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A LECTURE

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN A DEMOCRATIC DISPENSATION: MYTH OR REALITY?

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PROTOCOL:

2. I wish to thank the management of this institute for finding me worthy to speak on the subject matter of servant-leadership, which has been the cornerstone of our administration in Niger State and which I believe is the path to progressive governance in this democratic dispensation. The theme of this discussion - "Servant Leadership in a Democratic Dispensation – Myth or Reality?" - provides a platform for the understanding and appreciation of the concept and wider dimensions of this unique leadership style in relation to our democratic experience as a nation and particularly in Niger state.

3. It is for this reason that we shall be looking at the underlying principles of servant-leadership, demonstrating its relevance to democratic governance and to our administration in Niger State. Of course in this process, we shall also see some of the limitations or challenges as they were, in providing servant-leadership, particularly in a political set-up that had only been used to a top-down, often winner-takes-all leadership style. This is very significant in view of the fact that the majority of the people see leadership position or responsibility as a source of personal wealth; many have lost their souls and have become beggars, often breeding and sustaining dependency syndrome, otherwise known as *Maula or Ranka ya dade* culture.

4. I do hope that at the end of this interactive session, we shall all be more enlightened from the approach and the contributions that will follow,

which I believe is the real essence of the programme of this nature – that is, the cross-fertilization of ideas, on what servant- leadership truly symbolises and on how we can make the best use of its precepts in our day-to-day lives in whatever capacities we find ourselves, without necessarily finding quick fix answers as to whether servant-leadership is a myth or reality. Indeed, it becomes more real where a symbiotic relationship is established between the leadership and the followership.

5. Before we proceed, may I remind you that what we are doing in Niger State fits into the focus and vision of President Umaru Musa Yar'adua, GCFR, who declared during his inauguration at the Eagle Square, Abuja on May 29, 2007 that he would be a servant-leader, at exactly the same moment that I was being sworn-in as the Governor of Niger State in Minna, during which I

also declared that in the spirit of servant-leadership, I preferred to be addressed as “the Chief Servant” rather than “His Excellency”.

6. We are therefore drawing inspirations from Mr. President in the propagation of servant-leadership in Nigeria today, the major thrust of which is the provision of selfless, accountable, transparent and God-fearing leadership in a manner that puts the people at the driving seat. In other words, it recognizes the people as the target beneficiaries of the leadership agenda, particularly in a democratic setting. Like it is often said 'evil thrives when good people keep quiet'.

7. I do not intend to bore you with definitions of leadership or the argument about whether leaders are born, made or trained. It is however important for us to note that there is a paradigm shift from the academic exercise of describing leadership as an end in itself, to analyzing

leadership roles and the impact on achieving desired goals and objectives, either for an organization, a group, a state or country. The old school of thought associates leadership with organizational hierarchy or managerial position and focuses on mundane elements such as personal traits of individuals, dominance, status symbol, concentration of power, regimented, hierarchical, and often top-down. The new approach however, focuses on the results and impact generated by the actions and activities of individual stakeholders in achieving collective goals and aspirations. We are usually not concerned with the efforts or length of time spent, but with the outcome, the result of that effort achieved in an efficient manner.

8. We can therefore say with utmost certainty that whatever your position in a setting, whether you are a President, a Minister, Governor, Commissioner, a legislator, a Council Chairman

or a Councilor, a security chief or a cleaner in an organisation, you are exercising some leadership roles and functions. Indeed, your style in those roles invariably affects how you perceive your responsibility, your attitude to the work and your relationship with colleagues and the whole atmosphere of the work place. It suffices to say that leadership is whatever we do to facilitate the realization of the group's aims and objectives in a given setting.

9. A servant-leader therefore perceives his role as a humble employee, a servant, a steward who forgets his personal interest, who is more genuinely concerned with the welfare and development of others; he supports colleagues to excel as a good team player. He is more concerned with the greatest good for the greatest number. The guiding principle of the servant leader is *selflessness*. As a servant-leader, the

principle is "God first, others second, and I last". The servant-leader sees leadership as an opportunity to render selfless service and not to plunder the resources of the people or loot their funds. A servant-leader equates service to the worship of Allah (SWT).

