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# Politics and Morality in the Career of Alcibiades

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Gill Oluwatosin Adekannbi  
and  
Goke Akinboye

## *Abstract*

*The Greek historian, Thucydides, as well as the historian and biographer, Plutarch, are prominent sources of information about life and career of the Athenian politician and statesman, Alcibiades. While presenting the striking political contributions of Alcibiades as an orator, a military commander and a strategic adviser, the accounts of the duo also put on record some arguably ugly sides of his personality and offer parameters for examining how the activities of a politician become inimical to the interest of the state when the actions reflect his and societal foul values. Using qualitative interpretive method, this paper utilises Thucydides' The History of the Peloponnesian War and Plutarch's The Parallel Lives: The Life of Alcibiades to examine the political genius of Alcibiades and the moral questions it raised. Alcibiades' case is used to illustrate the impact of individual and societal values on political outcomes, especially when politicians resort to treachery and criminal acts to become the leaders of the people. Alcibiades's example, as discussed in the paper, also shows that the blame for political crisis would be shared between the electorate and the clever politician they elect to lead the state despite his failed character.*

**Key Words:** *Alcibiades; Political ingenuity; Societal values; Moral questions; Political outcome.*

## **Introduction**

When a politician is described as ingenious, it evokes the thought of being apt at taking actions that are considered expedient or most suitable in addressing political situations. Those who possess such

quality are hailed as good politicians but others, who out of moral considerations, behave differently are judged otherwise. This reasoning raises a serious issue on whether individuals, who are driven by the sense of what is expedient and aimed at meeting a utilitarian goal, are simply good politicians and statesmen. It has been argued in various studies that moral or socio-cultural values determine political outcomes (Husted, 1999; Lipset and Lenz, 2000; Paldam, 2002; Welzel *et al.*, 2003; Sandholz and Taagepera, 2005; Uslaner, 2004; Barr and Serra, 2010; O'Connor and Fisher, 2011). While it appears not strange in politics to hear people justifying morally questionable actions or outright evil as serving some good, reconciling private ethics of a prominent and influential politician with his public ethics or the aspirations of the public could sometimes be a difficult task.

The self-seeking attitude among popular politicians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria's democratic setting continues to be a moral concern. Politicians resort to treacherous or private acts that contradict their public profession of altruism or call to selfless service. The problem is expressed below:

The deification of money and power has ascended the dangerous crescendo where human spare parts, diabolical rivalry, spiritual poisoning, family feud, voodooistic proclivities and cultic magic have become the major ritualistic paraphernalia and in their wake leaving many people mad, dead, poor, deformed and some as mobile corpses. The voodooistic ritualist and ritualism have continued to maintain a banal presence in the Nigerian society ... We know why most ritualists and their patronizers are never tried in Nigeria. It is because they are the partners in crime with those at the helm of affairs, politicians and the rich... On the 19th of February 2014 this writer was also driving into Warri from Sapele at about 10:30pm when three men accosted a woman lunatic at the Effurun/Warri Roundabout and took her into the Naval open field and made love to her in turns. I drove to Ekpan junction and told the police what was going on, they simply laughed and said, "Mind your business" ... As the 2015 elections approaches, politicians and their ilk are preparing to acquire power by

all means. They are much more prone to getting to their hierarchical echelon by voodooistic acrobatics and diabolical manipulations. (Gbinije, 2014:1)

The question remains: if expediency excuses breaking promises or committing murders, resorting to deceit and treachery in politics, who has the blame when things go wrong for the society? Additionally, in seeking political ends, should quality of the means conflict with the society's moral standard? Thus, by employing a qualitative-interpretive research method, this paper uses Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and Plutarch's *The Parallel Lives: Life of Alcibiades* to discuss the political career of Alcibiades, a prominent figure who emerged at a period of crisis in the history of ancient Athenian democracy. The paper highlights the life of an individual with ingenuity vis-à-vis his moral values and the outcome of his political actions to the State. It illustrates how both individual and societal values determine the results of a democracy. Beginning with a brief consideration of how the Athenian began his public career, this paper progresses to appraise Alcibiades as a model of a self-seeking politician at various political settings.

### **The Peloponnesian War as the Background to the Rise of Alcibiades**

Born around 450 B.C into the aristocratic family of the Athenian politician, Cleinias whose wife, Deinomache, was from the ancient Alkmeonidai line, Alcibiades, became known as a statesman, an orator and a general (*strategos*). It is fitting to have a summary of major developments that preceded the emergence of Alcibiades' on the state's political stage at Athens in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. The Athenians at this time led a coalition of city-states known as the Delian League, and by this means, they freed the Greeks in Asia Minor from Persian control. Thereafter, the period of Athenian political hegemony over ally states began from 478 B.C. With relocation of the League's treasury from Delos to Athens by the middle of the 5th century BC under the pretence of effective leadership, what was at first an alliance of city-states at par was cleverly turned into Athenian empire (Forde 1986).

