

Psychological Dimensions and Pathways to Leadership Selection and Effectiveness in Nigeria

Adekunle, Morufu Abiodun

*Department of Social Sciences and Humanities
The Federal Polytechnic Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria
E-mail: adekunlemaroof@yahoo.com*

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the psychological aspect of leadership selection processes in Nigeria. In Nigeria, the recurring reports by mass media have been a paradox of a country abundantly blessed with human and natural resources. The problem of development lies in leadership. Some past and present Nigerian leaders cannot claim innocence of embezzlement or mismanagement of public funds. Thus, deficiencies in the leadership selection process can adversely influence the quality and effectiveness of a leader in terms of developmental success. Qualitative data generated from secondary sources were analysed using textual analysis. There is a linkage between leadership selection and leaders' effectiveness. The study also revealed that leadership selection processes in Nigeria lack psychological approaches that can enhance the quality and effectiveness of leadership. The paper concludes that leadership selection should be more rigorous, competitive, transparent, and merit-based. It recommends the adoption of psychological evaluation to ensure the selection of purposive, competent, and development-oriented leaders in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Leadership selection, leadership effectiveness, psychological assessment*

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership selection is crucial to Nigeria's development. Also, it has been documented that all great nations were blessed with good quality and effective leaders who know the way, go the way and show the way (Igbuzor, 2017). Leadership psychology is a subfield that focuses on leaders, leadership processes, and understanding the psychological factors that influence leadership effectiveness, decision-making, and behaviour (Judge *et al*, 2002). Leadership is an essential psychological concept and is key to all human development, i.e. the key to individual, corporate, and national development. According to

Eze (2005), leadership is the most important factor, which determines whether a nation can become developed or underdeveloped. Thus, no nation ever becomes developed unless it has a leadership that is free, intelligent, patriotic, people-oriented, action-oriented, and destination-bound, leadership that understands leadership psychology and applies it in moving people forward, and the leadership that is relevant, democratic, and self-reliant in all its activities Eze (2005) observed. This marked distinction in leadership standards accounted for the superpower status of the developed nations and the poverty-stricken status of the black African undeveloped countries.

A developing country like Nigeria is undeveloped when there is a reoccurrence of ineffective leaders or absence of effective leadership and when the population suffers from national poverty due to the dishonesty of national leadership. Achebe (1983) posited that the trouble with Nigeria is squarely a failure in leadership and personal interest challenges, which are the hallmarks of leadership. Achebe (1983) noted that the kind of political thought articulated and pursued by our political fathers is the type that produces aggressive millionaires/billionaires rather than selfless leaders of their people. Omeje (2007) asserts the outrageous manner in which our leaders acquire wealth. How does one explain that past and serving Nigerian leaders had cumulatively accumulated money (via fraudulent enrichment and corrupt practices) to the tune of trillions of Naira while the entire nation is in perpetual debt? Well-known cases of Nigerian leaders who become too rich abound. Hopefully, to fill some of the gaps and prevent or solve some of these problems and those relating to effective leadership, the path followed by the contemporary developed countries is instructive for Nigeria.

Ugwuegbu (2011) reported psychological studies on the social engineering process to overcome problems associated with leadership. Addressing the leadership challenge in Nigeria is crucial to unlocking the country's potential. However, leadership selection processes in Nigeria lack psychological approaches that can enhance quality and effective leadership. Leadership selection and leaders' effectiveness are intertwined and inextricably linked. This paper aims to examine the psychological aspect of the leadership selection process in Nigeria with the following objectives;

1. To investigate which psychological approach can overcome the problem of leadership selection and leadership effectiveness.
2. To explore the roles that psychological assessment can play in leadership selection processes in Nigeria.
3. To find out how psychological assessment can influence the selection of effective leadership in Nigeria.
4. To determine whether psychological dimensions to leadership selection processes bring about success in governance and national development.

This study would provide answers to the following research questions;

- i. What psychological approach could overcome the pervasive problem of leadership selection and effectiveness?
- ii. What important roles could psychological assessment play in leadership selection processes in Nigeria?
- iii. How could psychological assessment influence the selection process of effective leadership in Nigeria?
- iv. Does the psychological dimension of leadership selection processes determine governance and national development success?

