 - A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies.

Proverbs 16:8 - Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice.

Proverbs 19:1 - Better a poor man whose walk is blameless than a fool whose lips are perverse.

Isaiah 33:15-16

He who walks righteously and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes, who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil-this is the man who will dwell on the heights, whose refuge will be the mountain fortress. His bread will be supplied, and water will not fail him.