The Conversion of the City-states into Athenian Empire meant

military supremacy and influx of the empire's funds into Athens under the political guardianship of Pericles who led the state to a golden age (Bruell 1974). Although, Athens and Sparta had cooperated during the Persian War, particularly in mainland Greece, a tense political atmosphere followed. The position of Athens was never to the admiration of Sparta which was seen as a political and military rival in the community of Greek states (Forde 1986). The historian, Thucydides, readily associates the condition with the Peloponnesian War that soon broke out, saying: "the real cause I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon made war inevitable" (Thucydides 1. 23.6). Besides, Sparta's resentment towards Athens' domination precipitated war by placing some economic sanctions on the Megarians, Spartan allies, forbidding them from trading in all the harbours of the Athenian empire. Moreover, the Corinthians who were part of the Peloponnesian League, in another development, resented the Athenian blockade of its former colony, Potidea, as well as the support Athens gave to Corcyra in a quarrel between Corinth and Corcyra. The Spartans, considering the Corinthians with their powerful naval force as indispensable, and the Megarians' trade interest as worthy of protection, issued ultimatums asking Athens to review her policies towards the Spartan allies. The Athenian assembly under the preponderant influence of Pericles rejected the ultimatum. The uneasy relationship that afterward persisted between the two ancient super powers was relieved when peace was struck in 446/445 B.C, supposedly for thirty years. By 431/430 B.C, the peace was interrupted when the Spartan King, Archidamus II, invaded Attica and then, the devastating Peloponnesian war period that would last for twenty-seven years (431-404 B.C) began in earnest (Forde 1986).

It was a bitter conflict that was to forever change various aspects of the ancient Greek world. However, of primary interest here is how the war upset the social and political order of the democratic Athens, wrecked her economic strength and gave the people a new orientation. It is in connection with this period when the ostensible vibrant existence of many Athenians was undermined that the morality in the public



career of Alcibiades, a prominent Athenian politician is discussed.

As the Peloponnesian war engulfed the Greek world, Athens took pride in the leadership of Pericles in both civil administration and military strategy. Thucydides gives the following description of the reputable direction that was credited to Pericles thus:

The reason whereof was this: that being a man of great power both for his dignity and wisdom, and for bribes manifestly the most incorrupt, he freely controlled the multitude and was not so much led by them as he led them. Because, having gotten his power by no evil arts, he would not humour them in his speeches but out of his authority durst anger them with contradiction. [9] Therefore, whensoever he saw them out of season insolently bold, he would with his orations put them into a fear; and again, when they were afraid without reason, he would likewise erect their spirits and embolden them (Thucydides, 2.65.8-9).

Thucydides would not only extol the guardianship of Pericles as an incorruptible statesman in a democratic setting with some propensity towards corruption and insolence, but further depicts a picture of a political chasm at his demise. He develops the theme that at the death of Pericles, the Athenians became bereft of worthy leadership by repeatedly committing military blunders until their final defeat by the Spartans in 404. This is a background to the political rise of Alcibiades, who ironically was a nephew of the great Athenian leader, Pericles (Palmer 1982). What follows is an overview of the political course of Alcibiades that could be summed up as: diplomacy or intrigues, shifting of sides during the Peloponnesian war; a reputation for cunningness and treachery; a strong as well as a towering figure in the events that led to the woes of democratic Athens as the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. ended (Forde 1989).

### **Contextualisation of Deception in the Politics of the Statesman**

Alcibiades, at the age of 30, began to wield striking political influence

in the Athenian assembly when he was made a general. At his initial significant appearance after the Peace of Nicias treaty was signed, his position for aggressive Athenian policy became apparent. His moral tendency as a politician was first noticed when Spartan ambassadors were sent to Athens to clarify issues on the peace treaty from the Athenian general, Nicias, who seemed to have some sympathy for the Spartans. Alcibiades made no mistake in seeing this as the chance needed to employ tricks to discredit his political rival, Nicias. Thucydides relates Alcibiades' ploy to frustrate the peace efforts and advance the ambition of being a foremost politician thus:

An embassy came from Sparta, with reasonable proposals to begin on, and with assurances that they came with full powers to adopt any additional terms that were conciliatory and just. The council received them favourably, and the people were to hold an assembly on the following day for their reception. But Alcibiades feared a peaceful outcome, and managed to secure a private conference with the embassy. When they were convened he said to them: "What is the matter with you, men of Sparta? Why are you blind to the fact that the council is always moderate and courteous towards those who have dealings with it, while the people's assembly is haughty and has great ambitions? If you say to them that you are come with unlimited powers, they will lay their commands and compulsions upon you without any feeling. Come now, put away such simplicity as this, and if you wish to get moderate terms from the Athenians, and to suffer no compulsion at their hands which you cannot yourselves approve, then discuss with them what would be a just settlement of your case, assuring them that you have not full powers to act. I will cooperate with you, out of my regard for the Lacedaemonians." After this speech he gave them his oath, and so seduced them wholly away from the influence of Nicias (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 14. 4-8).

