

# **NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI'S INDIFFERENCE TO MORALITY AND ITS CATASTROPHIC EFFECTS ON NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY**

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## **Abstract**

Human beings are different from other animals because of their sense of rationality and power of transcendence which enables them to choose the right course of action and to distinguish right actions from wrong actions. Some actions are accepted to be morally right because they can promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. In a real democracy, people elect leaders or rulers who can take moral actions for their own good and make them happy. Morality and moral actions are what keep the society together and can make rational and intelligent agents happy. Any society that does not embrace morality will likely function in anticlockwise direction. Right from antiquity, morality has always been the foundation of politics until the time of Niccolo Machiavelli when he removed morality from politics. This centrifugal movement has created a gigantic vacuum in politics that to fill it needs a centripetal movement to morality. This work is written to debunk Machiavelli's claim that one should carry out mischievous actions in order to grab and retain power especially if one knows that fair means will not lead to firm and expected result. The work establishes that Machiavelli's indifference to morality has wrecked a great havoc to democracy in Nigeria and for democracy to be a viable and productive system of government, Nigerian leaders should grip on morality tenaciously.

**Keywords:** Morality, Democracy, Machiavellianism, Nigeria, etc

## **Introduction**

Human beings abandoned the state of nature because of its lawlessness and immoral nature. In that state, people's rights and liberties were not protected and the life of man according to Thomas Hobbes was solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. To avert this ugly situation, government was formed to protect the lives, liberties and properties of the citizens so that any government that fails to live up to this expectation is to be dissolved. This view was tenaciously held by John Locke, a Political Philosopher. Before this social contract theorist, Plato in the ancient period inculcated morality into politics. He castigated embezzlement of public fund and other corrupt practices and described that as an immoral act. Not only that, but he proposes death sentence to anybody who misappropriates public fund. This shows that government exists for the people and not for its own sake and the beacon of any government is morality. Morality is the foundation upon which any viable and productive government is built. This morality of human actions or the acceptable standard of human behaviour is the subject matter of ethics. Ethics deals with goodness and badness of human actions, what makes an action right or wrong, the standard of moral judgments et cetera. An action is said to be moral if it follows the acceptable standard of good behaviour.

The question now is, should morality be inculcated into politics or should the game of politics be played devoid of morality? Is there any connection between politics and ethics (morality)? The fact remains that politics cannot be discussed without morality for they are interconnected, interrelated, intertwined and inseparable. That is why what is morally unacceptable can never be accepted to be politically right. Political matters like how to organize the society or state politically, how to choose leaders, why the citizens should obey the state, what should be the functions of the state et cetera are moral matters and have moral aspects. These inquiries have to do with the contents of good life since political order, whatever word we may use to describe it, consists of the processes by which men's ideas of what is good are rationally set forth.<sup>1</sup> For Plato, the state exists to satisfy man's physical, biological, material and moral needs. The reason is that no man is self-sufficient while Aristotle states that the state exists for the sake of good life. This shows that there is a moral end to every political action and that is why every action taken by the state or government is followed by the question, is it right or wrong? Some will say that it is right while some will

say that it is wrong to carry out such action. Once right or wrong follows, morality comes in. Philosophers over the years inculcated morality into politics but in the Renaissance, Machiavelli came up with a political theory that is indifferent to morality.

### **Machiavelli's Indifference to Morality**

Machiavelli (1498-1527) was born in Florence in Italy. His political theory is known as Machiavellianism. In his book entitled “*The Prince*”, Machiavelli separated morality from politics. For him, any means that you can use to acquire and retain power is justified<sup>2</sup>. He maintains that any man who wants to act or behave in a good and moral way will experience great sadness. Therefore, any ruler that wants to maintain his rule must be prepared not to be always virtuous. Machiavelli says this because the ruler will discover that there are some things that appear to be virtues of which if he practices them, will ruin him, but there are some things or behaviours that appear devilish or immoral (vices) that will bring him security and prosperity. A prince or ruler for him should not be disturbed when people blame or criticize him for his behavior that causes pain or suffering to others so long as he keeps his subject united and loyal. He advises rulers to be very slow to believe allegations and to take actions. He cautions rulers not to be frightened of things in a way that is not reasonable or necessary, because those who seem to be afraid of their own shadows are weak rulers. For Machiavelli, it is better to be feared than to be loved if you cannot be both<sup>3</sup>. There is a generalization that he makes about men and that generalization is that men are ungrateful, fickle, harsh, deceivers, shun danger and are greedy for profit. He observes that when you treat human beings well, they will be yours and even shed their blood for you, risk their property, their lives and their sons, but the most annoying part of it is that when you are in danger, they will turn away. He says that anyone who makes himself or herself loved by others will always receive an injury or unjust treatment, but anyone who makes himself or herself feared by others will always receive less injury. Machiavelli points out that those rulers that achieve great things are those that know how to give their word lightly, those that know how to trick men with their cunning and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles.<sup>4</sup>

