Socrates Political Philosophy and Political Obligation in the Athenian State: Insights for Nigerian Governance

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines Socrates' justification for political obligation, emphasizing his belief that citizens must honor their agreements with the state, respect its laws, and contribute to its stability. The study relied on extant literature from secondary sources to advance the argument presented. Applying these principles to Nigerian governance, the study explores how Socrates' teachings can inform civic responsibility, ethical governance, and citizen-state relations in Nigeria. While obedience to laws is fundamental, the study highlights the limits of political obligation, advocating for lawful resistance in cases of injustice or governmental failure. Key areas examined include judicial integrity, responsible leadership, democratic participation and the need for citizens to engage actively in governance while holding leaders accountable. The study concludes that political obligation must be reciprocal; the state must ensure justice, economic stability, security, and democratic inclusivity, while citizens fulfill their duties through obedience, civic engagement, and lawful resistance when necessary. Socratic thought offers timeless lessons on governance and ethical leadership, reinforcing the necessity of a balanced relationship between state authority and individual conscience in fostering sustainable political stability in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Political thought has long been recognized as humanity's conscious effort to understand and address the complexities of collective life and governance. Sabine and Thorson (1973) define it as an evolving intellectual tradition that reflects the progression of human reflections on political issues throughout history. This disciplined inquiry into political structures and governance has attracted profound contributions from influential philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Karl Marx, and many others. At its core, political thought delves into fundamental questions regarding the extent of state authority, the nature of political obligation, and the intricate relationship between citizens and the state. Philosophers across different eras and ideological spectrums have sought to examine both the practical realities of governance and the ideal visions of a just political system (Morrison, 2010). Through these explorations, political thought has produced both shared principles and contested perspectives, shaping ongoing debates on governance, democracy, justice, and power dynamics.

Over the centuries, these intellectual pursuits have fostered diverse interpretations of what constitutes political legitimacy, ethical leadership, and civic duty. While some philosophical traditions advocate for state

authority and centralized governance, others emphasize individual freedoms, participatory democracy, and social justice. The study of social political philosophy and the concept of political obligation in the Athenian state offer profound insights into the foundational principles of governance, civic responsibility, and state legitimacy (Gonzalez, 2012). Ancient Athens, often regarded as the birthplace of democracy, developed a political system rooted in citizen participation, legal accountability, and moral responsibility toward the state. The Athenian understanding of political obligation, particularly influenced by thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, emphasized the duty of citizens to uphold laws (Woozley, 1979), engage in civic life, and contribute to the welfare of the state.

Socrates was not only a philosopher but also an active participant in political and legal discourse, engaging ordinary citizens in thought-provoking discussions about the societal challenges facing Athens. His approach to teaching, famously known as the Socratic dialogue, involved questioning and debating a wide range of philosophical and political issues, encouraging deeper understanding among his audience (Benson, 1992). Despite his contributions to intellectual life, Socrates was charged with impiety and corrupting the youth, accused of rejecting the gods recognized by the state and introducing new divinities. The Athenian court, composed of 501 judges, sentenced him to death, with a majority of 80 votes deciding his fate (Levinson, 2007). In an ultimate demonstration of political obligation, Socrates accepted his death sentence rather than defying the laws of the state.

Political obligation refers to the responsibility of individuals to fulfill their civic duties and obey the laws of their society. In a political system, citizens are expected to respect and adhere to the authority of the state, ensuring societal order and governance. Green (1999) defines political obligation as the duty of citizens to recognize and submit to the sovereignty of the state. This concept implies that individuals, as political beings, are naturally bound to live under authority and must therefore uphold its laws in accordance with societal expectations. The social contract theory further strengthens the notion of political obligation, highlighting the necessity of surrendering individual rights to a supreme authority in exchange for governance, stability, and protection. Thomas Hobbes (1991) argues that the moral duty to obey laws is central to maintaining a functional state. For Socrates, respect for justice, obedience, and adherence to agreements made between citizens and the state were fundamental principles of governance. This belief guided his decision to accept his execution, reinforcing the idea that political obligation demands individuals honor their commitment to the laws and institutions of the state.

Socrates identified two primary reasons why citizens are morally bound to obey the laws (James, 1985): Gratitude – Laws function as societal benefactors, ensuring order and stability, just as individuals owe gratitude to those who support them; and Contract – By choosing to live within a state, individuals implicitly agree to abide by its legal framework, establishing a social contract between themselves and the government. For Socrates, escaping his death sentence would have meant violating the very principles of justice and legal obedience that he espoused, further justifying the need for law and order in Athenian society.