Significance of the Study

The study on the Psychological Dimensions and Pathways to Leadership Selection and Leadership Effectiveness in Nigeria is significant as it explores the psychological traits, cognitive processes, and behavioural factors that influence leaders' selection and how effective they become in the Nigerian context. It provides insights into how leadership potential can be identified beyond political or social connections, emphasising competence, emotional intelligence, personality traits, and decision-making abilities. The findings can help improve leadership development programs, inform leadership recruitment and training policies, and ultimately contribute to better governance, institutional performance, and national development in Nigeria.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative explanatory research design to explore the underlying psychological factors influencing leadership selection and effectiveness in Nigeria. The study relied entirely on secondary data from a wide range of existing academic and institutional literature, including journal articles, books, published reports, policy documents, government publications, and credible online sources. The data collection process involved a purposive selection of materials relevant to the research questions and objectives. These sources were selected based on their theoretical, empirical, and contextual relevance to leadership psychology, selection processes, and effectiveness, particularly within the Nigerian socio-political landscape.

Electoral Management Process and Leadership Selection in Nigeria

Leadership selection processes in Nigeria are complex and multifaceted. One major challenge in political leadership selection is the faulty recruitment process, particularly in

elections. The electoral process encapsulates all the institutional procedures, arrangements and actions involved in elections. Alfa (2016) outlined an electoral process to include suffrage, the registration of voters, delimitation of constituencies, the right to contest elections, electoral competition between rival political parties, the body charged with the conduct of and supervision of elections, the method of selection of candidates within the political parties, nomination of candidates, method of voting, the actual conduct of elections, the determination of results, trials and determination of election disputes, and electoral malpractices and their consequences. In other words, an election is a process or tool for leadership selection.

Globally, election is the most acceptable method of leadership selection. A cursory look at the electoral process in Nigeria reveals that it was often flawed with irregularities, violence, fraud, irresponsible behaviour of political leaders and followers, electoral malpractices and monetization of politics, which undermine the credibility of the electoral process. In addition, the electoral system lacks inclusiveness, objectivity, effective institutions, and absolute independence of an electoral commission. These challenges to the conduct of elections in Nigeria have remained unaddressed and even seem to be worsening from the colonial era (1923 election) to the present democratic era (2023 election) (Gimba, 2022). According to Jega (2022), recruiting leaders in Nigeria has often resulted in ineffective and poor-quality leaders, leading to putting round pegs in square holes. African Independent Television (AIT) news commentary in 2025 described Nigeria as a nation in endless search of the electoral process. Scholars have argued that leadership selection (recruitment) at all levels of government is central to Nigeria's predicament and that proper leadership selection is key to good governance and national development.

Omeje (2007) observed that the present criteria for screening aspirants and public office holders in Nigeria only focused on economic status, legal status, and educational attainment without considering socio-psychological status. Typically, such criteria should delve into the personality profile of political leaders since everyday experience reveals that Nigeria's problem is not a lack of resources but quality and effective resources administrators. It, therefore, follows that the selection processes ought to be such that the personality traits, mental health status, interests, motives, needs, gender, and achievement motivation (Nach) of those aspiring to various public positions should be assessed to discover potentialities, development-oriented attributes and desire for excellence among leadership candidates.

Theoretical Explanation of Leadership in Nigeria

Leadership in Nigeria as in many other parts of the world, is a multifaceted concept shaped by cultural, political, social, and psychological factors. The theoretical

understanding of leadership in the Nigerian context involves the application of various leadership theories to interpret how leaders emerge, function, and influence outcomes within organizations, communities, and government institutions. These theories help to explain the successes and failures of leadership in the country.

According to Udegebe et al. (2000), there are several theoretical approaches to understanding leadership. Each approach has practical implications which lie in their underlying assumption. In this study, these theories on leadership are block-based on orientation and emphasis as follows:

Trait theories: Trait theories suggest that effective leaders possess certain inherent traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability. In Nigeria, leadership selection is influenced by perceived personal qualities, such as charisma, oratory skills, and confidence. However, this theory falls short in the Nigerian context when traits are emphasized over competence, resulting in the elevation of individuals who may lack the necessary skills or ethics for effective leadership. Over-reliance on traits has sometimes promoted leaders based on personality cults rather than their ability to solve complex problems or lead with integrity.

Behavioural Theories: Behavioural theories focus on what leaders do rather than what traits they possess. These theories classify leadership styles as autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. In Nigeria, many political and organizational leaders adopt autocratic styles, often due to hierarchical structures and traditional norms of authority. However, this style may hinder participatory governance and innovation. While some Nigerian leaders show democratic tendencies, many are seen as top-down decision-makers, leading to the alienation of subordinates and lower organizational morale.

