

Ethics, accountability and democracy as pillars of good governance

Case of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In postcolonial and post-apartheid contemporary Africa, ethics, accountability and democracy are usually divorced. This article argues that the three are inseparable; and, where they are divorced, the consequences can be catastrophic. It is further argued that democracy constitutes more than just voting. It is also about holding the government accountable for their actions. This is possible if citizens exercise their rights as well as impose principles that promote and strengthen democracy. For early Greek philosophers, citizenship had a moral and political dimension; namely: participation in public affairs, which is also referred to as civic virtue. The article argues that without democratic principles, there can be no democracy. For this reason, it is reasonable for citizens to expect professional behaviour from public officials, especially the President and his cabinet ministers. For this to happen, there is need to establish an ethical foundation or moral framework in government, which goes beyond ethical codes of conduct.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important contributions to political/social philosophy—the theory of the social contract—comes from seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers. But issues of good governance and public service predate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is evident in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, respectively, translated by Lee (1988) and Ross (1992). In *The Republic*, Plato defended the necessity of government by stating that

it enforced laws and resolved disagreements among citizens (Lee 1988; Wienand 2014). Government also deliberates or makes decisions about public policy. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle maintained that there is an intimate relationship between politics and ethics (Ross 1992). The following extract sums up Aristotle's social contract: *he who is unable to live in society or has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must either be a beast or a god, he is no part of the state* (Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book 1 paragraph 1253a2 in Saunders 1995).

For Aristotle, human beings are social and political animals; therefore, it is necessary to live as such, participate actively in society and influence public policy. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (paragraph 1049a in Ross 1992), Aristotle understands and defines politics simply as the highest good attained by action. Therefore, action is the final end for citizens or humans to flourish. Human flourishing for him meant the good life or living well. Held (2008) argues that for ancient Greek philosophers, citizenship had everything to do with active participation and involvement in government matters.

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

For social contract theorists, both the state and citizens had moral obligations, which would ensure that in its actions, government would be held accountable by the citizens. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, social contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, and David Hume, to name but a few, outlined government moral obligations as well as the limits within which the government could exercise these. Such limitations were imposed on the government by putting into place checks and balances in the form of the separation of power (*trias politica*). The *trias politica* is the doctrine that separates the powers between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. Akindele *et al.* (2012) assert that the horizontal organs of state are the apparatus of democratic governance without which "the *raison d'être* of democracy and governance would be a mirage". But this is only possible insofar as these organs of state operate independently and are true to the Constitution, which is the supreme law in South Africa and which government officials should respect. Accordingly, one of the main achievements of the social contract theorists was to impose political and moral obligations on the government and the citizens. In a nutshell, social contract theory is about political authority (Lessnoff 1998), its obligation, authority and limits. This was an extraordinary means of making sure there was not abuse of power in any of the afore-mentioned centres of political power. Althusius (1998:27) asserts: "the subject matter of politics is ... association, in which the symbiotes pledge themselves each to the other, by explicit or tacit agreement, to mutual sharing of whatever is useful and necessary for the harmonious social life". This is the basic aim of any form of social contract. It is this intimate relationship that is essential to ensure good governance.

Furthermore, the relationship between politics and ethics which Aristotle argued for is required from both politicians and citizens through leading a *virtuous* life. In *The Politics* Book 1, paragraph 1254a23 (in Saunders 1995), Aristotle argues that the good life is measured by, the following principle or slogan: "the rule is always better when the ruled are better". Basically what this means is that good governance changes ordinary people's lives for the better. Therefore, on the one hand, public officers by occupying their important offices are required to make deliberations and perform actions that are directed towards the common



good, so that all people may flourish. On the other hand, good citizenship is about holding public officials accountable for their decisions and actions, however, before governments can be held accountable for their deliberations and actions, citizens must know their rights and it is their moral obligation to participate in all democratic events, including voting.

It is argued that in most African countries politics and ethics are divorced which leads to the absence of accountability and political decay. In many African states, the tendency of the ruling political parties is to silence opposition political parties. In addition, more and more countries are becoming one-party states, which is the death-knell to democracy, and yet strong opposition and a multiparty system are required to sustain democracy. Many factors lead to the possibility of political decay including an absence of accountability, corruption and a lack of competence among those who are entrusted with certain ministries in the public service.

