

# **Accountability and Transparency:**

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**Two relevant attributes important in improving governance in Nigeria**

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The basic definition of democracy is government by the people i.e. rule of the majority. In other words, a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections. If this is so, this then means that having been elected by the people, it is incumbent on the leaders to be accountable and transparent in governance. This is hardly the case in Nigeria.

The just concluded presidential debate attests to this fact. If we are truly practicing democracy where power is vested in the people as described above, debates by aspirants seeking for elective positions should be an integral part of our election process. As it gives the people the opportunity and platform to decide on whom to vote for. A well-planned debate will usually give aspirants the opportunity to defend their track record and subject their proposed plans and policies to public banter. This is the case in all the countries that propagate democracy and who we emulate, be it in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and so on. In fact, in many of these countries, in addition to the debates, there are also institutionalized platforms to engage with the people, for instance, the state of the union in the US and so on.

In recent times, we have seen political leaders acting as though they were running their family or private businesses, with no sense of accountability and transparency to the key stakeholders i.e. the people. This makes mockery of the entire process. In today's electoral process, politicians will rather hold political campaign rallies where substantial issues are rarely discussed, and which does not offer the opportunity for aspirants and their supporters to engage in conversations on issues relevant to governance. At best, their supporters are like spectators who cheer them on even when the wrong things are said. There is no doubt that more often than not, a substantial part of these crowds is rented.

How then do we grow our democracy and improve the process if the status quo remains? They say a leader must be able to envision the goal he has for his people, articulate this vision in a way that the

people buy into it and feel part of it, and finally, the leader must also be the first to tread this path however arduous it may be. If this is indeed true, are we living up to these standards? “Posterity will judge us” – this is quoted each time! How intentional are we: in building the legacy we wish to leave behind, in framing our succession plans and in crafting how we want to be remembered, as we assume these positions? These are all critical questions that should form one’s mind set as they embark on the leadership journey. Consequently, if our current leaders fail to role model this, what will the next generation of leaders emulate.

For a start, we must collectively decide on the culture of governance we intend to build. Is it one where leaders govern without regard for the people and show no accountability, no transparency and no respect for the rule of law? Or do we begin to cultivate the attributes of transparency and accountability in governance? If we truly want our democracy to grow and better serve generations to come, the latter then suffices. A good place to start will be to integrate the presidential, gubernatorial and other similar debates into our electoral laws. It should be made compulsory for persons seeking elective positions to participate in such debates. This is the responsible way to go. Even though this may not be the case in other countries, we must consider what is in our best interest as a country.

Many will argue that majority of voters today do not have televisions in their homes and so are unable to watch these programmes (but this can also be simultaneously aired on radio stations to increase the coverage of audience). More so, that with the way the current electoral processes are set up, winners in these debates are not necessarily the ultimate winners. Building a culture is never a short-term achievement – it takes time, but the first step is usually the most important step. We should also not underestimate how the fall out of these debates reverberates across the country through the social media platforms, mainstream media and even through word of mouth. The choice is really ours!

It will better serve our country and our democracy if these debates are passed into law and made mandatory for key political aspirants, so that it then becomes an integral part of the electoral process. We can start by hosting the debates with participants drawn from flagbearers of the political parties with the most representation in the National Assembly. In addition, more participants can be included to the final debate from other political parties with either fewer or no representation, using a laid down and fair criteria. The criteria used in selecting participants during the last debate was not very clear. As at current count, Nigeria has over ninety political parties most of which have fielded candidates for key positions. So how did the organizers arrive at five participants? Also, how were the questions sourced?

In conclusion, we should also integrate the current presidential debate platforms rather than balkanize it. At last count there were three organizations doing this. I advise that they come together to form one strong entity for the sake of fostering this laudable initiative and ensuring that we begin to build a culture of transparency and accountability in governance.