

Popper's Notion of Criticism and Political Progress in the Nigerian Polity

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DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.13924902](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13924902)



Paper History

Received: 01-10-2024

Accepted: 02-10-2024

Published: 13-10-2024

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Abstract: Criticism is a forceful element for desirable change. The idea of criticism runs through Popper's philosophy from science to politics. The practical significance of this idea in the realm of politics cannot be underestimated. This is underscored by the recurrent need to deal with totalitarian and tyrannical elements at display in everyday politics. Modern democracy has been in crisis because of constant abuse of political power by leaders and other political actors. This evil has become persistent because of the ignorance of the populace about what a true democratic system ought to be and be characterized. Sadly too, those who are knowledgeable enough have failed, either out of fear or favour, to be committed to the values of true democracy, one of which is criticism. Any society deficient of such values is closed against progress and self-improvement. Therefore, using the analytical and critical methods of philosophical enquiry, this paper examines Popper's notion of criticism as a vehicle of political progress within the Nigerian polity. The study recommends, among others, the need for citizens to be more critical minded, effective engagement of Civil Society Organizations in political processes and the acceptance of constructive criticism by political leaders as a means of enhancing political progress.

Keywords: Criticism, Democracy, Political Progress, Open Society, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of what political structure would best ensure that the public powers in any commonwealth are effectively apportioned and exercised for the good governance of the society or how political power can be systematized to prevent corruption that comes with exposure to such powers has become perennial. Rightly so, this raises persisting and imperative concerns that are particularly germane to the discussion of global politics.

Over the different epochs of the existence of organized or political society and in various eras of philosophical thoughts, the debate about the problem of governance, civil leadership and effective distribution or moderation of public

power has been extensively discussed. From whatever perspective this might have been tackled, it points to the high demand for political progress in every generation. According to Cozzaglio & Favara (93), political progress can be said to be the achievement of better conditions of life in a society according to the standards of a given political system. It is a change that fulfills the function of politics as a field that is expected to ensure order, stability and security and provide justification for power that is acceptable to the masses (98). Therefore, in a democratic system, as related to the context of this study, political progress must comprise of the desirable change that befits an ideal democratic dispensation. However, the numerous indices of lack of political progress are a serious

issue in governance today the world over especially in Africa and particularly in Nigeria. Nigeria is supposedly running a democratic system of government that is bereft of salient conditions that characterizes a true democracy. There is that syndrome of exclusivity wherein the government belongs to the elite and no one could challenge political decisions. Sadly, as it is, Adegboyega and Obioha (1- 2) observe that such a democracy that rejects the tenets of progressive reasonableness, criticism and revision amounts to authoritarianism.

It was within such emerging political consciousness of the 20th century, that the quintessential scientist, Karl Popper developed his treatise on a practicable model of organizing the powers of the commonwealth such as to secure the people's rights and political liberty from despotic rulers. He addressed these matters in his decisive writings on the nature of governance maintaining that the foundation of true governance reposes in the openness of government to criticisms from free institutions. Hence, Ezeugwu posits that what popper offered, if well applied would hopefully result in genuine social and political progress (*Pieacemeal Social engineering* 115).

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Recently, there have been chronic maladies in political leadership the world over due to leadership failures of public office holders and such failures have been very remarkable even in nations which are known to be practicing traditional democracies. Leadership responsibility which is the thrust of political progress and development is lacking in Africa and Nigeria in particular. Adegboyega and Obioha (10) decry the low regard or disrespect for opinions of the masses on important issues pertaining to nation building. In addition, they point out the intolerant attitude of Nigerian democratic government towards opposing views of institutions and citizens against government policies. Worthy of note is the recent attempt by the legislature to pass a 'subversion bill' into law.

However, lack of political progress in Nigeria also owe largely to failure of the people to be rational enough to understand their rights and also demand for it (Ezeugwu, *Karl Popper's Open Society* 87). Most often, the masses are afraid to speak the truth to power as a result of either fear or favour. Human activists have been driven to extinction and journalists are often persecuted when their freedom of information rights adversely affects the political elites. These problems and many others that threaten the soul of true democracy have remained a cog in the wheel of political progress in the Nigerian polity.

