

Public Interest, Individual Liberty and the Quest for Democracy in Africa

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Abstract

Africa today is enmeshed in a deep developmental crisis arising not only from economic stagnation, which has made nonsense of the traditional laws of demand, supply and production, but also from the crisis of social order which is rooted in the absence of a stable political order. Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Zimbabwe and Sao-tome & Principe are recent examples of countries in Africa where political turmoil and anarchy have held sway. There is an overwhelming unanimity however that political stability must be guaranteed if there is to be development, a meaningful one indeed, in Africa. In this paper therefore we examine how we can sustain democratic values in many African states which are being forced to experience the whirl wind of democracy blowing across continents.

The Major contention in this paper is that for democracy to work in Africa there must be an alignment of public good and private interests. African societies have failed because leaders and followers alike, especially the former, have been unable to subordinate their injurious private liberty either in form of interests or values to that of the community at large.

It is the case that public good is often hampered by private interest, a situation which has made it possible for many African leaders to be richer than their countries and also made them willing to plunge their countries into war, if it would only help them to retain power for their selfish ends. We suggest reasons why leaders and followers might actually feel motivated to serve the common good in specific cases even when doing so may seem, on the balance, to diminish their own self-interests.

We conclude that for the sustenance of democracy in Africa, the state must be seen to pursue public good on the one hand, and on the other hand, the citizens, no matter their status, must be ready to jettison private interests that will be injurious to the public good since it is when the community flourishes that the individual can sustain his own good and interests. Given this presupposition it would be seen that public and private interests are compatible since they all aim at human well-being.

Keywords: Public; private; interests; good; democracy governance.

Introduction

The concern of this paper is how we can achieve our quest for democracy and good governance in African states that are now, more than ever before, enmeshed in the democratic current. This, we argue, is possible if it is recognised that Public interest, sometimes construed as public good, accommodates individual liberty and vice versa. But more fundamentally, the individual must be ready to align his interest with the public interest since it is when the state flourishes that the individual can sustain his own good and interest.

Conceptual Analysis of Public Interest and Liberty

Public Interest otherwise construed as public good is central to governance and tends to be related to communal value because it transcends private interests and tends to protect and promote individual's welfare. It is widely accepted that the concept of public interest is commonly employed to justify the action or policy of the state. For instance, certain policies of the state are defended by those in leadership on the ground of their contribution to the promotion of public interest. From this perspective many scholars see public interest as the standard for judging public policy (Gbadegesin, 1985:115). The concept of public interest, in spite of the social controversies it has generated(Adeigbo, 1994: 114), has often been equated with common good.

Let us start by considering reasons why the notion of public interest is identified with the common good and why it is also not socially incontestable. According to Adeigbo, the concept of 'X' being in the public interest is not really different or distinct from the concept of 'X' being for the common good because the two concepts are synonyms of one another, although public interest is the more common locution(Adeigbo, 1994: 114). Further, we must note that the notion of public interest issued in the context of authority – claims(Adeigbo, 1994: 114) to urge, persuade, exhort and constantly remind those who occupy positions of authority that they are there to look after the public interest or the interest of the people generally in the formulation and executions of their policies. Let us note at this juncture that polemics bordering on public interest and personal liberty may sometimes be seen to fall within the debate on communitarianism and liberalism. However, we are not keen on opening up this debate here since our modest task is to see how the two main dimensions of interest can be aligned in such a way that they will enhance our quest for community in Africa.

Public interest whether taken to be public good or common good serves two major purposes. One, it helps to legitimize the action of the government by giving the impression, correctly or incorrectly, that government policies are tailored towards meeting the overall interest of the people. Two, the notion of public interest also helps to check, control and direct government actions towards the directions that could satisfy the people's interest. In other words, the government would always want to remain popular, hence, it would embark on policies and

programmes that would meet the interest of its citizens. In order to gain the support of the citizens every government, whatever its form – monarchy, democracy, totalitarianism and military rule – would always want to be seen as pursuing policies that promote the public interest.

