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**Lockean Political Philosophy And Its
Implications For Nigerian Politics**

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Abstract

The political ideas of John Locke have greatly influenced the modern world. His political ideas have actually given to the modern world the concepts of constitutional government, religious toleration, representative institutions, the freedom of individual and private property. In addition, the philosophical theories are embedded in the American and British Constitutions. It is against this background that Lockean political philosophy and its implications for Nigerian politics are discussed in this paper. The paper concludes that Lockean Political Philosophy is of vital importance to Nigerian politics.

Keywords

Lockean, Political Philosophy, Implications, Nigerian Politics

Introduction

It is accurate to say that John Locke was the theoretical architect of democracy as it exists in the Western World today. His ideas, as expressed in his famous *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, were influential in forming the political philosophy of the founders of the American and French Republics. A careful study of the Declaration of independence and the American constitution reveals both documents to be replete with phrases such as 'All men are created equal', Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness, we hold these truths to be self-evident. The influence of Locke's Philosophy was enormous.¹ His political theory was adopted by those who drafted the American constitution. The British also adopted it in their constitution until about the end of nineteenth century.

Lockean Political Philosophy

He started his political philosophy with the state of nature. In the state of nature, men live on the whole peaceably. They own private property, such as land, and also have private possessions, such as cattle and sheep. In this state of nature, he states that men by nature, are not wholly selfish: one may quickly wants to ask why? According to him,

¹ Omoregbe, *Socio-Political Philosophy*, 86.

“they sometimes work for the good of others and they cooperate with each other”. Popkin says that what property they own, they may dispose of without asking the permission of anyone.² The only law which governs them is what Locke calls ‘the law of nature’. This is the provision that no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possession. Now, although, as a rule peaceful, men occasionally may transgress the law of nature; or steal his property. When this occurs, the injured party has the right to punish the transgressor. There would be no reason for men to leave the state of nature and form societies, except that difficulties arise in applying punishment to those who transgress the law. According to him, these difficulties are: everyone in the state of nature is his/her own judge of what is right or wrong and this leads him to make biased judgments. The reason adduced for this is that, one man can claim he was injured, another may deny it. Who is to decide the merits of the dispute? Even where it is plain that someone has violated the law, we may not have adequate force to punish him. Moreover, the degree of punishment will vary for the same crime. For instance, a man who steals a loaf of bread may be hanged by one group of individuals; but, another man may merely be fined. In order to overcome these impairments in the state of nature, men require a judiciary which will administer the law impartially, an executive who can enforce the law when it is broken, and a legislature to lay down constituent and uniform laws. According to Locke, society originates in the attempt to develop each institutions for the purpose of life

² Popkin, *Philosophy Made Simple*, 68.

without organized society.³ Men create a society by a voluntary agreement among themselves to erect these institutions.

Again, law, not force, is the basis of government. A government without law will be tyrannical. This is the characteristic of monarchy.⁴ A king can issue a decree stating that so and so is under arrest, there may have been no previous regulation to cover the alleged crime, the person may not have known that he was doing something which would evoke the wrath of the monarchy. Yet, the ruler can fabricate at will regulation for the purpose of imprisoning someone whom he does not like. Such a government operates by caprice, and the society which it controls will be correspondingly unstable. In a properly conducted government, (such as democracy), such a state of affairs will be ruled out. Democracy is the government by laws which are arrived at after long deliberation by properly chosen representatives of the people, and which are promulgated so that all men may become acquainted with them. All of this is sharply at variance with government by decree.

Besides, Locke believes that there are certain areas of human conduct which are immune to government interference, he called these 'rights'. The doctrine is the direct ancestor of the famous Bill of Rights in the American Constitution. The Bill of Rights maintains that the government is powerless to abridge certain types of conduct of the citizenry: such as the freedom to speak, to worship as one pleases, and so forth. The main right which

³ Locke, *The Treatises*, 69.

⁴ *Ibid*, 69.

he emphasizes, however, is the right to own private property. He believes that no government can justly take away a person's private property. This is because private property is, to a great extent, the fruit of a person's labour. In a significant sense part of the person is invested in his property.

In fact, Locke often uses the word 'property' to refer to a man's life and liberty as well as to his possessions and to take these from him, is tantamount to an assault upon his physical person. In the same vein, Locke argues that all men are equal in the sense that they have rights which are anterior to those given them by society, and since they are not given to them by society, they cannot be taken away by society either. What a sound, logical and valid argument!

Moreover, the most important democratic element in Locke's theory is his attitude towards government. Society is created in order to eliminate the defects of the state of nature. When men leave the state of nature in order to enter society, they thereby give up the power of punishment to an executive whom they appoint. But the crucial fact which he emphasizes here is that the executive is appointed by the people, and therefore is responsible to them. As he says, "the whole purpose of government is to make laws for the regulation and preservation of property and for the defense of the community against external aggression, all this only for the public good". Locke's theory is that the government is, so to speak, a glorified secretary. We entrust it with powers to do those things which we find inconvenient or impossible to do ourselves, just as we appoint a secretary to handle our affairs if we are busy. But if the secretary violates our trust (if he embezzles money or so) we can fire

him and, if the government violates our trust by attempting to usurp our rightful authority, we can dismiss it.⁵ The point we should note here is that the source of authority lies with the people who appoint the government merely as a means for carrying out their will.

