

Aristotle on the Primary Purpose of the State: A Philosophical Appraisal

Morrison Itelimo^{1*} Ogugua Jeremiah Chukwu²

1. Department of General Studies, School of Education, Isaac Jasper Boro College of Education, Sagbama, P.M.B 74, Bayelsa State, Nigeria

*E-mail: itelimorrison@gmail.com

2. C/O Department of Philosophy, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

E-mail: chukwu74@yahoo.com

Abstract

The purpose and primary function of the state has been an issue of immense concern among socio-political philosophers. In providing a solution to the problem, Aristotle posited that the state came into existence in the first instance to promote a good end, which is happiness to the citizens. Hence, in his view, the primary purpose of the state is to preserve life for humans and provide economic opportunities that would enable them enhance their well-being and fulfill their potentials. This position of Aristotle is also shared by most socio-political philosophers, who added that the promotion of the common good rather than personal or private interests remain the pivotal purpose of the state. However, the reverse appears to be the case in Nigeria as the state has failed to promote the well-being of her citizens and preserve life for all people. Instead, the resources of the state has been used by the leaders responsible for directing the day-to-day affairs of the state to promote their private/personal interest and that of their and cronies to the detriment of the generality of the citizens. The resultant effect of this anomaly is high rate of insecurity, poverty, unemployment, senseless killing, cultism/cult clashes, kidnapping and armed robbery. Therefore, the paper concludes that the promotion of good governance whereby leaders managing the affairs of will advance the interest and well-being of all citizens will translate to socio-economic development devoid of insecurity, bad governance and other social vices.

Keywords: Human Development, Common good, Governance, State, Insecurity

1. Introduction

The Classical or Socratic period of Philosophy shifted philosophical investigations from the basic constitutive element of the universe to the development of man and the society. With this as the *modus operandi* of the era, Aristotle sets out to construct a political theory of the state, highlighting its primary functions vis-à-vis the development of man. For Aristotle, the state is created naturally so as to provide a plethora of opportunities for man to attain fulfillment. Subrata and Sushila (2007) buttressed this fact by positing that the State for Aristotle denotes the highest form of political association and represented the zenith of social evolution. In their view, the necessity for the evolution of the state stems from the fact that it provided a framework for the satisfaction of the basic needs of man as well as ensuring the means to secure and realize the good life.

However, it is apt to note that the desire of Aristotle to propound a political theory concerning the functions of the State emanates from the failure of the state to judiciously utilize the resources available at its disposal to better the lot of the general population in Athens, Greece. In fact, the common wealth of the people managed by a privileged few manning the affairs of the state was used to better the lot of their cronies, families and relatives to the detriment of the general population, The mismanagement and frittering away of these resources by these privileged few promoted untold hardship and sufferings on the citizenry. The worse being that majority of the citizens, could not secure a fulfilled life and this propelled Aristotle to formulate the theory in order to correct this anomaly on the part of the state and its rulers. The essence is to show in clear terms the responsibilities that the state has to perform so that its citizens cannot only realize their potentials, but also secure a fulfilled life. Commenting succinctly on this, Subrata and Sushila (2007) further assert that the State provided opportunities for the achievement of man's full harmony and fulfillment. In the words of Stumpf (1993), the state in Aristotle's political theory is seen as an agency for enabling people achieve their ultimate goals as human beings. Promoting a better understanding of the functions of the state with reference to Aristotle political theory, he echoes:

The state comes into existence in the first instance to preserve life for families and villages, which in the long run are not self-sufficing. But beyond this economic end, the function of the

state is to ensure the supreme good of humanity, namely its moral and intellectual life (Stumpf, 1993).

From the above, Stumpf interprets Aristotle to imply that a state is functioning rightly when it acts for the common good of all citizens and not for a privileged few. This means that when the state preserve life and property as well as provide opportunities that will enable all citizens to maximize their potentials, then the state is living up to its constitutional responsibilities, But, the state is said to be corrupt and not functioning rightly when it fails to preserve life and acts for its private gain or interest.