Plutarch here presents Alcibiades as fearful of 'a peaceful outcome' that would boost the political image of Nicias and then resorted to portraying the Athenian assembly as ambitious. As the outcome shows, Alcibiades successfully 'seduced' the Spartan ambassadors. Plutarch further relates how he deceived or duped them:

They trusted him implicitly, admired his cleverness and sagacity, and thought him no ordinary man. On the following day the people convened in the assembly, and the embassy was introduced to them. On being asked by Alcibiades, in the most courteous tone, with what powers they had come, they replied that they were not come with full and independent powers. At once, then, Alcibiades assailed them with angry shouts, as though he were the injured party, not they, calling them faithless and fickle men, who [came] on no sound errand whatever. The council was indignant, the assembly was enraged, and Nicias was filled with consternation and shame at the men's change of front. He was unaware of the deceitful trick which had been played upon him (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 14. 8, 9).

The 'deceitful trick' of the master of 'cleverness and sagacity' worked. He began with a 'most courteous tone' and then daringly 'assailed [the ambassadors] with angry shouts', 'calling them faithless and fickle'; he caused a serious disquiet as 'the council was indignant'. 'Nicias was filled with consternation and shame' and 'the assembly was enraged'. Alcibiades had achieved two things: he discredited the diplomatic mission with plenipotentiary power to negotiate and also gravely undermined the political influence of Nicias. Judging by how he roused up for Athens a Peloponnesian democratic alliance against Sparta, McGregor (1965) would see his use of deception to manipulate and frustrate the armistice efforts as a sheer display of political ingenuity. He reasons thus:

We may, I think, dismiss as superficial and perhaps a little malicious Thucydides' report of Alcibiades' puerile

jealousy of Nicias and his colleagues, especially when Thucydides himself, in the same passage, grants that Alcibiades could plan as a statesman and strategist: "it really seemed to him that it was much preferable to effect alliance with the Argives," writes Thucydides (5.43.2). Alcibiades regarded the Peace of Nicias as no peace at all, a transition to a period of what we call "cold war," a mere prelude to a resumption of hostilities; he judged that the most effective method of destroying the power of Sparta was to destroy her hegemony in the Peloponnese (McGregor, 1965:30).

The argument above might lead to the conclusion that it was politically expedient for Alcibiades to resort to deceit and that he should be viewed as doing a state's bidding. Hence, the performance of Alcibiades above becomes a 'good political outing' or a shrewd display of ingenuity, making it hasty to see a picture of a self-seeking politician. More major events need to be considered to see if the politician was at this time introducing any moral controversy in his political play.

### **Alcibiades on a Collision Course with the State**

The rise in power and influence of the Athenian general was a thorn in the flesh of the Spartans as Alcibiades actively facilitated alliances with Peloponnesian states before the Battle of Mantinea in 418 B.C. Plutarch is apt in acknowledging his growing reputation when he pointedly says: "His accomplishment was a great one, to divide and confuse nearly the whole of the Peloponnese, to pit so many shields against the Lakedaimonians on a single day at Mantinea and to organise the battle and the danger very far from Athens ..." (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 15.1). In 416/415 B.C, Alcibiades again asserted his political influence when he allied with Nicias to accomplish the ostracism of Hyperbolos who was perceived a threat to his political ambition. However, a major highlight of Alcibiades' political profile came in the early 410s B.C. in the era of Athenian aggressive foreign policy. The events of the time continue to generate debates over his character and would be useful parameters in assessing the politician's morality.