However, political obligation is not absolute. Johari (1989) argues that citizens should critically evaluate state commands, ensuring that laws and policies align with human needs and social justice. If laws deny fundamental rights or fail to meet the reasonable expectations of the governed, individuals may reject or challenge them. This view aligns with John Locke's (1980) perspective that political authority must be held accountable and can be resisted if it contradicts the general will. Locke asserts that while the state possesses authority, individuals retain the right to question unjust laws and demand reforms.

Examining Athenian political philosophy in the context of Nigerian governance provides an opportunity to reflect on the nature of civic duty, the legitimacy of political authority, and the role of governance in ensuring societal stability and development. Nigeria, as a modern democratic state, grapples with challenges such as political accountability, citizen engagement, rule of law, and the balance between state power and individual freedoms. By drawing parallels between ancient Athenian democracy and contemporary Nigerian governance, this study seeks to explore how classical philosophical principles can inform and improve modern political structures. The Athenian state upheld the idea that citizens owed allegiance to the laws and institutions that fostered societal harmony and collective progress. Socrates' willingness to accept his legal sentence, despite its perceived injustice, exemplified a philosophical commitment to political obligation—an idea that remains relevant in discussions about state authority, justice, and obedience to law. Similarly, Aristotle's conception of virtue-based governance and ethical leadership provides a framework for assessing Nigeria's political leadership and governance strategies (Woozley, 1979).

By analyzing social political philosophy and political obligation through the lens of Athenian democratic thought, this study aims to draw meaningful lessons for Nigeria's political system, addressing key issues such as citizen responsibility, leadership ethics, policy implementation, and democratic consolidation. The discourse on political obligation remains central to contemporary governance, as it raises fundamental questions about why citizens should obey the law, what

justifies state authority, and how governance can foster trust and active civic participation (Kraut, 1984). This exploration offers a philosophical perspective on governance challenges in Nigeria, advocating for reforms that align with the principles of justice, accountability, and participatory democracy—values deeply embedded in Athenian political thought. Through this study, Nigeria can re-evaluate its governance approach, strengthen institutions, and promote a political culture that enhances democratic values and civic engagement.

Biography of Socrates (469 – 399 BC)

Socrates (469 BC – 399 BC) remains one of the most influential figures in Western philosophy, known not for proposing fixed doctrines or policies, but for his unique approach to inquiry, dialogue, and intellectual debate. He believed that thoughtful discussion and rigorous questioning could help individuals uncover deeper truths about life, morality, and society. Although many of his discussions touched on political themes, at their core, they explored fundamental ethical questions about how individuals should live. His impact was so profound that earlier philosophers are collectively referred to as Pre-Socratic philosophers (Guthrie, 1962).

Much of what we know about Socrates comes from Plato, his most famous pupil, whose writings extensively document Socrates' philosophical dialogues and interactions. Socrates lived in Athens, where he engaged in discussions with students and fellow citizens using what is now known as the Socratic Method—a process of questioning and dialogue designed to challenge assumptions and stimulate deeper understanding (Guthrie, 1962). Rather than claiming expertise, Socrates often pretended ignorance, stating, *"I know nothing; I am simply trying to understand what you are saying."* This approach allowed him to expose contradictions and refine ideas, making him a foundational figure in philosophy. As a result, he is often regarded as the father of Western philosophy, having uncovered key philosophical questions that continue to shape intellectual thought today (Benson, 1992).

Socrates was born in 469 BC in Athens, where he initially worked as a sculptor. He distinguished himself as a brave soldier during the Peloponnesian War, though he never pursued an active political career. However, following the Battle of Arginusae, he briefly gained prominence when, as one of the presidents of the Assembly, he resisted public demands for an illegal mass trial of Athenian generals. Later, during the rule of the Thirty Tyrants (404 – 403 BC), he refused an order to assist in the arrest of Leon of Salamis, demonstrating his commitment to justice over political coercion (Benson, 1992).

After democracy was restored, Socrates was put on trial in 399 BC, accused of introducing unrecognized gods and corrupting the youth. The formal charge against him stated: *"Socrates is guilty of refusing to recognize the gods of the state and of introducing new divinities. He is also guilty of corrupting the youth."* The Athenian court of 501 judges condemned him to death, with a majority vote of 80% in favor of his execution (Levinson, 2007). Despite opportunities to escape, Socrates refused to flee or plead for mercy, believing that accepting his sentence was an affirmation of his moral and political obligation to the state. He was executed by drinking poisoned hemlock, solidifying his legacy as a philosopher of unwavering integrity and commitment to justice.