Replicating the above scenario in Contemporary Nigeria, it is glaring that the state is perverted as it does not act for the common good of all the citizens. Today, many states in Nigeria are unable to pay their workers, and they have also failed to preserve life for families as is evident in the incessant killings of innocent citizens in different parts of Nigeria. This raises pertinent questions such as: Why are states in Nigeria unable to pay workers' salaries? Is it right for states to be owing their workers despite the huge resources, allocations and internally generated revenue accruable to them? What are the factors responsible for the failure of the states to fulfill their function of protecting lives and property? What is hindering the states from providing the opportunities needed for the citizens to maximize their potentials and secure a fulfilled life-comfortable life? Can these hindrances be surmounted? How?

It is against this backdrop that the paper seeks to undertake a philosophical exposition of Aristotle's political theory with particular reference to the primary functions of the state vis-à-vis its implications for governance in Nigeria. To achieve the objective of the study, the paper is divided into five sections following the Introduction. Section two undertakes a conceptual clarification of key concepts and theoretical framework. Section three highlights the views of philosophers and political thinkers concerning the function of the state under the caption Literature Review. Section four juxtaposes Aristotle's position on the function of the state with the act of Governance in states in Nigeria, while section five highlights comments which conclude the paper.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The need to explicate on the vital terms in the paper is imperative so as to promote a good understanding of their usage in the context of the study.

State: This is one concept in political discourse that has been defined in diverse ways, hence it has no universal definition, A state is conceived as a political entity or any politically organized community living under a single system of government (Della, 1996). Dibia (2003) defines a state as a politically organized body of people inhabiting a defined geographical entity with an organized legitimate government. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2015) defines the term as an organized political group exercising authority over a particular territory. Weber gives a comprehensive definition of the concept to be a compulsory political organization with a centralized government that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a certain territory. The use of force implied in Weber's definition makes the state autocratic and dictatorial. Instead, the state can maintain monopoly by the use of authority which shows that the creation of the state derives primarily from the consent of the governed. Woldring (2008) accedes to this fact when he presents an all-encompassing definition of the constitutional state as the organization of the mutual relationships between government, citizens and social institutions on a certain territory of culture, to protect and to distribute material and immaterial goods, upon the basis of maintaining law and justice, and to achieve the normative idea of the common good by realizing concrete goals of the government's policy. Alapiki (2004) conceives the state as a set of associations and agencies claiming control over defined territories and their populations.

From the above definitions, we can infer that certain essential features must be present for an entity to be called a state, the features include; territory, population, government, and sovereignty.

Governance: This is another concept in socio-political discourse that political scholars and analysts have construed differently. Governance refers to the process by which individuals saddled with the task of managing the affairs of a state or organization formulate and implement decisions that enable the state or organization achieve its outlined goal. Maserumule and Gutto (2008) conceive governance as the process of decision or policy-making, that is, a process by which decision or policy is either implemented or not implemented. This definition is somehow vague in that fails to highlight those behind the formulation and implementation of the decision/policy making and for whom it is intended. Therefore, adducing a clearer and more comprehensive definition, Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi (2006) construe governance as the traditions and institutions by which authority is exercised in a state or country. It also denotes the process by which a government is elected,

monitored and replaced, the capacity of the government to formulate and implement sound policies, respect that the citizens have for the state and institutions governing economic and social interactions among them. Soludo (2007) defines governance as the traditions or institutions by which authority in a state or country is exercised.

From the foregoing, it can be gleaned that certain indicators are pivotal for identifying the level of governance prevalent in a state or country so as to ascertain whether it is good or bad. To this end, Kaufmann, Kraay and Mastruzzi (2006) outlined six indicators namely: accountability, soundness of policies pursued by the government, political effectiveness of public service provision, quality of the bureaucracy, control of political corruption and rule of law. Rotberg (2009) added national security, human development, provision of economic opportunity and political participation as political goods used as indicators for determining the performance of government both in the state or country. In his view, the better the quality of delivery of these political goods to the citizens, the higher the level of performance of the government and the denoting of such governance as good and vice versa.