Contingency theories: These theories argue that the effectiveness of a leadership style depends on the situation. Fiedler's Contingency Theory and Hersey-Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory are prominent in this category. In Nigeria, a leader's success depends on matching leadership style with the followers' readiness, organizational goals, and cultural context. Leaders often struggle to adapt their styles to the demands of changing environments. Some leaders fail due to rigidity, especially during national crises or economic downturns when flexibility is crucial.

Transformational Leadership Theory: Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating followers toward a shared vision, fostering innovation, and ethical leadership. There is a growing need for transformational leaders who can rise above personal

interests to drive national development and social change in Nigeria. In this context, while a few leaders (e.g., in education, the private sector, or activism) exhibit transformational qualities, the public sector is often criticized for transactional or self-serving leadership.

Transactional Leadership Theory: Transactional leaders focus on structured tasks, rewards, and punishments. In Nigeria, this form of leadership is commonly observed in public service, where compliance is rewarded and non-compliance is punished. However, it can stifle creativity and long-term growth if not balanced with transformational elements. Despite this, Nigerian leadership is overly transactional, promoting short-termism, corruption, and patronage instead of building sustainable systems.

Given the above, the theoretical understanding of leadership in Nigeria reveals a complex interplay of global leadership models and local cultural dynamics. While various theories provide lenses for interpreting leadership behaviour, their effectiveness depends on how well they are contextualized within Nigeria's socio-political realities. The dominance of autocratic and transactional models highlights the need to shift toward transformational and servant leadership, which promotes inclusiveness, accountability, and sustainable development. A theoretically informed approach to leadership development in Nigeria would help build competent, ethical, and visionary leaders capable of transforming institutions. In addition, these theories emphasize the fact that certain styles of leadership are more effective in some situations than others. These theoretical approaches have implications for leadership selection and training.

Psychological Dimensions of Leadership Selection Process

Leadership selection involves identifying individuals with capabilities and qualities necessary to influence, direct, and manage others. The psychological dimensions of leadership selection refer to the cognitive, emotional, personality, and behavioural traits that inform the choosing of leaders. In the Nigerian context, the leadership selection process-whether in politics, business, or civil society- is influenced by several psychological factors that shape perceptions, expectations, and choices.

Meanwhile, George and Fred (2015) define leadership selection as identifying, evaluating, and choosing individuals to fill leadership positions within an organization or a nation. This process is critical to ensure selected leaders possess the necessary skills, abilities, and qualities to effectively lead and drive the organization's success or nation's development. Notwithstanding the methods used, consideration is to follow the key issues in leadership selection; job requirements, qualities (personality), diversity and inclusion, and succession planning (Stan, 2018). The current defective political leadership selection

process uses criteria such as religion, ethnicity, seniority, loyalty, and political patronage, among others that cannot guarantee or lead to the selection of effective leaders.

The problem of leadership selection is partly psychological and hinges on the personality attributes of would-be leaders. Researchers of leadership have shown that leadership effectiveness and styles correlate positively with social-psychological variables or personality attributes (Omeje, 2007). Some of the qualities include a strong drive for responsibility and task completion, vigour and persistence in pursuit of goals, venturesomeness and originality in problem-solving, drive to exercise initiative, self-confidence, personal identity, and willingness to tolerate frustration, a high sense of adaptability and dependability, high intellectual skills and aggressiveness (Stogdill, 1974). Davis (1972) also established a significant positive relationship between leadership effectiveness and personality attributes. Mueller (1988) involved politicians who responded to standard psychological tests and found that political leaders were decidedly less neurotic than the general male population, more self-sufficient, more extroverted and only slightly more domineering. The study also revealed that leaders are more self-confident than the average person, have fewer feelings of inferiority and are less irritable. Bass (1990) noted that personality is relevant for leadership effectiveness, including high energy, stress tolerance, self-confidence, internal locus of control orientation, emotional maturity, personal integrity, socialized motivation, and less need for affiliation. Also, Curphy (1993) asserted that leadership characteristics are associated with enhanced team performance.

Since personality attributes have a significant positive relationship with leadership effectiveness, it becomes necessary in leadership selection to identify people who possess these attributes that correlate with leadership success, which has implications for national development. To exemplify yet further, the screening of leadership candidates should include a psychological assessment (covering personality attributes, gender and mental health status). Thus, psychological assessment becomes an imperative part of the leadership selection.

Psychological Assessment and Its Application in Leadership Selection Process.

