

Increasing Government Legitimacy in a Hostile Environment

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ABSTRACT

There is an ongoing global fiscal and economic crisis. The wellbeing of the society is increasingly dependent on the efficiency of the government. In this era of industrial revolution, scientific and technological development, and increased population growth, more demands are on the government for the citizens' satisfaction. The times are becoming hard. Citizens are gradually losing the confidence they have in their governments. The political environment is gradually becoming hostile. Government legitimacy has become a serious issue of discourse in several countries. There is a popular belief that states cannot maintain authority unless they are legitimate. Power should be based on legitimacy; otherwise it would invite trouble and may prove ineffective. A political system can face a crisis if its legitimate position is in peril. The crisis of this nature brings about change in the existing social system as well. Public administration seeks to protect people's rights, regulate industry, ensure that public programmes operate effectively, stabilize economic conditions and enable a safe environment in which people live and work. This presentation takes into consideration the role of the government and the perceptions and expectations of the citizens in times of crisis. The study employed both theoretical and practical concepts in the analyses of the relationship between the government and the governed. References were made to relevant literatures on the issue. This study eventually presents effective solutions to the legitimate crisis being experienced by many countries.

Keywords: Government, legitimacy, crisis, hostility, governance and environment.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term "government" can be defined as a legally constituted body charged with the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which the citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences. Government legitimacy is the popular acceptance and recognition by the public of the authority of a governing regime, whereby authority to given is through consent and mutual understanding, not coercion. An authority considered as legitimate often has the right and justification to exercise power. Without political legitimacy, a government will suffer legislative deadlocks and collapse ultimately since legitimacy is a major condition for governing.

Government legitimacy is a virtue of political institutions and of the decisions about laws, policies, and candidates for political office made within such institutions. Legitimacy has been discussed using different concepts. Descriptive and normative concepts of legitimacy were considered in this study. The descriptive concept of government legitimacy refers to people's beliefs about political authority and sometimes, political obligations. According to Max Weber, that a political regime is legitimate means that its participants have certain beliefs or faith in regards to it. That is "the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey, is a belief, a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige" (Weber, 1964).

Weber distinguishes among three main sources of legitimacy: People may have faith in a particular political or social order because it has been there for a long time (tradition), because they have faith in the rulers (charisma), or because they trust its legality (Legal-rational). In contrast to Weber's descriptive concept, the normative concept of government legitimacy refers to some benchmark of acceptability or justification of political power or authority and possibly obligation. John (1993) opines that government legitimacy is linked to the moral justification, and not the creation, of political authority. This implies that political bodies may be effective or *de facto* authorities without being legitimate. They claim the right to rule and to create obligations to be obeyed, and as long as these claims are met with sufficient consent, they are authoritative.

In moral philosophy, government legitimacy is often interpreted as the normative status conferred by a governed people upon their governors' institutions, offices, and actions, based upon the belief that their government's actions are appropriate uses of power by a legally constituted government. According to the British social philosopher, John Locke (1632-1704), political legitimacy derives its strength from popular explicit and implicit consent of the governed. Government legitimacy can also be considered on the basis of the extent to which the population accepts naturally, without question, the organization to which it belongs. That is, the quality of being justified or willingly accepted by subordinates that convert the exercise of political power into rightful authority.

However, in an opposing view, political authority may be morally justified without being legitimate, but only legitimate authority generates political obligations (Simmons 2001). According to Beetham, (1991),

"a power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs".

The sharp distinction between descriptive and normative concepts of government legitimacy is undermined by the fact that we find normative uses of the concept in social science and descriptive uses in moral, political and legal philosophy. There are normative theorists who work with a descriptive concept of legitimacy.

1.1 Acquisition of Government Legitimacy

It is important to emphasize that every political system strives for legitimacy. An enormous variety of political systems have gained legitimacy in various ways, times and places. These include:

- Charismatic: legitimacy acquired through the ideas and personal charisma of a person whose authoritative persona charms and psychologically dominates the people of the society to agreement with the government's regime and rule.
- Traditional: this is legitimacy acquired from societal custom and habit that emphasize the history of the authority of tradition; such as in monarchy and tribalism.
- Rational-legal: legitimacy derived through a system of institutional procedure, wherein the government institutions establish and enforce law and order in the public interest.
- Civil: this is legitimacy acquired through agreement among the autonomous constituent institutions combined for the national common good.
- Democracy: legitimacy derived from the popular perception that the elected government abides by democratic principles in governing, and this is legally accountable to its people.
- Communism: legitimacy acquired from having won a civil war, a revolution, or from having won an election, such as the Presidency of Salvador Allende (1970-73) in Chile.
- Fascism: legitimacy derived from philosophically denying the popular political legitimacy of elected liberal democratic governments.
- Constitutionalism: this is legitimacy derived from popular belief and acceptance that the actions of the governed are legitimate because they abide by the law codified in the political constitution.

