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Article

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THE DEBACLE OF FOLLOWERSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC SURVIVAL IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

There is a growing concern about the deteriorating state of followership and its negative impact on the stability and growth of Nigeria's democracy. In recent years, challenges such as political apathy, corruption, ethnic bias, vote buying, and misinformation have weakened citizens' participation and accountability in governance. This study examined the crisis of followership and its implications for democratic survival in contemporary Nigeria. The objective was to analyse the relationship between responsible citizenship and democratic sustainability, while identifying the key factors undermining effective followership in the country. Using historical, expository, and evaluative methods, the study found that the quality of followership significantly shapes the direction of Nigeria's democracy, determining whether it thrives or falters. The findings revealed that the weakening of followership manifested in political complacency, blind loyalty, and complicity in corruption which contributed to poor governance, weakened institutions, and declining public trust. The study also observed that poverty, insecurity, and disillusionment among the youth have further eroded active civic participation and democratic vigilance. This research contributes to current debates on democratic consolidation in Nigeria by emphasizing that leadership failure is inseparable from followership failure. It underscores the urgent need for civic reorientation, ethical rebirth, and the strengthening of democratic institutions to rebuild public trust. The study suggested policies that can promote political education, transparency, and active citizen involvement, especially among young Nigerians, to counter the growing sense of hopelessness and political detachment. The study stressed that the survival of Nigeria's democracy depends not only on visionary leadership but also on enlightened and responsible followership. For democratic governance to succeed, citizens must go beyond mere participation to actively demand accountability, fairness, and justice in public life.

Strengthening followership, therefore, remains central to achieving transparency, unity, and sustainable democratic progress in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democratic Survival, Followership, Leadership, Weak Institutions.

Introduction

The concept of followership is central to the functioning of any democracy, as it defines how citizens relate to their leaders and institutions. In Nigeria, the quality of followership has become a pressing concern due to its direct impact on democratic stability and governance. A healthy democracy depends not only on good leadership but also on responsible, informed, and active citizens who hold leaders accountable. Unfortunately, Nigerian followership often reflects deep-seated issues such as apathy, blind loyalty, and complicity in corruption, which have eroded democratic values. The result is a system where citizens either disengage from political participation or support leaders based on ethnic or personal gains rather than competence and integrity. Nigeria's political culture, shaped by years of military dictatorship, corruption, and weak institutions, has made it difficult to cultivate effective followership. Many citizens have lost faith in the electoral process due to rigging, vote buying, and manipulation by political elites. This has created a vicious cycle where poor leadership thrives because of a passive or misguided citizenry. The lack of civic education and economic hardship further worsen the situation, as poverty makes people susceptible to political exploitation. Instead of serving as a check on leadership, followers often become instruments of political manipulation, enabling the same systemic failures they suffer from.

Current developments in Nigeria reflect how the failure of followership continues to threaten democratic survival. Electoral violence, youth disengagement, and the spread of misinformation on social media have all weakened democratic participation. Citizens frequently express frustration over poor governance, yet accountability remains minimal due to ethnic favouritism and a lack of unity among the populace. Movements like the *End SARS* showed glimpses of civic awakening, but their suppression by authorities revealed how fragile citizen-led democratic efforts still are. Moreover, insecurity, inflation, and corruption have fuelled public despair, creating an environment where populist and authoritarian tendencies can easily resurface. Addressing the crisis of followership in Nigeria requires a reawakening of civic responsibility and political consciousness. Citizens must move beyond passive compliance to become active participants in governance through informed voting, public advocacy, and community engagement. Civic education, youth empowerment, and transparency in governance should be prioritized to rebuild trust between the government and the governed. Only when followers demand accountability and model ethical behaviour can Nigeria's democracy mature and thrive. Strengthening followership is therefore not just about citizens obeying leaders but about nurturing a politically responsible populace capable of defending and sustaining democratic ideals.