There are some problems of course with the notion of public interest especially with regard to the meaning involved in the use of the concept. Such problems are: what is public interest? Is it self-evident and easily definable?, would a general tax relief or the payment of unemployment benefits, be in the public interest?, would the issuance of identity card to Nigerian citizens for instance be in the public interest? Does the public interest consist of the sum (or product) of interests which discrete members $P_1, P_2, P_3 \dots P_n$, have and share? So that if P_1 's interest is 'X', P_2 's interest is 'Y' and P_3 's interest is 'Z', and so on, the public interest would be the lowest common factor of X, Y and Z, on the least common multiple number between their individual interests? (Adeigbo, 1994: 115). Some skeptics have raised the problem that there might be a public interest, but we cannot know it. (Gbadegesin, 1985:115)

We are not concerned to provide answer to these questions. Rather, we want to show that public interest is a good that is worth pursuing. Brian Barry's definition of public interest as "those interests, which people have in common"(Barry, 1970) can serve as the basis for our exploration into the importance of public interest. Although Barry's definition has been criticized mainly on the ground that no interest is universally held by all members of a community, one can still agree with the fact that what individuals collectively take interest in, a social value which is irreducible to private values, if there is any such thing, will constitute public interest(Gbadegesin, 1985:122). Indeed, there are such values that are irreducible to private values, for example, the pursuit of security and peace in the community.

Even though it may be difficult to determine who the public is because of its shifting nature in terms of membership, the community can still be aptly referred to as the public. The reason is that a policy is not made in isolation and it is the community that has interest in a policy. Therefore, for the purpose of the analysis of public interest we are always having the community in mind. And because of its shifting nature, it always has what we call I assignable individuals. By unassignable individuals we mean members of the public that are affected by the policy of the state. This is perhaps why policies that are claimed to be in the public interest are not just chosen arbitrarily. Moreover if particular policies are considered along with the particular wants they are expected to contribute towards satisfying, then there are a variety of policies that could be claimed to be in the public interest through the idea of shared interests of unassignable individuals(Gbadegesin, 1985:126).

In spite of the controversies surrounding the notion of public interest and its different interpretations, we can say that at the level of theory the notion of public interest or common good

has as its central aim the good of all or most of the members of the community to which the individual must subordinate his private interests. Having said all this, let us examine the scope of individual freedom or liberty since it is required for the individual to curtail some of his liberty or interest in the pursuit of the public good within the sphere of governance.

Freedom or liberty at the social and political level dates back to some centuries ago. In Western societies such as France, Britain and America it was fought for and won through popular uprisings and revolutions. It is traditionally seen as a way of guaranteeing the exercise of certain rights for the individual. While the agitation for social and political freedom is pronounced in some societies, it is less pronounced in others, particularly African societies due mainly to the fusion of religious, moral and political values. Freedom or liberty (the latter being popularly used in social and political contexts) means that our action or desire is not constrained or impeded. However, in social and political context freedom means the absence of coercion (Irele, 1991: 70). This implies that there is absence of interference in the activities of an individual by other humans. In other words, there is lack of conscious interference from others which can include state authority.

J.S. Mill in his classic essay *On Liberty* (1859) concerns himself mainly with civil or social liberty. He tries to determine the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. He construes liberty simply as "protection against the tyranny of political rulers". (Mill, 1956: 3). What is of interest to us however is the extent to which the society can interfere with the liberty of the individual.

According to Mill, the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against the will of the individual, is when the action of the individual would harm others. From this standpoint Mill suggests that society is not even justified to restrict individual's freedom on occasions where the moral or physical good of the individual is endangered by the individual himself. His position thus rules out paternalism because he believes that the individual has absolute right over himself. In short, the individual is sovereign.

In recognition of the sovereignty of the individual, Mill believes that in any society opinion should not be sacrificed and silenced to the advantage of the majority. Accordingly: "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind" (Mill, 1956: 21). The reason why we are not justified in silencing the dissenting voice is because: "We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavouring to stifle is false opinion; and if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still" (Mill, 1956:21).

The moral and epistemological absolutism which Mill accords the individual is in the direction of the absolute freedom of the existentialist. The merit of this position however is that there are

occasions when an individual may be right while his society may be wrong or refuse to acknowledge the truth. A close example was in ancient Greece when Socrates stood his ground in opposition to majority of the members of his society.

At the social and political levels, a distinction is usually made between negative freedom and positive freedom. Negative freedom implies that our actions are not constrained. It is “freedom from”. It means we are not coerced into doing or from not doing certain things. Examples include freedom of movement, religion, association and speech. It is believed that “freedom from” can also metamorphose into “freedom to”. For instance, if one is not constrained from associating with others, it means that one has the “freedom to” associate with others.

Notwithstanding the clarification above, “freedom to” is taken to be positive freedom. According to the positive liberal theorists (Irele, 1991: 75), freedom in all its ramifications cannot be enjoyed unless the state provides certain enabling conditions or social conditions which would make them possible. For instance, the negative freedom of lack of restriction from attaining knowledge, especially university education, can only be enjoyed if the government establishes a university since this is an endeavour the aspiring individual cannot by himself wish into existence. Therefore, it is claimed that state action is necessary in order to promote freedom (Irele, 1991: 75).

