NIGERIAN JOURNAL OF PUBLIC SECTOR MANAGEMENT (NJPSM)

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Reviewers:**
**[1]Cinjel, N. Dickson, PhD & [2]Morgan Christopher Prayer**
[1&2]Department of public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Federal University Wukari, Taraba State

**Title:** The Prince
**Author**: Niccolò Machiavelli
**Original year of publication:** 1532 (published posthumously)
**Publisher of the Original Edition:** Antonio Blado d'Asola, Rome
**Modern English Edition:** University of Chicago Press, 1998
**Translator and Editor**: Harvey C. Mansfield
**Edition:** Second edition
**Number of pages:** 144 pages
**ISBN**- 13: 978-0-226-50044-7

# REVEIEW

## Introduction

The Prince is one of the most influential works in the history of political thought. It was written by the Italian political philosopher and diplomat Niccolò Machiavelli in 1513 and published posthumously in 1532. The book examines the nature of political power, leadership, governance, state security, political strategy, and the methods through which rulers acquire, maintain, and strengthen their authority. The book emerged during a period of political instability in Italy, when various city-states struggled for dominance and foreign powers interfered in Italian affairs. Machiavelli observed the weaknesses of political leaders and the consequences of ineffective leadership, political divisions, and military dependence.

Through his analysis, he sought to provide practical guidance to rulers on how to establish stable governments, defend their territories, and maintain political authority. Unlike traditional political thinkers who frequently emphasized the moral qualities of an ideal ruler, Machiavelli concentrated on the realities of political life and the practical challenges of governing. This review examines the background of the author, the major arguments of the book, its central themes, its contributions to political thought and public administration, its strengths and weaknesses, and its relevance to contemporary governance, particularly in developing countries such as Nigeria.

### Background of the Author

Niccolò Machiavelli was born on 3 May 1469 in Florence, Italy. He was a diplomat, political thinker, historian, and writer who lived during a period characterized by political rivalry, warfare, and instability. Machiavelli served the Florentine Republic in various diplomatic and administrative capacities. His official responsibilities enabled him to observe political leaders,

military organizations, diplomatic negotiations, and the practical challenges of governance. Following the return of the Medici family to power in Florence in 1512, Machiavelli lost his government position and was subsequently imprisoned and tortured on suspicion of involvement in a conspiracy. After his release, he retired to private life and devoted much of his time to writing. During this period, he wrote The Prince, a work intended to explain the practical realities of political leadership and the acquisition and preservation of power.

Machiavelli died on 21 June 1527, but his writings continued to influence political philosophy, leadership studies, international relations, and public administration. Other notable works associated with him include Discourses on Livy, The Art of War, and The History of Florence. His contribution to political thought lies primarily in his attempt to study politics as a practical field shaped by power, institutions, human behaviour, conflict, and the pursuit of political stability.

**Purpose and Objectives of the Book**

The principal purpose of The Prince is to explain how political leaders acquire, exercise, and maintain power. Machiavelli was concerned with the practical realities of leadership rather than merely describing how rulers ought to behave in an ideal society.

The major objectives of the book include:

- To explain the different types of principalities and systems of political authority.
- To examine the methods through which rulers acquire political power.
- To identify strategies for maintaining political authority and preventing rebellion.
- To discuss the importance of military strength and national security.
- To explain the relationship between leadership, public opinion, and political stability.
- To examine the qualities required for effective political leadership.
- To demonstrate the importance of understanding human behaviour in governance.
- To explain how political leaders can respond to uncertainty, opposition, and changing circumstances.
- To explore the relationship between political necessity and conventional morality.
- To provide practical lessons for rulers confronting political instability.

These objectives demonstrate that Machiavelli approached politics as a field requiring practical judgement, strategic thinking, and an understanding of the conditions under which governments operate.

**Summary of the Content of the Book**

The Prince consists of 26 chapters. These chapters discuss the acquisition of principalities, the exercise of political power, military organization, leadership qualities, and the challenges of maintaining political authority.

**4.1: Types of Principalities**

Machiavelli begins by identifying different types of political territories and principalities. He distinguishes between hereditary principalities, which have been governed by the same family for generations, and new principalities, which are acquired through conquest, fortune, or personal ability.

