

PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY AND THE POLITICS OF SYCOPHANCY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This work examined how sycophancy affected public service delivery in the Nigeria's public service. Sycophancy takes place in both military and civilian regimes in Nigeria. The main reason for sycophancy is to curry the favour of the government in power in terms of appointments, contracts award and allocation of values in the political system. Sycophants are groups of citizens that always come in to praise and eulogize every government in power though with dubious intentions of benefiting from the government in power. Sycophancy has often made our political leaders to believe that they are doing well whereas they are not. This has often given the political leaders a false sense of their performance in office. Sycophancy has often given our political office holders intoxicating effects of performance occasioned by excessive praise singing. This work believes that factors that influence sycophancy in Nigeria includes, political culture and orientation, colonial virus, system of rewards and sharing of resources/positions, defense mechanism, unpopular leadership, culture of betrayal and unfulfilled promises. Sycophancy continued to thrive in Nigeria because sycophants are usually rewarded by the government in power because of the role they play in laundering the image of the government in power whether they perform well or not. The study concluded that sycophancy has negatively affected the delivery of public service in Nigeria because the sycophants will always tell the government in power that they are performing well even in the obvious case of poor or non-performance. It was recommended, among others that, appointments into public offices should be based on merit, competence and capability. Sycophancy should be criminalized in the country, and that conferment of chieftaincy titles, honorary degrees and other awards to political officer holders while still in office should be prohibited.

INTRODUCTION:

Government the world over exists to provide essential services to the citizens. These services by the government are core services that no country can do without. These services are usually provided by the government through their representatives - elected and appointed citizens. Those elected are voted into office by their constituents who in turn appoint some people to assist them (the elected ones) to run the affairs of government. It is on this premise that Burns in Akindele (1998) defines representative democracy as a system whereby “all the people elected a few to do for them what they could not do together”. It is in order to ensure

that services are well delivered to the citizens that government has been in constant search for the best and efficient ways of carrying out its functions. This has necessitated the government to embark on several reforms in the public sector with a view to finding the best and effective ways of rendering essential services to the people.

Despite government's effort in rendering essential services to the people, several impediments have always come in to thwart government genuine efforts. One of such overlooked impediments is sycophancy. These are groups of citizens that always come in to praise and eulogize every government in power with dubious intentions of benefiting from such government. The sycophants are insincere, hypocritical and Janus-faced in their support of government policies and programmes. Their main intention is to unduly benefit from the government in power by unnecessarily praising those in power and their policies whether such policies are good or not. This has often made our political leaders to believe that they are doing well whereas they are not. This scenario often gives the political leaders false impression of their performance in office. This has often affected public service delivery in third world countries as sycophants will always tell the political office holders that they are performing so well in delivering of democratic dividends when indeed they are not. This has often been overlooked as a factor that impedes effective public service delivery in third world countries.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION PUBLIC SERVICE

The term public service connotes the public sector of the economy. The public sector is the domain of governmental activities. These governmental activities are carried out by the public service. Public Service can be used in two senses, first as an institution of government and second as service delivered by government. Adamolekun in Nwizu and Nwapi (2011) defines the public service as the “totality of services that are organized under government authority. The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended defines public service as comprising of:

- Clerk of the House of Assembly
- Members of staff of High court of Appeal or other courts established for a state by this constitution or by a law of House of Assembly.
- Members of staff of any commission or authority established for the state by this constitution or by law of a House of Assembly
- Staff of any statutory institution or corporation established by law of a House of Assembly.
- Staff of any educational institution established or financed principally by a government of a state or federation, and
- Staff of any company or enterprise in which the government of a state or its agency holds controlling shares or interest.

According to Obikeze (2011), Public Service implies “all that are provided by individuals who operate in government agencies, institutions, organizations and establishments”. The public service exists to perform certain essential services to the citizens. According to Nwizu and Nwapi (2011) the roles of the public service include:

- i. Prevention of exploitation: If private enterprises are allowed to render the essential services, there will be exploitation and discrimination in their provision so the public service helps to eliminate exploitation for services rendered.
- ii. Ensuring a constant supply of services: If these services are left in the hands of private enterprises, there will be irregular supply in order for them to make huge profits.
- iii. Public Service avoids private monopoly: Private monopoly in the provision of the essential services is detrimental to members of the public. It may lead to high cost of living but with public service whose aim is not to maximize profit but to render essential services to the people, the cost is usually lower.
- iv. Public service helps in economic development: Their presence attracts rapid economic development from both local and foreign investors and fastens the economic development of the state.

PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY

Public service delivery is concerned with the rendering of essential services to members of the public. According to Olowu (2002) “service delivery is the *raison d’être* of the public service. The primary reason for the existence of the public sector is to deliver services that the private sector may not deliver at all or to deliver services to those who cannot afford the market price of the products”. To Ahmed (2005), service delivery has been an old concept which draws attention of organizations to their responsibility to render service to their customers in the most satisfactory manner. This presupposes that, in rendering public service, there is an unwritten contractual relationship between the customer (the public) and the service provider (government agencies) which obliges the latter to render services to the former in the most satisfactory way, be it in terms of utility, quality, convenience, timeliness, cost, courtesy, communication or otherwise. Another presupposition is that just as in business, the customer is regarded as the king. Accordingly, in public service delivery, the public is regarded as ‘master’ and the ultimate judge of the performance and not sycophants.

According to Ahmed (2005), the Nigeria's public expectations from the public service in terms of service delivery include:

- An organization that is staffed with competent men and women and well managed.
- A public service that is courteous, friendly, receptive and helpful in its relationship with the public.
- Eager and proactive in offering information to the public with feedback and follow-up.
- Transparent, honest and averse to corruption, fraud and extortion of the public in official dealings.
- Exemplary in its standards of efficiency in both production and rendition of services with minimal waste.
- Punctual and time conscious in all official dealings.
- Run on well planned programmes with activity schedules and calendars that are firm and respected.
- Prompt in response to problems and complaints of the public, which are conclusively attended to.

- Objective, professional, fair and patriotic in the treatment of matters of public interest or cases entailing competition among persons or organizations.

A public service whose:

- Services and products are of cutting-edge standards
- Charges and billing systems are affordable and convenient to the public.
- Public infrastructure facilities are built to unblemished standards, regularly maintained and promptly repaired.

A public service with:

- Continuous improvement in service mix and methods based on communication and feedback from the public.

As Ahmed (2005) puts it “at the time of the handover to democratic regime in May 1999, the state of the Nigerian public service, in terms of image, operational modalities and service delivery was rather dismal. It was common for casual observer to paint the public servants as being lethargic and slow in official decision and action, insensitive to the value of time, irregular in work attendance, nepotism, corrupt, slow to perceive change and even slower to adopt it, unresponsive and discourteous to the public, etc. It was against this background that Obasanjo's administration decided to carry out a reform of the Nigeria's public service to enable it carry out its functions efficiently and effectively.

1.4 SYCOPHANCY

Sycophancy occurs when performances of legitimate functions of government are erroneously exaggerated to invoke unwarranted stream of praises on a public office holders or government in power. Sycophancy is a deceitful, misleading, highly opinionated but partial heap of unwarranted praises and encomiums on political leaders and, or government in power. It beguiles the masses to believe in failed government policies and programmes, which a sycophant paints in a very bright and attractive colours to mislead members of the public into believing that such government performs very well. This, of course makes governance wane significantly in integrity.

Etim (2017) posits that sycophancy is a way of winning or currying favour from powerful and influential people through flattery and praise singing. Sycophants display subservient and obsequious disposition which symbolizes fawning obsequiousness aimed at diverting attention from the pulse of the people to the exaggerated achievements or performances of those in power. Oloja (2016) contends that sycophancy is insincere flattery of people of wealth or influence in order to benefit from their largesse. This corroborates the perspectives of Akpogena (2018) that sycophancy is a civilized form of insincerity through which among other things, yes-men gain upward mobility from their object of supplication.