The involvement of the state in promoting freedom through the provision of an enabling environment for all individuals is what John Rawls advocated in his *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls, 1971). However, this notion of freedom is anti-thetical to the liberal conception of freedom which only advocates negative freedom. In fact, Robert Nozick in his book, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Nozick, 1974) argued that the state had no moral right to pursue any idea of the general good, its role is just to ensure basic rights.

In his “Two Concepts of liberty”(Berlin, 1969), Isaiah Berlin while agreeing with the general description of negative freedom as the absence of constraint sees positive freedom in a different light. According to him, positive freedom has to do with rational self-determination or self-mastery. It centers on the innate desire of man to control his own life’s project or his destiny (Irele, 1991: 75 - 76).

We should note that individual’s freedom is limited from the point it can harm the freedom of others. The concept of freedom especially at the social and political level goes along the notions of rights and duties. Rights are what we are entitled to, either through natural disposition or through legal claim for instance, the right to life is a natural right to be protected by the state is a right which the citizen of a state enjoys. Sometimes freedom is used interchangeably with right. For instance, we can talk about the “freedom of ‘X’ to drive his car. “We can also say that ‘X’ has

the right to drive his car". The two concepts go hand in hand and they are relational. We can say with reservation that freedom allows one to enjoy his rights. Duties concern those things that one is bound to do to members of his community and his community as a whole. The enjoyment of certain freedom and rights presupposes that one has some obligations to perform towards the source of the rights and freedom.

Obafemi Awolowo talks about three types freedom namely natural freedom, individual freedom, and collective freedom. (Ogunmodede, 1986: 78 - 80). The natural or absolute freedom is a state of continuous activity in which man never experiences any type of constraints. It is a state of being free to do whatever one likes in whatever way one chooses and at whatever time. But since natural freedom is an absolute freedom Awolowo admits that it is possible only in theory and speculation. Therefore this kind of freedom does not exist anywhere at anytime and for any individual or group of people. In fact, if we assume that it exists it would be impossible to practise it because of external and internal influences on man. Furthermore, its existence would be fraught with danger for both the individual and society (Ogunmodede, 1986: 79). Since it is impossible to have natural freedom in its absolute terms, Awolowo recommends that it is necessary to have moral, legal and social norms that would guide the exercise of the natural freedom of individuals in society.

The second type of freedom is individual freedom which is a relative freedom. According to Awolowo, it is this freedom that exists both in practice and theory. The freedom is meaningful and useful to both the individual and society. In short relative freedom is a condition for the existence of social life (Ogunmodede, 1986: 80). The third type of freedom is collective freedom in which a multiple complex group of people known as the state are both politically self-autonomous and economically self-viable and reliant.

Awolowo's classification of freedom into three viz natural or absolute, individual or relative, and collective is superfluous. What bears pointing out in his analysis is that freedom can either be absolute or relative. But we agree with his analysis that freedom is relative because an individual lives in society.

Reconciliation of Public Good and Private Liberty as Basis for Democracy in Africa

From our conception of individual's freedom or liberty, we have seen that the individual cannot enjoy total freedom or liberty even within a political space. Hence, the need for the alignment of public good and personal freedom is imperative if we are to evolve a sense of community in African states. Subsequently the fusion of public interest and private interests will show that the tension or antagonism between the two can be reconciled thereby making them compatible. Let us then examine how public and private values are compatible in the attainment of a community.

Community, we should note, is the basis for the actualization of individual values, aspirations and goals. Anything that would hamper this objective, all in the name of individual's freedom, should be conveniently checked by the communal might for the good of the individual himself and the community at large.

The compatibility of community and individual values starts from the premise that the individual who has imbibed the spirit of community voluntarily gives up certain personal rights in ensuring the continued survival of the community. There is an implicit recognition by the individual that he could only actualize his potentials within the community. This explains the reason why some individuals go to the extent of sacrificing their lives for the survival of the community during famine, war and natural disasters.

While the individuals cannot survive without the society, the society itself needs its individual members for its survival. The point is underscored by Hegel when he argues that "individual freedom can only be attained in a kind of rational ethical community". (Daly, 1994: xx). By this Hegel means that there is always an existent community in which the individual finds himself because this is the only way through which his happiness can be guaranteed.

The individual's goal needs the community for its realization. However, for the proper enhancement of his project, there must be some checks and balances which the community imposes on individual actions. Furthermore, it is through checks and balances such as rewarding and punishing those who make the actualization of the goal of the community possible or difficult that order is brought about. But we may ask at this juncture: what is the goal of the community? Our answer(s) to these questions would provide the reason why public and private interests or values must be aligned in human social environment such as Africa. But let us pause to consider the reasons why leaders and followers might actually feel motivated to serve the 'common good' or the 'public interest' in specific cases when doing so would on the balance diminish their own self-interest.