3. CRITICISM AS A SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY

From the beginning of his career, Popper projected the idea that the acquisition of knowledge grows through a critical attitude, constant criticism and revision. This critical method is the theory of fallibilism or falsification, foundational to his philosophy of critical rationalism (Agashi 1). Popper assumed that there is no verification of theories in science but refutation or falsification. He argued that all criticism consists in pointing out contradictions or discrepancies and that scientific progress consists largely in the elimination of contradictions wherever we find them (Dykes 5).

In critical rationalism, Popper rejects induction as a scientific method while proposing a continuous process of conjectures and refutations as the only method through which scientific knowledge progresses. He opines that propositions must be capable of being refuted in order to be considered scientific knowledge (Adegboyega & Obioha 8; Dykes 6; Agashi 2). Popper believes that certainty in the scientific enterprise is elusive; hence any claim of precision or desire for certainty is an illusion. No scientific theory can be regarded as absolutely certain or sacrosanct since all knowledge is conjectural, hypothetical and merely tentative solutions to problems (Harper 95).

Popper further maintains that we cannot have certain knowledge and that all our knowledge is fallible and so we should abandon the search for absolute knowledge. The solution therefore is to jettison the assumption that only certain or justified knowledge can be considered knowledge (Pickel 89-90). He opines that since knowledge maybe true but we do not have any way of knowing for sure, then all knowledge are conjectures, though some may stand up to criticism than others and hence considered closer to the truth. Therefore, the best way to improve our knowledge or develop novel and improved theories is through criticizing instead of justifying or refuting instead of confirming our beliefs and theories (Onebunne & Umeogu 92-93).

Hence, scientific knowledge can only be considered knowledge if they refer to the world of experience and by implication refutable (Agashi 2). Popper holds that since we cannot conclusively verify knowledge, we can possibly falsify them conclusively. However, the certainty of this falsifying claims cannot still be guaranteed. By implication, every claim to knowledge remains ever open to criticism (Pickel 91).

4. POPPER'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

Popper's political thought could easily be gleaned from his philosophy of science founded on his scientific methodology that subjects every truth to criticism (Agashi 2).

He aimed at developing a political theory that is free from authoritarian suppositions. Popper dreamt of a society where citizens have unfettered opportunity to critically express their convictions on virtually every issue. For him, Society makes progress through criticism just as science makes progress through the overthrow or modification of theories by refutation. The same way that scientific knowledge progresses through the refutation of theories, the society also makes progress through the similar principle by being a tolerant society to opposing or critical views (Ezeugwu, *Karl Popper's Open Society* 83).

4.1 Popper's Closed and Open Societies

Popper's *Open Society and Its Enemies* maintains a firm liberal position against the tenets of modern totalitarianism (Ryan 89). Some of the fundamental problems addressed in this debut include the paradox of sovereignty, individualism versus collectivism, piecemeal versus utopian social engineering, sociology of knowledge and the autonomy of sociology (Pickel 84). Fundamentally, these are some of the ideologies that play out in two different societies he identifies as closed and open societies.

4.1.1 Closed Society

Popper distinguished a closed society from an open society, the former being analogous to the Spartan society prior to the Athenian imperialism characterized by suspicion of alien influences as dangerous to tribal taboos, economic protectionism, abhorrence of egalitarian and democratic principles, discrimination against inferior tribes, enslavement of neighbours and fear of expansion of city states (*The Open Society and Its Enemies* 184). Let us thematically examine some of these features of a closed society.

4.1.1.1 Totalitarianism

In the closed society, government exercises total control over the affairs of the society and citizens are deprived of the right to critically reflect on the things that concern them but only to accept and pattern their lives after the customs and taboos of the community. Such societies do not welcome personal or individual decisions and suggestions but rather aim at actualizing goals by coercing all to align with the pursuit of such goals. Invariably, the law enforcement agencies are deployed to silence every conflicting opinion already considered a threat to the status quo. (Ezeugwu, *Karl Popper's Open Society* 86). Through this totalitarian repression, government becomes absolute and unlimited in its economic, moral and cultural policies (Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* 186).

Popper traces the root of totalitarianism to the philosophy of Plato (Adegboyega & Obioha 5), who argued that change leads to degeneration, hence pushing the world towards decay. Therefore, everything that exists in the human society is susceptible to change and a mere copy of the original present in the ideal world of forms every change consequent is a step away from perfection. However, Ezeugwu reveals that totalitarian ideology looks very attractive on the surface because it promises a perfect society and a haven where all societal and political problems find instant resolution (*Karl Popper's Open Society* 85).