It is to be noted that sycophants do not spare any person or government in power during civilian or in the military era. According to Iyayi (2001), sycophants are like group of prostitutes always waiting round the bend on the street of power for the next customer (Political office holders) to come into office. We all know the work of sycophants. They are the professional praise singers, those that declare their readiness to die for the political office holders and those in power; those who use the adjectives reserved for God for painting the

soiled names of their masters. In Iyayi's very words:

It is the sycophants who declare that their masters can change the course of rivers, direct the sun to set in the East and alter the calendar of time. It is the sycophants who declare that the world would come to a dismal and immediate end if their masters were to vacate the seat of power. It is the sycophant who forgets his own birthday but stands and sings on the occasion of the birthday of the master's mistress and wives. It is the sycophant who tells his naked and bald master that he is dressed in the greatest splendour. The sycophant has said to us again and again that his master is immortal and invincible.

From the above, one can succinctly deduce that the work of sycophants produces an intoxicating and heady effects on the political office holders making them believe that they have performed well in service delivery to members of the public.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was developed by Icek Ajzen in 1980 as an attempt to predict human behaviour. The TPB posits that attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control influence behavioural intention. The Theory was intended to explain all behaviours over which people have the ability to exert self-control.

The theory examines how behaviours become consistent with predetermined goals and therefore shares much in common with the nature and goal of behaviours that epitomize sycophancy (i.e reasoned action chosen for a predetermined goal in preference for other contending options of behaviours in a political system).

Fundamentally, the theory of planned Behaviour is a variant of the theory of reasoned action. The peculiarity lies in its description of situations that account for a planned behaviour and strategies adopted in pursuit of the target intentions. The theory critically appraises the factors that encourage, motivate and sustain the perpetuity of an action, which in its form looks like a political subculture that springs up a newly or emerging anti-thesis political behaviour in the system. According to LaMorte (2019), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) started as the theory of reasoned action in 1980 to predict an individual's intention to engage in behaviour at a specific time and place. The theory is intended to explain all behaviours over which people have the ability to exert self-control with the key component focusing on behavioural intent, which specifically states that behavioural intentions are influenced by the attitude about the likelihood that the behaviour will have the expected outcome and the subjective evaluation of the risks and benefits of that outcome.

This theory is related to this work because the sycophants planned his behaviour of praise singing, flattery and obeisance with the intention of getting positive rewards from the system. If he succeeds in getting the expected rewards from the system, then his aim would have been achieved. Sycophants always expect some kind of rewards or benefits from the system as a result of his planned behavioural disposition to those in power.

IMPACT OF SYCOPHANCY ON PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY IN NIGERIA

Sycophancy has been a thriving business in Nigeria since independence. In fact most of those who have been appointed or co-opted into government since independence have always been sycophantic fraternizers in the corridors of power and outside. The environment

in which sycophancy operates in Nigeria is very dynamic. Regardless of political and economic status, educational background and leadership position in the political strata, those who engage in sycophantic behaviours share a common objective - to curry favour. Hence, sycophancy and sycophantic behaviour emanate from reasoned calculation of the receptive nature of its conduct in a political environment.

Many people see those who engage in sycophantic behaviour in governance and politics as selfish, shameless, deceptive and political gamblers with decayed conscience. Others view sycophancy as an emerging way of survival in a competitive political environment, the purpose of which is to curry favour and opportunities from those in power. When Nigeria attained independence in 1960, sycophancy accelerated unhealthy diversion of attention from steering the wheel of governance towards national unity and development without moderation or necessary checks to nip the ugly effects in the bud, and this promoted egotism among the class that stepped into the rather big shoes of the departing colonial masters.

Praise singing in support of each leader by people seeking personal or group favour such as political appointments, contracts, siting of projects in their communities, recognition, employment opportunities, among others, assumed a threatening dimension. It infected governing and non-governing elites, and reversed public trust in civil governance. It became common knowledge that sycophancy made the government operated in falsehood, relegated national interest and allowed personal ambitions to displace facts about the poor nature of governance in the country.

The collapse of the first Republic and subsequent military intervention in governance drew much inspiration from sycophancy. Expectedly, empty heroic praises and flattery have continued to lure government into taking despicable actions with defensive ploys to blindfold the public with basket of lies. As toxic substance, it pollutes the integrity of governance and exemplifies the bane of politics and leadership in the post-colonial Nigeria.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SYCOPHANCY DURING MILITARY ERA

The military as an organization has its own values and norms which make it a unique organization. These values and norms are transferred to the larger society in terms of discipline during governance. The universalistic character of achievement orientation in the award of honours and promotion is said to be endemic in the military. Thus, the values of puritanism, discipline, rationality and achievement orientation of the military are assumed to be much more directly relevant to change and development (Etim and Ukpere, 2012).