Despite never writing philosophical works or formally calling himself a teacher, Socrates gathered a devoted following of admirers and students, including the famed Plato and the controversial Alcibiades. Among his disciples were also Critias and Charmides, relatives of Plato who later participated in the tyranny of the Thirty. Many of his followers produced Socratic dialogues, though only Plato (427–347 BC) and Xenophon (ca. 430–355 BC) left substantial written accounts of his philosophy (Mukherjee & Ranaswamy, 2007).

Socrates' death marked the beginning of a lasting intellectual legacy, as most subsequent philosophers traced their philosophical ancestry to him. His contributions to political, legal, and ethical thought earned him immense fame, making him the most celebrated philosopher of pre-Plato Greece. His emphasis on moral inquiry, justice, and critical thinking continues to shape modern philosophy, governance, and education.

Socrates' Thought as a Reflection of His Environment

Socrates (469–399 BC) is widely regarded as one of the most influential philosophers of all time, shaping the foundations of Western thought. His philosophy, method of inquiry, and ethical beliefs were deeply influenced by the political, social, and intellectual environment of ancient Athens. To fully understand Socrates' philosophical outlook, it is essential to examine the historical, cultural, and political circumstances that contributed to his unique approach to knowledge, ethics, and governance.

Socrates was first influenced by the intellectual climate of Athens. For Ebenstein (1969), the Greek were the first to make the problems of man and society the object of critical reflection and systematic reasoning about society. The ancient philosophers were concerned with questions of what role knowledge could play in the development of society, how best to organize society so that man enjoys his life to the fullest, what form of political arrangement could facilitate this or if there was one universal model, constitution or political system that could engender peace, security and development in society. In an attempt to answer these questions, philosophers applied the prescriptive and descriptive paradigms to suggest possible ways of addressing societal challenges.

Sabine and Thorson (1973) also note that, while the Great Age of Athenian public life fell in the third quarter of the fifth century, the Great Age of political philosophy came only after the downfall of Athens in her struggle with Sparta. Prior to this era, the Athenians were not much engaged in either reading or writing. As such, scarcely anything was preserved on prevailing political theories. There however exist indications that during the fifth century, active political debates on issues of public concerns and the conduct of government were common place. Political questions of various dimensions were actively asked and discussed and the Greek even conceptualized what exist today as comparative government.

Ancient Athens during Socrates' lifetime was a thriving intellectual hub, home to sophists, poets, historians, and early philosophers. This period marked the rise of critical thinking and debate, with thinkers challenging traditional myths and exploring natural philosophy, ethics, and the structure of society. The Sophists, a group of itinerant teachers, advocated rhetoric and relativism, often prioritizing persuasion over truth. Socrates directly opposed their approach, arguing that virtue and knowledge must be pursued for their intrinsic value rather than for personal gain. Pre-Socratic philosophers such as Anaxagoras and Heraclitus influenced Socrates, contributing to his belief in logical reasoning and rational inquiry as tools for uncovering deeper truths about morality and existence. Socrates' reaction against the Sophistic tradition and his insistence on universal truths, rational thought, and the pursuit of virtue was a direct response to Athens' intellectual environment, where rhetoric often overshadowed ethical inquiry.

The Athenian political landscape also played a significant role. Socrates lived during a tumultuous period in Athenian history, characterized by war, political instability, and shifting governance systems. His views on justice, political obligation, and moral integrity were shaped by his first-hand experiences with democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny. The Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) between Athens and Sparta weakened Athenian democracy, creating an atmosphere of political distrust and disillusionment. Socrates questioned how power should be exercised and whether leaders truly governed for the well-being of the people. The execution of the Athenian generals after the Battle of Arginusae (406 BC), despite their military success, reinforced Socrates' belief that justice should not be subject to popular sentiment but grounded in rational principles. The rise and fall of the Thirty Tyrants (404–403 BC)—a brutal oligarchic regime—further shaped Socrates' ideas about ethical governance, justice, and individual responsibility. His refusal to comply with the tyrants' oppressive orders demonstrated his commitment to moral integrity over political convenience. Socrates' insistence on moral virtue and ethical reasoning in governance stemmed from witnessing the shortcomings of Athenian democracy, oligarchy, and the instability caused by political conflicts. His philosophy sought to distinguish justice from mere political expediency.