Throughout history, different systems have been used to recruit political leaders, ranging from self-governance, and monarchy to complex democratic systems. However, it has been documented that the progress, development and fortune are tied to the type and quality of the political leaders that they have had and continue to have (Igbuzor, 2017). According to Omeje (2007), psychological assessment evaluates a person's psychological status. It involves forming an opinion about the assessed personality traits, leading to a decision on the person. It establishes a diagnosis for someone with a mental disorder (like kleptomania among leadership candidates) in case of clinical assessment, determines the

intellectual capacity of the person assessed, and predicts a person's appropriateness for a particular position/job or crime (Halgin & Withbourn, 1993). Psychological assessment and the systematic evaluation of individual psychological traits, abilities, and behaviours are standardized tools and techniques. In the context of leadership selection, psychological assessment is a powerful tool that helps identify candidates with the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal qualities essential for effective leadership.

The aim of assessment in private or public sector organizations is to fit the man to the job/position and vice versa by assessing every aspect of the person's personality traits, aptitude, interest, personality type, dexterity, level of general intelligence, emotional intelligence level and all other psychological endowments relevant to the job/position. Measures of cognitive abilities and normal personality, structured interviews, simulations, and psychological assessment predict leadership success reasonably well (Howard & Bray, 1990; Hughes, Ginnette & Curphy, 1993; and House, Spangler & Woycke, 1991).

As a leadership selection method, psychological assessment can be conducted in designated assessment centres using assessment tools such as psychological tests, interviews, and simulations to evaluate leadership candidates. These tests/battery of tests gain insight and gather obtrusive information that reveals the personality attributes of the testee. More importantly, the method of assessment and type of tests determined by the purpose of the evaluation. Thus, for leadership selection, many psychological tests, such as personality, honesty, integrity, and vocational inventory, among other, could be administered to select intelligent, meritocratic, honest, and exemplary leaders who would be effective in moving the nation forward and ultimately bring about needed national development. Effective leaders would guarantee development manifesting in growth, high per capita income, increased national productivity and happiness, reduced national poverty, improved living standard, accountability, and reasonableness in governance, qualitative education, better societal conditions, and absence of social vices that have characterized Nigeria for many decades.

In Nigeria, however, the use of psychological assessment in leadership selection is still at a nascent stage. Most leadership positions, especially in politics and public administration are filled based on informal networks, ethnic affiliations, political loyalty, or socio-economic status, rather than scientific evaluation of psychological competencies (Ibrahim & Obiora, 2021). This neglect has significant implications. It contributes to leadership failures, organizational inefficiencies, and governance crises. For example, leaders who lack emotional intelligence or critical thinking abilities often struggle with conflict resolution, team management, and ethical decision-making. A structured psychological assessment can help prevent such outcomes by identifying individuals with high leadership potential and personal integrity. Leadership selection is a crucial issue in a

given democracy because developmental success depends on the effectiveness of the leaders. Scholars have opined that the success or failure of organizations and nations depends on leadership excellence and not managerial acumen (Eze, 2005). Omeje (2007) further opined that if Nigerians desire change in their political, social, and psychological conditions, the leaders should be people of proven integrity, selflessness, and possess those psychological qualities or traits that correlate positively with effective leadership. Psychological assessment becomes indispensable in identifying such leaders. It is imperative to adopt psychological assessment in the leadership selection process and training and accountability to citizens compulsory for aspirants, appointed and elected public office holders to understand and identify factors that can enhance effective leadership and motivated followership in Nigeria (Udegbe, 2000). The neglect of psychological assessment in leadership selection has significant implications and contributes to leadership failures, organizational ineffectiveness and governance crises (Ibrahim & Obiora, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Leadership selection in Nigeria ought to be rigorous, competitive, gender-sensitive, and transparent to pave the way for the emergence of much-needed effective leaders. If this milestone is achieved in our fledging democratic rule, then a new course to national development would be assumed to be charted entirely differently from the statuesque ante. Consequently,

- i. The psychology Bill (the establishment of the Nigeria Council of Psychologists) before the national assembly should be passed and enacted as a law needed for the professional practice of Psychology in Nigeria.
- ii. Government agencies, political parties, and corporate bodies should adopt standardized psychological assessments (e.g., personality tests, emotional intelligence scales, and cognitive ability tests) as a prerequisite for leadership positions.
- iii. Policies should mandate psychological tools in leadership selection, particularly in public service recruitment and political appointments.
- iv. The screening unit of the electoral agency should employ psychologists as professionals to ensure that objectivity and best practices are considered in the selection process.
- v. Organizations should invest in leadership development programs that focus on technical skills and psychological growth, self-awareness, ethical reasoning, and emotional stability.

- vi. A multi-disciplinary approach to solving Nigeria's leadership problems should be incorporated into the social engineering process.

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