4.1.1.2 Historicism

Popper observed that Hegel is the father of historicism which could be considered as a sophisticated form of totalitarianism or modern totalitarianism (Popper, *Open Society and its Enemies* 20-21). Unlike Plato who predicted the extinction of the material world based on its mutability, Hegel taught that the change in the essence of things does not lead to degeneration but a perfect condition called the absolute Idea. Hegel's 'absolute idea' became the foundation of the Marxists perfect communist state. This idea assumed that the political process of attaining a communist society requires absolute state control. This Marxist interpretation of history has also been looked upon by Popper as deficient (Ezeugwu, *Karl Popper's Open Society* 86). Karl Marx foresaw the evolution of a classless society through the process of social revolution initiated by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie whereby the dictatorship of the capitalist system in turn destroys the system itself.

Historicism in its very nature hampers present political action by an undue reference and reverence to history based attempts to discover and apply the origins, patterns, laws, trends and destinies of institutions imagined to have contributed to the evolution of history (Wilkie 64). However, some tenets of a closed society in the discourse of Popper have been remarked to advantageous in different aspects of the society. Particularly, Ezeugwu critically appraised the ideas that characterize Popper's closed society as capable of being a source of moral stability, social security and togetherness that contemporary western society lacks (*Karl Popper's Open Society* 85).

4.1.1.3 Utopian Social Engineering

The utopian social engineering is a political policy advanced in the closed society as a means of attaining set goals through a well thought out blueprint. Popper considers utopian social engineering as one of the enemies of the open society and a very regressive approach towards politics (Corvi 52). In other words, utopianism is the attempt at reconstructing

or reforming the society as a whole. This approach is dangerous because dictatorial and totalitarian principles are inevitable for the full implementation of political blueprints. Wilkie (64) explains that blue print politics refers to the practice that political reforms must follow a preconceived model of society.

In furtherance of his analysis, Popper seems to draw a parallel between the tenets of historicism and utopianism. He opines that the alliance of both creates a holism that is interested only in the development of the society as a whole instead of its facets. Hence, Popper places this utopian approach in contrast to contrast to piecemeal model of social engineering. (Popper, *Poverty of Historicism* 74).

4.1.2 Open Society

4.1.2.1 Democratic governance

Popper's *Open Society and its Enemies* abhors high handedness and dictatorial tendencies of leaders as an alternative path to the growing advance in fascist and totalitarian ideology of his time, while setting a new agenda for democratic governance with the lessons of true democratization (Ezeugwu, *Karl Popper's Open Society* 83).

Popper holds that the political structure of the society must offer a wide range of opportunity for the rational and critical input of its citizens without limitations. In particular, Popper says that the distinguishing feature of a good system of government is that it should be open to criticism (Harper 96). Popper's idea hacks back to the etymological and the undiluted understanding of democracy which means rule by the people. For him people can rule through constructive criticism and free election (Agashi 1). Such a view led him to reformulate the central problem of political theory, thus, 'how is the state to be constituted so that bad rulers can be got rid of without bloodshed, without violence'? as distinct from the old question of 'Who should rule?' (Agundu & Ukange 163). Hence, Popper suggested that the fundamental goal of politics should be how to eliminate misrule and not to concentrate on the traditional question of "who should rule the state?", as asked by political philosophers from the time of Plato (Notturmo 60).

According to Popper, even the most adequate answer to the question of who should rule would not bring solutions to the problem of governance since all rulers are fallible and would virtually do what they will with power. The inconsistencies and confusion that arise from the principle of popular sovereignty exposes the paradox of democracy and can only be overcome if the question "who should rule?" is abandoned (Pickel 87). Hence, Popper further challenges the democratic principle of majority rule and popular sovereignty

with his question, "what if it is the will of the people that they [the people themselves] should not rule, but a tyrant instead?". The majority rule as remarked by Popper expresses a tyranny of democracy where the majority opinion is upheld as sacrosanct hence any decision reached by the majority must be accepted (Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies* 123). As a result, Popper recommends the jettisoning of the principle of majority rule in favour of the principle of democratic control which is egalitarian in nature characterized principally by general elections and representative government (Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies* 125).