The social structure and citizen engagement also played out. Athenian society placed a high value on civic participation, expecting male citizens to be actively involved in political decision-making and public discourse. This engagement with governance and law deeply influenced Socrates' method of inquiry and critique of Athens' political and moral values (Morrison, 2010). Socrates frequently engaged ordinary citizens in discussions, believing that wisdom was not confined to the elite but should be pursued by all (Woozley, 1979). Athens was a society driven by public opinion, where persuasion in the Assembly often dictated political outcomes. Socrates rejected popular rhetoric in favor of philosophical reasoning, believing that truth should be independent of majority consensus. His method—known as the Socratic dialogue—reflected Athens' interactive culture, where open debate and questioning were seen as important elements of civic life. However, his challenge to societal norms and authority figures made him a controversial figure among those who valued tradition over inquiry.

Moreover, the religious and ethical beliefs conditioned the thinking of Socrates. The religious traditions in ancient Athens centered on the worship of gods and adherence to traditional rituals. Socrates, however, introduced a rational approach to ethics, questioning blind faith in mythology and emphasizing the role of individual reasoning in moral decision-making. His trial and execution (399 BC) were partly influenced by accusations of impiety, as he was charged with introducing new gods and corrupting Athenian youth. Socrates did not outright reject religion, but he emphasized critical thinking and moral philosophy over adherence to divine commands. He argued that virtue could be cultivated through knowledge, rather than simply obeying societal customs. Athens' traditional religious beliefs and state-sponsored rituals clashed with Socrates' emphasis on individual moral inquiry, leading to tensions that contributed to his eventual prosecution.

Lastly, the conservative elements of Athenian society viewed Socrates as a threat to political and moral stability. His habit of questioning authority, societal norms, and accepted beliefs made him an easy target for those who sought to preserve tradition and silence dissenting voices. His trial and execution in 399 BC were politically motivated, serving as a warning against philosophical challenges to state authority. Despite opportunities to escape, Socrates accepted his fate, believing that adhering to law—even an unjust one—was a demonstration of political obligation. His death further solidified his influence on subsequent philosophical traditions, inspiring Plato and later thinkers to expand on his ideas. His trial was not simply a legal matter but a clash

between progressive philosophical inquiry and conservative political forces, highlighting how his environment ultimately shaped both his philosophy and his fate.

Clearly therefore, Socrates' thought was undeniably a product of his Athenian environment—an era defined by intellectual evolution, political instability, social engagement, and ethical debates. His philosophy arose in direct response to the Sophists' relativism, the limitations of Athenian democracy, the erosion of justice in governance, and the role of law in shaping individual responsibility. This lay credence to Plamenatz (1966)'s words when he insists that every thinker, even the most abstract, is deeply influenced by the circumstances of his day. Socrates' relentless questioning, pursuit of virtue, and ethical convictions were not abstract ideals but practical responses to the challenges of his time. By embracing critical dialogue and moral reasoning, Socrates profoundly influenced the course of philosophy, leaving an intellectual legacy that continues to shape discussions on justice, knowledge, governance, and ethical leadership.

Theoretical Perspectives on Political Obligation

Political obligation—the duty of citizens to obey the laws and authority of the state—has been a subject of philosophical debate for centuries. While Socrates (469–399 BC) remains one of the most renowned figures advocating unwavering commitment to the state, even at the cost of his life, various theoretical frameworks have emerged to explain the nature and justification of political obligation. These theories offer diverse perspectives on why individuals should recognize and submit to political authority.

The early theories of political obligation were the *Divine Theory* and *Social Contract Theory*, which propose distinct justifications for citizens' obedience to the state. The Divine Theory of Political Obligation argues that obedience to political authority is rooted in faith and divine will. According to this view, individuals must submit to the commands of rulers because all governing authority is an extension of divine power. This theory asserts that a ruler's authority does not arise from inheritance, custom, or public approval, but rather from a divine mandate, making it independent of human choice (Stephen & Orokpo, 2018). Consequently, citizens obey rulers as an expression of their faith in God and divine law.

The *Social Contract Theory* suggests that political obligation stems from an implicit agreement between citizens and the state, wherein individuals cede certain freedoms in exchange for security, stability, and governance. Hobbes (1651), in *Leviathan*, argues that without government, life in a state of nature would be *"solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,"* characterized by chaos and conflict. He insists that citizens voluntarily surrender authority to the state to ensure order. Rousseau

(1762) also contends that political obligation is based on the general will, meaning citizens must abide by laws crafted for the collective good. He argues that society should renew the social contract through continuous democratic participation, John Locke advocates for checks and balances, ensuring that power are distributed among different branches of government, preventing authoritarianism (Locke, 1980). Together, these theories highlight why individuals accept governance—either as a necessary safeguard against anarchy (Hobbes), an expression of collective will (Rousseau), or a contractual exchange (Locke).

