

# Fundamentals of Politics and Governance

Dr. Chika Okeke-Agulu  
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# Nation, State, Society and Economy

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Idowu A. Johnson

## Introduction

TERMS such as *nation*, *society* and *state* are frequently used in the context of politics. It would be misleading to attempt a strict block or compartmentalised treatment of those concepts because they exist in close relationship, and distinction may only be plausible in terms of form or characteristics of each of the concepts, depending on the intention of the political scientist (Oyediran, 2003). It has been observed that a thorough understanding of any political system is impossible without a proper appreciation of the nature and dynamics of the state, given that the state is the epitome of political organisation in any society (Olaitan, 2001). Thus, the state is now the dominant principle of political organisation in the world.

The state is a unique institution, standing above all other organisations in the society. The state is not just the supreme coercive power in any political society, but also the crucial association to which all members of a society belong (Olaitan, 2001: 92). In this chapter, effort has been made to

distinguish between nation, society and state. This distinction is necessary because the state, with its unique characteristics, has a long-term incentive to increase the wealth of its people and therefore of itself. In this regard, the overall objective of the chapter is to provide an insight into how the institutional framework upon which the economy of different countries (states) operates across the world.

### Distinction among Nation, State and Society

**Nation:** The terms *nation* and *state* are used synonymously, along with the more common word *country*, and they are clearly related. In fact, in ordinary conversations, most people use the words *nation*, *state* and *country* interchangeably. However, the word *nation* has two distinct meanings (i) a political unit (a state) or (ii) an ethnological unit (a race). A nation in the political sense is simply a juridically-organised nation or a nation organised for action under legal rules (Anifowose, 1999: 93). In the ethnological sense, a nation is commonly defined as a group of people who form a distinct community by inhabiting a definite territory and recognising themselves as possessing a relatively homogeneous set of cultural traits. These include a common or related blood, a common language, a common religion, a common historical tradition and common customs and habits.

The most important aspect of the definition of a nation is that the people should have certain shared characteristics; a group of people with nothing in common cannot be a nation. Barrington (1997:712) has stressed the importance of territory to the identity of nations by noting that they are unique and collectively united by shared cultural traits and the desire to control a territory that is considered as the group's national homeland. Thus, the belief in the right to territorial control is central to distinguishing a nation from other collectives. Examples of nations include the Jews,

Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. However, members of a nation may or may not be living together in a contiguous territory or under the same government. For instance, the Jews, Romans or Gypsies of Europe, Chinese, Yoruba and Hausa are examples of nations whose members are spread over the territories of different sovereign states.

*State:* Many people confuse *nation* and *state* and substitute one for the other. Though they share some features and may be mutually-reinforcing, *nation* and *state* describe different experiences. However, in political science lexicon, a *state* is different from a *nation*. What then is a state? A state is a political unit that has ultimate sovereignty; that is, a political unit that has ultimate responsibility for the conduct of its own affairs (Shively, 2008:54). For example, Nigeria is a state, France is a state, Ghana is a state, the United States of America is a state. The Yoruba people and the Jewish people do not make up a state, since they are not a political unit.

There are different definitions of a state. Harold Laski defines the state as. "a territorial society divided into government and subjects claiming, within its allowed physical area, a supremacy over all institutions." He further emphasises that the state, "is in fact the final legal depository of social will. It sets the perspective of all other organisations. It brings within its power all forms of human activities, the control of which it deems desirable. It is, moreover, the implied logic of this supremacy that whatever remains free of its control does so by its permission." (Laski, 1967: 15). MacIver argues that the *state* means "the organisation of which government is the administrative organ."

A state has a constitution, a code of laws, a way of setting up its government, and a body of citizens". The state, according



to him, is a form of human association which, acting through the law as promulgated by a government, endowed to this end with coercive power, maintains within a community territorially-demarcated, the universal external conditions ... of social order (MacIver, 1966: 22), while D. D. Raphael (2005) conceives the state "as an association designed primarily to maintain order and security, exercising universal jurisdiction within territorial boundaries by means of law backed by force and recognised as having sovereign power over different households and their common affairs" (Raphael, cited in Onyeoziri, 2005).