On the other hand, the paper adopts Liberal Theory as the theoretical construct. The theory is ideal for the study due to its emphasis on the power of the citizens (electorates) to recall those managing the affairs of the state when they fail to formulate people-oriented policies and defend the civic freedom of the citizens. John Locke is one of the chief proponents of this theory. The theory holds that the state or government came into existence as a result of human contrivance, hence policies of government must, to a large extent, reflect the wishes and aspirations of the people. Also, the theory stipulates that representatives of the people must always consult with them on matters of importance so that decisions reached reflect the views of the people. This implies that laws made by the state (government) must protect, promote and project the interest of all the citizens and not the interest of a privileged few. In fact, the state or government owes the citizens a duty to guarantee and protect their civic rights and liberties, while the citizens in turn obey the laws of the state. Where the state or government fails to do this, then it is dissolved.

However, the theory also posits that when the representatives of the people fail in their primary responsibility of carrying the people along, or formulate laws and policies that are inimical to the well-being and welfare of the people, then the people have a right to recall their representatives and elect those that would abide by the terms of agreement. It is very clear from the tenets of Liberal theory that power rightly belongs to the people and since everyone cannot rule at the same time, it follows that the people elect representatives through elections to protect their interest in governance. Thus, the citizens are ever-ready to obey the laws of the state and perform their civil responsibilities, while the state also ensures that it promotes the interest of all the citizens; thereby ensuring that social pact binding all parties is kept.

Therefore, whenever the citizens perceived that the social pact has been breached, then the exercise of their power of recall is put into action. As the 2019 elections draw near, the citizens are urged to vote wisely by electing those they feel will represent them impartially by protecting their interest and well-being.

3. Literature Review

Political thinkers and Philosophers have constantly been engaged in a debate concerning the purpose of the state. While some argue that the primary purpose of the state is to secure maximum happiness for her citizens, others assert that the sole duty of the state is to promote the common good of all the citizens. Aristotle, as of the early proponents of this view, clearly explains that the reason for the evolution of the state remains the inability of families to satisfy and provide for all their needs. This shows that since man is not self-sufficing, it follows that he needs the state to be able to utilize the opportunities made available by the state to satisfy his needs. This is how the state promotes and secures the supreme good or happiness (true well-being) of her citizens. Aristotle expresses this fact lucidly thus:

Every state is as we see a sort of partnership, and every partnership is formed with a view to some good (since all the actions of all mankind are done with a view to what they think to be good). It is therefore evident that, while all partnerships aim at some good, the partnership that is the most supreme of all and includes all the others does so most of all, and aims at the most supreme of all goods; and this is the partnership entitled the state, the political association (Aristotle, 1990).

With the above, Aristotle illustrates the partnership that brought the state into existence with the deed of partnership being that the state promotes the happiness or supreme good of its citizens.

John Locke also maintains that the primary purpose of the state is to promote the common good of its citizens.

He took time to explicate on the term common good which he identifies as the protection by the state, of the inalienable rights of the citizens and the use of the resources at the disposal of the state to improve and better the living conditions of the citizens as well as to guarantee peace and safety in society. For Locke, the state evolved as a result of a contract where the people resolved to surrender some of their inviolable rights in exchange for peace, security and enhancement of their well-being. Jean-Jacques Rousseau also contributes to the debate that the essential purpose of the state is to promote the common good or general interest of all the citizens.

Jacques Maritain, in his contribution, asserts that the ultimate purpose of the state is to promote the common good of all the citizens such that everyone has equal access to economic, political, cultural and participatory rights. Putting this vividly, he posits: “*The common good of the political society is the final aim of the state and comes before the immediate aim of the state*” (Maritain, 1951). Maritain strongly asserts that the promotion of the common good by the state entails the prudent use of resources owed by the state to advance the well-being and welfare of all citizens irrespective of class, political or ethnic affiliation as well as protection of their rights and ensuring peace, stability and order in the society. In doing this, the state promotes the material and spiritual development of all citizens and the resultant effect is overall progress and growth in every sector of the state.