Sicily had been on the minds of the Athenians since when Pericles

was alive and, with the pretext of aiding Athenian allies in the region, attempts were made by Athens at having a foothold there even after the death of Pericles. However, with Alcibiades, it was no longer time for modesty or caution but utter conquest of the island. Plutarch recounts his position as a leading and unrelenting advocate of the Sicilian expedition thus:

But the man who finally fanned this desire of theirs into flame, and persuaded them not to attempt the island any more in part and little by little, but to sail thither with a great armament and subdue it utterly, was Alcibiades; he persuaded the people to have great hopes, and he himself had greater aspirations still. Such were his hopes that he regarded Sicily as a mere beginning, and not, like the rest, as an end of the expedition. So while Nicias was trying to divert the people from the capture of Syracuse as an undertaking too difficult for them, Alcibiades was dreaming of Carthage and Libya, and, after winning these, of at once encompassing Italy and Peloponnesus. He almost regarded Sicily as the ways and means provided for his greater war. The young men were at once carried away on the wings of such hopes, and their elders kept recounting in their ears many wonderful things about the projected expedition. Many were they who sat in the palaestras and lounging-places mapping out in the sand the shape of Sicily and the position of Libya and Carthage (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 17. 1-3).

Thucydides similarly portrays inordinate ambition as the drive behind this expedition that Alcibiades was eager to lead as follows:

And the Athenians, having called an assembly and heard both from the Egestaeans and their own ambassadors, amongst other persuasive but untrue allegations, touching their money, how they had great store ready both in their treasury and temples, decreed the sending of sixty galleys into Sicily, and Alcibiades, the son of Cleinias, Nicias, the son of Niceratus, and Lamachus, the son of Xenophanes,

for commanders with authority absolute; the which were to aid the people of Egesta against the Selinuntians, and withal, if they had time to spare, to plant the Leontines anew in their city, and to order all other the affairs of Sicily as they should think most for the profit of the Athenians (Thucydides, 6.8.2)

Alcibiades' optimism about the expedition won the day despite what could be judged a rather more pragmatic explanation and evidently superior reasoning of Nicias to the contrary. Thucydides would want his readers to believe that the Athenian Assembly led the way and should have the blame for the decision; however, he does not fail to report Alcibiades' overriding passionate ambition by saying:

But the expedition was most of all pressed by Alcibiades, the son of Cleinias, both out of desire he had to cross Nicias, with whom he was likewise at odds in other points of state, and also for that he had glanced at him invidiously in his oration, but principally for that he affected to have charge, hoping that himself should be the man to subdue both Sicily and Carthage to the state of Athens, and withal, if it succeeded, to increase his own private wealth and glory (Thucydides, 6.15.2).

Nicias' position was defeated by Alcibiades who, goaded by ambition, used all oratorical skills to convince the Athenians that the campaign would not only mean more inflow of wealth to Athens but also a door to further imperial expansion. While Alcibiades might not be described as being out to deceive the people in this instance, immodest and selfish political leaning could be perceived as the basis for making the speech that completely undermined the logical argument of his rival and set the glory-seeking Athenians on the path to a historical disaster. It may yet appear too early to judge his motives, though.

A crucial test of Alcibiades' statesmanship and moral sense began when, as soon as he was appointed General to serve alongside Nicias, his political opponents levied charges of sacrilege against him (Thucydides, 6.27.1). Alcibiades had been associated with the offence 'committed formerly through wantonness and too much wine by young

men; and withal, how they had in private houses acted the mysteries of their religion in mockery'(Thucydides, 6.28.1). It is noteworthy here that Alcibiades, in addition to his record of deception, had a case of mockery of the mysteries to answer. Therefore, even when the present accusation was allegedly a ploy of his enemies, Alcibiades established reputation was no help as Thucydides later remarks:

But touching Alcibiades, the Athenians took it extreme ill through the instigation of his enemies, the same that had opposed him before he went. And seeing it was certain, as they thought, for the Mercuries, the other crime also concerning the mysteries, whereof he had been accused, seemed a great deal the more to have been committed by him upon the same reason and conspiracy against the people (Thucydides, 6.61.1).

The development could be interpreted as Alcibiades' attaining leadership position at Athens without any serious concern over his morality or with some negligence of the private life he led. This does not mean that his dualistic nature escaped the public knowledge. Concerning him Plutarch next relates:

But all this statecraft and eloquence and lofty purpose and cleverness was attended with great luxuriousness of life, with wanton drunkenness and lewdness, with effeminacy in dress, — he would trail long purple robes through the market place, — and with prodigal expenditures. He would have the decks of his triremes cut away that he might sleep more softly, his bedding being slung on cords rather than spread on the hard planks. He had a golden shield made for himself, bearing no ancestral device, but an Eros armed with a thunderbolt. The reputable men of the city looked on all these things with loathing and indignation, and feared his contemptuous and lawless spirit. They thought such conduct as his tyrant-like and monstrous. How the common folk felt towards him has been well set forth by Aristophanes in these words:—"It

years for him, and hates him too, but wants him back;" And again, veiling a yet greater severity in his metaphor:—"A lion is not to be reared within the state; But, once you've reared him up, consult his every mood." (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 16. 1, 2).