Conceptual Clarification

In keeping with the logical positivist tradition of philosophical reflection, there is a compelling need to offer a contemporary clarification of socio-political concepts in this age of globalization. This thinking is founded on the Socratic belief that the knowledge of operational concepts in any dialogue or debate is key to mutual comprehension and appreciation of the terms under study. Socrates is famously quoted to have said, "If you want us to talk, clarify your terms" (Agundu 2019, p. xvi). Without underrating other cardinal concerns of philosophy as an intellectual enterprise, it is worth noting that conceptual

clarification is one of the essential preoccupations of Philosophers. This task has been performed dutifully by philosophers through the ages, but the obvious facts which has endured in every age is the dynamism of meanings of words and concepts as contexts of usage and application vary. In as much as certain concepts always carry the same meaning and connotations, ambiguity and equivocality also always persist as inherent attributes of certain concepts; hence, the need to always clarify concepts for easy understanding and communication.

What then is Leadership?

Leadership is a complex and dynamic concept that carries different meanings depending on context and perspective. Although it has been defined in various ways across cultures and situations, all interpretations share a common understanding of leadership as the act of guiding and directing the affairs of a group, organization, or state. Essentially, it involves the ability to influence others toward achieving a shared goal. As Agundu (2019, p. 330) explained leadership is “the process of social influence in which one can enlist the hand and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task.” Similarly, Alan (1991, p. 67) emphasized that true leadership goes beyond authority. It is “ultimately about creating a way for a people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen.” According to McSwain (1998, p. 90), leadership is fundamentally about capacity the ability of leaders to listen, observe, and engage others in meaningful dialogue across all levels of decision-making. It involves using one’s expertise not as a tool of dominance but as a foundation for collaboration, transparency, and value-driven guidance. True leadership, therefore, is not about imposing personal visions but clearly articulating them while fostering collective participation. As McSwain explained, leadership means setting agendas rather than merely reacting to them, identifying problems, and initiating transformative changes that lead to genuine and lasting improvement rather than simply managing existing conditions. Kretnr (1995, p. 469) defined leadership as a social influence process through which leaders seek the voluntary participation of subordinates to achieve organizational goals. Similarly, Vain (2000, p. 49) viewed leadership as a dynamic interaction within a group, where one individual, in a given context and time, motivates others to willingly commit themselves to accomplishing shared objectives. Both definitions emphasize influence, voluntary commitment, and collective goal attainment as the core of effective leadership.

Followership

The leader–follower relationship is as old as human society and has been acknowledged throughout history (Maroosis, 2008). Modern followership studies trace their roots to Mary Parker Follett, who emphasized respect for human dignity over status or gender distinctions (Barclay, 2005). This perspective reinforces the growing recognition that followership is just as vital as leadership, if not more so. As Aristotle noted, “he who cannot be a good follower cannot be a leader” (Maroosis, 2008), highlighting that society depends equally on both roles. Leadership emerges naturally from group existence, as human cooperation requires coordination and direction (Arowolo, 2015). Indeed, as Sharma, Sadana, and Kaur (2012, p. 718) assert, political leadership is inevitable wherever people live in groups, for followers provide the foundation upon which leadership stands—without followers, leaders cannot exist.

Followership is understood as the reciprocal social process of leadership, representing the ability of individuals or groups to accept and cooperate under the authority of a leader. In recent times, it has gained global recognition as an essential component of

leadership studies. Kellerman (2008) noted that the traits of followers significantly influence both the leader and overall performance. Essentially, followership entails the capacity, willingness, and discipline to follow effectively. The Civil Air Patrol's Professional Development (CAPPD, n.d.) defines it as achieving goals while upholding respect for authority, integrity, and a positive attitude. Similarly, Kelley (1992) describes followers as individuals who act with intelligence, independence, courage, and strong ethics. As Bennis (2010) and Suda (2013) observed followers often have a clearer understanding of everyday organizational realities and at times, following can be even more challenging than leading.