10. Indeed, servant-leadership is more concerned with service, excellent service delivery in the most humble, accountable and unassuming manner. The servant-leader does not think or pretend to know all the problems or have the solutions to them; he involves the people in analyzing situations and finding solutions to identified problems, he allows the people to claim ownership of the solutions, thereby encouraging participatory democracy. The servant-leader submits himself to the wishes of the people and does not have a separate agenda from that of the people.

11. In an elected capacity, the servant-leader considers himself as subservient to the electorates whom he had gone, literally, to beg for a job, to canvass for votes during election, often with promises and pledges. He is a honest political activist, not one who deceives and misleads the people all the times in the name of *siyasa* which, to many people is synonymous with hypocrisy, but one who represents the people's interest and who is sincere and reliable. In that position, the servant-leader is bound to constantly relate, consult, and effectively involve the electorates in decisions and policies that directly or indirectly affect them. Hence, the political servant-leader sees the electorates as his masters, whom he treats with respect and honour because they gave him their mandate and trust. Dialogue and continuous feedback are the building blocks of this relationship.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

12. It is regrettable that a common feature of our democratic culture today is one depicted by a scenario where the electorates see their elected representatives and political office holders as untrustworthy, selfish and corrupt, no matter the level of integrity, honesty, dedication and selflessness. A number of reasons may be responsible for this, viz: the absence of political ideologies and clear-cut manifestoes for the political parties, the sudden rise to wealth and fame by elected politicians, the desperation with which the political elites struggle to get into political office, using all sorts of means, including decamping from a particular party when frustrated, in one breath and going back in another breath after their ambition has been fulfilled or thwarted, i.e. winning or losing elections.

13. All of these occur because we do not yet have an enduring democratic culture which sees public office purely as opportunity to render service. The solution to these negative trends is the enthronement of a credible *democratic process* that encourages the registration of parties based on an acceptable service contract with Nigerians, and the preparedness of the parties to be self-sustaining.

14. Here, the journey to the emergence of a servant-leader starts from the party formation through to the electoral point. This is the vehicle that conveys the good leader to the point of service delivery. If parties are formed on the basis of ethnicity, parochial interests, regional affiliations or elitists' tendencies, the nationalistic aura that servant-leaders carry runs the risk of being stained when in power. This is not to say that parties that have strong regional base cannot

produce a good leader. The suggestion here is that formation of political parties should have a national outlook to be able to generate goodwill among various interests in the country.

15. Similarly, the arbitrariness that characterize the activities of the parties must be properly checked to produce a recognizable identity for individual parties that Nigerians can relate with. By their philosophical, nay ideological, persuasions Nigerians would become more enlightened about party processes and the ideals of the parties themselves become strengthened and rooted in their members for a genuine contest of power in the service of the people.

16. The above is one strong factor that encourages the emergence of servant-leadership since members will enjoy transparency and decorum based on a party manifesto that allows fair play and justice. The existence of decorum

and democratic principles at party level, otherwise referred to as internal democracy in the parties, leaves room for a free choice of a leader that is widely acceptable to the members and the electorates. The emergence of such a leader from a party that is well-grounded and focused reduces the burden of indecision on what services to deliver to the people.

17. The second element in the emergence of an enduring democratic culture is *the attitude of the leader*. On the ascension to power, what sustains the whole process remains the disposition of the leader. This is in consonance with the notation in the Holy Bible that “whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all...” (Mark 10:42-45). The leader must, of necessity, possess a strong character and sense of humility. By this, I mean the leader must be accessible,

approachable and amenable to the wishes and aspirations of the people. In the exemplariness of his leadership, he follows the rules publicly and privately, he works diligently with honesty, does not indulge in thievery, and handles simple and complex matters with compassion. This builds confidence and respect in the followers who see through the character of the leader.

