

THE WHITE COLLAR

IDOWU OLOFINMOYIN

idowu.olofinmoyin@norfolk-partners.com



In Search of Our Philosopher Kings

There was once a nation of poor farmers struggling under the weight of three seasons of drought. On all sides the country was flanked by bigger more

politically stronger nations who saw their opportunity to absorb the productive nation into their own.

After the first season the strong charismatic leader of the nation to the north, a brilliant military general proposed they join his nation. "You will have all the land of the North to farm, more territory than any other... as long as you surrender to my military" but they declined. After the second year the rich and affluent aristocrat king of the southern nation visited and proposed "Look, I am the richest man in my nation and my nation is the richest in all the lands, join us and you will also be the richest nation in all the lands... as long as you pay me all my taxes" but again, the farmers declined. After the third year the highly educated king of the West, and in the fourth year, the beautiful Queen of the East- they all came promising what they had to the small nation, as long as it would yield to them and their ways, but as always they declined.

Then in the fifth year a man in a caravan and donkey came to their land. His caravan settled on a small piece of land and there the man began to grow plants of all kinds from the many seeds from all around the lands he carried in his caravan. This was the only food grown in the farmers' nation for five years. Gradually, the man taught the nation of farmers how to grow in the drought- they made him king and once more they were the greatest farming nation in all the land". ~ A King for our land

As Nigerians we are shrewd in our approach to life. With an infant mortality rate of 72.40 per 1000 children under 1 year of age and as a nation of 160 million, from early childhood we are well versed in struggle and competition. We demand the most we can get for every naira that comes out of our pocket. In our businesses we stretch and adapt in difficulty, at home we are a 'nation of managers' always preparing for the "rainy day" never wasting or taking any moment of electricity for granted.

However ask yourself this- as demanding as we are of ourselves, our money, time and resources, do we apply the same scrutiny into our choice of those who control our money, our time and our resources? No, not your bank or your investor, or your accountant- your elected leaders. For instance, who is your elected Representative in your State House of Assembly? Or how can you demand accountability for the resources they receive on your behalf?

For all our hard work and toil we demand little or nothing of those who



seek our mandate to lead us. In our pursuit of better lives, we often ignore or pay little attention to the choice of those who day in and day out make decisions that directly affect the attainment of that better life.

No Democracy Without Informed Choice

A large part of this off-the-cuff standard to which politicians are held to is due to a voter "apathy" which many Nigerians feel towards the electoral process, a lack of belief that anything can be done to influence the predetermined results. But this is exactly the attitude that allows the status quo to persist and enables a lack of accountability or fear of consequence when those elected to lead contest.

The election of a democratic government is not simply organising a national voting exercise for a "popular election". Democracy is premised on the people's choice of their leaders, a choice that is free and fair, and a voluntary expression of will. But choice cannot exist without being informed, because a real choice can only be exercised in knowledge of what is chosen and its alternatives. Therefore in a democracy access to knowledge of those who seek to lead is as important as the "choice" of who leads.

This is why along with the basic voter education functions of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in the Constitution and section 2 of the Electoral Act there should be a responsibility to expose candidates

contesting to lead in government to the scrutiny of the electorate by organising events that make this possible.

Requiring Higher Standards of Scrutiny

Appearance, behaviour and speech are the three most basic forms of identifying and discerning a person's motives. As we grow older we hone these skills, becoming adept at discerning motive and character to the point that we learn how to identify a person's culture, education and affluence simply by looking at them. If we apply this basic standard to our daily associations and in our lives as a people how can it then be prudent to select the men and women who will determine our future without even first requiring that we examine them publicly under conditions that allow voters discern more about their political values and principles?

Until Philosophers Are Kings...

Returning to the lesson of our farmer nation and the discourse above, we see that leaders are a reflection of the priorities of those who choose them and a nation will allow leaders to emerge that represent its value system. Nigeria today is plagued with economic, sociocultural and political crises that, though far from being unique to us, persist as a result of a leadership crisis.

In Plato's Republic the ancient philosopher Socrates argues: "Until philosophers are kings, or the

kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils".

The Philosopher Kings in our context are therefore those men and women who show themselves to have values that prioritise the investigation of truths and principles of knowledge or conduct- in short those who are given to exercising not just education but learning in the issues that are important to us as Nigerians. They are the people who desire the greater good for our country and who possess the knowledge and skill to achieve it at the expense of selfish interest and at the cost of self-sacrifice.

Still we must ask ourselves whether our current electoral process is compatible with identifying the men and women with these qualities and if not how do we begin to change it to do so. How do we reprioritise our politics in a way that what we look for in our leaders are proven records of integrity, knowledge and skill rather than political alliance, wealth and the right connections? If we are true to ourselves we can begin to make the changes in our electoral processes that enable us to identify those who have the vision and the temperament to solve the problems we face today. If we are not, we can continue to expect nothing but more of the same, leaders with problems rather than solutions.