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Ethics in politics



Chibueze Clinton

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In certain circles and institutions, ethics in politics, serves as a classic example of an oxymoron. More clearly, it is referred to as a dirty game. This perception is, of course, the consequence of a universal and perennial unethical approach employed in administering the affairs of a state.

Nevertheless, an analysis of the circumstances surrounding the emergence of politics reveals that politics itself sprung from ethical reasons, at least in respect to social and economic interaction of members of a community or country.

And according to Hobbes, it is the only way to guarantee man's peace and security. Therefore, politics, by itself, is ethical. It has to be to manage the affairs of a country justly, which is actually its chief reason of being.

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So, when ethics and politics become contradictory or when politics is regarded as dirty, it simply means that a political system has lost its way; never even knew its way from the beginning; or its way was never intended to be ethical.

Generally, ethics in politics is the practice of making moral judgments about political actions, and the study of that practice. The latter suggests that it is not enough to be good or intend to do good, but that one must be taught how to do good.

In this case, make moral judgments about political actions as they affect every aspect of citizens' life. These actions include judgments on human rights, financial mechanisms, security threats, environmental challenges, migration, ethnic tensions, consumption, energy and others.

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And as have been experienced in several countries, for instance, Nigeria, these issues require leaders—and institutions—with strong ethical disposition before they can be effectively addressed otherwise one experiences widescale human rights abuse, financial embezzlement, neglect of the environment, ethnic tensions et cetera to the point of a near complete breakdown of law and order.

Thus, on the objective level, political ethics has to do with political leaders—presidents, governors, senators, ministers and so on—and the political system within which these leaders operate.

The Nigerian and indeed, African phenomenon, clearly shows us daily that political leaders without values hardly lead responsibly and hence, fail to take responsibility for their decisions and the consequences of these decisions because of the failure or inability to consider the full consequences of these decisions and how to manage the unforeseen.

It goes beyond vision, intention and motivation to having a political system with processes, tools, principles and methods that guide political leaders to make and implement decisions.

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For as they say, “the devil is in the details.” In this regard, political ethics scholars recommend training for political leaders, establishment of frameworks for implementation, investigation and incentive and others.

On the subjective level, political ethics extends also to citizens and their involvement with the political activities in their communities and countries.

Vox populi, vox Dei resonates the importance of citizen’s involvement and large consultative processes aimed to achieve sound political choices.

As such, political socialization becomes very essential for the cultivation of citizens’ character and correct political disposition. The home, school and religious centres are the major places where political socialisation happens which implies that those who lead these places have it as a responsibility to teach and persuade their members to participate in the political affairs of their communities and countries.

These include voting when they ought to and joining citizens’ associations and political parties. It is when citizens participate in politics actively and with the right values that their voices can become the voice of God.

Increased demands by citizens for an ethical government in Nigerian and other sub-Saharan African countries coupled with the attempts of these governments to position themselves as justly serving the people demonstrates the role and necessity of political ethics.

It also shows that both political leaders and citizens recognise the importance of having an ethical political system. But as one cannot be successfully ethical without the other, political ethics is not only the business of political leaders but also the citizens with formal ethical structures put in place to help both go beyond just intending to be ethical or acting ethically to how to be and act ethically.

Clinton is a research assistant at Lagos Business School and volunteer at Christopher Kolade Centre for Research in Leadership & Ethics

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