He says that there are two ways of fighting and these include by law or by force. Fighting by law is natural to man, but fighting by force is natural to beast. If the first one proves inadequate, one should have recourse to the second one. So a ruler for him must understand

how to make a nice use of the beast and the man. As he adjures rulers to know how to act like a beast, he also suggests that they must learn from the fox and the lion. The reason he gives is that the lion is defenseless against traps and a fox is defenseless against wolves and because of this, one must be a fox in order to recognize traps and a lion to frighten of wolves. He contends that those who simply act like lions are stupid. So it follows that a prudent ruler cannot and must not honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist<sup>5</sup>. He makes this recommendation because human beings according to him are not good and do not keep their words to you. As a result of that, you need not to keep your word to them and also that one must know how to colour one's actions and to be a great liar and deceiver. The reason he gives is that men are so simple and so much creatures of circumstances, that the deceiver will always find someone ready to be deceived. He states that a ruler should not deviate from what is good if that is possible, but he should know how to do evil if that is necessary.<sup>6</sup>

A ruler says Machiavelli should appear to those seeing and hearing him as a man of compassion, a man of good faith, a man of integrity, a kind and religious man. He is of the view that one should have the last quality because men in general judge by their eyes rather than by their hands. The reason is that everyone is in a position to watch, but only a few are in a position to come in close touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be but few experience what you really are<sup>7</sup>. He adds that any ruler who wants to maintain his rule is often forced not to be good because whenever that class of men on which you believe your continued rule depends is corrupt, whether it be the populace, soldiers or nobles, you have to satisfy it by adopting the same disposition and the good deeds are your enemies<sup>8</sup>.

### **Flaws in Machiavelli's Indifference to Morality**

Politics is essentially applied ethics since its main concern is how to organize society in such a way as to ensure justice for all the members of the society. To talk of removing morality or justice from politics is therefore to talk of doing the impossible. For, once morality is removed from politics, the latter ceases to be politics and turns into the display of naked power and greed, a kind of situation described by Thomas Hobbes as the state of nature<sup>9</sup>. Machiavelli makes a generalization that all men are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers. For making this general statement, Machiavelli commits what the ancient logicians call *a dictosecundum quid ad dictum simpliciter*. That is a material fallacy that is called converse accident or hasty

generalization. To argue, for example, that since Mr. A, B and C are ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, then everybody is ungrateful, fickle, liar and deceiver is to commit the fallacy of converse accident or hasty generalization. Again, Machiavelli believes that human beings by nature are egocentric (self-centered or selfish) but this is spurious and mendacious. For the fact that some people can do something that can benefit others shows that they are still some people who are altruistic. So, that his belief has a flaw. Also, he says that a prince or ruler must have no other object or thought nor acquire skill in anything except war, its organization and its discipline. For him, the art of war is all that is expected of a ruler. This is misleading; he fails to understand that it is not only the art of war that keeps states in peace and order. Being able to provide the basic social amenities, infrastructures, improving the welfare and living standard of the people, protecting their lives and properties et cetera will enable a ruler to win his state. His view that the first way to lose a state is to neglect the art of war is flawed. He forgot how he lost in the battle that he fought at the capture of Pisa in 1509. Why did he not apply such skills to win that battle since he knows the role of being skilled in the art of war in winning a state? He believes that lying, cheating, playing tricks and others can make one to become a ruler or acquire power but this is false. One's knowledge and uprightness can pave way for one to become a ruler or get what one wants. I have seen many people who are leaders or who acquired power not by immoral means but were elected by the people because of their good works. So, Machiavellianism is a deceiving, misleading and confusing political theory.