Modern political philosophy offers several arguments for why citizens should obey laws, ranging from consent and gratitude to fairness and social membership. Consent theorists argue that political obligation arises from individual consent. If citizens willingly participate in elections, accept national identity, or engage with political institutions, they are implicitly consenting to the authority of the state. Beran (1987) maintains that only explicit consent—such as formal agreements—can generate genuine political obligation, while Plamenatz (1968) argues that voting in elections constitutes consent, as individuals actively choose to engage with state processes.

The *Gratitude Theory of Political Obligation* suggests that citizens owe obedience to the state out of gratitude, as the state provides security, infrastructure, and essential services. Plato's *Crito* recounts Socrates' refusal to escape execution, explaining that his loyalty to Athens stemmed from gratitude for the city's protection and governance (Bentley, 1996; Simmons, 1979). Citizens should acknowledge their debt to the state by abiding by its laws and upholding its institutions.

The *Fair Play Theory*, proposed by Hart (1955), argues that political obligation emerges from reciprocal benefit. Individuals benefit from collective security, infrastructure, and public institutions; therefore, they must also contribute to the system through obedience to the law. Hart asserts that those who enjoy the advantages of social order should accept the restrictions necessary to maintain it, creating a fair exchange between state and citizen.

Membership or Association Theory posits that citizens have an inherent obligation to obey laws simply by virtue of being members of society. Dworkin (1986) argues that political obligation is similar to familial or social relationships, meaning people owe loyalty to their nation without needing to consent explicitly. Since political membership is not always voluntary, individuals must abide by legal obligations just as family members adhere to social expectations.

Natural duty theorists maintain that obedience to just institutions is a fundamental moral duty. Rawls (1999) asserts in *A Theory of Justice* that individuals are bound by a natural duty of justice, requiring them to support and

comply with laws that promote fairness and equality. Since justice is a universal moral requirement, citizens have a duty to uphold legal systems that embody fairness, even without personal consent.

Socrates' staunch defense of political obligation aligns with many of these theories, particularly Gratitude Theory and Social Contract Theory. His refusal to escape execution in *Crito* reflected his belief that citizens owe allegiance to the state as a form of gratitude and social responsibility. Additionally, contemporary political theories provide valuable insights for modern governance, including Nigeria. *Consent Theory* and *Fair Play Theory* support democratic governance, emphasizing electoral participation, public accountability, and civic engagement. *Natural Duty Theory* reinforces the need for just institutions, arguing that governments should be rooted in fairness and equality, ensuring political obligation is morally justified. Social Contract Theory highlights the importance of citizen-state agreements, ensuring that governments deliver security and protection while respecting individual freedoms. By applying these theories to Nigeria, the country gain a better perspective on the challenges of governance, law enforcement, and citizen responsibility, reinforcing the need for justice, accountability, and ethical leadership.

Socrates Philosophy and Political Thought

Socrates' political philosophy was deeply rooted in his concept of justice, legal obligation, and governance, emphasizing the moral duty of citizens to obey the laws of the state. His ideas were shaped by his environment, ethical reasoning, and his opposition to the Sophists, who prioritized rhetoric over truth. Socrates believed that justice was the foundation of all laws, arguing that any law not justified by justice was meaningless (James, 1985).

Socrates' thought was centred on the *concept of law and justice*. He divided law into unwritten divine law and written human law, asserting that there was no fundamental contradiction between the two. He maintained that justice was the root of all laws, and that without justice, laws lose their legitimacy. His emphasis on justice as the guiding principle of governance laid the foundation for later philosophical discussions on natural law and legal ethics (James, 1985).

Again, *allegiance to law and political obligation* reflects in the philosophy of Socrates. He introduced the theory of concord, which emphasized citizens' allegiance and obedience to the law. He argued that without absolute obedience to the law, unity and integrity in the Republic would be impossible. However, his exaltation of law-abidingness did not exclude the necessity of criticism, as he believed that laws should be subject to rational scrutiny (Mukherjee & Ranaswamy, 2007). Xenophon, one of Socrates' interpreters, reinforced this idea, stating: *"A*

Republic that is obedient to laws is happy in peace and invincible in war" (Mukherjee & Ranaswamy, 2007).

Part of Socrates' ideas relates to the *role of the state and political authority*. Socrates held that the state must always be obeyed, even when its decisions were disagreeable to individuals. He argued that citizens implicitly consent to follow the laws of the state by choosing to live under its sovereignty (Bentley, 1996). This idea aligns with the social contract theory, which suggests that individuals surrender certain freedoms in exchange for the benefits of organized governance (Benson, 1992).