In advocating for democracy and good governance, Hossain (1999) argues that ethics and good governance are needed to place government under greater scrutiny. By scrutinising government deliberations and actions, citizens exercise their moral rights to participate as actively as possible in government matters: indeed, participation must be a feature of all political activities. Understood from Hossain's viewpoint, morality is necessary for good governance and should underpin all political behaviour. Aristotle postulates that practical wisdom informs how the individual character is formed and further argues that an individual can learn to be virtuous by habitually behaving or acting virtuously (Koenane 2014). In order to position our argument, below we define the terms democracy, virtue, accountability and competence.

Democracy

The concept of democracy is arguably one that is most used in politics and social philosophy and many other disciplines. However, democracy is not easy to define as there are as many definitions as there are political systems. Etymologically the term "democracy" is a combination of two Greek words, *demos*, meaning "people" and *kratein* meaning "the rule" (McNeese 2015:1). Thus, the original meaning of democracy was the "rule of people by the people" (McNeese 2015). Understood from this perspective, democracy involves the will of the governed through active participation. However, as much as democracy seems to be the generally accepted system of governance, this has not been always the case, especially in the time of the Ancient Greeks. For instance, Plato and Aristotle among others had their reservations about adopting democracy as the best system of governing, and for good reasons (Held 2008). Therefore, people should not naïvely accept that democracy is the best system of governing. One of the most eminent political scientists of all time, Machiavelli (1983), concluded that all systems of government together (that is, selected elements in each) could promote a tenable political system on which civic virtue depends.

Therefore, it is practical to use the plural form and refer to "democracies". Consequently, Akindele *et al.* (2012) correctly assert that democracy means different things to different people given their diverse socio-political, socioeconomic, ideological and cultural backgrounds. In his work entitled *Strategic Political Planning*, Duvenhage (1998:2) rightly observes the interconnectedness between democratisation and democracy. According to him, democratisation means transformation brought about by a government when moving

from an undemocratic dispensation into a new democratic order. Duvenhage (1998:11) further articulates that a democratic dispensation is characterised by the following: limited government; responsible government; constitutionalism; political and other freedoms as well as regular free and fair elections.

Most political philosophers and scientists limit themselves to these characteristics in their discussion of democratic principles, but we add to the list, the requirement that presidential candidates should be restricted to two terms, which is the standard practice for a presidential candidate to remain in office. Whether the practice of remaining in office for two consecutive terms is a rule or just a consideration in most democratic states is not certain, but if it is a constitutional provision, then it must be observed. Most African presidents seem reluctant to step down, to the extent that sometimes they have to be removed forcefully from office, or they manipulate their countries' constitutions in order to remain in the presidency for as long as they live. There is much speculation as to why some presidents find it difficult to vacate the presidency when their two terms end. The refusal to step down is now referred to as "third-term-ism". Africa tops the list of countries where presidents have stayed in power for ever – almost like "until death do us part" (for example, Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda to mention but a few examples). In *The Politics, Book 1* (in Saunders 1995), Aristotle advocates for a political system where the constitution allows for virtuous citizens to be elected into political power and voted out and replaced by others. As early as the ancient periods, staying in political power forever was not considered prudent. Where prudence prevailed, political leaders would step down graciously when it was time to do so.

As previously mentioned, one of the achievements of the social contract was that it imposed moral as well as political obligations on both the state and the citizenry. This meant that if citizens abdicated their responsibility to hold politicians and government accountable, then they were to blame. To this end, the *Second Administrative Reforms Commission* of 2007, asserts that it is easy for public officials to "deviate from ethical" norms if allowed [presumably by citizens] to exercise power arbitrarily (Indian Government 2007). Therefore, these two components (that is, the moral and political components) are intimately related. It seems fair for citizens to expect professional behaviour from public officials, especially the president and his cabinet ministers. Regarding the meaning of moral and political obligation better, Simmons' (2002) *Political Obligation and Authority* becomes important. In this seminal work, Simmons defines political obligations as the general moral requirements to obey the laws and support the political institutions of our own states or governments (Simmons 2002:17). This definition suggests that good citizens have a moral obligation towards supporting the laws of the country (irrespective of whether they as individuals agree or disagree with those laws), which entails conducting their deliberations and actions in a manner that good citizens would do. Additionally, Simmons (2002) elucidates that political legitimacy and political obligation are *moral correlates*, meaning that they are inseparable.