1.2 Features, Causes and Effects of a Hostile Environment

By this “environment”, I mean a polity, which can be defined as an organized society, such as a nation, having a specific form of government. It can also be referred to as a political group of any size or shape, which can be a government, a state, a country, or even a social group. That is, it is a society that is organized in a political way and that has its own form of government – a geographic area with a corresponding government.

A political environment is said to be hostile when the political atmosphere increasingly gets charged. This is caused by several factors. These include political and economic instability; the use of coercion; information disseminated by the media; absence of peace and law; presence of dissident groups, and the role of external agencies. When a significant proportion of the populace lose faith in the government's institutions as a result of any or a combination of the aforementioned factors, the polity begins to experience crisis which is a breeding platform for hostility.

2. EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY

It is noteworthy to give empirical cases of legitimacy under different regimes on a global level. One factor, which can seriously cause hostility in the polity, is economic instability. If successive governments are unable to provide for the economic wellbeing of the citizens, the governments' legitimacy can be challenged. This was the case in Weimar Germany, when the newly established state was unable to cope with the economy's problems and it was soon overthrown. More recently, this can be seen in Argentina, which was going through a serious depression in 2002 while the rest of the world prospered. This led to serious questions being asked as to why it was just Argentina suffering a downturn. Economic difficulties have sparked unrest in Yemen and this undermines the stability of the country.

Another factor that can cause hostility in a political environment is political instability. This is when there is a lack of trust in the electoral system and governmental institutions or there are inadequate checks and balances or separation of powers. This can be seen in Zimbabwe when the country slipped from being a democracy to a dictatorship under Robert Mugabe. This has led to a breakdown in legitimacy and widespread unrest in a now unstable country. Similar things have occurred in Afghanistan in 2009, when a huge portion of votes went uncounted, meaning that a large proportion of the population did not have any say in the elections. This undermined the legitimacy of the country and provoked a lot of opposition. The elections in Iran in June 2008 were subject to a lot of fraud and it is widely believed that the vote was rigged after the president's opponent polled less votes in his home constituency. Demonstrations broke out following these elections and a significant amount of the citizens viewed the government as illegitimate.

The use of coercion can contribute to the crisis in a country, causing breakdown in legitimacy. This can be seen in the dictatorial regimes of Stalin and Hitler, who used fear and violence as a basis to control their populations. In Nepal, the government worked to repress Maoist activity by imprisoning innocent people because of their beliefs. This was similar to what happened in Northern Ireland with internment. In the Ivory Coast, the security forces used tear gas to drive back protesters and stifle their views leading to unrest and lack of faith in the government. Burma is a military state, employing coercion to stifle opposition, famously against its monks who led large scale peaceful protests against the government. The obstruction of free media and censorship can also cause crisis in the country, as seen in China where foreign press was banned from entering the country and the domestic press strictly controlled. This was also the case in the USSR and Nazi Germany where the government's control of the media led to a lack of faith in the institutions and a breakdown in political stability.

Another factor that can cause resentment in a polity is lack of transparency, as seen in Burma when reporters were barred from entering the courtroom during pro-democracy leader Aung Suu Kyi's appeal against her house arrest and no reason was offered for the rejection of her appeal. This shows widespread of corruption within all branches of the government, including the judiciary. The absence of peace and law in a country can also cause crisis as this weakens people's faith in the ability of the government to control lawlessness and ensure their safety. This is clearly seen in Mexico, in which some areas are entirely controlled by drug lords and violent crime is prevalent.

The presence of minorities can lead to unrest if they feel mistreated by the government, and this can also lead to a breakdown in legitimacy. This was the case with Radovan Karadzic and his violent campaign against the Muslim Bosnians and condoned Serb violence, isolating that portion of his country entirely, weakening the government's claim to legitimacy.

2.1 Practical example from Nigeria

Using Nigeria as a case study, the Southeastern states of the country agitate for secession because they feel marginalized and discriminated by the Central government. The South South people complain of being cheated and marginalized even when crude oil exploration is done in their states, rendering the land and water resources unfit for their desired uses, yet without commensurate benefits from the Federal government. This causes negative vices such as kidnapping, armed robbery and vandalism of oil pipelines in that region of the country. Also, some sects of the Northern states of the country agitate that western education is a sin. This belief, among other factors, brought about the menace of terrorism being witnessed in some parts of the country.

