

APATHY AND ACTIVISM FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS UNDER A CHANGED DEMOCRATIC INITIATIVE

Osezua Ehiyamen MEDIAYANOSE

University of Ilorin, Nigeria.

Visiting Scholar, University of Texas at Austin, USA

osezuaomo2002@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The paper examined the activist role of public administrators in a democratic system. It attempts to analyze the active participation of public administrators in the process of formulation and implementation of governmental policies. The paper argues that most times public policies largely reflect the desired value commitment of public administrators, and the politicians in whom the electorate entrust their mandate. It further argues, not minding legitimacy problem, that activist role of public administrators is not unacceptable if it is directed towards the public interest. The paper adopts desk research method; drawing data mainly from secondary source and adopts analytical research in arriving at keyfindings.*

Keywords: *Apathy, Activism, Public Administrators, Role, legitimacy and Democratic System*

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of public administrators in the conduct of the business of government of any political system is pivotal. Administration which is the bedrock of the executive organ of government is relevant in any form of political system; democratic or tyrannical (Ahmad, 2005). Public administrators in this sense are conceptualized to be non-political officials who are saddled with the responsibility of the day-to-day implementation of the government policies and programme. In other words, they are to do the bid of the politicians; elected or appointed, who are directly representing the interest of the people. Thus, the conceptualization of the role of public administration only to implementation of policy of government portrays an apathetic role. In some situation, and in actual fact, public administrators participate actively in the process of both formulation and implementation of policy. Public administrators can be powerful actors in the policy process and may thus function as political key-agents for major policy change. This is because the functions of modern states require situational adaptation and thus discretionary power of individual public official, but as non-elected officials the power can bring considerable legitimate problem (Rothstein, 2007). Therefore, relying on their expertise, public administrators guide politicians who are more or less naïve in the art of administration, in setting agenda, formulation and implementation of public policy.

Thus, the focus of this paper is to discuss the activist role of public administration most particularly under a democratic system. The paper attempts to discuss how active participation or activist role of public administrators by which their value commitment affects the public policy which is expected to reflect the belief and values of the elected officials in whom people directly entrust their mandate. The rest of the paper is divided into four sections. The next section deals with brief conceptual clarification. Also, some

of the environmental factors that influence the performance of public administrators in a political system are discussed. This is followed by the analysis of the activist role of public administrators in policy process and democracy; and also the analysis of the activist role of public administration and legitimacy in democratic system. Then, conclusion is drawn.

2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

In whatever sense it is used, public administration has a long history which dated back to the beginning of history of mankind, with research revealing administrative task and practices since recorded history. Indications are that what we have today as modern systems of administration have emerged, one way or the other, from the old practices and experiences of the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, the Greeks and Romans, and much later from the Christian Church, and the German Cameralists of the middle ages (Onuoha, 1999). In trying to capture the nature and role of public administration and all the interconnections, Henry (1986) defines public administration as a practice which has the purpose of promoting a superior understanding about the relationship between government and its citizens through the encouragement of public policies which are more responsive to the social needs and managerial practices which are more with the aim of the institutions being the effectiveness, efficiency and fulfillment of the deeper human needs of the citizens. This definition positions public administrators in a strategic corner of not implementation but good governance that delivers on its responsibility. It does not see public administrators as mere implementers of policies made by the politicians but instead as active role in both formulation and implementation of good policies. This is an activist view of public administrators. In his own view, Adebayo (1984) posits public administration to be concerned with the most efficient means of implementing policy decided by the policy-makers. It is an exercise that is concerned with the means through which ends (policies) are achieved. On the other hand, this view only portrays public administrators as mere implementer of policies, who cannot shape and re-shape based on their expertise the policy direction for the purpose of ensuring good governance. This is an apathetic view of public administrator.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS AFFECTING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Environmental factors examines all the natural, historical, socio-cultural and religious factors, and other significant national experiences which could have in one way or the other influenced the performance of public administration (Onuoha, 1999). These factors go a long way to determine the extent to which public administrators of a state can be apathetic or activist in performing their roles. In the case of Nigeria, the first influence arose from British colonialism. The fact that Britain colonized Nigeria and established British public service structure and procedure in the administration of the colonial territory, influenced the development public administration and of course the performance of public administrators in Nigeria (Ibid). The structure and procedure are not in tandem with the reality of social setting made up of very many ethnic and cultural

differences in Nigeria. Those factors have created problem of balancing management and control in the public service, which in actual fact, are partly responsible for the problem of nepotism and favourism often associated with the management of public administration in Nigeria.

Another influence on public administration in Nigeria is frequent incursion of the military into its political system in the past. Basically, the military are not trained to administer but only defend the territorial unit of the state. So, whenever the military take over the power, the first assignment is to dislodge the political decision-makers. And the military knowing full well that they are naïve in public administration, they lean heavily on public administrators for governing the state. Therefore, during the military era in Nigeria, public administrators were well established. They formulated, implemented and in overall determined the direction of public policies.