Common to the definitions above is that the state is the most inclusive of all human organisations, with formal institutions for regulating the most significant external relationships of men within its scope. So, a state constitutes a basic political unit which consists of a group of individuals who are organised in a defined territory for the pursuit of secular common welfare, the maintenance of law and order and carrying out of external relations with other groups that are similarly organised, a phenomenon from which no person or group can seek exclusion (Hoffman and Graham, 2009; Onyeoziri, 2005). Thus, the state remains a unique political form, distinct from all preceding political systems. The state differs from any other association on the following grounds:

- ◆ It alone has the right to exercise force to compel obedience to its orders. It may impose any penalty, including imprisonment, deportation or death, as it chooses on its citizens. Other associations can impose force on their members only by special permission given by the state. The state lays down the framework within which all other exercise of power must function.
- ◆ It is an all-inclusive association, that is, all departments

of life are, at least potentially, under its control while no other association caters for more than a limited department of life. All other organisations and activities within the national frontiers are subordinate to the state.

- ◆ It is compulsory for everybody, and not voluntary, like other associations. Everybody must belong to a state. He joins one willy-nilly at birth and he cannot withdraw from the state as he can from other associations. No individual can join another state or even reside within its territory without obtaining the permission of the state.
- ◆ The basis of the state is territorial, that is, its jurisdiction includes everybody who was born in a certain stretch of the territory and continues to reside there. He is automatically subject to its laws.
- ◆ It has permanency. Other associations are not permanent; they may rise, disappear, and re-emerge, unite and separate with ease. The state does not have these attributes. The state, because of its rigid, unbroken coercive framework of political law, has permanency and fixity that distinguishes it from all other associations.
- ◆ It has complete independence and sovereignty. The state is the ultimate source of legal competence. In principle, it is absolutely sovereign. Sovereignty means supremacy and may be defined as the power of the state to make laws and enforce them with all the means of coercion it cares to employ (Anifowose, 1999: 86-87). The argument is that only the state is sovereign, separate from society, can protect all who dwell within its clearly-demarcated boundaries, recruit personnel according to bureaucratic criteria and fix tax effectively.

**Society:** Society is defined as the largest group of people

inhabiting a specific territory and sharing a common way of life (culture). The people in a society share this common way of life as a result of interacting on a continuous basis and because they have acquired patterns of behaviour on which all more or less agree. Society differs from many other large groups because, within this group, people can live a total, common life, whereas in smaller groups a person lives only one facet of his/her life (Perry and Perry, 1994: 53). According to Oyediran, emphasis in the definition of society is twofold, viz:

- (i) From the perspective of social relationship; and
- (ii) From the perspective of persons (Oyediran, 2003: 26).

He further asserts that society has been defined to “include, in the widest sense, every kind or degree of relationship entered into by men, whether these relations be organised or unorganised, direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious, co-operative or antagonistic. It includes the whole issue of human relations and is without a boundary or assignable units. Of amorphous structure itself, it gives rise to numerous, specific overlapping and interconnected societies, but it is not exhausted by them” (Oyediran, 2003: 26).

Essentially, society refers to all human associations which suggest the whole complex of relations of man with his fellow human beings, a complicated network of groups and institutions expressing human associations. Thus, society represents the complex relationships among many entities like religion, family, education, trade union, the media and culture which do influence social life but do not owe their origin or their inspirations to the state. In this regard, society is a socially-organised human community which assumes plurality of associations, one of which is the state. State is the political aspect of the society which regulates

human public conduct through an established system of control to maintain some form of social order.

While it is true that the state and the society are social entities made of people, they are not the same because the state has come to be recognised as the whole entity for political objectives. In the same vein, the state exercises authority through laws enacted and enforced by government and it is the only one that can legitimately use force. Society, on the other hand, can only use moral persuasion, influence or social ostracism or expulsion. The society cannot imprison a man for the violation of its requirements.

