# The Personal is also Political in Nigeria's 2023 Elections

Salawu Olajide
February 24, 2023

To do good is one thing. To know what it is that is good to do is another. The former can easily be determined by the value of its consequences while the latter might pose as a palm kernel in a person's cognitive processes. It is an uneasy epistemic process because of the skepticism that plunders humans when it comes to decision-making. This indeterminacy of knowing the good thing to do has often been used to excuse moral failure in liberal democratic systems. This indeterminateness of "knowing the good" is also what worries political epistemologists when they analyze, either descriptively or normatively, what an ideal political theory or set of values should be. But this deficient epistemic architecture has often been exploited in liberal democracies: Since we cannot know the value of our actions until we do them, then no one ought to present their beliefs, values, or ideals as the right ones. In strictly political terms, we cannot know the right candidate until we vote for them. Campaigns and manifestoes are often far away from the real attitude of politicians once they emerge. We see this in our student government politics, federal, state, and local government leaders, and in all the arms of government that hinge on the majority vote.

It is the exploitation of this deficit in human political epistemic architecture that I aim to talk about briefly in this essay as regards the upcoming 2023 Nigeria Presidential elections. As a direct link to the first paragraph of this essay, I would like to exposit a moral failure in liberal democracy that is

often masked with liberal values of individual rights and the right to vote. Before I go about that, I think it is important to rehash how liberal democracy has fared in Nigeria. The point I aim to discuss here has been well-articulated here by the Cameroonian political philosopher Ajume Wingo: “Africa lacks the particular history of liberal institutions and values that have served as the foundation for democratic institutions in the West.” He argues that the chances for a well-functioning democracy in Africa are bleak without such a bedrock. The liberal democratic institutions that we find in the West established democracy on a foundation that was a hundred years in the making. As Wingo rightly notes, universal suffrage and the idea that all citizens have an equal say in how the government runs, which are commonly regarded as the core principles of democracy, are, of course, a relatively recent addition to the pre-existing structure of the rule of law, constitutionality, separation of powers, and anti-democratic safeguards for individual expression and property rights against the majority. Western democracy’s “vitality and durability” are a result of the system’s overall architecture, which lets internal conflicts strengthen the system rather than cause it to collapse. For the reasons Wingo points out, Nigeria’s history with democracy is very different from that of the West. The ideals and values that help ground liberal democracy in the West are simply lacking, which is why democracy has been disastrous for the country since it began as an ideal political theory post-British colonialism. Democracy manifests itself in Nigeria, as it does in most other African countries, as a means of electing political leaders. Although maintaining the population’s composure and the flow of Western aid, Wingo argues, the formalities of elections and opposition parties don’t actually give the responsiveness to the public that we Africans in the diaspora have come to expect from democracies.

One of the problems of democracy—and this is not endemic to Africa—is that the “common good” that we hope to achieve cannot easily be determined by the general will of the people during elections. For instance, when the majority of the people in Plato’s allegory of The Ship of Fools decided to defer to the authority of the person who is good at convincing people with his loud voice that he is capable of sailing a ship, we see that they were headed towards destruction when they neglected the expertise of the skillful sailor on the ship. Rhetoric and cash, in a capitalist system, can easily convince the majority in times of emotional ambivalence—an emotional state that is rampant during elections because of the “indetermination of the value” of future actions such as voting. But the people in Plato’s ship are not simply “fools”, they are simply not just philosophers that find it easy to transcend the senses and rationalize probabilities and alternatives. This skepticism about the “common good” grounds my conception of moral failure in liberal democracies.

So, when does moral failure manifest in a liberal democracy? Moral failure occurs when, in the face of a better alternative, a person chooses to vote for another candidate. The reasons for a person committing to this failure are numerous: vote buying, tribalism, and nepotism, among many others. For instance, your father commits a moral failure when he chooses to vote for a racist incompetent (whatever that means) republican candidate because he supports conservative ideals that are far away from the vicious character of the candidate and not the obvious candidate with a semi-virtuous character. Ditto when your cousin chooses to vote for the PDP presidential candidate despite his corruption and explicit nepotism because he is a party member. You also commit a moral failure when the reason why you voted your mother as local government chairperson is simply because she’s your mother and not because she is an obvious better candidate compared to Cash Madam or Alhaja Fatima. Moral failure, as it is described here, has been playing out in Nigeria’s democracy since it got shipped to the country via imperialism, but social consciousness has radically shifted, and Nigerians are now aware that proceeding with such failure is what builds the unjust society that they live in. Thus, there has been a resurgence in why there is a good reason to pay attention during this looming election in order not to continue with this failure, especially given the long-term effects such failures have on the well-being of the masses.