### **Catastrophic Effects of Machiavelli's Political Theory on Nigerian Democracy**

On 29th May, 1999, Nigeria abandoned military rule for a democratic system of government because we feel that it is capable of remedying the deficiencies in the military government. Military government that we practiced was characterized by humiliation, suppression, unlawful killings, injustice, lawlessness et cetera, but today, Nigeria is in a very heinous state that is worse than that of military rule as a result of strict adherence to Machiavelli's political theory. All the vices that made us to run away from military rule are what we are experiencing now in Nigeria. Majority of the Nigerian politicians today are adherents to Machiavelli's political theory, they believe that any means (whether fair or foul) could be used to grab and retain political power. Some of them have not read "*The Prince*" that is the book where this Machiavellianism is propounded. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a piece of advice to

the Magnificent Lorenzo de Medici with the intention of obtaining favour from him. His political theory was aimed at solving the problems that surrounded Italy and not Nigeria during his own time. Italy then was characterized by political corruption, moral degradation and decay which were different from the ones we are experiencing in today's Nigeria democratic society. Italy then was not practicing democracy and so, Machiavelli was advocating for absolutism.

Majority of the Nigerian politicians today have followed this Machiavelli's erroneous reasoning of separating morality from politics which has many negative effects. The application of this theory has led to the violation of human right to life.<sup>10</sup> The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stipulates that every person has a right to life and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life<sup>11</sup>, save in execution of the sentence of a court in respect of a criminal offence of which he has been found guilty in Nigeri.<sup>12</sup> As a result of the fact that we have no reverence for human life, people are killed anyhow in Nigeria before, during and after election in order to acquire power. The Machiavellian aspirants hire assassins to assassinate their opponents and that is why it is difficult to conduct free, fair, credible and transparent election in Nigeria. Rigging of election and snatching of ballot box is seen here and there during elections because we want to acquire power by all means. To avert this Machiavellian practice, President Muhammadu Buhari gave an order during the 2019 general election that anybody caught snatching ballot box should be shot to death. The freest and fairest election was conducted in Nigeria in 1993 during military rule and we should remember that why we bade bye - bye to military rule is because of its grave defects and irrationalities. Now, we are in a democratic dispensation and since 1999 to 2019, no credible, fair and transparent election has been conducted in Nigeria. The worst is the one conducted in 2023. One can now ask, what is the cause? Is democracy worse than military rule? This could be the reason why Winston Churchill argues that "democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." Democracy is not a bad form of government, what makes democracy to look as if it is a bad system of government is the application of Machiavellian principles to it.

Using any means to achieve what one wants in life is misleading and wrong because Machiavelli himself did not apply this teaching to his practical life experiences. When Machiavelli was appointed secretary and second chancellor to the Florentine Republic, he

organized an infantry force which fought at the capture of Pisa in 1509, but three years later, it was defeated by the Holy League at Prato, the Medici returned to Florence and Machiavelli was excluded from public life. Now, why did he not apply his principles to avoid defeat? Not only that, but he suffered from imprisonment and torture which made him to retire to his farm near San Casciano, where he lived with his wife and six children and gave his time to study and writing. Why did Machiavelli not use lie, deceit, fraud and other evil means to free himself from imprisonment and torture? You can now see that Machiavelli did not practice what he preached.

Also, the application of Machiavellian principle to Nigerian democracy has led to one political party state. Democracy demands that there should be multi-parties; these multi parties are to be rivals during elections in order to make elections competitive and meaningful, but today, anybody who is not a member of the ruling party is incarcerated, unseated or oppressed. Opposition is a very bad thing in Nigeria. Majority of the Nigerian politicians use any means which could be either fair or foul to ensure that no other political party except their own springs up after election. This absence of opposition has made government to be unproductive without focus, mission, target and vision. We were talking about vision 2020 many years ago. Now, 2020 has come and gone and we have nothing to show for it. Most of our leaders do not care about their subjects, but their private interests. They are there to fill their capacious and roomy pockets and not to satisfy the needs of the poor masses. This is shameful and disgraceful. If you see how our Senators, House of Representatives members and other political appointees are spending our money, you will shed tears and pray the rosary for Nigeria. They say that there is recession, but the recession does not affect the luxurious lives and spending of our leaders, it is only affecting the lives of the less privileged and destitute. The Machiavellians that we have as our leaders play god, they do not fear God let alone the citizens that they are falsely representing. Give them money for constituency projects and they will use it for their personal projects and that is why our roads are death traps, our hospitals are poorly equipped, our schools lack basic and essential equipments and manpower and graduates are roaming on the streets like sheep without a shepherd. No plan for the youth, no plan to reduce unemployment and no plan to improve the standard of living of the poor masses. That is why Omoregbe states that any government made up of dishonest and fraudulent people whose main purpose of coming to government is