### Theories of Origin of State

The fundamental reason for the existence of the state is the maintenance of social order, as it has been pointed out. However, it is widely agreed that the state has not always existed, at least, in the form in which we know it today. In its present form, it is a product of a long process of evolution during which it has assumed various forms at different times and in different parts of the world. Nobody seems to know for a certainty just when, how, and why this evolutionary process began. Philosophers and political scientists through the ages have offered many speculations on this. A few of these speculations are regarded as important and are referred to as *theories* of the origin of the state (Ayeni-Akeke, 2008). The origin of the state can be viewed from different perspectives and these include the divine theory, the natural theory, the social contract theory and the force theory.

#### *The Divine Theory*

This is the oldest among the theories of the state. The theory of divine origin of the state, as observed by Anifowose (1999), outlines three propositions:

- (1) It is established by an ordinance of God.
- (2) Its rulers are divinely ordained.
- (3) The rulers are accountable to no authority but God.

This theory is essentially about using the divine to explain or rationalise or justify the actions of rulers. The theory argues that whoever is in a position of authority is so appointed by God. That without God's will, there is no way an individual could have attained such a position. According to the proponents of this theory, the authority to rule, which is the power of the state, is derived from God and vested in the anointed monarchs. What is intriguing about this theory is that even when the ruler or king is despotic and repressive, he still cannot be challenged because it is the will of God. Thus, this theory not only locates the creation and sustenance of the state in divine will, it also rationalises monarchical rule. The divine theory had its roots in the ancient oriental empires, Hebrew and Christian teachings and protestant reformation. However, in Islam, although it is also agreed that the ruler is anointed by God, the followers or the ruled have a right to disobey him if he is guilty of corruption or fundamentally disagrees with the teachings of *The Quran* (Yagboyaju, 2014).

### *The Natural Theory*

The natural theory conceives of the state as something whose basis is inherent in human nature. Therefore, the question of its being created by either God or man does not arise. This view, which was articulated by the ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, can only mean that the state appeared simultaneously with the appearance of men on the face of the earth (Ayeni-Akeke, 2008: 36). Man and the state were seen as mutually inclusive and inseparable, and that the state is not an artificial creation. The state has evolved out of a complex

set of social relations, from family to work, from religion to other social formations. Indeed, in the pursuit of goals of life, man chooses to belong to various social organisations for any reason he can conceive and it is out of the need to control the complications arising from the complex form of multi-social relationships that the state emerged. Thus, Aristotle argues that man is, by nature, a political animal. The need for order and security is an ever-present factor: man knows that he can develop the best of what he is capable only through the state; man outside the state is indeed not a man at all but a god or a beast (Anifowose, 1999).

The main theme of the natural theory is that the state is in a gradual but historical growth. It is in continuous development and no single point in history can be indicated as marking its beginning. Thus, the state may be conceived as the product of a political process which followed a pattern of development. On the basis of existing knowledge, the family is the basic social unit from which large, more complex units have developed. The next step is the formation of a public authority within them and more regular relations with one another. With the rise of an agricultural economy, there was a gradual growth of these communities. Eventually, some merged with others after much interactive processes. At some point in this process, one community after another found it desirable to adopt a formal method of controlling the conduct of its members. Thus, a formal public authority was established and the community assumed the form of what is now generally known as the state (Anifowose, 1999: 97). The state, in this view, is not simply a collection of separate individuals but a *living* entity which embodies the essence and interests of all its members.

### *The Social Contract Theory*

The theory of popular sovereignty constitutes the basis of the social contract theory. This theory is associated with three philosophers: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Though the views of these people on the origin of the state differ in detail, they share some common features.

The postulations of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) about the origin of the state can be said to be a derivative of his observation of the state of nature which he denotes as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Baradat, 1979). According to Hobbes, man is naturally an absolutely self-regarding, acquisitive, and pleasure-seeking creature who will do anything to achieve his quest for pleasure. The *state of nature* comprises such men who pursue their interests regardless of the consequences to others. Life in the state of nature is essentially that of jungle, it is survival of the fittest.