18. Another important element in entrenching servant-leadership in the Nigerian democratic dispensation is *the vigilance of the citizens*. The Nigerian electorates have the onerous task of keeping vigilance on the elected officers on how they operate the system. Their active participation is a prerequisite for the enthronement of servant-leadership. The creation of independent appraisal organs and channels will go a long way in checking the wrong steps of the leaders and in compelling them to act

in accordance with the rule of law. If leaders know that the electorates are watchful, they would be more circumspect in their behaviours, private and public.

19. It is the responsibility of the people, the followers to speak out, to 'blow the whistle' as soon as they notice foul play or abuse of office by the leaders. Quite often, things get out of hand when there is complacency and conspiracy by the followership to be silent even in the face of blatant abuse of office and arrogant display of wealth by people elected or appointed to serve. This does not augur well for the growth and stability of our democracy.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND SECURITY SERVICES NEXUS

20. Ladies and gentlemen, it is pertinent at this juncture to explore the connection between servant-leadership and our duties as security officers. As security officers, we have a duty to render selfless service by providing quality information to promote servant-leadership in a democratic dispensation. Our attitude should be guided by the overriding need to promote and preserve the integrity and security of the nation and its citizens, regardless of their social status, ethnic or religious backgrounds. We must be fair and just to all manners of people in the discharge of our duties.

21. As servant-leaders in the Security Services, we must personify the shared vision and mission of our various organisations and remain focused on the realization of those vision and mission in

the overall interest of the nation. We must be aboveboard and demonstrate zero-tolerance for corruption and its tendencies in our professional and social lives; we must exhibit a high sense of responsibility and decorum at all times in order to succeed in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Hence, we must see ourselves as agents of positive change in the society.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND DEMOCRATIC DISPENSATION IN NIGER STATE

22. Permit me to share with you at this juncture some of our initiatives and approaches to democratic governance in Niger State using servant leadership principles. We believe that governance must be participatory at all levels in order to build consensus and forge common grounds to realise collective aspirations. We

started by promoting credible internal democratic process for the emergence of candidates for our party's elective positions as well as the local government elections. We made a deliberate policy of non interference and non imposition of candidates. I refused to anoint any candidate for any elective office as used to be the case before we came on board, in order to de-emphasise god-fatherism in politics.

23. We thereafter introduced the *Jama'a Forum* (the People's Parliament), which affords us the opportunity to relate and share our views with the electorates on a variety of issues and indeed all matters of concern to the people in a conducive atmosphere. The practice is to demystify power and allow the people to have a say in governance. This is why, as the Chief Servant, I usually lead a contingent of elected and appointed public officers to visit the people in different locations of the State to discuss freely with the people, to

explain the basis of government policies, to obtain feedback on how government is faring and to get input from the people on what their priorities are.

24. At this forum, the people are allowed freely to speak on issues of concern to their lives, to ask their elected representatives questions on the campaign promises, and even to express their dismay where some public officers (elected or appointed) are not living up to expectation. I am happy to note that the Jama'a Forum has assisted us tremendously in gaining valuable insights into what the people need and expect of government.

25. We have realized, for instance, that the average illiterate village dweller is not after all unintelligent; that most times the people know their problems and even have ideas on how to solve those problems, but they only require assurance, guidance and confirmation from us

that they are on the right course. We also have entrenched a culture of documenting and publishing the proceedings of the Forum to serve as a reference guide and social bond between government and the people. Indeed, in the spirit of transparency and accountability, we are documenting and publishing everything we are doing in government for posterity to judge. After all, government is not a cult, a secret society or any individual's private property.

26. Further to that, as servant-leaders, we thought we must democratize the development by empowering the people at the grassroots to articulate their problems and to solve them. Thus, we introduced the concept of the Ward Development Committees (WDCs), charged with the responsibility of providing purposeful leadership and delivering services at the smallest political unit, that is the ward level.

27. At that level, the WDCs are autonomous in conceiving and executing development projects that are of priority and that would add value to the lives of the people. At the moment, these 274 ward committees are doing impressively well with the monthly grant of N500,000 each for their projects. This success story has necessitated the need to increase the grant to One Million Naira monthly, as soon as work is concluded on the appropriate legislation on the WDCs. The essence of this approach is to create a sense of community participation, ownership, transparency and accountability in the management of resources. This is also outside what the Federal, State and Local Governments may decide to do in those areas.