to enrich themselves is not a government but a gang of thieves and treasury looters. In other words, once morality is taken away from government we do not have a government any more. We have a gang of criminals or a gang of thieves with the key to the national treasury in their hands.<sup>13</sup> Nigeria is the only country where snakes swallow money. That is why terrorism will hardly go out of this country because we are taking what we should do for granted. Machiavellianism has reduced democracy in Nigeria to advanced form of despotism or autocracy. Various shades of vices ranging from indiscipline, tribalism, licentiousness, ethno-religious violence, armed robbery, thuggery, ritual-killing, hired-assassination, abortion, bribery and corruption, embezzlement of public funds, sycophancy, selfishness, avarice, sabotage, oppression, fraud, apathy to work, and so on have become regular features in our national life. Most of these vices have been institutionalized by both the ordinary citizen and those in the corridor of power.<sup>14</sup> We are practicing a mere shadow or carbon copy of democracy. Until Nigeria solves her problem, there can never be progress, development and success.

## **Conclusion**

Every explanation, formulation, theory or treatise by any scholar is influenced by that person's intellectual background, age or time that the person was born, his experience in life, education or the school of thought that he belongs. That is why every political thinker is said to be the product of his age. It is not every political theory that was formulated either in the ancient period, medieval period or modern period that can work in the contemporary period. Things are changing every day and new problems are emerging. The problems that people faced in the past were different from the problems that people are facing today. The methods used in solving the problems then may not work if the same methods are used today. Machiavelli wrote when absolute monarchy was in practice, but today, the system of government that we practice is democracy. Machiavelli's book "*The Prince*" teaches effective tactics for the absolute ruler. Since Nigeria is not practicing absolutism, but democracy, we should embrace democratic principles like human rights, liberty, justice, equality, rule of law et cetera. It is only by bringing morality into politics that tremendous positive changes will start taking place in Nigeria. It is only morality that will make our leaders to have reverence for human life and know very well that human life is sacred and should not be exchanged for money. It will also make our leaders to protect people's



properties and avoid coveting them. Morality when restored to politics will make leaders to treat their subjects as ends and not as a means to an end, it will make them to know that they are there for the people and not for their own sake. This will make them to be altruistic in their political activities instead of being egocentric which is the root cause of immorality.

## Endnotes.

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<sup>1</sup> Irele Dipo, *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, (Ibadan: Penguin Books, 1998), 2

<sup>2</sup> Machiavelli Niccolo. *The Prince*. (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 3

<sup>3</sup> Machiavelli Niccolo. *The Prince*, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Machiavelli Niccolo. *The Prince*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli Niccolo. *The Prince*, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Machiavelli Niccolo. *The Prince*, 57-58.

<sup>7</sup> Machiavelli Niccolo. *The Prince*, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Machiavelli Niccolo. *The Prince*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Omoregbe, *Social Political Philosophy and International Relations*. (Lagos: Jojah Educational Research and Publishers Limited, 2007), 131.

1. <sup>10</sup> Kasali Monsuru Adegboyega, "Analyzing the Evolution of Private Security Guards and their Limitations to Security Management in Nigeria" *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies (AJCJS)*, Vol.5, NO.1 &2, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, "1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria" (Chapter IV, Section 33, Subsection 1).

<sup>12</sup> Federal Government of Nigeria, "1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria" (Chapter IV, Section 34).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Omoregbe, *Social Political Philosophy and International Relations*, 131.

<sup>14</sup> Ezedike, E.U. "Socio-Ethical Problems in Nigeria: The Way Out", in Andrew F. Uduigwome (ed.), *Introducing Ethics, Trends, Problems, Perspectives*. (Calabar: Campus Life Books, 2001), 191.