There is no regulatory agency that can moderate the activities of the constituents of the state of nature. It is precisely for this reason, that is, to bring about sanity and restraint, that Thomas Hobbes presents an arrangement where somebody will be in charge, that is, somebody in a preponderant position. The fellow, according to Hobbes, will have absolute powers. Hence, the individual with such powers has been referred to variously as the *absolute monarchy*, or the *leviathan*. The Leviathan, as conceived by Hobbes, enjoys absolute powers and can make laws on any matter that will promote peace and security for the people. In this arrangement, there is a contract. However, Hobbes argues that the sovereign power is absolute but he has to respect the individual's right to self-preservation.

The Lockean philosophical contribution to the debate on the

origin of the state in some respects agrees with Hobbes but it also differs in some significant respects. In his own version, John Locke (1632-1704) conceives neither man as naturally greedy nor the state of nature as violent. While the Hobbesian state of nature is essentially that of strife, the Lockean state of nature is moral and social character, in which men have rights and at the same time acknowledged duties. For Locke, all true states must be based on consent which may be tacit rather than open. He further argues that government must be based on the rule of law. It must be limited and not absolute. The implication is that it must derive from the people, hold power in trust for the people and use it to promote their welfare. Locke then asserts that if a government is not for the people's good, or if it does not depend on their consent, or if it exceeds its authority, such a government can legitimately be overthrown. This is where the Lockean postulation is remarkably different from the Hobbesian position of *absolutism*.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) explanation of the origin of the state is based on a different assumption of what he considers the real or essential nature of man. Man, in his own opinion, is naturally social, caring and co-operative. According to Rousseau, the social contract which men enter into is designed to provide collective security. He further explains that the contract consists "the total alienation of each associate, together with all his rights to the whole community" (Ebenstein, 1969: 430). According to Rousseau, people give up their powers, rights and freedom, not to any individual, group or institution as Hobbes' and Locke's versions of the contract theories assert, but to one another. Rousseau holds that, in forming the association, each individual surrenders all rights to it. He endows the association with a "general will" which has absolute authority over the behaviour of individuals or groups.



Unlike Hobbes or Locke, Rousseau insists on the right of all the people to participate in the affairs of government. He is inclined to view direct democracy as the most ideal political method. Rousseau contends that political authority is not legitimate unless it is exercised directly by the people. The only law the individuals must obey is the law they gave to themselves. Rousseau's theory serves as the basis of democracy and the justification of revolution against arbitrary rule. He demonstrates that government should depend on the consent of the governed. Rousseau's ideas have thus been incorporated into the constitutions of many nations like the United States and France (Anifowose, 1999).

### *The Force Theory*

This school of thought holds that the state is a creation of conquest and coercion of the weak by the strong. The proponents share the common belief that force is the means by which naturally free human beings were coerced into accepting the domination and control by an individual or group. They point to the fact that what distinguishes the state from any other social organisation is the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence (Carneiro, 1978). The theory gives an empirical account of evolution of the state that was, largely, a scholarly perfection of how states actually emerged. The theory further argues that contention among small communities of people, mostly over boundaries, shared territories or material resources, eventually leads to the incorporation of the weak and suppressed side under the authority of the oppressive and stronger side. In the same vein, the force theory has no respect for the natural rights of the citizens and does not approve of any resistance to the acts of political authority.

### **Characteristics of the State**

The state, at this level, is analysed by its distinguishing

features. When these are used to describe the state, it brings out the saliency of the state. Thus, it is apt to say that most political scientists agree on the following as the distinguishing characteristics of the state: territory, population, government and sovereignty.

### *Territory*

Any state must possess a well-defined territory. Although the territory is a prominent feature of the state, there is no unanimity with regard to the size of the state. This means that the size of some countries will be big, others can be small or medium-sized. The size of the territory is an important determinant of the viability of the state in terms of resources. A state's territory is not limited to the land; also, it embraces the air, the waters extending outward from the coast for a distance of 12 miles, lakes, mountains and other topographical features as well as natural resources.