Plato argued that insofar as those who run for elections for government positions are concerned, there is a need to distinguish between their desire for power and desire to render service (Lee 1988; Wienand 2014). For Plato, there are those who seek to be in government for selfish reasons (profit) and those that are committed to serving citizens (Lee 1988; Wienand 2014). Plato did not trust the democracy of the *polis* (city) of Athens and its



government and it was for this reason he advocated for a ruler who knows and understands philosophy, in the form of a *philosopher king* (Lee 1988; Wienand 2014).

Rousseau differentiated two conceptions of democracy namely: true and false democracy. Commenting on false conceptions of democracy, Rousseau argued that democracy involves more than just casting a vote on a ballot paper. Rousseau puts it thus:

The people of England deceive themselves when they fancy they are free; they are so, in fact, only during the elections of members of parliament; for, as soon as a new one is elected, they are again in chains, and are nothing (Rousseau cited in Miller 2003:48).

Like Rousseau, Dieltiens (2005) sees active citizenship as involving more than casting a ballot during elections. This, without doubt, applies to South Africa where people understand democracy as exercising their right to vote, and thereafter continue with their lives. For Rousseau, citizens need to participate in policy decisions and hold government officials accountable for their decisions and actions, which are important principles in cementing democracy (Rousseau cited in Miller 2003). True democracy therefore allows many other forms of proactive citizen participation such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression, the right to protest and the right to demand transparency from government. At times, history does repeat itself. During the apartheid era, free speech was censored in South Africa. The ruling government under the presidency of Jacob Zuma suddenly introduced strategies that seemingly suppressed freedom of speech. Citizens were denied free access to information as draconian laws were imposed relating to so-called *classified information*. Unfortunately, there is an increasing trend for governments, particularly in the Sub-Saharan region, to impose laws which suppress freedom of speech and thus weaken democracy. The *Second Administrative Reforms Commission* (Indian Government 2007) makes a valuable point when it declares that “every democracy requires the empowerment of citizens in order to hold those in authorities to account”. Dieltiens (2005) argues that robust citizenry is characterised by meaningful participation in political matters affecting their lives, particularly the democratic decisions.

Some of the important independent organs of state that are created to ensure government compliance are referred to as *Chapter 9 institutions*; and, these include the Office of the Public Protector and that of the Auditor-General. These are institutions which are also constitutionally recognised; and, as such their rulings are legally binding. The role of these institutions is to enforce the rule of law, particularly among government officials. Further, these institutions ensure accountability in how government exercises its mandate. The recent political controversy relating to Nkandla is an example of how government can be held to account for its decisions. The controversy is put into its proper perspective by American political maestro Harold Lasswell (1936:1) who argues “that regardless of how government is structured, a minority will always hold real power”. This being the case, actions that undermine democracy will always be part of the process of governing. However, this danger of undermining democratic principles and institutions is observed by Mill (1973:489) who warns:

The disposition of mankind, whether as rulers or as fellow citizens, to impose their own opinion and inclinations as a rule of conduct on others, is so energetically supported by some

of the best and by some of the worst feelings incident to human nature, that it is hardly kept under restraint by anything but want of power; and as the power is not declining, but growing, unless a strong barrier of moral conviction can be raised against the mischief, we must expect, in the present circumstances of the world, to see it increase.

