

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY AND NIGERIAN LEADERSHIP

BY

YUSUFU BALA USMAN

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY

ZARIA

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When I was invited to give this lecture I was allowed to choose the date and time. But I was not given the choice of topic. It was given to me as Public Accountability and Nigerian Leadership. This might be because the organizers have a set programme and the lectures are in a definite series. It might simply be because of the great importance attached to the issue of public accountability, on its own, by the Social Science Club. It might also be because the organizers cannot think of anything else and just wrote down the first thing that came to them in order not to send a completely blank invitation. Therefore it is not clear to me what dimension of this subject, the organizers and the audience want me to touch. I am going to focus on one aspect of the subject. This is the question of how to ensure that accountability to the public becomes a central and entrenched feature of the Nigerian political system, especially from 1979. I will be brief and leave enough time for questions, comments and discussions.

In a way there is nothing controversial about the need to ensure public accountability. The need for it is widely accepted in this country. There are of course, powerful groups and cliques

with clearly fascist and super-elite tendencies in the bureaucracies and business companies who only pay a grudging lip-service to this and only keep quiet because the conception of the "public" is at present so fuzzy. But inspite of this super-elitism and the fuzziness, the need to ensure that leadership is genuinely accountable to the public is certainly widely accepted.

The drafters and promoters of the constitution proposed by the majority of the members of the CDC claim that one of its innovations and merits are its provision for public accountability. These are supposed to include the ombudsman-type institutions; the code of conduct; the specifying of objectives and Directive Principles and the restrictions on carpet-crossing in legislatures, in this draft constitution. The debate has however centred around the issue of whether a specific provision guaranteeing freedom of the press is necessary in order to ensure public accountability. And also on whether a powerful executive president, especially one whose ministers should not be elected members of the legislatures can in any way be accountable to the public. But not only has the way the majority of the members of the CDC approached the issue of public accountability been very superficial, but the debate itself has avoided basic issues. This is mainly because the draft constitution, which the government is trying to impose as the only one on the agenda of debate, is not intended to be understandable or if you like accountable to the public. Its language is pompous, verbose, and obscure. It is tortuous, choked with innumerable and cross-references. The arrangements of its chapters and section can have

only one rationality - obscurity. It is clearly not intended for the public to understand and it is virtually untranslatable, into meaningful prose or verse in any Nigerian language.

Perhaps the only way the Nigerian public can understand it - or at least what it has in store for them - is if it is made into a television series like *The Village Headmaster* or *Kuliya Manta Sabo*. In this series members of the CDC - with an open invitation to Chief Awolowo as the most important non-participant in the drafting exercise - would be the actors. They would act out the roles they have designed for themselves as chief justices, executive presidents, executive vice-presidents, presidentially appointed ministers from an indigenous ethnic community of one of the nineteen states, special advisers, indigenous landlords with absolute rights over thousands of acres of land, indigenous shareholders and other species of indigenous parasites and trading-post agents.

If the debate has really taken off - and without the publication of our alternative draft and a systematic mass political education exercise it cannot take off - some fundamental issues relating to public accountability would have been raised. The question: what is the precise purpose and objective of making the leadership accountable to the public would have been tackled? Other issues like what is "the public" or who exactly constitutes "the public;" what does accountability mean and of what level or levels are its operation meaningful given its defined objectives? would all have been grappled with.

It is clearly important to establish the purpose of public accountability. At the most immediate level its purpose may be

a cliché intended to prevent discussion of participatory democracy and reduce it to an empty phrase. It is important to establish this purpose even if some people dismiss the attempt as theoretical, academic or idealistic, for these have become derogatory words in discussions in this country, as one is supposed to have no theory, to be non-academic and to have no ideals.

Is the purpose of public accountability essentially to prevent agitation and protest and keep the public quite and pacified? Or is the purpose to make the public understand what the leaders are doing for them so that they can more effectively follow and submit? Or is the purpose essentially to render account in the sense of profit or loss of public revenue. Or is the purpose of public accountability to enable the public to control the goals, nature, methods and operations of a political system on a permanent basis through a continuous flow of information, discussion and decision in popular organs.

But even if we answer these questions there is still the issue of what constitutes "the public." All types of leadership in society, with no exception are accountable in one way or another to a public. The issue is, which public? It may consist of the shareholders or boards of directors of the large multinational corporations? It may consist of the Nigerian bureaucratic and business agents of these? It may consist of a group or inter-locking groups in some institutions? It may consist of the editors, staff, contributory readers and letter-writers of newspapers? It may consist of a collection of church or mosque congregations? It may be a clan or tribal union or some such body?

It may be an old boys association? It may be just a clique and their network of clients and agents? Or "the public" may consist of an incoherent combination of these? The point I am making is that what we need is not just public accountability but a clear and pervasive grasp that ^{in a genuine democracy} this public consists should essentially of the common people, the exploited and humiliated masses of peasants and wage-earners. In our draft constitution this comes out clearly for we define clearly who the government should serve and be accountable for. It is made categorically clear that the government has no business been accountable to the business and bureaucratic agents of the capitalist system or any person who lives from the milking of public funds and exploitation and not from the products of their material and mental labour.

But it is not only establishing clearly the nature of "the public" which is important. Equally important is the nature and operation of accountability. A public which consists essentially of peasant farmers and wage-earners cannot make a leadership, or indeed anybody, accountable to it in a society built on the private ownership and accumulation of wealth; especially a society on which this private accumulation by a tiny minority is carried on almost entirely, through the manipulation of public office and institutions.

In other words there cannot be genuine accountability in a capitalist society, more so in a dependent capitalist society like Nigeria. This is because the ownership and control of the basic means of existence land, housing, clothing, food, transport, information is central to accountability. It is farcical to

pretend that those who own and control these or those who serve them can be made accountable to those who have nothing but their humanity, labour and need. In order to have public accountability there has to be ~~just~~^{and} democratic social and economic system through the establishment of cooperatives and various form of collectives. These alone can establish the basis of genuine public accountability for they entrench it with regards to the most basic things and^{at} the most basic level. Only in a society in which collective ownership and accumulation is dominant and all public institutions are clearly and unambiguously separated from private ownership and accumulation of wealth can public accountability be assured. This type of society would bring about genuine democracy, independence and self-reliance and lay the essential foundations for socialism.

One cannot deal with the issue of public accountability seriously and honestly without raising the issue ^{the alternative} of social and economic system and organization, which in the contemporary epoch involves the decision about capitalism and socialism. It is no use pretending that these are alien. It is also not useful to try and hide behind any of the universal religious and pretend that these distinctions, these clear cut alternatives between collectivist and individualist forms of social and economic organization do not exist. In contemporary Africa the choice is clear because the alternative to cooperatives, collectives and socialism is not and cannot be some form of independent individualist system or capitalism. It can only be further dependence and incorporation as satellites of the Western capitalist system. The issue of public accountability in this country for the present and the

future has to be examined from/basic levels and seen in its
fundamental context. We cannot really afford to waste time on
these
this and other such issue, with pretence and double-talk.