The concept of followership has often been misunderstood and unfairly viewed in a negative light. As Ricketts (2000, p. 758) observed the term "follower" is frequently associated with inferiority, as many people believe that following is less important or prestigious than leading. This perception implies that followers are less intelligent, capable, or successful than leaders. Challenging this culturally biased view, Kristina Ricketts argues that regardless of the title used, followers are equally essential to the leadership equation, serving a different yet complementary role that is vital to achieving collective goals. Asogwa sees followership as the descriptive expression of being a follower one who supports a person in authority, whether religious, traditional, or political. It arises from the idea that others should follow the leader vested with legitimate authority (Agundu, 2019, p. 336). Rost (2008) further defined followership as a form of collaborative leadership, an influence relationship between leaders and collaborators pursuing meaningful, shared goals.

Democratic Survival

Democratic survival refers to the ability of a democratic political system to endure and maintain its basic principles and institutions over time. According to scholars like Larry Diamond (2017), the survival of a democracy requires more than just holding regular elections, but also requires the protection of civil liberties and political rights, the rule of law, and the institutionalization of democratic norms and values. However, democratic survival is not always guaranteed, as many democracies throughout history have faced challenges and crises that have threatened their continued existence. As Linz and Stepan (1996) argued, democracies can suffer from a variety of problems such as corruption, polarization, and authoritarian encroachment that can erode public trust in democratic institutions and procedures. Additionally, external forces such as foreign intervention, economic shocks, and military coups can also pose significant threats to democratic survival. In light of these challenges, it is important for democracies to constantly strive to strengthen their democratic institutions and procedures to enhance their ability to withstand crises and ensure their long-term survival. This can involve measures such as reducing corruption, promoting social and political inclusiveness, and ensuring the independence of the judiciary and media, as well as maintaining a vibrant civil society. By taking these steps, democracies can ensure that they remain robust and resilient in the face of adversity, thus securing their democratic survival.

Weak Institutions

Refer to governance structures such as legal systems, bureaucratic agencies, and norms of accountability that lack sufficient authority, capacity, or legitimacy to effectuate rules, deliver public services, or maintain order (Brinks, Levitsky, & Murillo, 2019; Fiveable, n.d.). In such contexts the formal "rules of the game" may exist on paper but are either not enforced, fail to shape behaviour, or change so frequently that their effectiveness is undermined (Brinks et al., 2019). The result is a governance environment prone to corruption, policy

failure, and social instability because citizens cannot reliably depend on public institutions to uphold rights or provide collective goods (Al-Jundi, Shuhaiber, & Al-Emara, 2022; Fiveable, n.d.).

Relationship between Leadership and Followership

A critical look at the concepts of leadership and followership from the prism that there can't be no leader without at least a follower reveals that they exist on form dialectical relationship between the concepts. In some quarters, this relationship is viewed as a master/servant relationship, a one up/one down relationship among others but that argument in the thoughts of Landino (1990, p.764) "is a misconception". He alluded to the fact that the "assumption that the leader's interpretation must dominate is detrimental to both player in the leader follower relationship". Landino (1990, p.765) redefined the relationship between leadership and followership when he intimated that, "to think of leaders without followers is like thinking of teachers without students. Both are impossible, they are two sides of the same process, two parts of a whole". Quoting Frisina, Ryan contended that, "because leadership and followership are relational, a thoughtful researcher cannot understand one without the other. If one were to plot out characteristics that both leaders and followers share, what he or she would discover is that both leaders and followers go hand in hand". Deducible from the dialectical relationship that exists between leaders and followers is the fact that leaders who want to create true followers in any socio-political arrangement or configuration must understand that the relationship that exist between them and the followers is on the basis of social contract, hence leadership should be seen as an opportunity to serve the people along contractual lines and with the intent of providing and insuring that the common goods of human flourishing are deliver to the people.

Qualities of Good Followership

The qualities of good followership outlined by Irikana and Orisa (2007, as cited in Thom-Otuya, 2012) resonate strongly with Kwasi Wiredu's philosophy of consensual democracy, which emphasizes collective responsibility, truthfulness, and moral commitment in governance. According to this view, democratic stability depends not only on just leadership but also on followers who uphold discipline, loyalty, self-reliance, and constructive participation. By avoiding sycophancy, telling the truth to power, and engaging in cooperative nation-building, followers embody Wiredu's call for communal harmony and participatory governance essential for Africa's democratic renewal.