Recently, a man in his mid-60s was trending on Twitter for a video of him posted on the platform. In that video, he is defending regionalism –what I would like to call a small unit of right-wing kind of nationalism. He is caught saying at a community meeting that by the bond of ethnic relations, it is ungracious for a Yoruba person not to vote for the APC presidential candidate –a candidate that has a somewhat squeamish background: his various links with drug cartels in the United States in the late 90s and early 2000s has been reported by both Nigeria and international Media; his educational history is foggy; and his date of birth remains a debate, especially in Nigeria Twitter political wars. But this does not indicate enough reasons for this man that make the bigoted and tribalistic campaign in his community meeting to not vote for Bola Tinubu, neither does the nepotism of the ruling party's candidate since his time as Lagos State governor in 1999. By virtue of his ethnicity, he is inclined to get the majority votes of his ethnic group. Competence is not a determining factor, nor should his moderate efforts to preserve rectitude. But this kind of (possible) bad selection is often masked in liberal democracies with the liberal values of "individual rights" and the "right to vote for the candidate of my choice." This mask is often professed through affirmations like "it is my right to vote for anyone I like. And it is equally within my right to canvass for the candidate of my choice". But does it suffice to just blame the man of regionalism? A glance at the history of Nigeria proves that such blame is uncharitable: If you are familiar with Nigeria's colonial history and the 1914 amalgamation of the country's southern and northern protectorates by British imperialist Lord Lugard, it comes into light why some Nigerians might hold such vicious sentiments. It is perhaps normal for regionalism to manifest as a vice within social and political relations when the unification of specific regions is done for economic reasons and the ideals, values, culture, political system, and religion of the regions are not part of the consideration. But colonialism, just like capitalism, is a lack of love. It is a selfish and exploitative system that builds the unjust world we now live in.

I am not in this essay campaigning for or against a politician or a faction of political sentiment. Other presidential candidates have their own share of public criticism too. The PDP presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar, who was a former vice president, is well-known for his immersion in corruption. His former boss, Obasanjo, did not miss the chance to call him "a most disloyal human being." Opponents have also identified the populist Labour Party candidate as hypocritical, as detailed here by a reporter who has gained accolades for his good research and propaganda against political bad attitudes.

The kind of poor decision-making in liberal democracies elicited by the mid-60-year-old man I scapegoated above is what I call "a moral failure in liberal democracies." In a liberal democracy, moral failure occurs when, in the face of obvious incompetence and a lack of virtuous character, an individual under the mask of liberal values chooses to vote for a candidate despite huge evidence that a better alternative exists in the poll. This definition does not do justice to what I am trying to do with the term I am articulating here, but it suffices when we consider that the personal is also political. If the goal of a government, as J.S Mill points out to us in the 19th century, is to promote individual moral and intellectual well-being, then the personal choices we make within our rights affect the political institutions that build our society. For instance, voting for a political candidate who would criminalize gay relationships is an invitation to the chaos that your great-grandson would face when he loves and kisses another man.

Even though there are checks and balances between the different arms of government, an individual cannot evade responsibility for their political choices. The question of political and moral responsibility that I am pointing out here is to indicate that our political choices are simply not personal; they affect others as a result of the legitimacy we will give to political leaders when we vote for them. Since political institutions shape not just our interests but our lives and characters, the actions and inactions of political leaders are what determine our society, and Nigerians going to this presidential election must take this into consideration.

Idowu Odeyemi is a philosophy PhD candidate at the University of Colorado Boulder. His theoretical works draw from social, political, and moral philosophy and applied epistemology. He has received the Eaton Research Award and the Beverly Sears Research Grant.