Qualities shown by expressions, such as 'great luxuriousness of life', 'wanton drunkenness', 'lewdness, with effeminacy in dress' and 'prodigal expenditures' are hardly desirable in a leader at Athens. The portrayal of Alcibiades above does not only give an image of a vain person, but the allusion to him by the phrase 'a lion is not to be reared within the state; but, once you've reared him up, consult his every mood', presents a picture of an unstable character of erratic behaviour; a potential terror in the state; a morally unsuitable leader and a citizen to be watched with utmost suspicion. This notion about Alcibiades may sound a bit preposterous. Nonetheless, concerning this and the thinking that 'he was naturally a man of many strong passions, the mightiest of which were the love of rivalry and the love of pre-eminence' (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 1. 1), it is necessary to consider more of his activities.

Returning to the allegation of sacrilege against him at the outset of the Sicilian expedition, Alcibiades, wary of the danger that loomed if he should embark on the journey without exonerating himself, requested an immediate trial. However, arguments were successfully made allegedly by his enemies for the trial to be suspended until he would return, so as not to disrupt the expedition any longer. True to his fear that his opponents would incite the people against him when he would not be present to defend himself, shortly after his departure, his political enemies renewed their pursuit of the accusation of irreverence with additional instances of his alleged cases of impiety. The accusers prevailed, hence, the state trireme was sent to bring him and others who purportedly mutilated the *hermai* or sacred objects and profaned the Eleusinian mysteries from Catania back to Athens to stand trial.

Alcibiades pretended to be following the heralds back to Athens in his own ship as he had requested but escaped with his crew at Thurii. The political tide against him worsened in Athens where he was sentenced in absentia to death and his property was confiscated while a



reward of one talent awaited anyone that killed him. The charges of desecrations and other acts of impiety against Alcibiades continue to be viewed as the machination of his enemies (Mcgregor 1965) and no effort is made here to join issues over that, since how Alcibiades handled the situation, even when viewed as such would suffice in making assessment of moral character.

### **The Politician Who Fought against His State**

Plutarch reports how Alcibiades, making use of his 'political sense' took a step that casts aspersion on his 'moral sense'. The writer relates:

Alcibiades had no sooner sailed away than he robbed the Athenians of Messana. There was a party there who were on the point of surrendering the city to the Athenians, but Alcibiades knew them, and gave the clearest information of their design to the friends of Syracuse in the city, and so brought the thing to naught. Arrived at Thurii, he left his trireme and hid himself so as to escape all quest. When someone recognised him and asked, "Can you not trust your country, Alcibiades?" "In all else," he said, "but in the matter of life I wouldn't trust even my own mother not to mistake a black for a white ballot when she cast her vote." And when he afterwards heard that the city had condemned him to death, "I'll show them," he said, "that I'm alive. (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 22. 1, 2).

Alcibiades, now desperate, took a position against the state which he just spoke in glowing terms of defending and seeking its prosperity. He at once took steps to thwart the Athenian army's effort at securing the aid of Messana and further made their campaign in Sicily turbulent. Next, he took residence in Sparta where he spearheaded outstanding strategies in crucial campaigns against Athens, his homeland. He crippled Athens by instigating uprisings among its subjects or allies. Alcibiades would surpass anyone in rousing the Spartans against the Athenians as shown by his address to the Spartans (Thucydides, 6.89-92). With him as the author, Sparta would be convinced to do two things to ruin the chances

of the Athenian army in Sicily: send Gylippos and his troops to Syracuse to conduct its defence and then fortify Dekeleia in the following spring (Thucydides, 6.93. 2-4).

These developments raise the question of whether Alcibiades would see anything morally wrong with taking arms against his people or betraying his native Athens or would rather sacrifice his political ambition and settle for a low profile political life in exile with the hope that he would someday be exonerated and recalled. Thucydides provides his answer:

Now I must crave this: that I be neither the worse esteemed for that, having once been thought a lover of my country, I go now amongst the greatest enemies of the same against it, nor yet mistrusted as one that speaketh with the zeal of a fugitive. For though I fly from the malice of them that drave me out, I shall not, if you take my counsel, fly your profit. Nor are you enemies so much, who have hurt but your enemies, as they are that, have made enemies of friends. I love not my country as wronged by it, but as having lived in safety in it. Nor do I think that I do herein go against any country of mine, but that I far rather seek to recover the country I have not. And he is truly a lover of his country not that refuseth to invade the country he hath wrongfully lost, but that desires so much to be in it as by any means he can he will attempt to recover it. I desire you therefore, Lacedaemonians, to make use of my service in whatsoever danger or labour confidently, seeing you know, according to the common saying, if I did hurt you much when I was your enemy, I can help you much when I am your friend. And so much the more in that I know the state of Athens and but conjectured at yours. (Thucydides, 6.92. 1-5).