Leadership, Followership Debacle and Democratic Turn Down in Nigeria

The theoretical constructs adopted by this study postulate leadership followership congruence, suggestive of symbiotic relationship between leadership and followership, such that the dispositions of leaders are also reflected in the followers' behaviours. This is particularly true in Nigeria as there have been established facts bordering on the reckless behaviour of leaders that have led to distrust and apathy on the part of followers, thereby leading to debacle between the two important partners in the democratic development (EU 2007). The right of citizens to effectively and meaningfully participate in the affairs of their country through established democratic means is the foundation of sustainable democratic survival in good governance. Such a right cannot be taken from them because it is guaranteed by the Constitution. In Nigeria, the franchise grants citizens aged 18 and above the right to vote and be voted for. Yet, as the nation approaches the next general elections,

this democratic right remains undermined by persistent electoral malpractice. Historically, Nigerian elections have often resembled organized crime, where political actors manipulate processes to subvert the people's will (NHRC, 2015). The National Human Rights Commission's report identifies such actions as unlawful, criminal, and unconstitutional, violating citizens' fundamental right to freely choose their leaders. With recurring cases of electoral fraud and violence still threatening political participation, the forthcoming elections (2027) will once again test Nigeria's commitment to genuine democracy and transparent governance.

Considerably, this study contends that one of the biggest problems evident in Nigerian leadership and followership is anchored in their erroneous worldviews, beliefs, and assumptions on the meaning and the context of leadership; worldviews that detach and distant values and servant-hood from the meaning and the context of leadership, which translate to misconduct, unethical behaviour, and leadership crisis. In other words, to lead is to serve (Locke, 1986; Sendjaya, 2015), and both leaders and followers work collaboratively to effectively accomplish the common goal of the country; a dyadic relationship that is grounded in mutual empowerment of both parties. This perspective corresponds to Kwame Nkrumah's ideology of consciencism, which stresses the importance of morally conscious and visionary leadership determined in the people's consciousness. Even after two decades of democratic practice, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile owing to the disconnection between leaders and followers. Rebuilding this relationship would require visionary leadership combined with institutional integrity that breeds trust. As Nkrumah would say, true democracy needs leaders endowed with consciousness and able to galvanize a following that is active and responsible, and this would call for reforms that provide for electoral processes defined by transparency and credibility.

Basically, in Nigeria, there are five major factors fueling leadership-followership debacle: manipulation of electoral process by the political leadership/ruling elite, electoral violence, poverty, unemployment and corruption. These factors are largely perpetrated, facilitated and sponsored by the political leadership. Electoral manipulation, defined by EU Election Observation Mission (2007) as the lack of essential transparency, procedural irregularities, significant evidence of fraud, predetermined and deliberate voter disenfranchisement at different stages of electoral process and lack of equal conditions for contestants, has pervaded the electoral process in Nigeria from the 1979 elections to the 2019 general elections. There has been a progressive degeneration of election outcomes, the 2007 elections being the worst in the history of Nigeria (EU 2007; NHRC 2015). As EU (2007, 1) put it, 'the 2007 State and Federal elections have fallen far short of basic international and regional standards for democratic elections. In the same vein, electoral violence is defined by Birch and Muchlinski (2018) as an act or threat of coercion, intimidation or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arises in the context of electoral competition. According to Sisk (2008), electoral violence is a sub-type of political violence in which actors employ coercion in an instrumental way to advance their interests or achieve specific political ends. In broader conceptualization, electoral violence encompasses the purpose behind violence, psychological violence and the actual violence.