Moreover, one of Socrates' views was on *government and leadership*. Socrates was a strong advocate for the rule of the wise, rejecting democracy, oligarchy, hereditary aristocracy, and tyranny. He believed that only a philosopher-king could serve the true purpose of the polis. His classification of government was as follows: Tyranny – Rule of men over an unwilling mass; Plutocracy – Government based on property qualifications; and Democracy – A system where all citizens participate in governance. Socrates argued that the purpose of a ruler should not be personal gain but the welfare of the people. He insisted that leaders must prioritize the needs of the citizens over their own interests and that self-serving rulers should be punished (Vlastos, 1991).

Justice, Equality, and the Philosopher-King also emerged from the portfolio of Socrates' political philosophy. He emphasized geometrical equality, which he defined as political justice and equity, distinct from numerical equality. He believed that common people lacked the ability to participate in state affairs, advocating instead for the rule of philosopher-kings. His vision of governance was deeply ethical, arguing that without morality, politics would corrupt society (Benson, 1992).

Socrates introduced the concept of *ethical politics and governance*, asserting that politics without ethics would contaminate society (Schlosser, 2014). He believed that officials must be moral and ethical individuals, as without virtuous leaders, citizens could not be expected to uphold moral values. His philosophy laid the groundwork for modern discussions on political ethics and leadership integrity (Benson, 1992). Socrates' political philosophy remains highly relevant today, offering valuable insights into governance, justice, and ethical leadership. His ideas continue to shape modern political thought, particularly in discussions on citizen responsibility, state authority, and the role of morality in governance.

Dilemma of Justice and Civic Duty: Socrates' Enduring Legacy in Political Obligation

Socrates stands as a profound example of political obligation, embodying its principles not only in his teachings but in the very way he lived and ultimately met his death. His philosophy on political and legal duty was rooted in two fundamental convictions: One must never

commit an injustice, even if one has suffered an injustice; and one must fulfill all agreements entered into, regardless of personal cost. These principles are vividly illustrated in *Apology*, where Socrates boldly declares that he *"would never submit wrongly to any authority through fear of death, but would refuse at any cost—even that of my life"* (Plato, 1993). His unwavering commitment to these ideals underscores his belief in the necessity of respecting the laws and institutions of the state, even in the face of personal injustice.

As it relates to Socrates' acceptance of judicial authority, he was condemned to death by a jury of his fellow citizens in a trial conducted according to Athenian legal traditions. Despite recognizing the injustice of his conviction, he refused to flee from prison, even though the opportunity to escape was readily available. Instead, he chose to accept his death sentence, demonstrating his unwavering belief in the legitimacy of state authority and legal verdicts (Plato, 2000). For Socrates, the central ethical dilemma was whether disobedience to the court's ruling would undermine the very laws and institutions that governed Athenian society. His conclusion was clear—to break the law would be to weaken the fabric of justice itself, even if the law had treated him unfairly. Thus, his commitment to legal obligation was absolute; reinforcing his stance that political responsibility transcends personal grievances.

Socrates views the relationship between the citizen and the State as a social contract. He viewed citizens' obligations to the state as analogous to a child's duty to a parent. He reasoned that just as a father creates nurtures, educates, and protects his children, the state performs similar functions for its citizens. As a result, individuals owe allegiance and obedience to the laws of the state, in much the same way that a son respects the authority of his father. The implied agreement between Socrates and Athens was foundational to his reasoning: The state provided security, education, and civic structure; Socrates had freely chosen to remain in Athens, despite being aware of its laws; and his voluntary decision to live within Athenian society signified his acceptance of its legal framework. Thus, he believed that breaking the laws would equate to violating the very contract that enabled society to function harmoniously. He argued that any rejection of state authority must come through lawful reform rather than individual defiance (Plato, 2000).

Socrates' ethical argument for civic duty was fervent. While Socrates emphasized obedience to the state, he also acknowledged that a ruler's ultimate duty is to uphold justice. He asserted that: Governance should prioritize the well-being of the people, rather than personal ambition; equality must be a cornerstone of any political system, ensuring that justice prevails; and citizens should abide by laws, but also critically engage with them, shaping a more ethical and just society (Vlastos, 1991). Socrates was willing to sacrifice his life rather than undermine the rule of law, demonstrating his belief that political obligation is the foundation of civic order. His execution reinforced his commitment to justice, legal integrity, and the moral contract between individuals and the state.