According to Machiavelli, hereditary principalities are generally easier to govern because their populations are accustomed to the ruling family. New principalities, however, present greater difficulties because the ruler may encounter resistance from established interests and citizens who prefer the previous government.

This discussion highlights the importance of political legitimacy, continuity, and institutional stability.

**4.2 The Acquisition and Maintenance of Power**

One of the central arguments of the book is that acquiring political power is different from maintaining it. Machiavelli explains that a leader may obtain authority through inheritance, military conquest, personal ability, political opportunity, or the support of influential groups.

However, maintaining authority requires continuous attention to political circumstances, administrative effectiveness, security, and public attitudes. A ruler who fails to understand the conditions that brought him to power may lose authority even after achieving initial success. This argument remains relevant to contemporary governments, where electoral victory or appointment does not automatically guarantee effective administration.

**4.3 The Importance of Military Strength**

Machiavelli considers military organization essential to the survival of a state. He argues that rulers should not depend excessively on foreign armies or mercenaries because such forces may pursue interests different from those of the state they are employed to defend.

Instead, he emphasizes the importance of reliable military forces that are committed to the security and survival of the state. His argument demonstrates the relationship between national defence, political independence, and governmental stability.

In contemporary public administration, this principle can be extended to the importance of effective security institutions, professional armed forces, adequate training, accountability, and appropriate funding.

**4.4 The Qualities of an Effective Leader**

Machiavelli argues that an effective ruler must possess practical intelligence, courage, flexibility, strategic judgement, and the ability to respond to changing circumstances.

He recognizes that political leadership involves difficult decisions and that a ruler cannot always rely on ideal circumstances.

According to his analysis, leaders must understand when to be firm, when to negotiate, when to exercise caution, and when to take decisive action.

Nevertheless, the capacity to act decisively should not be confused with unlimited or irresponsible authority. Contemporary democratic governance requires leadership to operate within constitutional, legal, and ethical boundaries.

**4.5 Virtù and Fortuna**

Two important concepts in The Prince are virtù and fortuna:

- Virtù refers to the qualities that enable a leader to act effectively, including courage, intelligence, initiative, strategic judgement, and adaptability. It does not simply mean moral goodness in the conventional sense.
- Fortuna refers to fortune, chance, and circumstances beyond an individual's complete control.

Machiavelli argues that successful leaders must recognize the role of circumstances while developing the capacity to respond effectively to unexpected events. This argument has important implications for public administration because government performance depends partly on leadership competence and partly on external conditions such as economic crises, natural disasters, conflicts, and international developments.

**4.6 Whether It Is Better to Be Loved or Feared**

One of the most famous arguments in The Prince concerns whether a ruler should be loved or feared. Machiavelli suggests that, if a ruler cannot achieve both, being feared is generally more dependable than being loved because affection may change with circumstances. However, he warns that a ruler should avoid becoming hated. His argument reflects his belief that political authority requires some degree of discipline, predictability, and control.

From a contemporary governance perspective, this argument should be interpreted critically. Fear may produce obedience, but excessive coercion can undermine trust, legitimacy, participation, and long-term political stability.

Democratic leaders are more likely to achieve sustainable results when they combine lawful authority with public trust, fairness, accountability, and effective service delivery.

**4.7 The Relationship between Morality and Politics**

Machiavelli challenges the assumption that political leaders can always govern successfully by applying ordinary moral expectations without considering the circumstances in which decisions are made.

He argues that rulers may encounter situations in which political necessity conflicts with conventional moral principles. This position has contributed to debates about political realism, ethical leadership, and the limits of political power.

However, the argument should not be interpreted as an unrestricted justification for corruption, oppression, dishonesty, or the abuse of public office.In modern democratic societies, political decisions must be evaluated according to constitutional requirements, legal obligations, ethical principles, and their consequences for citizens.

**4.8 The Importance of Public Opinion**

Machiavelli recognizes that a ruler's relationship with the population can significantly influence political stability.

Public perceptions of leadership, justice, security, and economic conditions may affect whether citizens support or oppose a government. Although Machiavelli sometimes approaches public opinion from the perspective of political survival, his analysis illustrates the practical importance of understanding the population.