The Debacle of Followership and Democratic Survival in Nigeria

This perspective aligns with Kwame Nkrumah's ideology of consciencism which emphasizes the need for morally grounded and visionary leadership rooted in the people's consciousness. Despite over two decades of democratic practice, Nigeria's democracy

remains fragile due to a disconnect between leaders and followers. Strengthening this relationship requires fostering trust through visionary leadership and institutional integrity. As Nkrumah would argue, genuine democracy demands leaders who embody ethical consciousness and inspire active, responsible followership achievable through reforms that ensure transparent and credible electoral processes. Genuine democracy could be achieved by de-manualizing the electoral process through introducing electronic devices for processing and returning of results to complement the card readers which the Independence National Electoral Commission (INEC) claimed to have put in place as BVAS but refused to use during the 2023 general election. When the BVAS became operational and reliable, it would be Nigerians, not electoral manipulation and violence, that would be able to enthrone and dethrone political leaders at will. This will bring about leadership responsibility and the subordination of political leadership to the electorate.

Although one can argue that the need for active followership is both a moral obligation and a constitutional right, in the Nigerian context, perhaps, because of all the distasteful experiences that leadership-orientation has given, the reforming of leaders stands to be a lofty ideal unless underpinned by active citizens' involvement. Power can corrupt; therefore, if democracy is to survive, an active and critical citizenry needs to be maintained. The French Revolution and the Arab Spring mark epochs wherein public consciousness and participation took on an active role to challenge undemocratic regimes and promote democratic governance as in Egypt and Libya respectively. While leadership is central in creating and pursuing a strategic vision for the advancement of a nation, in a true democracy, it is the active citizenry that should guide and hold its own leadership accountable (Nwolise, 2006).

Leadership is not merely occupying an office; it is acting in the interest of that role. A leader has to identify the right path, show it, and then lead the followers along that path. A leader takes in followers, carries the followers along with him/her, and involves them in public decision-making and policy formulation. The leader should inspire followers to work voluntarily and cooperatively as opposed to coercively or in a divisive mode towards common goals. Moreover, public policies and programmes must be collectively decided to actually reflect the will of the people. Above all else, the leader must be humane; without compassion or empathy, leadership becomes a mere and meaningless function. Concomitantly, the concept of political democracy is on one hand a social contract, which gives the people the option of governing themselves by choosing their leaders, and taking responsibility therefore, constituting a court for leadership by watching, suggesting to, compelling, checkmating and even confronting; and on the other hand, gives the leadership its legitimacy by determining and agreeing that it is rightfully constituted and therefore worthy of obedience.

The Role of Followership for Democratic Survival in Nigeria

Followership is very important in the democratic survival of a country like Nigeria, as it defines the viability of a leadership performance. The definition of followership in a democratic process entails the behaviour and attitudes of an individual, who follows a particular leader or subscribes to a political ideology. An active and responsible follower, who can hold the leaders accountable, is what every democratically practicing nation needs, especially Nigeria, where the leadership has always been marred by corruption, abuse of power and mismanagement of resources. Followership in Nigeria is one of the things that ensure that democracy survives since it usually acts as a check on leaders' actions (Adeyemo

2017). When followers are enlightened and involved, they can be made accountable by their leaders and make demands on transparency and accountability from those in leadership positions. Such accountability remains a strong deterrent to corruption and abuse of power, which are at the highest risk in overthrowing a democratic government. Thus, the active participation of followers in the democratic process will make the democratic system itself more resilient to challenges and sufferings from internal and external threats. Followership also determines the general quality of leadership to the Nigerian populace. The action of a follower has the potential to encourage or discourage that follower's leader. Hence, it declared that followers who favour corrupt and unethical practices in their leaders send a message to those leaders that they can engage in such activities and be sure that such will not bring about any change in behaviour. On the other hand, if followers bond for accountability and transparency, it becomes more likely that their leaders act more decently and responsibly towards upholding democracy.

Consequently, followership in Nigeria suffers from political apathy, lack of political awareness and literacy, which would otherwise facilitate accountability by the people from their leaders. The apathy and lack of political engagement have led to a situation where it would require great effort to find the courage and means with which the masses would actively participate in the democratic process. Therefore, Nigerian leaders are left alone to play at will in their corrupt and unethical practices. But this has started to change, as more Nigerians become politically aware and engaged. Using social media and other types of technology, people are becoming more informed about political issues and demanding accountability from their leaders. Such involvement contributes to the survival of democracy in Nigeria, as it means that leaders will be made to account for their actions, while a culture of transparency and accountability begins to take root. It is expedient to note that followership is a critical component of democratic survival in Nigeria, as it helps to prevent corruption, abuse of power, and mismanagement of resources. A democratic society requires active and responsible followers who can hold their leaders accountable, and this is especially important in Nigeria where the history of leadership has been characterized by these issues. As more Nigerians become politically aware and engaged, the role of followership in ensuring the survival of democracy will continue to increase.