The speech above shows how far Alcibiades would go to express his grave hurt feelings at being 'wrongfully' treated, so that not even his mother for whom he would have affection could stop him. His state had become his worst enemy and since his driving force made this the

option for getting back at his political enemies, love for his homeland was almost synonymous with vengeance towards it. He became so bitter that, acting as if under oath, he persuasively told the enemies of his people: 'If I did hurt you much when I was your enemy, I can help you much when I am your friend' (Thucydides, 6.92. 1-5).

At Sparta, his reputation increased and he became greatly admired both in public and in private homes as a champion in the swiftness of his adaptation to Spartan lifestyle of harshness. Plutarch, however, represents this as a chameleon-like outlook when he says:

Assuming more violent changes than the chameleon. That animal, however, as it is said, is utterly unable to assume one colour, namely, white; but Alcibiades could associate with good and bad alike, and found naught that he could not imitate and practice. In Sparta, he was all for bodily training, simplicity of life, and severity of countenance; in Ionia, for luxurious ease and pleasure; in Thrace, for drinking deep; in Thessaly, for riding hard; and when he was thrown with Tissaphernes the satrap, he outdid even Persian magnificence in his pomp and lavishness. It was not that he could so easily pass entirely from one manner of man to another, nor that he actually underwent in every case a change in his real character; but when he saw that his natural manners were likely to be annoying to his associates, he was quick to assume any counterfeit exterior which might in each case be suitable for them (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 23. 3-5).

As a personality of 'violent changes than the chameleon', Alcibiades 'could associate with good and bad alike'. He had propensity for luxurious ease and pleasure' as equally as he had for 'magnificence in his pomp and lavishness'. When 'his natural manners were likely to be annoying to his associates', like a chameleon, Alcibiades 'was quick to assume any counterfeit exterior'. True to the foregoing picture, the events that ensued would show the Spartans that Alcibiades had affection for Sparta no more than he did for Athens before his sense of

superiority was slighted.

Another side of Alcibiades' record at Sparta presents a picture of non-moral politician who would employ whatever means to gain power and remain politically relevant. While the Spartan King, Agis was away on some campaigns, Alcibiades got involved in a scandalous affair that produced a child by the king's wife. Alcibiades who allegedly did not deny this action again reflected his disposition towards depraved behaviour in his ambitious quest for power when he said, 'he had not done this thing for a wanton insult, nor at the behest of mere pleasure, but in order that descendants of his might be kings of the Lacedaemonians' (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 23. 7).

Meanwhile, Alcibiades maintained a close association with Spartan general and threw all his weight behind Sparta's cause as he spearheaded, causing Athenian allies to revolt. But his moral reputation only made him loathsome to Agis and "the most influential and ambitious of the other Spartans also were already envious and tired of him, and soon grew strong enough to induce the magistrates at home to send out orders to Ionia that he be put to death" (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 24. 2) despite his immense contributions at Sparta. For the second time, in another circumstance of controversy over his morality, Alcibiades faced new threats to his life.

In what might appear as escaping for his life, after making distinguished enemies from among his hosts at Sparta, Alcibiades sought safety under the Persians where, serving as an adviser to the satrap, Tissaphernes, he gave counsels that undermined the interest of the Greeks. Beyond his ingenuity, shrewdness and sound policy suggestions which attracted the satrap, Plutarch at this instance raises issues over Alcibiades' morality when he says: "For his versatility and surpassing cleverness were the admiration of the Barbarian, who was no straightforward man himself, but malicious and fond of evil company" (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 24. 4). According to Plutarch, Tissaphernes got a fitting dishonest and evil-intentioned companion in Alcibiades, who spared no time in endearing himself to the Persians and fervently used his relationship with Tissaphernes to cunningly jeopardise the Persians' aids to Sparta and wear Athens out at the same time. The maverick

policy of Alcibiades was using his position with Tissaphernes to put both Sparta and Athens at a disadvantage and pave the way for his recall to Athens.

### **Alcibiades Sponsored an Oligarchic Coup**

Things began to work in Alcibiades' way following the dire situation in Athens. Although the Athenians remained strongly attached to full democracy, their military and fiscal policies follies towards the end of the fifth century B.C did not only make the vacuum of a worthy leadership glaring but also brought them face to face with total annihilation. This provides a background to the setting in which Alcibiades next functioned. Alcibiades sensed that the democratic atmosphere at Athens was hostile to his hope of a recall. Hence, While at Samos, he cashed in on the economic straits of Athens to orchestrate an oligarchic coup against democracy under the facade of securing financial and military aids from Persia. Alcibiades' motive was clear when he met with the Athenian embassies demanding that the Athenian constitution should be changed to facilitate his recall. "The captains and chief men in the armament at once embraced the idea of subverting the democracy" (Thucydides, 8.47. 2), falling his bait. The initial resistance to Alcibiades' seductive scheme was short-lived, since "the multitude, if at first irritated by these intrigues, were nevertheless kept quiet by the advantageous prospect of the pay from the king" (Thucydides, 8.48. 3).