In view of the aforementioned, it can be observed that Nigeria, as well as several countries in the world, is undergoing serious socio-economic crisis. Therefore, government legitimacy is gradually diminishing, hence the need to proffer possible ways of reclaiming the "lost glory".

3. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY

This study was carried out by the use of some theoretical and empirical observations with the overall aim of arriving at a better understanding of the relationship between legitimacy and belief in legitimacy. The theoretical aspect explains the general features of legitimacy that may hold in any situation in which legitimacy would be involved. The empirical aspect is based on local and subjective observations of unavoidable local and subjective practices. These observations were drawn from the reports of various people who shared their experiences with me.

I had some interactions with some staff members of Phemakus Construction Company Ltd, an indigenous construction company in Ibadan. The choice of a private establishment was based on the fact that most public workers are usually scared of discussing government affairs with those outside their sphere of operations. I interacted extensively with eight workers of this company drawn from different cadres. The interview was based on the hierarchical order and the inter-relationship pattern along the pyramid of management. I consider them to be honest in their responses since they all gave similar answers to my questions even when they were interviewed differently. Furthermore, I compared their responses with the output of my discussions with two of my friends who are civil servants but would take the risk of confiding in me as regards their experiences in their workplace.

4. OUTCOME OF THE FIELD SURVEY

The results of the interviews show that the workers obey the company's rules basically for one major reason: they have been given proper orientation as regards the operations and ethics of the company, and everyone has been made to understand the positive effects of abiding by the laid down rules, which they now respect and considered a part of their lifestyle. To this effect, the company adopts the "carrot and stick" principle, which means workers are compensated for abiding by the guiding rules but get punished for breaching same, which may involve ultimately losing their jobs since the rules have become a binding agreement between the two parties, thus necessitating its legitimacy.

On a broader level, the aforementioned can be extended to the relationship between the government of any country and the governed. Government legitimacy corresponds to what people should believe to be legitimate in the light of social rules they already respect. That is, legitimacy is not necessarily immediately effective through the actions of individual agents. However, belief in legitimacy derives from what people actually respect in consideration of the social rules they already respect though they may be unclear or wrong about it. Therefore, I submit that effective government legitimacy is best achieved when people's beliefs in legitimacy are respected through the conscious actions of individual citizens.

5. GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE, CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS, TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND STANDARDS OF EVALUATION

Government legitimacy is the foundation of such governmental power as is exercised, both with a consciousness on the government's part that it has a right to govern, and with some recognition by the governed of that right. Every regime seeks to justify its reign, and this justification is based on various concepts as earlier discussed in this piece, that a political regime is legitimate means that its participants have certain beliefs or faith in it.

Pure coercive power requires no legitimacy; brute force is its own only justification. Might, at least in the eyes of its wielder, make right. However, the mighty often find out that it is one thing to assert one's dominance by force (whether in the form of personal brawn or in weaponry), and another thing to maintain control through force. But all political governances exert some degree of coercive power. They need their citizens to perceive that they have the right to do so. Since coercive force reduces freedom of action, it is a disadvantage to the affected citizens. Therefore, coercive force requires legitimation. Because the legitimation of coercive powers depends on the welfare of the affected citizens, these powers can only be defended if they bring more advantages than disadvantages for each individual. Something that is advantageous for everyone can be brought about by exchange; distributive advantage can consist in mutual advantage. Even if a coercive social order brings about coordination, efficiency, security and stability, and thereby the collective welfare of a society, it lacks legitimacy if this is accompanied by disrespect for the interests of individuals or groups within the society.

However, some form of legitimacy tends to be needed to maintain control. For example, in the legal system, some people obey the law simply because they believe in the rule of law and the appropriateness of the government making and enforcing the laws. In fact, if the majority did not accept this, it would take massive amounts of time, weaponry and energy to enforce it. Thus, the rule of law itself is sufficient for the vast majority of the law-abiding citizens. Beyond this, it is largely their support that allows the government to enforce the law on those who do not accept its legitimacy. Governments utilize exchange mechanisms with citizens on a frequent basis. For example, in democratic societies, candidates tend to make campaign promises in return for votes. If the candidates, when elected, make good on those promises, they will be in a good position for re-election. If not, their re-election is in jeopardy and the officials may become ineffective and not listened to long before re-election time since they are no longer legitimate holders of people's trust.