4. THE ACTIVIST ROLE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS IN POLICY PROCESS

Theoretical and empirical studies have shown that individual can have considerable and sometimes even decisive influence over the output of public policy process. Research on street-level bureaucrat (Lipsky, 1980; Meyers and Nielsen, 2012) concludes that even relatively low ranking officials can have important discretionary power in relation to citizens and that this authority can be used to influence the public service actually deliver to the citizens. In research on policy entrepreneurship (Kingdon, 1995; Mintrom and Norman, 2009), public official have also been identified as playing key-roles in shaping policy agenda and labeled bureaucratic entrepreneurs (Schneider, 1995). Policy entrepreneur beyond agenda setting has also been discussed focusing on entrepreneur within the bureaucracy and during implementation (Hammond, 2013). Even within institutional theory there has been a surge “to bring the actor back in”

Conceptualization as institutional entrepreneurs (Lowndes, 2005) or institutional activists (Petticchio, 2012) public officials are portrayed as playing key-role in changing institutional rules, norms and routines. Within the tradition of state feminism, for instance, democrat have been identified as important actors in changing state policies in line with feminism, or at least gender equality, agenda from outside government (Yeatman, 1990) and within planning research, individual planner have theorized as important advocate of weak social groups to effective counterweight powerful societal interest (Davidoff, 1965).

Drawing on these theories as well as empirical findings within the field of environmental policy and implementation, Olsson (2009) defines activist role of public administrator as when an individual is engaged in civil society network and organization who holds a formal position within public administration and who acts strategically from inside public administration to change government policy and actions in line with a personal value commitment. Just like policy entrepreneur, activists distinguish themselves through their desires to significantly change current ways of doing things in their areas of interest (Mintrom and Norman, 2009). They also share key entrepreneurial skills and qualities most importantly “their willingness to invest resource- time energy,

and sometimes money- in the hope of future return (Kingdon, 1995). However, public administrators as activists are motivated by a personal value commitment while the policy entrepreneur can be motivated by many factors, ranging from ideological belief to “love of the game” (Hammond, 2013).

The theory of activist role of public administrators argues that officials can potentially function as key political change agents as they wield interrelated means of power. First, they occupy positions which grant them specific rule-bounded authority in the policy process. Second, they possess particular skills, (e.g. expert-based authority) which grant them (imperfect) control over specific activities in the policy process. Thirdly, they have access to important resources from within public administration (e.g. inside knowledge of the political and administrative landscape) that can be combined with network resources (e.g. the mobilization of such civil society as civil society resources as knowledge lobbying and opinion-making (Olsson and Hysing, 2012).

5. ACTIVIST ROLE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS AND LEGITIMACY IN DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM

The fundamental tension between democracy and public administration, and politics and administration in modern society has been deemed to contribute to general decrease in the citizenry’s trust and confidence in government (Stout, 2013). Although the question of administrative legitimacy has remained an unsettled issue, scholars have largely focused on management and governance rather than the legitimate role of administrators in democracy. But it is considered very germane to dwell on the issue for clarification.

Legitimacy, or rightfulness of power, is a necessary feature to ensure order, stability and effectiveness in any political system (Beetham, 2013; Bernstein, 2011). According to David Beetham (2013), power can be said to be legitimate to the extent that (i) it conforms to the established rules; (ii) rules that can be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate (iii) there is an active consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation. Thus, legitimacy is understood as a multidimensional, context-sensitive concept comprising shared rule, normative belief and appropriate action.

A basic premise for discussing legitimacy in public administration is to recognize its political power. In most cases it is necessary to empower public administrators in order for them to carry out politically assigned duties to the benefit of the broader public. Thus, from a legal-constitutional perspective, actions of public administrators are legitimate only by being granted specific authority and jurisdiction expressed in status adopted through due legal process by the parliament, making the issue of legitimacy a rather straightforward matter (Lowi, 1993). However, as already being noticed, public administrators are empowered or exercised power beyond detailed legal prescriptions by the need for situational adaptation of policy which necessitate giving them discretionary powers and autonomy. As citizens cannot hold non-elected officials directly accountable and as superiors cannot control and steer from above due to lack of insights and

knowledge on the specific cases, legitimacy in the activist role of public administrator becomes a contested issue.

6. CONCLUSION

The paper x-rayed the role of public administrators in the policy process in a political system. It explained that the nature of the role of public administrators may be apathetic or activist. It is apathetic if public administrators only participate at level of implementation of policy as formulated by the politicians and activist if they are empowered to exercise the authority to shape and re-reshape the policy right from the formulation to implementation stage. It further discussed the legitimacy problem which the activist role can bring about. Elected officials are the people in whom the electorate entrust their mandate, therefore the policy must reflect their values and aspirations, not the non-elected officials'. But most importantly the view of this paper is for the policy to ensure good governance whether it is shaped or re-shaped in line with vale commitment of public administrators. If the non-elected officials are patriotic, they will genuinely use their expertise to assist politicians formulate sound and progressive policies, and appropriately executed. So, activist role of public administrators in a democratic system is not unacceptable if it is directed toward the public interest.

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