In a democratic system, especially in Africa, these values are deemed to have been eroded since the time the military made inroads into civil governance. Elections are organized frequently, but they do not usually lead to the installation of popular candidates in power. The electorates are often convinced that elections do not offer real political choices. At the same time, the struggle for free and fair elections has become the fulcrum of the struggle for democratic transition (Ibrahim, 2003). Amid the turbulent political happenings in Nigeria, it is to be noted that sycophancy was critical in attracting and luring the military class into civil governance. Displaced politicians usually eulogize the virtues of the military and run down civilian government just to curry favour whenever the military takes over the government through coup d'etat.

It characterized the various coups and counter coups in Nigeria and this sycophantic disposition did not even spare democratic governance. Rain of empty praises and flattery on

military leaders without predicating them on performance is often the order of the day. Aside sycophantic obsession during Aguiji Ironsi, Gowon and Murtala/Obasanjo era, it was from the regime of Buhari-Idiagbon to the twilight of military exit from civil governance in May, 1999, that sycophancy began to display its influence in manipulating national leaderships for personal gain. Sycophancy became a lucrative business with specialty in applauding every policy introduced and projects or programmes implemented by leaders whether such policies or programmes are good or not. These sycophants are quick to lampoon critics of such policies or programmes despite the veil selfish ambition shrouding in such deceitful flattery.

For example, those who made Buhari believed that “War Against- indiscipline” and “Austerity Policy” were the best in reviving the comatose economy and instilling consumption discipline in Nigerians were quick to discredit the policy after his overthrow in a coup led by General Ibrahim Babangida. The “War - Against - Indiscipline” rapidly became unpopular, at least among the elites and it helped set the stage for Babangida's successful coup against the Buhari's government in 1985 (Campbell, 2016). The reason for the hurried change was to demonstrate loyalty to the new administration and shift the focus of their sycophantic behaviours to new concerns of the emergent administration. Hence, in spite of the fact that General Babangida was manipulating the transition to civil rule and refreshing sit-tight mentality in power, sycophants swiftly blew the sordid policies and activities to canonical status insisting that Babangida was only taking his own time to do the transition programme to avoid mistakes that always accompany impetuous decisions.

The Association for Better Nigeria (ABN) formed by Arthur Nzeribe after the Babangida's regime abolished all political parties and decreed into existence two political parties - the National Republican Convention (NRC) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1991, played same sycophantic role by eulogizing Babangida's decisions. The same type of sycophantic disposition gave impetus to the formation of Youth Earnestly Ask for Abacha (YEAA) in 1997, led by Daniel Kanu and primarily committed to urging General Sani Abacha, who was the then Head of the military junta to run for the Nigeria's presidency. This was to enable Abacha changed from khaki to Agbada. YEAA drummed support for Abacha to transmute from military Head of State to civilian president.

Sycophancy became infectious when the five political parties created by Abacha on 30th September, 1996, namely, Congress for National Consensus (CNC), Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN), National Centre Party of Nigeria (NCPN), United Nigeria People's Convention (UNPC) and Grassroots Democratic Movement (GDM) all unanimously adopted Abacha as their sole consensus presidential candidate. This defied all known democratic and electoral norms and tended to ridicule the agitations of pro-democracy groups that military must hand over power to the civilian class.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SYCOPHANCY UPON RETURN TO DEMOCRATIC RULE SINCE 1999

Since the return to civil rule in Nigeria in 1999, each President and Governor has had to cope with the increasing gale of sycophancy in the system. Political jobbers easily penetrate the ranks of influential political office holders to mislead government where there is public mistrust on its policies and programmes. Across different administrations in the Fourth Republic, sycophancy has made several policies and programmes of government veer off track abruptly, lose focus, and most times stalled occasioned by the relentless activities of sycophants. There are frequent unsubstantiated claims about the achievements that

government has made with nothing tangible for a proof. For example, government or its sycophantic fraternizers always publicly and without fear of contradiction announce that the government has refurbished refineries to start operation on full capacity though without supplying proofs. Sycophants will announce to the world that poverty has been wiped from Nigeria based on growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and economic diversion. There were and there still are many such sycophantic exaggerations about government activities and achievements in Nigeria.