In this quotation, Mill (1973) warns strongly against political domination, which occurs in weak democracies. In South Africa, citizens experienced what was widely considered an undemocratic political move by government when it decided to exterminate the Scorpions indiscriminately, although their success rate in investigating, prosecuting and convicting bad elements, especially in government, was self-evident. The Scorpions were a wing of investigators who investigated all crimes including white collar crimes involving high profile individuals and politicians. It had a higher success rate and convictions than any form of policing in South Africa. Many South African citizens expressed their dismay when the Scorpions were disbanded since such political interference with institutions that fight corruption is regarded as a violation of democracy. Unchallenged corruption weakens government efforts to render effective service delivery. Unwillingness to deal effectively with political corruption is regarded as a direct attack on good governance and democracy. The Nkandla controversy epitomises such grand corruption and the unwillingness of prominent government officials to be held accountable. The Nkandla scandal is undoubtedly a clear example of an undemocratic cabinet and a betrayal of citizens' trust. This leads to a consideration of the virtues and ethics espoused by Aristotle (Ross 1992; Saunders 1995).

Virtue

To understand Aristotle's virtue ethics, one must first understand his doctrine of *the golden mean* (Ross 1992; Saunders 1995; Koenane 2014). For Aristotle, the mean is that which rests between two extremes; namely deficiency and excess (cited in Koenane 2014), and has everything to do with excellence (*arête*). Additionally, Aristotle differentiates between two types of virtue: moral virtue and intellectual virtue. Of these, the focus in this discussion is on moral virtue, which enables an individual to make rational choices and good decisions (Aristotle cited in Koenane 2014). Therefore, virtue in Aristotle's philosophy is bound up with the character of the moral agent. Further, moral virtue is also regarded as that which enables a person to be prudent in decision-making and in his or her actions; it is considered as practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

Phronesis is practical wisdom and practical wisdom is the virtue that is connected to actions. In this way, some of our actions define our real selves; in other words, we are the landscape(s) of our actions; we are characterised by them. For Aristotle, paying too much attention to behaviour is not enough because this would create a false separation between the doer and the deed. The Aristotelian ethic avoids this false separation of the deed from the doer: the deed is not something outside the character of the doer. Thus, actions are a manifestation or expression of the character or moral agent. Accordingly, moral goodness is a quality of a moral person whose character has cultivated moral virtues, attitudes and other values which define him or her. Josephson (1995:81) puts it differently when he articulates that "the quality of our ethical society is determined by the ... actions of public officials".



Moving from the premise that practical wisdom informs decisions and directs actions towards the common good, it is reasonable to argue that a virtuous leader is one whose actions are directed towards the well-being of humanity. A good government is one whose ultimate end (teleology) achieves the good for its citizens, allowing humanity to flourish. Accordingly, for Aristotle, virtue is of utmost importance for public leadership (Josephson 1995). Applying this assertion to politics, Aristotle argues that citizens have the right to practise as watchdogs of government policies and decisions. Lesshoff (1998:10) puts it thus: “[t]o talk of citizens having ‘rights’ ... is to talk of ways in which citizens can make claims to the limits of state power”. Most political philosophers maintain that as much as it is a moral obligation on the part of citizens to vote, it is equally important for citizens to remove the government in the form of a vote of no confidence, or to impeach individual political leaders should the need arise. Most Western states do exercise this right if and when they feel strongly about misdemeanours and other acts which betray the constitution, particularly if the transgression is considered as a betrayal of public trust. In the Aristotelian sense, action is the fundamental principle on which all political actors are judged.

Aristotle’s virtue theory can be described as adopting a meaningful way of life, or an attitude or moral outlook demonstrating an individual’s life orientation. *Attitude* in this context refers to how an individual interacts habitually with the outside world. For Aristotle, virtue is not innate in any person; thus, no one is born virtuous. Virtue in Aristotle’s theory is acquired through practice. Put differently, by repetition of virtuous actions, virtue is a disposition which becomes second nature or habit. Accordingly, an Aristotelian would argue that an individual becomes what he or she does repeatedly. This further suggests that actions define individuals’ dispositions. Following from this premise, there exists an intimate relationship between good persons and goodness in general.