For contemporary public administrators, this principle reinforces the need for effective communication, citizen engagement, public consultation, transparency, and responsiveness to community needs.

**5.0 Critical Analysis of the Book**

The Prince is an important contribution to political thought because it examines political leadership through practical observation rather than relying exclusively on abstract ideals. One of its major strengths is its realistic treatment of political power. Machiavelli recognizes that leaders operate in environments characterized by competition, uncertainty, conflicting interests, and institutional challenges. His analysis encourages readers to examine the actual conditions under which political decisions are made.

Another strength is the book's emphasis on leadership competence. Machiavelli demonstrates that political authority requires more than occupying an official position. Leaders must understand their environment, anticipate challenges, assess available options, and respond appropriately to changing circumstances.

The book also contributes to the study of statecraft by highlighting the importance of military preparedness, political strategy, and administrative judgment.
However, the book has several limitations.

- First, its approach may encourage an excessive emphasis on the preservation of power. When political survival becomes the overriding objective, leaders may neglect public welfare, democratic accountability, and the ethical responsibilities associated with public office.
- Second, Machiavelli's treatment of political morality is controversial. His arguments may be interpreted as permitting questionable actions whenever leaders believe that such actions serve the interests of the state. Without clear ethical and institutional boundaries, this approach can be used to justify authoritarianism and abuses of power.
- Third, the book gives considerable attention to the actions of individual rulers. Although it recognizes the importance of political circumstances, it does not provide a comprehensive modern framework for understanding democratic institutions, bureaucratic accountability, public participation, and constitutional government.
- Fourth, its political environment differs significantly from contemporary democratic societies. Modern states operate through constitutions, legislatures, courts, professional bureaucracies, civil society organizations, and established administrative procedures. Consequently, Machiavelli's recommendations cannot be applied without considering these institutional differences.

Despite these limitations, The Prince remains valuable because it stimulates critical discussion about leadership, political responsibility, power, and the challenges of governing effectively.

**6.0 Relevance to Public Administration**

The ideas presented in The Prince have considerable relevance to public administration, particularly in the areas of leadership, decision-making, organizational management, policy implementation, and crisis response.

**6.1 Administrative Leadership**

Public administrators occupy positions that require planning, coordination, supervision, and the implementation of government policies. Machiavelli's emphasis on practical judgment suggests that administrators must understand their institutional environment and develop the capacity to respond effectively to administrative challenges. Nevertheless, administrative leadership must be guided by professionalism, integrity, and respect for established rules.

**6.2 Policy Implementation**

Government policies may fail when administrators do not understand political conditions, organizational capacity, public expectations, and the interests of relevant stakeholders. Machiavelli's emphasis on understanding circumstances provides a useful basis for examining why policies succeed or fail.Public administrators should therefore combine strategic thinking with consultation, evidence, institutional cooperation, and effective monitoring.

**6.3 Crisis Management**

- Governments regularly confront emergencies involving insecurity, economic instability, public health, natural disasters, and social conflict.
- Machiavelli's discussion of fortune and adaptability highlights the importance of preparedness and timely decision-making.
- Modern public administration can draw from this perspective by strengthening contingency planning, inter-agency coordination, emergency communication, and institutional resilience.

**6.4 Accountability and Ethical Governance**

Although Machiavelli emphasizes political effectiveness, contemporary public administration must also protect public resources, uphold the law, and ensure that public officials remain accountable. His work can therefore serve as a starting point for discussing the tension between administrative effectiveness and ethical responsibility.

Effective governance requires not only the capacity to make decisions but also the willingness to justify those decisions and accept responsibility for their consequences.

**6.5 Organizational Behaviour**

Machiavelli's observations about human behaviour are relevant to organizational management. Public institutions consist of individuals and groups with different expectations, motivations, interests, and levels of influence.

Understanding these factors can help administrators manage conflict, encourage cooperation, negotiate competing interests, and improve organizational performance. However, modern organizational behaviour also emphasizes employee welfare, participation, motivation, teamwork, and professional development.