Given the constitution of society itself it becomes imperative for leaders and followers alike to make some self-sacrifice in order to ensure the continued blossoming of the society. We should note that the diminution of self-interest is only in the short run considering what the individuals in society, whatever their status, will gain on the long run. The utilitarian argument comes handy in providing answer to the above question in the sense that there is no sacrifice on the part of the leaders and followers that is too enormous if it would promote greater good over evil or greater happiness for the greater number of people. Of course this is not to suggest that the satisfaction of the majority is the focal point of any action, rather the majority in the loose sense gives us an approximation of what the general good is.

Furthermore, a major incentive for self-sacrifice on the part of the leaders and followers is based on the need to ensure liberty, equality and justice, which are all at individual's domain since this is only possible when there is social solidarity. This clearly underscores the fact that there is no protection for the individual who finds himself at odds with collective decisions based on fair play and justice. Perhaps this is the reason why in some African states, Nigeria in particular, election results are accepted by opponents not based on the conviction that they lost the election but on the conviction that the acceptance of election results will stem the tide of violence which may result in the disintegration of the countries. This also explains the unceremonious end of two of Africa's foremost political Rebels, Fode Sankoe of Sierra-Leone and J. Savimbi of Angola, who in spite of their inclusion in governments of national unity didn't see the need to abide by the general will.

From our analysis, the goal of the community is synonymous with that of the individual and that is the good life or well-being of both the individual and the community. The individuals through an implicit social contract have come to have a sense of the community formed to serve their interest. The social contract involves the individuals seeing the need to work together and control themselves so that their persons and properties can be preserved. In other words, the community is serving the interest of the individuals and we can see that the two are not anti-thetical to one another, they are complementary.

Our claim that both the community and the individual are not anti-thetical is not to suggest that there are no tensions between the community and the individual. The tension may sometimes be brought about by the fact that an individual's action threatens social existence, or it may be that the community's stance is detrimental to the survival of the individual. The nature of the tension tends to show that: "Our self-inventions and our allegiances are always complex, contingent and shifting" (Basu,1998 : 8) . This means that we switch between our communitarian and individualist identities from time to time. In other words, our actions may be in line with communal or individualist values as occasions may demand. However, in cases where the survival of the community is pitched against the individual's will the community will takes precedence over the individual(Gbadegesin, 1998: 133). The suppression of individual's whims and caprices is only legitimate if it would help to foster the survival of the community. And in cases in which the individual's survival is threatened, it is perfectly legitimate for the individual to disobey communal norm to ensure his own survival.

From the analysis so far, it is obvious that public interest and individual interests are compatible when they form a synthesis in achieving the goal of well-being. According to Ruth Benedict (1946 : 232 - 235), the society and the individual are not antagonistic in the proper sense of the term. In fact, it is the society which provides the culture from which the individual gets the raw material to make his life. In addition, if the culture of a particular society is rich, it is reflected in the fast

development of the individuals and if it is poor, the individuals also suffer. Though we must concede that individuals have their differences which also account for their autonomy, yet the importance of the community cannot be over-stressed. This is because:

Society is never an entity separable from individuals who compose it. No individual can arrive even at the threshold of his potentialities without a culture in which he participate. Conversely, no civilization has in it an element which in the last analysis is not the contribution of an individual (Benedict, 1946 : 234).

The lengthy quotation from Benedict only serves to underscore the interdependence of the community and the individuals. Neither can survive without the other. This is the reason why the community draws its strength from its people. We should be quick to note that the connection between public good and personal liberty can only be situated in the alignment of the two to promote the general good or a sense of community which is in dire need is most emerging democracies in Africa. This is best done when the individuals employ or direct their personal liberty to the attainment of public good and on the other hand when the state pursues public good which in line with the positive human values.

Conclusion

In concluding our discussion, we want to note again that the quest for democracy in contemporary African states is a joint venture on the part of the leaders and followers alike. Democracy and democratic principles cannot obtain in an isolationist situation of "we against them". Rather, democratic development which is a veritable avenue for other forms of development can only come about if we can strike a balance of obligation between public interest and individual liberty: This is also analogous to a balance of obligation between the community and the individual since the two spheres are inseparable (Oyeshile, 2006 : 102 - 119).

The African continent is in urgent need of democratic development - a development that is *sine qua non* for the eradication of poverty, conflict and diseases in all their facts. The unflinching pursuit of the goal of Democracy manifested in the appreciation of human values can only be achieved if we start by reconciling public good with individual liberty.

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