28. While we are recognizing the need for input from the bottom-up, we are also conscious of the huge reservoir of knowledge, experience and

wisdom of our elder citizens, many of who have meritoriously served or are still serving Nigeria and humanity in different endeavours. We therefore established and strengthened the Niger State Economic and Social Advisory Council (ESACON), made up of eminent and respected Nigerlites, to advise Government and to add value to what we are doing because most of these people have seen and been through a lot in life.

29. The ESACON has assisted our administration in so many areas, articulating our State's position on issues of national concern, like the Electoral Reforms, the Constitution Review and proposing roadmaps for the revitalization and reinvigoration of vital sectors of education, health, agriculture, commerce and investments, infrastructural development, security and a host of others. We have had to engage our senior citizens in that most productive manner because servant-leadership represents service to all

segments and members of the society, both the active and visible and the retired or withdrawn.

30. At the governmental level, we have instituted a culture of regular meetings to discuss issues of concern to the progress of the State. These meetings cut across all strata of government, including all levels of political appointees who meet regularly with the Chief Servant to exchange ideas on how best to serve the people. Political appointees use these fora to give feedback on what the people are feeling about government and its programmes, on the progress being made in respect of development activities at the local government areas. This has proved to be a good mechanism for effective communication, as political appointees are now required to submit quarterly reports of their activities to the office of the Chief Servant to justify the expenditure on their salaries.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS: NIGER STATE EXPERIENCE

31. Undoubtedly, we are experiencing some challenges, as should be expected from any pioneering effort. First, is the difficult task of changing the people's orientation and attitude to government and governance; getting the people to appreciate that public service is not an avenue for personal enrichment; and most importantly, getting the people to understand that there is honour and integrity in service delivery, beyond material acquisition and personal aggrandizement.

32. Since accountability and transparency are some of the hallmarks of servant-leadership, mischief makers are exploiting our openness to confuse, mislead and deceive the people by faulting our stance of documenting everything we do in governance for posterity. We are also getting flaks from all quarters for introducing *the State of*

Service Address, an annual presentation by the Chief Servant to the State House of Assembly and all Nigerlites, during which we give detail account of the funds we are receiving on behalf of the electorates and our activities over a period. We intend to sustain the State of Service Address as a major component of our service contract with the people.

33. We also introduced the Due Process mechanism to bring back sanity and diligence in government enterprise. This has also not gone down well with some elements of the political class, who had been used to a situation where public funds were given out to them by the leadership in their own understanding of 'human development'.

34. Distinguished guests, it is indeed heartwarming to note that despite these challenges, the people we serve attest to the fact that they are experiencing positive changes in

their lives through our leadership style anchored on the principles of servant-leadership. We make bold to say that in Niger State today, the people are enjoying free education, free health care services for the under-5 and the aged above 70, free NECO, WAEC and NABTEB examination fees, graduate employment for all residents of Niger State and subsidized agricultural inputs, among others.

35. We are also promoting national unity and integration by abolishing contract appointments for Nigerians on account of so-called non-indigeneship. As far as we are concerned, every Nigerian is entitled to permanent and pensionable appointment in Niger State once found suitable. Similarly, we are co-owning all federal establishments in our State by supporting and encouraging them to carry out their responsibilities for the benefit of our people and the State. These have all been made possible

through our commitment as servant- leaders, to the growth and development of the people we serve.

36. Ladies and gentlemen, I believe you must have observed that servant-leadership is indeed a reality more in a democratic dispensation than in any other setting, once the symbiotic relationship is established between the leadership and the followership, once those in leadership position can appreciate that leadership means total commitment to the improvement of the welfare and well-being of the people, and once the followers too understand that they have a duty and the right to demand for quality leadership. This is the only way that servant-leadership can be properly enshrined and for it to thrive in our polity.

37. I thank you all for listening and may Allah continue to bless us all. Amen.