A good society comes from good persons. Since government and presidents are elected from the society, good political leaders are those whose good dispositions and good governance skills are a product of good citizens. Dieltiens (2005) quotes from Tomas who rightly draws attention to the interrelationship between being good citizens and good persons. Thus, a good society does not come about by accident. In one way or another, government actions represent the society we are or are becoming, so if governments compromise values such as honesty, fairness, accountability and trustworthiness, which undermine the moral fabric of our society, we should be very concerned. It is argued that incorporating ethics into education system (in particular, virtue ethics) would cultivate good or virtuous leaders in society.

Josephson (1995:82) concurs, stating that “[t]he pendulum of social consciousness seems to be swinging the other way and there is a call for a return to traditional moral values and value-centred education”. He further articulates that “we do know that ethics are ‘learned’ or ‘developed’, yet many are not sure if ethics can be ‘taught’” (Josephson 1995:82). This points to the reality that returning to traditional moral values may be cultivated from a young age, well expressed by Sotho-speaking people in the idiomatic expression: *thupa e kopjwa e sa le metsi*. This is the equivalent of the English expression: “one cannot teach old dog new tricks”. Using the ethical maxim to express the same point, one could simply argue that good character is formed and developed during childhood. The emphasis here is that in order to have a society in which humans flourish, good character traits and attitudes towards the common good must be encouraged in early childhood development. The idea of minimal

citizen education in government and governing matters is also supported by Dieltiens (2005) who consider it as (maximal citizen education) as more of an ideology in a negative sense.

Esman (1997:1), applying the Aristotelian theory, asserts that “for governance to be considered good, the government has to be effective”. It is important at this stage to ask what is required for the government to be effective. To answer this question fairly, once more Aristotle’s theory that a good government is one which promotes and achieves as its ultimate goal the wellbeing of humanity, is relevant. For humans to flourish requires the provision of services that are directed at promoting the common good. It could be argued that good governance is generally compromised when cronies are appointed as cabinet ministers rather than competent individuals, undermining accountability. The next section deals with the relationship between good governance and accountability (or lack thereof) of political office bearers.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

There is no way good governance can be discussed without introducing the ethical principle of accountability. Accountability, argues Cameron (2004:59), “is an important element of governance”. This point to the importance of accountability in modern democracy and the role it plays in promoting good governance. The absence of accountability in talks on democracy is like running a motor-vehicle on a flat tyre. What then is accountability, and what role does it play in modern democracy? Put differently, what does it mean to say citizens should hold government accountable? To answer these questions, it is necessary to begin by defining the concept of accountability. This section interrogates the concept of “accountability” within a moral and legal framework. The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, 1996 subsections 91(1) and 92(2) calls for accountability from the President, Deputy President and cabinet ministers as individuals and collectively. For the sake of clarity the Constitution states:

The President and the deputy President and each minister are individually accountable to Parliament [and the entire nation] for the exercise and performance of their power and duties (RSA 1996: subsections 91 & 92).

The Constitution is explicit about what individual accountability entails. According to Rautenbach & Malherbe (2004:178), individual accountability entails the following:

- A duty to explain to Parliament how the powers and duties under his or her control have been exercised and performed.
- A duty to acknowledge that a mistake has been made and to promise to rectify the matter.
- A duty to resign if personal responsibility has been accepted.

Josephson (1995:84) contends that accountability means the ability to “accept responsibility for decisions and the foreseeable consequences of actions and inactions, and for setting examples for others”. Accordingly, wherever, the term “accountability” is used, it will be in accordance with these two closely connected definitions.



Accountability implies that Parliament must be provided with full disclosure, in order for citizens to know the truth. There is a saying that “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”; analogously, the truth is in the details. Where mistakes have occurred, these must be acknowledged openly and plans must be undertaken to remedy the situation. Rautenbach & Malherbe (2004:179) further explicate that resignation of the culpable individual must also be considered. Assuming that this interpretation is correct and constitutional, Aristotle puts it thus:

each man [and woman] can judge competently the things he [and she] knows, and of these he is a good judge. Accordingly, a good judge in each particular field is one who has been trained in it (Nicomachean Ethics paragraph 1095a in Ross 1992).