### *Population*

Population is very important for an entity to qualify and be described as a state. A state is inhabited by a group of individuals which it regards as citizens or subjects and all others as aliens. While a big population can be an asset to the state, it is necessary to include age distribution. This is because there are implications for having more of a particular age distribution such as the old and aged or children age brackets. Definitely, this would have consequences for the economy, productivity and security of the state.

### *Government*

Government is the agency through which the state expresses, formulates and realises its will. Government is also responsible for the co-ordination of all the activities of the state. Indeed, it is the government that wields and uses

the coercive powers of the state. Some people confuse the state with the government. They are certainly not the same and cannot be used as synonyms. The basic distinguishing feature is that one is permanent while the other keeps changing. The state has a permanent feature, while government changes from time to time. Government, in the widest sense, consists of such institutions as the executive, the legislature and the judiciary which represent the physical aspect of the state. The government represents the political authority of the state but not the sovereign authority itself.

### *Sovereignty*

Sovereignty is the essence of the state. It is that feature that really shows the authority of the state. Jean Bodin in his book, *Republic*, published in 1576, coined the term to describe the absolute and perpetual powers and rights of kings to rule the people in their domain as they deemed fit and without recognising the rights of any internal or external elements to interfere in the affairs of their states. This fundamentally political conception is still the dominant sense in which the term *sovereignty* is used today. It has, however, come to acquire a legal connotation over the years to mean not only complete political autonomy, but also supreme legal authority of a state to make laws and decisions as well as enforce them on the people within its territory without hindrance by internal or external forces (Ayeni-Akeke, 2008: 27).

Based on this, no state can claim jurisdiction over another; also, the courts of one state cannot question the validity of the laws and other legal acts of another state. According to this principle, every state, acting through its government, has the exclusive jurisdiction and final authority in internal matters over the people living within its territory.

Rosenberg (1994) argues that sovereignty only arises when the state is sharply separated from society. A sovereign state must be in a position to determine what she wants or what she does not want. Thus, the sovereignty of the state is brought out by that latitude of action by the state. No matter how tiny a state is, a sovereign state is free from the dictation of another state no matter their size. Political scientists distinguish between the variants of sovereignty. Hence, there is *legal sovereignty* and *political sovereignty*. Legal sovereignty is that which the state exercises, it is derived from the law; while political sovereignty is that which is exercised by the people.

### The State and Economy

At the beginning of this chapter, attention was drawn to the complex relationship between nation, state and society. With the exception of society, both nation and state were used as synonyms. One reason nation and state tend to commingle in common use is that leaders of states have almost universally tried to link the two to harness the emotional attachment of people to their nation and use that attachment to build support for the more abstract, legal entity the state (Shively, 2008: 56). However, the state is the most animating concept in understanding politics and the political process in the modern social formation. Notably, the primary function of a modern state is to provide essential social services to its citizens. Today, the roles of governments in the economy continue to increase due, for the most part, to the demands by citizens on their governments to formulate and pursue policies that will sustain a peaceful and dynamic environment in which economic development can take place. Every modern state has been constrained by domestic and global exigencies to take up these responsibilities. Thus, states have become the most important forces shaping not only the economic

structures and processes of their societies but also the well-being of their citizens.

Basically, economic forces have a huge impact on a citizen's life. The institutional framework upon which the economy of different countries operates differs across the world. According to Schaefer (2005), economic system refers to the social institution through which goods and services are produced, distributed and consumed. As with social institutions such as the family, religion and government, the economic system shapes other aspects of the social order and is in turn influenced by them. The different economic systems that have been practised among nations, though differ in degree, can be categorised into three major systems: capitalist, socialist and mixed economy.