Interestingly, the self-seeking cause of Alcibiades was noted by a general, Phrynichus, when he reasoned that Alcibiades "cared no more for an oligarchy than for a democracy, and only sought to change the institutions of his country in order to get himself recalled by his associates" (Thucydides, 8.48.4). But his protest was to no avail; consequently, the Athenians went ahead to curry the favour of Tissaphernes on Alcibiades' terms. The Athenians soon discovered that, contrary to the impression they were given, Tissaphernes and Alcibiades had different interests. Tissaphernes would rather continue, as earlier advised by Alcibiades, to pursue the policy of wearing out both Athens and Sparta without giving advantage to either side. Again, instead of acknowledging his failure, Alcibiades dubiously would make

the Athenians believe that the negotiations with Tissaphernes for support failed in spite of his genuine efforts because the Athenians were not ready to make enough concession to the Persian.

The negotiations failed, but the conspiracy engineered by Alcibiades succeeded in replacing democracy with the oligarchic rule of the Four Hundred in 411 B.C. Ironically, even when Alcibiades had advocated the overthrow of democracy, things did not simply go in his favour immediately when the "Four Hundred entered the council chamber, ... departed widely from the democratic system of government, and except that on account of Alcibiades they did not recall the exiles..." (Thucydides, 8.70. 1). The distrust of the oligarchs towards Alcibiades which prompted their action never deterred Alcibiades from reaping the gains from the conspiracy he masterminded. This became obvious when, almost simultaneously at the accession of the Four Hundred, a democratic government was constituted by Athenian crews in exile at Samos and its assembly voted the recall of Alcibiades. The stage became set for the realisation of Alcibiades' ultimate goal: recall to Athens.

### **Alcibiades' 'Heroic' Return to Athens and His Fall**

Alcibiades, still anticipating help from Tissaphernes, soon gained the confidence of the men on Samos and he was popularly elected general (Thucydides, 8.81, 82.1). However, he felt the need to do a lot more to build an impeccable record that would make his return to Athens not a risk but heroic and least resisted. Alcibiades resumed a course of great service to his state by cleverly maintaining a relationship with Tissaphernes that kept the Persian fleet away from Athens. It was another success story for the political genius who again from his Samos base and in the atmosphere of support from Tissaphernes, supported the replacement of the rule of the Four Hundred with that of the Five Thousand at Athens. With the leaning toward restoration of other democratic structures at Athens, the oligarchic extremists lost out and Alcibiades at once was recalled.

Meanwhile, while still away from Athens, Alcibiades' uneasy relationship with Tissaphernes went sour so that Athens would now fight without any thought of support from that source. The situation

brought Alcibiades to the forefront as he led the Athenians to a series of successful campaigns. By 407B.C, Alcibiades had become a triumphant general of the Athenian demos who deserved no less than a heroic welcome at Athens, and that was what he got despite his cautious entry. As the Athenian champion at the moment, he returned to a new political setting where his detractors, having diminished to a minority, had no influence.

On his return, once again as a general, Alcibiades, put his political ingenuity to task. With his weapons of perfidy or arbitration instead of force, he wooed cities to the Athenian side and led his state to decisive victories. However, his military skills and valuable political talents would not make a lasting impression when he was blamed by his opponents for the Athenian loss at the battle of Notium in 406B.C. Alcibiades went into exile a second time and attempted to renew his relationship with the Persian court but he never regained relevance in Athenian politics until he was assassinated in 404B.C.

Yet, Plutarch's words are apt in describing why a politician such Alcibiades was prominent in the Athenian political history. He writes:

And indeed, his voluntary contributions of money, his support of public exhibitions, his unsurpassed munificence towards the city, the glory of his ancestry, the power of his eloquence, the comeliness and vigour of his person, together with his experience and prowess in war, made the Athenians lenient and tolerant towards everything else; they were forever giving the mildest of names to his transgressions, calling them the product of youthful spirits and ambition. (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 16. 3)

'Voluntary contributions of money', 'unsurpassed munificence towards the city', 'glory of his ancestry' 'the power of his eloquence', 'the comeliness and vigour of his person', 'experience and prowess in war', every physical display that Alcibiades could make; all played down any moral defect in him.