This is a clear articulation of what is regarded as competence, which according to Aristotle involves training. Incompetent ministers will not realise when blunders are made in their respective ministries and would not even understand why accountability and resignation are required. Macaulay & Lawton (2006:706) posit that competency is “an underlying characteristic of a person that results in efficiency and effective work performance”. Following the logic of this argument, lack of competence compromises performance, and poor performance compromises good governance. Rautenbach & Malherbe (2006:706) advocate for what they call “joint responsibility”. Josephson (1995) argues that every day government officials are faced with challenges and situations that put ethical “consciousness and commitment” to the test. The test of the principle of accountability is fundamental in answering the question of who is accountable or responsible for certain actions which adversely affect the public, which is called public accountability. Accountability determines if a particular government can or cannot be trusted. This is important as it influences voting.

Whether it is realised or not, the decisions governments make always have moral implications and it is these bad decisions for which society requires government officials to account. Macaulay & Lawton (2006) argue that good government is traditionally inseparable from the idea of the virtuous leader. Therefore, assuming this is correct, good government flows from the character of the moral agent. Insofar as the Nkandla controversy is concerned, public accountability refers to the need to provide an explanation, full disclosure of facts and information that led to certain decisions, and the processes which were followed or omitted in taking these decisions. In its attempt to get out of a situation which compromised government and called for accountability, the government resorted to lies for its self-serving decisions on Nkandla. We believe what the President and his Cabinet do not understand that the Nkandla expenditure came from tax payers’ financial resources so the least the government could do was to give them an honest, transparent, truthful explanation. The Nkandla issue and how the Office of the Public Protector dealt with this issue says a lot about the characters of all involved parties in terms of the provisions of Aristotle’s virtue theory. For Aristotle, some political actors in the Nkandla issue would not be regarded as upright, while the Office of the Public Protector would be judged to be of good character. The matter of Nkandla is seen by many in South Africa as an attack on Chapter 9 institutions and a direct attack on the person of Thuli Madonsela, the Public Protector or as a violation of the Constitution by virtue of which the Public Protector’s powers and Office are instituted and protected (RSA 1996: section 182). Further, the decisions Thuli Madonsela contained in her Nkandla report reveal her to be a virtuous, courageous person. Given the position

of the President and his loyalists, it could not have been an easy task for her to perform. Her conduct conforms to Callan's (1997) idea of the *politics of virtue*, referred to as *civic virtue* in other circles. The politics of virtue demands more involvement and responsibility from citizens.

Broadly, in most Sub-Saharan African countries, citizens are involved in politics only when their votes are needed by politicians; therefore, democracy for most voters is limited to voting during general elections and municipal by-elections. People who restrict their political participation to voting only, would not be regarded as having civic virtue. Insofar as the Aristotelian virtue ethics is concerned, such people are regarded as deficient as far as their civic participation in public matters is concerned. Greek philosophers would hold that active participation is not limited to casting a vote during elections; citizenship is the highly prized cultivation of civic virtue in politics, practised on a continuous basis.

COMPETENCY, ARBITRARY POWER AND DEMOCRACY

Sometimes democracy is compromised by arbitrary misuse of power and disregard for ethical norms and standards. Addressing arbitrary misuse of political power, Atkinson & Bierling (2005:1003) write: "[t]here are still areas in which political loyalties trump legal requirements". That is, "To trump legal requirements" is to undermine the constitution; to undermine the constitution is to promote lawlessness; promoting lawlessness is poor governance; and, poor governance compromises democracy (Atkinson & Bierling 2005:1003). Philosophy distinguishes between power and authority. Power as a concept is neither positive nor negative. In a positive sense power indicates the requirement to obey but this obedience must be enforced legitimately. But power can also be negative if it is abused. Therefore, power has a moral significance. On the other hand, authority is power used correctly.

For instance, citizens have a moral obligation to obey the law, whereas government through its organs such as police services and the courts has authority to exercise power as a strategy to enforce law and order. There are many ways political power is misused in most African states, one of which is appointment of political loyalists in government positions, irrespective of whether most of those appointed to ministerial positions are competent or not. Where appointments are politically motivated and are based on cronyism rather than merit, effectiveness is compromised. In South Africa, this seems to be precisely what happens: political loyalists are given strategic positions, which they do not have the required competences to carry out effectively. It is important to conceptualise the term "competence" and apply it to the topic of this article. The question that needs to be answered is: what is competence and what role does it play in creating an enabling environment for good governance?

