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## Bad governance and political selection in Nigeria has a human cost

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The pursuit of good governance in Nigeria should focus on encouraging trustworthy and competent electoral candidates, says Toluwalola Kasali, committed to serving in the public's interest. Disenchantment with the political system, especially among the rapidly growing youth population, makes the challenge increasingly urgent.

### The human cost of bad governance

Nigeria's **poor socio-economic performance**, human rights abuses, **widespread poverty**, insecurity, **corruption** and lack of trust in the political system have led to disenchantment amongst the electorate, especially the youth who make up **51%** of the **84 million** registered voters. This matters in a fast-growing population of over **200 million**, with more than **60% of people** under 25.

There can be two possible effects from such disenchantment on voter turn-out in the 2023 elections; it can motivate high turn-out in which people demand better governance or lead to apathy and low turn-out. It is expected that the high stakes at play will mobilise the former. There is a need for people to participate in choosing political leaders who will serve the public's interest and promote good governance.

The human cost of bad governance is evident in the low level of basic infrastructure, weak healthcare and educational system, high unemployment and the number of out-of-school children, amongst others. Across the socio-economic class divide, there is a feeling that the effects of bad governance will catch up with everyone someday. The recent protests by young Nigerians against police brutality, the **EndSARS protests**, exposed the gross human rights abuses suffered by many Nigerians at the hands of the institution created to protect them. More than about the police itself, the protests demonstrated the youth's discontentment with governance throughout the country.

Nigerians are now demanding that the government tackles the root causes of poverty, insecurity, human rights abuses and socio-economic instability – through the levers of good governance. Moving ahead to the 2023 elections, attention must be focused on the overlooked question of who becomes a political leader to achieve these goals.

## Why are political leaders important?

Over the past five electoral cycles since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, less attention has been paid to **'who' becomes a political leader**, particularly the quality of people elected as members of the Local Government Council, State Assembly, House of Representatives and Senate, as well as those elected as Governors and the President.

While good governance depends on building strong institutions that provide the framework for politicians to act in the public's interest, it also depends on choosing competent and trustworthy politicians who have the strength of character to uphold the values of the institutions in the first place. For one reason,

elected officials can choose to undermine institutions' integrity for self-dealing and personal gain. The Nigerian electorate should, therefore, demand and **elect political leaders who are competent and honest**, but how can this be guaranteed?

## Where do political leaders come from?

Elected public office holders, as members of Nigerian society, adopt their values and beliefs about patriotism, public service, honesty and integrity from that same society. These values are learned in families, schools, communities, associations and organisations and **impact how elected officials behave** in positions of trust.

Where the principles of civic duty, honesty, integrity and service are instilled in every Nigerian citizen, the chances increase that the pool of available candidates will embody some or all of these attributes. However, if only a few individuals in society recognise that such attributes are fundamental to good governance, it becomes a challenge. For transformational change, we must build a society with core values that espouse what we hope to stand for as a nation and what we hope to achieve for the country's future.

## What motivates a political leader to run for office?

A political leader's motivation to run for public office will be varied and affect the quality of decisions and public policies adopted and implemented should they be successful. Their motivation might include self-identity, self-interest and enrichment, the responsibility of public service, family background, salaries, experience, or a combination of these factors. In particular, the significant opportunities for rent-seeking in public office in Nigeria have often attracted many politicians with a focus on extracting rents.

It is therefore important to consider what type of formal and informal rent structures exist in Nigeria's elected offices that attract these individuals, rather than candidates with a public service focus, and what systems exist to scrutinise, expose and check these excesses; improved checks and balances that **reduce rent extraction** and greater scrutiny of political behaviour tend to improve political selection.

Alternatively, if the structures in public office reward excellence, hard work and performance, it is more likely to attract and motivate politicians with a focus on serving and ensuring accountability. Ahead of the 2023 elections, a key issue to consider is what range of mechanisms can be implemented to make it more likely that good candidates put themselves forward for office.

## What determines who gets successfully elected?

Election processes influence which individuals get selected for office. In Nigeria, **social cleavages** exist along religious, ethnic and class lines, which often inform their choice of candidate, rather than a politician's policy preferences. Political parties also use a patronage system and **vote-buying to win elections**. The culture of vote-buying is facilitated by the level of poverty in the country, amongst other things, and it is used as a tool to perpetuate the poverty cycle.

Politicians, moreover, play street-level politics and take advantage of huge financial resources to build social capital through grassroots networks, including transport unions, market associations, cooperatives and religious and professional groups. Therefore, to support civic engagement and voter education ahead of 2023, it will be crucial to counter these methods by mobilising such grassroots groups and building social trust by enlightening them about the importance of good governance and its impact on their daily lives and their children's future.

Such mobilisation should be carried out through a combination of social media, print, radio, TV and grassroots channels. Voters' access to this information will inform them about the quality of candidates and their vision for Nigeria. When the quality of electoral competition rises, to win elections, political parties might be forced to bring forward better qualified candidates through a transparent process of party primaries. In the long-term, civic education in school curriculums should be prioritised from an early age.

## Quality by accountability

Elected politicians should remain accountable to those they are elected to serve. If Nigerian politicians knew that retaining their position was based on their actual

performance, there would be a greater incentive for effective behaviour and to remain accountable to the people. That level of accountability would also reduce the chances of poor-performing politicians getting re-elected.

Every citizen must therefore hold public officials accountable – this is not a role reserved for the few. The media, civil society groups and the public should play a critical role in public disclosures about politicians' performance through their own engagements and investigation.

The race towards improving accountability and good governance begins now, and the power is in the people's hands. The focus should be on encouraging the election of candidates who are trustworthy, competent and committed to serving in the public's interest, building the Nigeria its citizens and young people hope to see.

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*Photo by Ayoola Salako on Unsplash*

### About the author



**Toluwalola Kasali**

Toluwalola Kasali is a finance and policy consultant who seeks to drive sustainable change by influencing policy. She served as a Special Adviser to a former Minister of Finance in Nigeria, and she is a Fellow Chartered and Certified Accountant with an MSc in Energy Studies. Toluwalola is a 2019 British Council Emerging Policy Leader who recently completed an MSc in Public Policy at LSE, winning the Lloyd Gruber Prize for the Best Policy Paper in the School of Public Policy.

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