Thucydides similarly notes how the values of the people affected the pursuit of Alcibiades' political ambition concerning the Sicilian

expedition. He writes:

And every one alike fell in love with the enterprise: the old men, upon hope to subdue the place they went to, or that at least so great a power could not miscarry; and the young men, upon desire to see a foreign country and to gaze, making little doubt but to return with safety. As for the common sort and the soldiers, they made account to gain by it not only their wages for the time, but also so to amplify the state in power as that their stipend should endure forever (Thucydides, 6.24.3).

No matter the moral controversy surrounding the activities of Alcibiades, the politician functioned in political settings that arguably justify his deeds as expedient and popular with 'the people' (Rhodes 1985).

### **Conclusion**

Alcibiades' ability to interact with and live in the camps of enemies might be an appearance of a diplomat of international repute. Although, a notable public figure who was experienced in the art of government, his political career was beleaguered by moral controversy. As a political genius, he manoeuvred his way through difficult political terrains by resorting to perfidy, he indeed had least regard for his state as he meted equal treatment to both enemies within and without to survive at a time of political upheavals among the Greeks. His policies as well as methods for achieving them were mostly expediential and were very erratic, since his personal ambition dominated his thinking.

The above political outlook depicted by the deeds of Alcibiades exemplifies a situation where consideration for morality suffers when the values of the political player dictates that this is expedient to sustain his political interest or that of his group. Hence, in politics, morally questionable actions or outright evil may be winked at or ultimately go unpunished when the politician is influential and, perhaps, pursues the base values of the entity that bears the name of the people.

Even when the private ethics of a prominent and influential politician are at variance with his public ethics, there remains the other side to his



acceptance: The values of the people. Indubitably, Alcibiades had some immoderate political ambition, but how far he could go in his sly approach owed much to the public reception. Alcibiades was an embodiment of the political aspirations of his homeland. It is reasonable to believe that the passion and ambition of Alcibiades were to the Athenians much delight when he used treachery in keeping the Spartans away for a time. While he was a strong advocate of the Sicilian expedition, his oratory could only sway the Athenians to further pursue their imperial ambition; Alcibiades wanted Sicily and Carthage, so did his people. It was a network of public glory with private gain and ambition between them.

The Athenian assembly 'fell in love with the enterprise'; the 'old men' had the 'hope to subdue the place'; 'the young men' burned with 'desire to see a foreign country and to gaze'; 'and the soldiers...made account to gain by it not only their wages for the time, but ...that their stipend should endure forever'. No doubt, the existing values of the people only got some urging from the politician who 'finally fanned this desire of theirs into flame' (Plutarch, *Alcib.* 17. 1). Alcibiades was, therefore, eagerly doing the people's bidding, which harmonised with his political interests. But his loyalty to the people would not go beyond that. When he believed he was falsely accused and his life was at stake, the game changed; he betrayed his people in Messina and later defected to Sparta where he dealt his people more blows as an enemy by instilling the fear of Athenian ambition into the Spartan leaders and revealing the Athenians' hope to conquer Sicily, Italy, and even Carthage. While he promised the Spartan absolute support, his character failure soon got him out of Sparta to the side of the Persians where his treachery was of great value in exhausting Sparta and Athens.

Alcibiades was a model of a politician who would dextrously exploit any deficiencies of other political players to achieve his ends and when his ambition was involved, even oligarchy could serve much good as democracy. He typified the leaning to break promises that could be found with a contemporary politician, who commits murders and use all deceits and treachery to attain political goals.

Therefore, the situation of a state becomes precarious, whether as a result of an Athenian Assembly's inordinate desire for greater wealth as

in the ancient time or because a Nigerian in modern African society believes he is getting his share of the national cake by desperately trading his vote in an election for money or bags of rice. It was a cynical atmosphere as Alcibiades joined fellow Athenians to Sicily, escaped with his crew at Thurii and subverted the course of his homeland on his way to the side of the enemy Spartans. In addition, he left the Spartan side in a controversy over his conduct, went farther to the Persians as he sought his recall to Athens by sponsoring an oligarchic coup and by manoeuvring Tissaphernes to exhaust both Athens and Sparta. Whatever the blame for what would be considered a character failure at any point of his self-seeking career must be shared between him and all who allied with him out of sheer self-interests; either to oppose oligarchs or support democrats.

Recently, some Nigerians got the phone numbers of the representatives of their senatorial districts in the Senate and began to call to blame them for poor performance and corruption. Of interest was the response a caller got from his representative: "If you voted, it was not free. I paid every inch of the way" (Baiyewu *et al*, 2016: 2). If the Athenians would hold Alcibiades responsible for their woes, Alcibiades would probably have retorted, "you did not deserve anything better"! A corrupt system tends to grapple with corrupt leaders.