Way Forward

As a way forward, and in line with Nwolise's conceptualization of leadership, followership should equally be examined and strengthened to support the following propositions: democracy is not granted on a platter of gold, it is earned through struggle, and its sustenance requires eternal vigilance, as democratization remains an ongoing process. For leaders to perform their duties effectively, their responsibilities must be constantly demanded by the general citizenry. In a democratic society, governance should reflect the collective aspirations of the people, expressed through their active and critical participation in political processes. Leaders can only carry their followers along when citizens see participation as a civic right and duty. Exemplary leadership inspires devoted followership; however, in Nigeria, political irresponsibility among followers has led leaders to depend on social backers for class interests, rather than pursuing shared national goals. Furthermore, public policies should emerge through collective engagement, reinforcing the leadership–followership nexus and ensuring the continuous renewal of the social contract. Ultimately, leaders must be guided and held accountable to the principles of humaneness and empathy in governance.

However, in Nigeria these attributes of leadership have been inexistent. Nigeria has sunk into “fallacy of electoralism” (Mottiar, 2002, p.3) having held four successive general elections without fair representation, this is a practice described by Schedler (2002) as “elections without democracy: menu of manipulation”. While leadership in Nigeria has for sure been irresponsible, corrupt, self-serving, personalizing, and clueless. it is only critical followership that can reverse the trend. If democracy is a social contract between the governed (followers) and the leaders, then, if by any chance, any member of the state decides to be apolitical, such a person lacks the locus standi to either complain about inefficiency of government or expect that government should keep its own side of the social contract. History has it that peoples that are now brought under a single political entity called Nigeria were critically involved in their various governments before the interruptions of colonialism. In addition to the aforementioned, the executive immunity should be removed from the constitution to drastically reduce the atmosphere of impunity. This will reduce impunity in government and ensure swift punishment for constitutional infraction and non-performance by political leaders. Youth and women empowerment is desirable. This will not only reduce the level of poverty and unemployment but also mobilize the youth towards national cause and societal ideals. Finally, corruption needs to be fought more aggressively to ensure that national resources are deployed towards wealth generation, democratic survival, youth empowerment and national development.

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that political democracy is predicated largely on the will of the people. The absence of a credible followership capital has over the years fed, and nurtured the entrenchment of clientele politics in Nigeria. The country is therefore, beset by numerous structural bottlenecks; such problems can only be put to proper ending and redress of the general citizenry-those most affected-not political opportunists whose interest is served best by the continuity of the status quo. Great investments have been made in the Nigerian project of democratization; thus, all citizens affected by government actions should see their civic duty to keep the democratic flame burning in all possible ways. In a broader sense, Nigeria could learn from Botswana, where four factors have sustained good governance: the absence of civil and political strife, the political leadership's commitment to the promotion of multiparty democracy through constant engagement with the grassroots, sound economic policies, and a fair degree of assimilation of local knowledge in national governance. The political and economic challenges facing Nigeria as a nation after sixty-five years of nationhood, of which twenty-six years have been spent on steady democracy, are enormous and hydra headed. From religious riots, we have graduated to religious bombing, and various ugly vices that stare us in the face daily. There is no gainsaying that the biggest problem facing this country today is the dearth of selfless and transparent leadership. A leadership that is accountable, responsive, transparent and responsible to Nigerians in dealing with the country, that is devoid of corruption, *saa-ilumo* self-centeredness, and nepotism. Nigeria needs leaders in the work of Chinua Achebe, that are upright and true to stabilise nation's quest for growth and development. Trust worthy leaders who have the nation's state at heart as well as the genuine concern for the well-being of Nigerians.

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