Sycophants trumpet government policies in the media and other channels of public discourse with ceaseless encomia even before their actual implementation. Presidents, Governors, Senators, Representative members, House of Assembly members and other classes of appointees of government are targets of the praise singers, some of which they instigate and sponsor in order to swag public perceptions and opinions on their often ridiculously overrated principals and their performances. They use the services of hired and paid praises singers, either within the government circle or outside the corridors of power, especially people that resort to parochial behaviour in pursuit of their goals and not really about public interests.

It was part of the reason that towards the end of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's administration in 2007, a third term idea was mooted and pursued for the extension of his tenure beyond the two terms allowed by the constitution under the guise of a constitutional amendment (Etim, 2017). Again, this was hailed by sycophants as a step in the right direction because according to them, this would afford Obasanjo's administration ample time to consolidate on the gains of the nascent democracy. That being a retired military general, that he was the only one with the intellectual resources and military training to help consolidate the new found democracy beyond two terms.

Again, the administration of the then President Goodluck Jonathan witnessed sycophantic groups that were hurriedly formed to persuade him to re - contest that election, even though he had earlier intended to serve only one term in office prior to the 2011 general election. The most vociferous sycophantic voice in those days was that of the Transformation Ambassadors of Nigeria (TAN).

Sycophancy was also among the reasons that weak presidential bureaucracy characterized the first term of President Muhammadu Buhari (2015-2019); including embarrassing parochial appointments; a cabinet of mediocrities; and a lifeless economic team, etc (Oloja, 2016). Sycophants usually adorn national dailies with the portrait of leaders and goodwill and congratulatory messages for achieving feats or proposing projects that the fate is still hanging in the air. Often times, radio announcements, jingles, billboards, posters, social media platforms and adverts are media for communicating praise singing messages. This creates integrity deficits for the government and in addition makes observers to look at leadership as people that play hoax as a ploy to bamboozle unsuspecting public.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SYCOPHANCY IN NIGERIA

The subject matter of sycophancy revolves around attempts to influence leaders in the corridors of power in order to get rewards through praise singing, flattery and obeisance. It is deceitful, distorted, misleading and delusional. Several factors are known to give wings to sycophancy to not only fly but thrive in Nigeria.

These factors include:

- **Political Culture and Orientation:** Political culture encompasses the laid down political norms, orientations, attitudes, behaviours, perceptions, values, preferences and institutional framework which are aimed at developing, sustaining and consolidating the unique political attributes of a particular system. The culture influences perceptions and behaviours towards political activities and programmes, including governance. In Nigeria, these culture and orientations majorly focus on ethnicity, religion and struggle for leadership. It occasions the incidences of sycophancy among those that cling on to these factors to promote feuds.
- **Colonial Virus:** As a colonial state, Nigeria formed its political behaviour on a wrong foundation, which tilts predominantly towards parochial political culture, thrives in shallow knowledge of the political process, loss of interest in fact - finding and passion for sideline praise singing that are not only baseless but rent seeking adventure. Since colonial administration traded on fantasy in the administration of its foreign territories, it was convenient for post-colonial leaderships and subjects to embrace the same attitude and play to the gallery.
- **System of rewards and sharing of resources/positions:** The system of allocation of resources or positions in most political system is based on support and not on merit derived from capacity to perform (Chahal and Poonam, 2015). It plays alluring role especially where government rewards sycophants to stop exposing the shortcomings of the system or challenging the credibility of the leadership through constructive or destructive criticisms. Because the system emphasizes positive support as condition for rewards and or allocation of resources/positions, many people usually toe the line of camouflaged support, using all manner of strategies, including sycophancy to be outstanding where rivalry among supporters is competitive and overbearing in magnitude. The essence of sycophancy is to pave way for recognition and therefore to curry favour.
- **Defense mechanism:** Performance is the measure of compliance by leadership with promises made during campaigns. Among several cases that attest to this assertion, mention can be made of few examples. First, at the verge of the 2015 general elections, army of sycophants worked for re-election of President Goodluck Jonathan and publicized his scorecards even when some sections of the public openly alleged that his party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Governor's performed poorly in every ramifications. Sycophants took over and launder his image and scorecard to no avail. He lost the election. Similarly, during the 2019 presidential election, Buhari's poor performance came to the fore. The President's performance was not significant enough, but in order to cover up the poor performance, sycophants used questionable scorecards to assuage public judgments on the government and he was re-elected for second term despite very abysmal outing in his first term in office.
- **Unpopularity of leadership:** When a leader is unpopular, the concomitant consequences are the engagement of sycophants for some rebranding jobs. Etim (2016), illustrates this with the case of Abacha. The assumption was that sycophancy made the craze to support extension of his dictatorial rule pervasive and knew no bound as both the young and the old were falling over themselves in this frenzy. Even the five political parties of that time, which the late Bola Ige described as five fingers