***Capitalist Economic System:*** This is an economic system in which the means of production are held largely in private hands and the main incentive for economic activity is the accumulation of profits. The owners of the means of production are generally called capitalists or the bourgeoisie and the people whose labour they hire, the working class or workers, or the proletariat (Ake, 1981: 14). The basic features of capitalism are:

- (i) institutions of private ownership of resources backed up by legal guarantees;
- (ii) competitive free enterprise;
- (iii) satisfaction of consumer needs through production of goods for sale in the market;
- (iv) maximisation of profits by producers;
- (v) reliance on the market mechanism to determine the types, quantity and cost of goods to be produced by individual economic units (households, business firms, commercial farm, etc.), all of which operate under conditions of perfect competition;

- (vi) recognition and reward of individual efforts on the basis of merit; and
- (vii) recognition of the right of individual persons and organisations to make economic choices on the basis of *personal* interests without let or hindrance by any government claiming to know the best choices people should make.

In practice, capitalist systems vary in the degree to which the government regulates private ownership and economic activity. In theory, decisions about allocation of resources in a market system are highly decentralised. In a pure capitalist economic system, decisions in respect of the basic economic questions are taken by the individual economic units (i.e. households and business firms), with government playing a minimal role of ensuring a conducive environment through provision of laws and maintenance of order. Though a pure capitalist economic system may be rare in life, the economy of the United States of America is one approximate example, where producers and consumers are allowed freedom to transact business within the confines of the law.

**Socialist Economic System:** The Socialist Theory was refined in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. These European radicals were disturbed by the exploitation of the working class that emerged during the Industrial Revolution. In their view, capitalism forces large numbers of people to exchange their labour for low wages. The owners of an industry profit from the labour of workers, primarily because they pay workers less than the value of goods produced. As an ideal type, a socialist economic system attempts to eliminate such economic exploitation. This type of economic system is also known as command or planned economy. Here, the government or the state plays a dominant role in the process of taking economic decisions.

The means of production are owned and controlled by the state and the distribution of goods and services produced are done through central authority. The defunct Soviet Union is one close example of a socialist economic system. In addition, socialist societies differ from capitalist nations in their commitment to social service programmes. For example, the U.S. government provides health care and health insurance to the elderly and the poor through the Medicare and Medicaid programmes. But socialist countries typically offer government-financed medical care to all citizens. In theory, the wealth of the people, as a collective, is used to provide health care, housing, education, and other key services to each individual and family (Schaefer, 2005: 417). With ownership and control of the means of production, socialists believe that the state will be able to carry out long-range planning to ensure efficient utilisation of collective wealth for production and equitable distribution of goods among all the citizens. The objective is to facilitate social and economic equality, which is posited as a *sine qua non* for creating a harmonious and co-operative society that is devoid of exploitation, alienation and oppression.

***The Mixed Economy:*** The desire by many countries to maximise the advantages of capitalist and centrally-planned economies has led them to devise the hybrid economic system, popularly described as mixed economy. Mixed economy represents the combination of some features of both capitalist and socialist economies. It allows for significant involvement of both the individual economic agents/units (household and firms), and the state in the process of arriving at economic decisions. Productive resources are owned and controlled by both the private and the public. There is an appreciable degree of mechanism in the process of allocation and distribution of economic

resources, as well as involvement of government in the allocation of resources for production and distribution. In some cases, however, the state and private entrepreneurs may collaborate and establish joint ventures, in which either of them could own majority interests. With the exception of a few countries such as Cuba and North Korea, virtually all developing countries operate a mixed economy.

### Conclusion

Having identified the differences between nation, state and society, it is imperative to conclude that the state as a modern institution has, as its identifying features, a sharp separation from other associations. As earlier pointed out, the state remains the concept that is most widely accepted and used to denote the context of political activities. The state is the abstract embodiment or symbol of the political institutions. The state differs from all other institutions in two essential ways. First, membership in the state is compulsory for all who are living within its territorial limits. Second, the state differs from all other aspects of social organisations in that it has the legitimate authority of enforcing laws through force. Furthermore, the social life of every citizen in a given state is determined by its economic system. Three basic types of economic system were examined in this chapter. It can be said that the economic system of a state has an important influence on social behaviour and on other social institutions.

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