The concept of competence is derived from the Latin word *competere*, which is closely linked to the word "compete". Competence implies possession of adequate skills to compete or perform at the highest level. Aristotle puts it thus:

each man [and woman] can judge competently the things he [and she] knows, and of these he is a good judge. Accordingly, a good judge in each particular field is one who has been trained in it (Nicomachean Ethics paragraph 1095a in Ross 1992).



This is a clear articulation of what is regarded as competence, which according to Aristotle involves training. Macaulay & Lawton (2006:706) posit that competency is “an underlying characteristic of a person that results in efficiency and effective work performance”. Following the logic of this argument, lack of competence compromises performance, and poor performance compromises good governance.

But the trend in most African countries is the appointment of loyalists into strategic government positions, disregarding the appointed individuals’ ability to perform. Particular political ministerial positions should be allocated to competent individuals, so that competent ministers are in full control of their ministries. A minister should take blame and be accountable for anything that goes wrong in the ministry. This stresses the need for a minister to be of virtuous character. We could go so far as to suggest that Aristotle would regard competency as a form of virtue because competence suggests action or performance by a moral agent. In a case where a minister errs because of lack of competence in performing his or her duties, she/he cannot be held responsible. It is the one who has appointed him or her to the position who should be held accountable. Again, in matters where good governance is assured, competence in appointees to ministries is essential. Political wisdom in this sense presupposes practical wisdom in appointing competent individuals to appropriate ministerial positions, increasing the likelihood that good governance and full accountability from each minister will result.

In South Africa, the tendency is to appoint individuals without delving deeply enough into their ability to perform. From 1994 to the present day South Africans have experienced several cabinet ministers, commissioners and even directors in government departments being sacked from their powerful positions and demoted altogether. At other times cabinet ministers and public (political) office bearers placed in strategic governing positions have been removed from their positions for failing to perform but have then been appointed to other departments. An example from the recent past was the political scandal wherein the country had three ministers of finance in four days, in the persons of former Minister Nhlanhla Nene, Mr Desmond van Rooyen (who lasted only three days in office) and Pravin Gordhan, who was reappointed to the position he occupied before Nene. Such trends suggest to citizens that somebody is not sure about what they are doing and more often than not this is a clear indication that people are appointed not on the basis of their skills and performance, but that their appointments are motivated by other factors.

CONCLUSION

This article argued that ethics and accountability are integral parts of promoting democracy and good governance, to which the social contract theory of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is highly relevant. It is the contention of this article that the role played by social contract theorists in contemporary governments cannot be underestimated. The social contract theory ensures that government does not abuse its legitimate powers, by establishing structures that limit those powers. The article further stresses the importance of the active participation of citizens which is essential in sustaining and strengthening democracy. Good governance is the product of good government officials whose aim is to achieve a social context in which humans can flourish. The Aristotelian test for government – whether the

government achieves this aim – is affirmed. Virtue (that is, *arête*) is learned through practice until excellence is achieved and becomes habitual.

In the Aristotelian sense, good and virtuous character plays an important role in leaders' decisions and actions. It has been argued that ensuring good governance and democracy imposes obligations on both government officials and citizens, in which case all must actively play their roles. The moral and political obligation for government is to make deliberations that would benefit larger society; whereas citizens are required to participate actively and challenge governments to explain their decisions and actions. The ideal of good governance through the appointment of competent ministers has been argued for, since deficiency in competence undermines good governance and accountability. In order for government officials to abide by the rules, there must be a structure in government that is strictly appointed for advising the president and his cabinet. Also discussed in this article, is the value of ethics and a virtuous leader in promoting good governance, and the view that good leaders come from a good society. Introducing virtue theories at school level from early childhood onwards is advocated, with reference to the Basotho expression: *thupa e kopjwa esale metsi*.

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