Government policies in such a system would always give allowance to the contrary views and inputs of the citizens as a sign of being ready to make adjustments to their operations and decisions (Ezeugwu, *Karl Popper's Open Society* 84).

4.1.2.1 Piecemeal Social Engineering

Social engineering is a theory of social governance propounded by Karl Popper as a criticism of historicism and a pathway to social and political reforms (Avery 26). It is the application of scientific thought to solving social problems just as an engineer would use technical know-how to solve problems of science or technology (Umotong 114). Therefore, Popper defines piecemeal social engineering as a process attaining social development by addressing societal issues critically in bits and stages. Popper believes that piecemeal process must be accompanied by critical thinking so as to arrive at positive results whether in the sciences or social sphere (Ezeugwu, *Piecemeal Social Engineering* 109).

This method of politics aims at combating the most immediate problems of society rather than seek an ideal society by trying to eradicate all evils in the society at once, probably based on an already set out blueprint (Popper, *Open Society and Its Enemies* 148). This theory creates rooms for adjustments and possible changes in plans when or wherever a targeted situation changes, hence every policy becomes a mere trial, ready to be improved upon. While it does not posit that the attainment of an ideal society is an illusion, it maintains by tackling problem in bits an ideal state can still be achieved. According to Ezeugwu *Piecemeal Social Engineering* (113) argues critical rationalism is integral to the operation piecemeal social engineering since criticism aids in finding new solutions for problems through analysis and reforms.

5. THE STATE OF NIGERIAN POLITY

Nigeria operates a democratic system of government. However, the nation's democracy in its present form is suffering from serious socio-political crisis enough to reveal

that there is an enormous problem of governance. Essentially, the political concerns that taunt the nation may be reduced to issues such as concentration of political power in those who govern, absence of suitable check and balancing structure that allows the people or civil societies call public officials to order, wrong ideologies influencing the selection of political leaders and the wanton disregard for the rule of law. Upon assumption of public office, many government officials are often seen to set aside public interests and employ the powers of governance for their personal advantage. This kind of attitude could also be related to the ill and corrupt means through which they get into office whereby believing that since they rigged their way through, they are not also accountable to anyone.

Udofia and Uduigwomen (34) observe that Nigerian political parties are motivated by the power of self aggrandizement instead of objective ideology. Hence, despite the multi-party system in operation, the ruling political party makes attempts at privatizing power in terms of doing everything to silence the opposition parties, where, for instance in the parliament the election of all the principal offices is manipulated to favour one party. This invariably undermines the power of the popular sovereignty since the members of parliament who are representing the interest of the public are now being dictated for.

Ndianefoo (8), observes that low literacy level coupled with gullibility and docility of the general public becloud the desired critical attitude of the most people towards governance thereby thwarting political progress due to failure to make objective judgments and positive inputs towards governance. In the face of this quagmire, Nigeria continues witnessing severe problems of power abuse, violation of human rights, low pace of development and authoritarianism. According to Ezeugwu, these issues are further aggravated by the fact that governance thrives in secrecy, lacks openness and community involvement and as a result breeds so much corruption to the extent that it is almost forbidden to criticize government officials or policies (*Piecemeal Social Engineering* 118). Same accusations of corruption, nepotism, tribalism, and other vices have always been alleged in successive governments since military regime and have remained the bane of Nigeria's socio-political development (Udofia 77). These problems within the leadership structure have not only impoverished the nation but have also predisposed the Nigerian polity to failure and degradation of the system and institutions meant to uphold ideals in the state (Denis 5).

To say the least, the list of Nigeria's distemping factors of backwardness as a nation can continue on and on.

This is what Udofia (79) succinctly terms a socio-political poverty comprising inequality, injustice, impropriety, decadence, corruption, destruction of building blocks of freedom and all other factors that create the present situation of discordance, incoherence, seeming disintegration, conditions of squalor and dysfunctional system.

6. POLITICAL PROGRESS IN THE NIGERIAN POLITY

All of Popper's thesis on the open society reveals that a society progresses with a genuine change in the light of vigorous but rational criticism. Such a society recognizes that no one has a monopoly on the truth. In such a society, citizens are able vigorously to debate government policies and the future direction of their country and freedom is maximized, both the weak and the poor are protected, legal guarantees of freedom of association and freedom of speech are assured. Such societies are not just the exclusive domain of mature democracies but also part of any state's democratic development. An open society is not a function of culture or history, but of a genuine commitment to government transparency and civil rights.