Woldring (2008) corroborated the views of Maritain by maintaining that the proper function of the constitutional state is indeed the promotion of the common well-being of all citizens. In his view, a reciprocal relationship exists between government and the governed such that the citizens are empowered legally to evaluate the policies of government whether or not it promotes their well-being. In trying to engender a better understanding of the proper function of the constitutional state, he posits:

The common good is the general goal of the state and the concrete goals of government’s policy. Since the purpose of the state is the common good, citizens should have the legal right to evaluate the policy of the government to promote their common wellbeing. In their mutual connection, these features give a more adequate insight into the proper character and the purpose of the constitutional state than any other political theory (Woldring, 2008)

Gleaned from the above is the fact that the state exists for advancing the overall well-being of the citizens, while at the same time enacting laws that regulate the conduct of all for peace and order in the society. Also, when the state fulfills its legal obligations, the citizens on their part perform the constitutional functions expected from them.

Alapiki (2004) lent credence to the fact that the state was created to enable humans realize their full potentials and by so doing attain the good life. Articulating his views concerning the primary function of the state in a clearer perspective, he writes:

...the state has a divine and extra mundane origin because it was specifically created to address and satisfy the interest of all in the society. The essence of the state..., is to project and guide the interest of society as a whole and to mediate and reconcile the antagonisms which inevitably arise from social existence. The state assumes the character of an impartial, neutral and all-purpose institution which is intended to prevent society from disintegration and ensure peace, law and order (Alapiki, 2004)

Alapiki affirms that when the state performs its functions of promoting the interests of all persons in the society, then conflicts will be non-existent as peace, stability and order will prevail. This implies that the state ought to guarantee the happiness of its citizens by ensuring the enthronement of good governance expressed in constant power supply, functional employment opportunities and quality healthcare services, effective and functional institutions, provision of portable pipe-borne water and quality education. This will translate to total socio-economic development in the state devoid of chaos, instability and other social vices that are currently plaguing states in Nigeria.

Basil Nnamdi in his book *Political Obligation and Civil Disobedience in Hannah Arendt: A Politico-Philosophical Perspective*, asserts that the primary responsibility of the state is to promote the public happiness of her citizens. In his view, a state or government is worth its name only when it seeks or guarantees the common good of the human persons which it is made to serve. Elaborating more on this with emphasis on making clear the use of state and government interchangeably as well as meaning of common good as it pertains to the state, he writes:

...the state is only true to type when it is a means to procure, preserve and foster that which is truly essential to man as man. And invariably, this is the common good as it is good and common to the

*human persons in general. The government, as an artificial construct of a people constituted by the people for the benefit of the people, then bears the person of the state or commonwealth for it is its ultimate duty, and above all, its **raison d'être** to serve all and sundry. This is why the terms government and state are sometimes used interchangeably, for in the management of state affairs, the essence of government and that of state coincide (Nnamdi, 2011).*

With the above, Nnamdi reiterates that the state promotes the common good of all the citizens by guaranteeing its welfare through provision of gainful employment, affordable healthcare, accessible and functional education, eradication of poverty to its barest minimum, guarantee liberty, justice and equality as well as promoting public and private happiness.

4. Juxtaposing Aristotle's Purpose of the State with the State and Governance in Nigeria

The rebirth of democracy in 1999 brought joy and happiness to Nigerians. Nigerians were excited because they felt that the return of democracy would facilitate socio-economic and national development. In addition, Nigerians were also ecstatic on the ground that the return of democracy will bring about the delivery of democratic dividends expressed in accountability, transparency, participatory governance and prudent utilization of resources to improve the well-being of the citizens.

However, this was not to be as democracy entrenched political corruption to an unprecedented level, bad governance, embezzlement, mismanagement of resources resulting in high rate of unemployment, poverty, kidnapping, armed robbery, cult clashes and insecurity. In fact, state governors became billionaires overnight as they looted the treasury of their states with impunity and reckless abandon buying choice properties within and outside Nigeria, rewarding their cronies and families with inflated contracts, living ostentatious lifestyle, riding in exotic and luxurious cars, while the citizens wallow in poverty. Highlighting the current realities of affairs in states, Egharevba and Chiazor (2012) assert:

...a close look at the political structures and processes particularly the democratic institutions with which the political leadership relate with the people have left much to be desired; such that the basis of social contract for which the state was established is completely eroded. Rather than the leadership of the state who occupy positions of political control or governance to use the resources of the country to promote the well-being of their people, they use their political office and position to plunder the state wealth for their personal self-centred aggrandizement and to reward their personal allies and external foreign collaborators at the expense of the overall national development of their people.