**7.0 Relevance to Contemporary Governance in Nigeria**

The ideas in The Prince can be applied critically to contemporary governance in Nigeria. Nigeria's political and administrative environment presents challenges involving leadership effectiveness, institutional capacity, insecurity, corruption, policy implementation, and public confidence in government.

Machiavelli's emphasis on competent leadership suggests that public officials must understand the political and social conditions affecting their responsibilities. Leaders should be capable of making timely decisions, responding to changing circumstances, and coordinating public institutions.

His discussion of political stability also encourages reflection on the relationship between government authority and public confidence. Political stability is more sustainable when citizens regard institutions as legitimate, responsive, and fair.

Furthermore, the book highlights the importance of preparedness in addressing security challenges and emergencies. Nigerian public institutions require effective coordination, reliable information, adequate resources, and the ability to respond to changing threats.

However, Machiavelli's arguments must be applied within Nigeria's constitutional and democratic framework. Political effectiveness should not be used to justify the abuse of office, suppression of opposition, or disregard for human rights.

Instead, his work should encourage public leaders to combine strategic competence with transparency, accountability, respect for the rule of law, and a commitment to the welfare of citizens.

**8.0 Contribution to Political Thought**

The Prince occupies an important position in the history of political philosophy because it provides a distinctive examination of political power and leadership. Machiavelli's approach encouraged scholars to examine political institutions and leadership behaviour in relation to practical circumstances. His work contributed to discussions about political realism, statecraft, military organization, political stability, and the relationship between power and morality.

The book also influenced later debates about political leadership and the responsibilities of rulers. Although its conclusions remain controversial, its enduring importance lies in the questions it raises about the exercise of authority and the conditions required for effective government.

For students of political science and public administration, The Prince provides a foundation for examining how political power operates and how leadership decisions affect institutions and society.

**9.0 Lessons for Students and Public Administrators**

Several important lessons can be drawn from The Prince.

- First, leadership requires knowledge of the political, social, and administrative environment.
- Second, effective decision-making requires practical judgment, preparation, and an ability to adapt to changing circumstances.
- Third, political authority alone does not guarantee effective governance. Leaders must develop the capacity to manage institutions and respond to public needs.
- Fourth, understanding human behaviour is essential for managing organizations and resolving conflicts.
- Fifth, leaders must recognize that unexpected events can affect the implementation of policies and the stability of institutions.
- Finally, political effectiveness must be balanced with ethical conduct, accountability, and respect for the law.

These lessons are valuable for public administrators, political leaders, civil servants, students, and researchers interested in leadership and governance.

**10.0Conclusion**

Niccolò Machiavelli's The Prince remains one of the most significant works in political philosophy and the study of leadership. Through its examination of political power, statecraft, military preparedness, human behaviour, and political stability, the book provides important insights into the practical challenges of governing.

Its greatest contribution lies in its realistic analysis of leadership and its recognition that political decisions are often made under conditions of uncertainty and competing interests.

Nevertheless, the book's emphasis on political survival and its controversial treatment of morality require careful interpretation. In contemporary democratic societies, effective leadership must be guided by constitutional principles, ethical responsibility, accountability, and respect for human rights.

For public administration, The Prince is particularly valuable as a text for examining leadership competence, policy implementation, organizational behaviour, crisis management, and the relationship between political authority and administrative responsibility.

In conclusion, The Prince should not be read merely as a manual for acquiring and retaining power. It should also be studied critically as an enduring contribution to debates about political leadership, public responsibility, and the challenges of achieving effective governance.

**References**

Machiavelli, N. (1998). *The prince* (H. C. Mansfield, Trans. & Ed., 2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1532)

Benner, E. (2013). *Machiavelli's prince: A new reading*. Oxford University Press.

McCormick, J. P. (2025). *The people's princes: Machiavelli, leadership, and liberty*. University of Chicago Press.

Samuels, R. J. (2005). *Machiavelli's children: Leaders and their legacies in Italy and Japan.* Cornell University Press.

Viroli, M. (1998). *Machiavelli.* Oxford University Press

Viroli, M. (1992). *From politics to reason of state: The acquisition and transformation of the language of politics, 1250–1600.* Cambridge University Press.