In building a successful open society, guaranteed access to information is one the most critical elements. Citizens should be able to discuss the issues of the day, challenge the media and government, and, when they see fit, take to the streets to register their protest in peaceful demonstrations. In turn, those in positions of public trust and authority should listen to citizens' concerns. Corroborating this view, Ndianefoo (7), believes that there would be a greater level of peace and social harmony in Nigeria if there are free debates and amicable resolution of issues between leaders and the governed instead of authoritarian stances and rulings.

Underpinning these processes should be a lively and independent media, ready, willing, and able to hold those who occupy positions of public trust to the standards of an open society. The government should accept the media's legitimate right to challenge its policies and also the public's support for such critiques. Politicians should make themselves readily accessible to the media and the people instead of being intolerant of personal but opposing views held by any citizen or citizens on government policies and institutions (Adegbayega & Obioha 10) In a society where this is the practice, the media accepts its responsibility to filter information fairly and objectively, so that citizens are accurately informed. The purpose of such access is clear: to build public trust, which in turn safeguards against corruption.

In a nutshell, from the context of Popperian framework, criticism can enhance political progress of the Nigerian polity by making the citizens to inculcate a critical mindedness where they are inquisitive of those who are entrusted with the task of governance. The critical culture of questioning everything, as proposed by Popper, would bring about a true democratization of the Nigerian polity where openness and transparency will be guaranteed in the socio-economic and political circumstances of the nation (Ndianefoo 7). Political leaders who find themselves under intensive, regular public scrutiny are more inclined to act honestly, ethically, and in the public interest and less inclined to sell out the public interest in favour of their own. In other words, a free, independent and pluralistic media is essential to a free and open society, and to the political progress of any democratic system.

Enhancing political progress through criticism as proposed by Poppers can only be possible in an open Society which by nature upholds democratic values like freedom of speech, mass media, respect for human rights, rule of law, supremacy of the constitution as well as free, fair and credible elections for periodic change of government. Nigeria will witness a tremendous progress when all these are mainstreamed into the polity.

7. CONCLUSION

Popper's notion of criticism stands as a valuable tool for enhancing political progress in contemporary society. By advocating for rigorous scrutiny of ideas, policies, and actions, Popper emphasizes the importance of fostering an environment where accountability, transparency and ethical decision-making thrive. Through the lens of Popper's philosophy, individuals and institutions can engage in constructive dialogue, challenge dogma, and embrace change, thus cultivating a culture of political progress. Moving forward, it is imperative to continue applying Popper's principles to address the challenges of our time and promote a more responsive and progressive political landscape. From the above, it can be deduced that Popper's response to questions of political progress remain applicable to political office holders and civil societies in the 21st century and his work can serve as a reference point and practical guide in resolving our crises of governance.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be deduced from the study of how Karl Popper's notion of criticism can enhance political progress:

1. The citizens should be informed, enlightened and educated in order for them to be able to inculcate critical-mindedness in choosing or electing responsible leaders who will be transparent and accountable to them. There should be much awareness and sensitization of the people about the need to be actively participating in the political activities of their state or nation in order to ensure that the right and responsible people are in power.
2. Civil Society engagement should be fostered to facilitate opportunities for civil society organizations and grassroots movements to engage in political processes, advocating for transparency, accountability, and responsible governance. There should be a vocal opposition party to keep the government in power up and doing by constantly and constructively criticizing their policies.
3. Open dialogue should be encouraged by establishment of forums for open dialogue and debate where diverse perspectives can be expressed and challenged constructively, fostering a culture of respectful discourse and accountability.
4. Political leaders and institutions should be encouraged to embrace and welcome constructive criticism as a means of improving decision-making processes and fostering public trust. Political leaders must bear in mind that they are public servants who must be answerable to the people.
5. The citizenry (electorates) must take advantage of their constitutional rights of freedom of speech and expression to constructively criticize, evaluate and question the policies and actions of government in order to enhance.

Policies that enhance transparency in governance should be advocated such as open data initiatives, whistleblower protections, and accessible government records, promoting accountability and trust in political institutions. The Mass Media for instance must be empowered to fearlessly report the policies and happenstances in government as well as actions of political actors in order to inform and orientate the people through undiluted information dissemination and reportage.

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