Socrates' justification of political obligation remains relevant in modern governance, influencing contemporary discussions on social contracts, legal obedience, and the role of dissent in shaping ethical leadership. His unwavering adherence to the principles of justice and civic responsibility serves as a powerful reminder that a functioning state relies on the commitment of its citizens to uphold its laws—even in the face of individual injustices. By choosing to accept his death rather than escape, Socrates provided a timeless demonstration of loyalty to the state and the necessity of maintaining legal and institutional integrity. His philosophy challenges modern thinkers to reflect on the balance between obedience and reform, emphasizing that justice must always be the cornerstone of governance.

Socrates' Thought on Political Obligations: Lessons for Nigerian Governance

Socrates' reflections on political obligations have remained profoundly relevant for centuries, shaping discussions on civic duty, governance, and the legitimacy of political authority. His unwavering commitment to obeying the laws of Athens, even at the cost of his life, underscores his belief in the necessity of political obligation for societal stability. In contemporary political discourse, his principles provide valuable lessons for Nigeria's governance, particularly in relation to citizen responsibility, government accountability, and the balance between obedience and justice.

Socrates and the Nature of Political Obligation

Socrates was deeply committed to the principle that every citizen has a duty to obey the laws of the state, even if certain laws appear unjust. In *Crito*, he argues that breaking the law weakens the very foundation of justice, emphasizing that citizens should either work within the system to reform laws or accept them as binding contracts (Plato, 2000). His stance is rooted in the understanding that laws maintain social order and ensure the continuity of the state. From this perspective, Nigerian citizens have an ethical and legal responsibility to respect and adhere to the laws of the land. This includes: paying taxes to support national development; protecting public infrastructure and refraining from vandalism; defending the country against external and internal threats; and upholding civic engagement by participating in democratic processes and respecting institutional authority. Like Socrates, citizens must acknowledge that political obligation is a fundamental aspect of maintaining a functioning society, and compliance with laws is a prerequisite for stability and national progress.

Political Obligation and the Role of Public Institutions

In Socratic thought, different roles within society demand unique obligations. This idea aligns with Nigeria's institutional framework, where various sectors hold responsibilities that contribute to national stability. For example, the Military and Security Forces, Socrates would argue that members of the armed forces have a solemn duty to uphold the rule of law and protect the nation from internal and external threats. In Nigeria, this translates to defending the country against insecurity and terrorism, including insurgencies like Boko-Haram and ISWAP; remaining faithful to the military oath and refraining from unconstitutional activities or coups; and ensuring security without abusing power, maintaining allegiance to democratic principles.

In the Civil and Public Service, government officials, including civil servants, must uphold transparency and accountability, ensuring that public resources serve the collective good rather than personal interests. Socrates would advocate for strict adherence to ethical governance, ensuring efficiency in administrative functions; eliminating corruption and self-serving bureaucracy, which undermine trust in state institutions; and delivering public services effectively, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development. Similarly, in Nigeria, ethical lapses in public service weaken political obligation, as citizens may lose faith in the system. Socratic principles demand that leaders prioritize justice and public welfare above personal gains.

Relating to the institution of the Judiciary and Legal System, Socrates viewed the judiciary as the cornerstone of a just society, arguing that laws should be respected and upheld by both citizens and leaders. In Nigeria, this means ensuring impartial justice, where legal verdicts serve fairness rather than political interests; respecting court decisions, reinforcing confidence in the legal process; and strengthening distributive and retributive justice, guaranteeing equal treatment under the law. Citizens, while obligated to obey the law, also have the right to challenge unjust governance through lawful means. This aligns with Nigeria's democratic system, where activism and legal reforms can address flaws in governance without undermining the rule of law.

The limits of political obligation in governance

While Socrates emphasized absolute obedience to laws, he recognized the right of citizens to challenge unjust rulings. This idea is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where issues such as economic inequality disproportionately benefits elites while the majority suffer in poverty; persistent insecurity, including terrorism, kidnapping, and banditry, threaten national unity; and political corruption, undermining trust in governance.

Given these challenges, Nigerian citizens must strike a balance between political obligation and holding leaders accountable. Socrates' philosophy implies that while obedience maintains order, it must not be blind allegiance. Citizens should demand government accountability, insisting on transparency and responsible leadership; exercise democratic rights, including voting and civic activism; and advocate for social reforms, pushing for equitable economic policies and security measures. Thus, political obligation in Nigeria should not be absolute submission, but rather active engagement, ensuring governance aligns with justice and the collective welfare.