Citizens consider a social order as being valid with rightful claims on their loyalty if it brings about, or successfully maintains an industrial affluent society and those in authority operate on some cultural norms with the citizens. Citizens presume a government to be legitimate when they are getting something from it. That is when they give the government their support and loyalty, they expect from the government economic prosperity, security and trust that mutual benefits of their association will continue. Considering the centrality of popular perceptions about government's performance on the development and maintenance of legitimacy, it is important to note that the economic performance of the government is highly valued by the citizens. In order to avoid a decline in government legitimacy, it is very important for the government to convince its citizens, with some frequency, that they are receiving something in return for their compliance. The citizens expect from their government the provision of public order and security, an unbiased and effective rule of law, free and fair elections as well as economic stability and progress.

Moreover, the primary criterion of government legitimacy should be its degree of commitment to the protection of human lives as demonstrated by its endeavours to meet the most basic needs of the citizens. This implies that the citizens should be treated as ends, never solely as means. Otherwise, they feel dissatisfied, losing confidence in the government, thereby causing legitimacy crisis.

6. PRACTICAL WAYS OF INCREASING GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

In this present period of global crisis, it is expedient for governments to be looking for confidence building mechanisms that can lock-in their commitments and start a virtuous cycle where growing trust builds legitimacy, which in turn builds support for the rule of law. There are many ways in which reform-minded governments can demonstrate a break from the past that will build confidence and encourage citizens to embrace the cause of reform.

These include:

- Establish a realistic agenda and timeline for introducing a specific set of measures to reform governance, increase inclusiveness, fight corruption, and build a more robust judiciary.
- Appoint people with a reputation for integrity to senior ministerial positions.
- Ensure that governments include people from all major ethnic, religious, and regional groups.
- Remove discriminatory policies that disadvantage sections of the population.
- Create mechanisms within the political system to ensure excluded groups have better representation in government (such as introducing quotas or giving minority groups vetoes over certain legislation).
- Create new independent agencies to fight corruption, reduce monopolies, oversee elections, monitor budgets, oversee courts, and/or implement contentious reforms.
- Empower an international organization to implement reforms and oversee important business agreements, elections, government expenditures, etc.
- Reallocate resources to enhance the security of ordinary citizens and to make the justice systems more accessible.

The aforementioned actions will increase the legitimacy of government, ensuring that they are more endowed with “rightness” in the eyes of the citizens.

6.1 Citizen Engagement and Democratic Action as Vital Instruments for Increasing Government Legitimacy

Citizens expect the government to place them at the centre of policymakers’ considerations, not just as targets, but also as agents. This will ensure the development of policies that will respond to individuals’ needs and are relevant to their circumstances. This brought about the emergence of “co-creation” and “co-production” concepts to describe this systematic collaboration between government agencies, non-government organizations, communities and individual citizens. Here, the citizens are regarded as agents whose agency matters and whose right to participate directly or indirectly in decisions that affect them should be actively facilitated. This implies that power is to be exercised through, and resides in, its citizens.

However, for effectiveness and efficiency of this concept, it is required of public servants to acquire new skills as enablers, negotiators and collaborators. It is also required of citizens to be given an orientation to the public good, a willingness to actively engage, and the capabilities needed to participate and deliberate well. Citizens want to have a say in how solutions are developed and services delivered beyond the general preferences they express when endorsing a party’s platform and electing parliamentary representatives to pursue their interests and concerns through the legislature. For a government to govern well, it needs more direct participation by citizens to ensure stability, to facilitate people’s wellbeing and to manage environmental, health, security and issues into the future.

The government must harness the ideas, knowledge, wisdom and skills of the non-government sector in order to prevent wastage of resources and curtailment of opportunities. However, the government must ensure that the system is properly designed so as not to outrun the ability of the government to control it. Furthermore, to increase government legitimacy, the government should ensure popular participation and regime accountability secured by free and fair elections combined with a system of political checks and balances. This brings about patriotism and civic nationalism that secure loyalty to the government.

7. CONCLUSION

The issue of government legitimacy can be considered to be of utmost importance in politics and political analysis. The political system should be resilient enough to survive periods of crisis. Rulers and authorities should strive to enjoy from the citizens a fundamental condition needed to formulate and implement policies in an effective manner; that is, they will be able to make decisions and commit resources without needing to obtain approval from the ruled and without resulting to coercion for every decision. Leaders in a political system should try to ensure that whenever governmental means are used to deal with conflict, the decisions arrived at are widely accepted not solely from fear of violence, punishment or coercion but also from a belief that it is morally right and proper to do so.

Government legitimacy means the capacity to produce and maintain a belief that the existing political system is most suitable to the society. The masses must obey it without reluctance and accept its sanctity and consider it worthy of respect and reverence. It is important to note that no government enjoys the complete support of the entire population. There are different levels of legitimacy, which a government can have, and it is only when the levels drop due to a significant portion of the population believing it is illegitimate that there is legitimate crisis.

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