of the leprous hand adopted Abacha as their sole Presidential candidate. It is thus, not out of place to assume that late Abacha was such a good man to have enjoyed such massive adoption and support. Evidently, though, this was nothing but the work of sycophants, otherwise, there would not have been such massive celebration across the country when the news of Abacha's death broke out.

- **Culture of Betrayal:** In politics, leaders treasure betrayal of their predecessors or rivals as an advantage in the game of wits. Politicians switch parties to serve the purpose of giving classified information about their party or their estranged master or mentor. It recycles sycophancy and the values attached to the shameless practice. Sadly, it should be noted that, the same set of people which praised one leader or administration also do same to all sets of leaders that come into government with the intention of benefiting from them all.
- **Politics of gansterism:** During political campaign, people align with parties and candidates in pretense that they want to help to achieve their electoral victories. Equipped with this mentality, they employ all tact including sycophancy to fleece the party or candidate of money and other valuables, but with no real love for the party or the party candidates.
- **Unfulfilled Promises:** Unfulfilled promises results in sycophants laundering the soiled image of the government in power and thwarting public opinions about its scorecards. The sycophants do this by creating fictitious performance profile that markets the net value of the government or leadership to unsuspecting and gullible members of the public.

CONCLUSION

This paper tried to look at how sycophancy in modern government has negatively affected the delivery of public goods and services to the public. Public services are meant for the benefits of all members of the public. However, these public services do not come as expected. Some are privatized or commercialized and as a result some of these services are paid for. Expectedly, not everybody can afford to pay for such services. Besides, most public services are channeled by public office holders to their cronies, ethnic and tribal groups, etc. Thus, our public office holders fail the people in effective service delivery. In most cases, even when this failure is obvious, the sycophants will tell us that the public office holders, especially politicians are doing very well against every known standard and yardstick of performance. These often make public office holders in Nigeria relaxed and believe that they have performed well and thus thumb chest themselves for doing well, when they indeed have not. The activities of sycophant thus affect effective public service delivery in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To stem the raging tide of sycophancy in derailing effective service delivery in the country, the following recommendations were made:

1. Reorganization of the political system to emphasize competence, capacity and personal discipline as essential qualities expected of a potential leader before aspiring for any elective office or position.

2. Appointment to public offices should be based on merit, capacity and penchant for service delivery which will make sycophancy a poor business in governance.
3. De-emphasizing ethnicity, religion, class solidarity and sectionalism as the basis for association with leadership position and thus putting a stop to unnecessary sycophantic fraternizing.
4. Sycophancy should be criminalized in governance. This will put a stop to misleading information and inciting claim about implemented policies/projects/programmes that have no verifiable proofs and or shielding the ineptitude of leadership or intentional false claim to give credit to poor performance in office.
5. Prohibition of conferment of chieftaincy titles, honorary degrees and other awards on any leader whose tenure has not expired.
6. There should be a curtailment of unnecessary media portrayal and publicity on leader's performance of his or her statutory and constitutionally assigned roles and functions. After all, these were what they swore an oath to do when voted or appointed into office. These are their assigned roles and functions and no one needs to praise them for doing what they are paid to do.

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