Looking Ahead

From Socrates' philosophy, Nigeria can derive key lessons on governance and civic responsibility. *Political obligation must be reciprocal*. Citizens owe allegiance to the state, but the state must ensure security, fairness, and justice in return. The government must provide necessary infrastructure and social services that improve citizens' lives; guarantee protection from violence and economic instability, securing livelihoods; and enforce laws fairly, avoiding selective prosecution or authoritarian rule.

Ethical leadership is essential

Socrates argued that only wise and virtuous rulers should govern, rejecting corruption and tyranny. In Nigeria, this means political leaders must prioritize justice over personal interests; corruption must be eliminated, fostering trust in governance; and legislators must enact policies reflecting citizens' needs, ensuring equitable development.

Lawful resistance is justifiable

While Socrates upheld respect for law, he recognized that citizens should challenge injustice through legal channels. Nigeria can adopt peaceful protests and legal activism to demand reforms; judicial independence, ensuring that the legal system serves justice without political interference; and strengthened democratic institutions, preventing authoritarianism and governance failures.

In Nigeria, various protests and demonstrations have shaped governance, policy decisions, and social justice movements. These protests are protected under Section 40 of the Nigerian Constitution, which guarantees the right to peaceful assembly and association. Section 39 of the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, allowing citizens to voice grievances. Court rulings, such as All Nigeria Peoples Party v. Inspector General of Police (2008), also affirm that police permits for protests are unconstitutional, reinforcing citizens' rights to demonstrate. Based on these legal frameworks, some of the protests and movements actually expressed the rights of the Nigerian citizens. The EndSARS Protest (2020) was one of Nigeria's most significant protests, demanding the abolition of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) due to allegations of police brutality. The protests were peaceful,

with demonstrators gathering in major cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt. Protesters used social media to mobilize support, making it a global movement. The government eventually disbanded SARS, showing the impact of lawful resistance.

There was also the June 12 Protests (1993). Following the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election, which was widely believed to have been won by Moshood Abiola, Nigerians took to the streets to demand the restoration of democracy. The protests led to political reforms, culminating in Nigeria's transition to democracy in 1999.

Another protest was the Fuel Subsidy Protest (2012). In January 2012, Nigerians protested the removal of fuel subsidies, which led to a sharp increase in petrol prices. The protests, known as Occupy Nigeria, were peaceful demonstrations held across the country. Citizens demanded economic reforms and transparency in government spending. The government eventually reinstated partial subsidies, showing the effectiveness of lawful resistance.

Ali Must Go Protests (1978) is also a valid example of lawful resistance. In this protest, university students protested against education policies introduced by the then-Education Minister, Dr. Jibril Aminu. The protests led to government concessions, highlighting the power of student movements in shaping policy.

The various Labour Union strikes and protests are also sound examples of lawful resistance. Nigeria's labour unions, including the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), have organized peaceful protests and strikes to demand better wages and working conditions. These protests have led to salary adjustments and improved labour policies. Therefore, lawful resistance remains a vital tool for democratic engagement in Nigeria, allowing citizens to demand accountability, challenge injustice, and influence policy decisions. Protests must remain peaceful and within legal boundaries, and must serve as powerful mechanisms for social change. These lessons emphasize the need for a balance between state authority and civic rights, ensuring Nigeria's political system functions in a just and equitable manner.

CONCLUSION

Socrates' philosophy on political obligations offers valuable insights for Nigerian governance. While citizens must obey laws and uphold national stability, the state must also ensure justice, security, and economic inclusivity. His principles highlight the importance of ethical leadership, civic responsibility, and governance accountability, reinforcing the need for a society founded on fairness and participatory governance. Nigeria's political challenges demand that citizens should respect constituted authority, but also exercise their right to demand just governance. Socrates' philosophy serves as a guiding framework, reminding both leaders and citizens that political obligation must always be rooted in justice and collective well-being. Applying these lessons to Nigeria, it becomes evident that respect for the rule of law, ethical governance, and civic duty are crucial for national progress. While citizens must uphold their responsibilities—such as obeying laws, paying taxes, and defending the country—leaders must also govern with integrity, ensuring economic inclusion, security, and social welfare. Political obligation should not be a one-sided demand for submission, but rather a reciprocal agreement between the state and its people, guaranteeing justice, stability, and equitable governance. Moreover, Socrates' philosophical ideals reinforce the need for a balance between obedience and lawful resistance, allowing citizens to challenge injustice through democratic means. Nigeria's governance must reflect these principles, fostering active civic engagement, legal accountability, and the prioritization of the common good. By adopting the Athenian approach to ethical leadership and civic duty, Nigeria can build a governance structure that upholds justice, strengthens institutions, and ensures political stability.

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