Locke believes that in order to safeguard the people against the concentration of power, he envisages a government divided into three branches, each of which would function as a check upon the other. He calls these divisions the Executive, Legislative and Federative branches of government. He believes that for the smooth-running of government, there is need for separation of powers among the three arms of government. He believes that if those who make the laws also enforce them, self-interest will be the order of the day.

The Implications for Nigerian Politics

Now, having vividly explained Lockean political philosophy, it is imperative to discuss the implications for Nigerian politics. These implications will now be marshaled and fully discussed as adumbrated earlier. From the outset, Locke believes that the supreme power belongs to the people, it follows (for him) that whoever governs without the consent of the people is a usurper. He describes usurpation as a domestic conquest arguing that any person or group of persons who usurps power has no right to be obeyed.⁶ According to Locke, men create government to secure their rights, and if government becomes destructive

⁵ Locke, *The Treatises*, 70.

⁶ Uduigwomen, *Footmarks on African Philosophy*, 158.

to life, liberty and property, it can be overthrown and replaced by a government which will respect their natural rights.⁷ With all intents and purposes, this goes straight to Nigerian leaders and politicians. The onus is on them to safeguard the rights and property of all Nigerians. To this end therefore, wanton destruction of precious lives cum valuable property mostly in the North East of Nigeria must stop now. The government should do everything humanly possible to put an end to this.

Again, following Locke's notion of sovereignty which is the bedrock of the greatest democracy of our time (that is, American democracy) military regime is no true representative of the Nigerian people. It is an aberration, a destruction of political society, order and popular sovereignty, a usurpation of power, and an erosion of the people's inalienable rights. Since it does not enjoy the consent of the people, it should not decide for or act on behalf of the people. Where it does, the people are not under obligation to obey or co-operate with it, because according to Locke, whoever gets into the exercise of any part of the power, by other ways than what the laws of the community have prescribed has no right to be obeyed⁸ to take over the reins of the government. Without mincing words, and to declare with authoritative finality, it should not be; it must remain a rumour. On no account should the military try this. It is immoral to destroy democracy under the guise of bringing about changes in the democratic process. Civilian regimes deserve to be left to make their mistakes, correct them with the passage of time so that after

⁷ Locke, *The Treatises on Government*, 426.

⁸ *Ibid*, 457.

several test-runs true democracy shall evolve. It must equally be borne in mind that constitutionally, military government is an aberration. The constitution of Nigeria states thus: The Federal Republic of Nigeria shall not be governed nor shall any group or any group of persons take control of the government of Nigeria or any part thereof, except in accordance with the provision of this constitution, this constitution shall prevail and that other law shall to the extent of the inconsistency be void.⁹ The thrust of the argument here is that the military rule is established by decrees rather than constitution. It therefore shows that it is baseless, unconstitutional, illegal and illegitimate. My argument hinges on the fact that the use of decree by the military for the purpose of administration constitutes a great danger to the right and liberty of the people.

In addition, though, Locke is the defender of the right to own private property; he however does not advocate the unscrupulous amassing of excessive wealth. Man's right to own private property is according to him limited within reasonable bounds which is dictated by needs, the same natural law gives man the right to own private property also sets limits to this right. What this boils down to is that Locke is not a defender of crude, greedy and unscrupulous ways and means of acquiring property. I want to believe that there is a need for our politicians and those at the helms of affairs to borrow a leaf from this.

Above all, the government according to Lock, is the servant of the people and is responsible to the people. The government derives its power from the people, a mandate to carry out the wishes of the people. If the rulers are not

⁹ *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999.*

fulfilling the wishes of the people, then, the people reserve the right to remove them from the power and elect new rulers who will carry out their wishes. Rulers should always keep in mind that they are elected into office by the people with the mandate to carry out their wishes. This calls for serious reflection. Omoregbe adds to this when he avers that the main function of the government in Locke's philosophy is to enforce morality and protect the fundamental human rights of individual citizens.¹⁰ Irele corroborates this when he says that Locke believes that the principal function of government is just to preserve man's natural rights and to create the condition where these rights can be secured.¹¹ Again, Appadorai adds to this when he says that Locke's concept of natural rights is of value.¹²

Conclusion

In this paper, we have made efforts to lucidly explain Lockean political philosophy and its implications for Nigerian politics. It is obvious that Lockean political philosophy is of vital importance to Nigerian politics. For instance, his insistence on law, and not force, as the basis of government cannot be over-emphasized or relegated to the background. Locke's point can be encapsulated in the aphorism that "the government is, so to speak, a glorified secretary." The crux of the matter is that the government is the servant of the people and is responsible to the people.

¹⁰ Omoregbe, *Socio-Political Philosophy*, 133–134.

¹¹ Irele, *Introduction to Political Philosophy*, 47.

¹² Appadorai, *The Substance of Politics*, 26.

The people reserve the right to remove any government that fails to perform its duty properly.