From the above, it is very clear that governance in states in Nigeria is a far cry from that depicted by Aristotle. For instance, Aristotle posited that the state was created with an aim, which is to preserve life for families and also provide the opportunities needed by the citizens to fulfill their potentials-happiness. But the state has failed woefully in this regard. In most states in Nigeria, insecurity is on the high as innocent citizens are killed on daily basis. The New Year killings in Rivers State where at least twenty persons were murdered on their way back from church and the killings of over sixty persons by herdsmen in Benue are cases to buttress the lapses of states to preserve the lives of the citizens. Similar incidences were also recorded in Zamfara, Kogi, Plateau, Kaduna, Lagos, Ogun, Anambra, Enugu, to mention but a few.

In terms of providing the economic opportunities for the citizens to secure the good life, the state has also failed. Cases abound of how states in Nigeria owe civil servants and pensioners. In fact, in some states, the civil servants are being owed between three and six months including pensioners. In this type of scenario, can the citizens be happy for non-payment of salaries by the states? The obvious answer is No. Yet, the governors of these states collect monthly allocations and even bailouts from the central government with nothing to show that these allocations have been judiciously utilized to enhance the well-being and welfare of the general population.

Today, most past governors have been arraigned by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) for the billions they embezzled and squandered while holding sway as the captain of their respective state's ship. These governors would have used the monies to better the lot of the citizens they swore to serve and protect their interest. Instead, they impoverish the people and use their political office as a means to wealth and siphoned monies meant for developing their states. The resultant effect is the high rate of poverty, kidnapping, armed robbery cultism, politically motivated killings, cult clashes and unemployment prevalent in several states. Using the indicator provided by Rotberg (2009), it is very clear that states in Nigeria have performed below par in entrenching good governance that promotes economic and human development, security, transparency and

functional opportunities for the citizens to maximize their full potentials. Obuah and Enyinda (2004) depict the situation thus:

Given these happenings, therefore, it is glaring that the state in Nigeria can be classified as a “failed” state given its kleptocratic and “lootocratic” nature, coupled with its consistent failure to meet the expectations of the people to live improved living standards.

Gleaned from the above, one can say that the governors in the various states are only interested in using their political power to misappropriate state resources without regards to meeting the basic needs of the people. Therefore, it did not come as a surprise when a renowned playwright Chinua Achebe (1983) posited that the problem of Nigeria is squarely that of leadership. This implies that bad leadership and governance at the state level is solely the bane of underdevelopment experienced in Nigeria today as it promotes political corruption which in turn stagnates human development.

5. Conclusion

It is very clear that the state evolved out of the need to preserve life for humans and to ensure the provision of economic opportunities that would enable them to secure the good life, a life of happiness where humans can achieve their full potentials. A state is regarded as rightly fulfilling this function when the interest of all people irrespective of class, education, religious or political affiliations, is promoted. The state is perverted and enthroning bad governance when it seeks after its own interests. In Nigeria, good governance has been elusive in the states as there seems to be a disconnection between the government and the governed in that government promotes parochial interest. The governors of most states have succeeded in using the resources of their states to promote self-aggrandizement by acquiring choice properties within and outside Nigeria, drive luxurious cars, advance the well-being of their families and cronies, corruptly enriching themselves with tax payers’ monies, while at the time impoverishing the lives of the citizens. Worst still, the misappropriation of state funds by governors has exacerbated unemployment, poverty, insecurity, kidnapping, armed robbery, etc. Today, the insecurity in most states is worrisome as innocent citizens are killed and maimed with reckless abandon as is the case in Rivers, Kogi, Plateau, Zamfara and Kaduna. The paper argues that the governors in these states should sit up and perform their constitutional responsibility of preserving life and property of her citizens as well as ensure that the resources of their state is judiciously used to cause a positive improvement in the life of the citizens. Promoting the common good of the citizens by the states will go a long way in enthroning peace, progress and order in the society and the confidence reposed by the people in the government to always formulate people-oriented policies that would advance their well-being will be justified.

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