

POLITICAL EDUCATION FOR EQUITY AND NATIONAL UNITY: A DISCOURSE ON THE 2007 PRESIDENCY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

A famous Greek Philosopher, Aristotle, once described politics as 'the master science' because according to him it controls and coordinates all other aspects of society. This clearly shows that politics is very important in society. In view of the importance of politics in society therefore, those who engage in political education by way of teaching or studying the science of politics as well as politicians engaged in the game of politics should emphasize equity and fair play for national unity. Nigeria is a plural society of many ethnic groups with different cultural backgrounds and therefore general political education is needed for the citizens to imbibe the virtues of equity and fairness in their dealings with one another in order to promote national unity and create a sense of belonging among the various groups. It is against this backdrop that this paper is written to discuss Nigeria's Presidency in 2007, with a view to suggesting which" part or zone of the country should produce the next president as a way of promoting equity, fair play, national unity and national reconciliation.

Introduction

Nigeria is a country where unity is greatly needed for the various ethnic groups that make up the country to co-exist and live in harmony with one another. Unfortunately, that unity has continued to elude the country because its politics is not based on equity and fair play. Nigeria's politics to a large extent, is politics of winner takes all. As a result of this, major groups have dominated Nigerian politics to the detriment of others. Even among the dominant groups, there is cut-throat competition for the control of state power and the resources. The nature of Nigerian politics has created a very big political problems for the country which according to Ake in Alapiki (2004:83) manifests itself in the following ways:

- (a) A form of political competition is which people seek political power by all means, legal or not, with the result that politics is debased to warfare and the political system tends to break down.
- (b) The prevalence of ethnic and sectorial loyalties which prevent the emergence of national identity and collective purpose.
- (c) A political leadership alienated from the masses which maintains power without mandate or accountability.

Added to the above is the fact that there are calls for a sovereign national conference where the component units or groups will discuss and determine the fact that the country itself. The national confab summoned by President Obasanjo is really not the one the people have been clamouring for. Some other scholars might have suggested different ways in which the Nigerian political problem can be solved. However, the author of this paper in his own contribution feels that general political education is needed for the citizens to imbibe the virtues of patriotism, political tolerance, equity, social justice, true federalism and to know their rights and obligations to the state.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to explain certain key concepts in this paper. The first of such concepts in 'polities'. Politics has several definitions but only a few will be considered here. Lasswell (1958:13) defines politics as "who gets what, when and how". This means that politics decides or determines who gets what, when and how in the society. Looking at the Greek concept of politics, Anifowose (1992:2) says politics to the Greeks refers more accurately to:

A process by which men debate matters concerning the 'polls' that is, the political community, and take actions in an attempt to realize the public interest or the common good.

This explanation of the Greek concept of politics shows that politics is for the common good of society. But when politics degenerates into dividing people along lines that threaten the corporate existence of the state, something is certainly wrong with that type of politics. The second concept to be explained is education. Education according to Denga (1993:1) is:

...An on-going process that facilitates the learning and acquisition of theoretical and practical skills that equip mankind to utilize the environment effectively for personal success in life, as well as for the development of society.

From the above definition of education, Atia (2004:164) says political education is the training that makes one acquire:

Special political skills, concepts and theories that equip him to understand the intricacies of politics...

Such understanding of the intricacies of politics through political education, can be effectively put to use to develop national policies that will be free of divisive tendencies. That type of national politics will emphasize the virtues of political equality, fair play and promote national unity, national identity and peaceful co-existence among the component units.

Political education of the citizens will also facilitate the rotation of power, especially the presidency, among the geo-political zones on equal basis. Furthermore, it will make the citizens to clearly understand which zone shall produce the president, as is seemingly clear to politically enlightened minds which zone should produce the president of Nigeria in 2007.

The Political Situation in the Country Before 2007

An analysis of the political situation in the country in the not too distant past, will start with the collapse of the Second Republic in 1983. The Second Republic from 1979-83 was headed by President Shehu Shagari from the North-West geo-political zone. He was overthrown by the military in a coup d'etat and the person who succeeded him as Head of Government was General Mohammadu -Buhari also from the North-West geo-political zone. After 20 months in power, Buhari was overthrown by General Ibrahim Babangida from the North-Central zone. Attempts were made by Babandiga to return power to a democratically elected government culminating into the June 12, 1993 • presidential election which was popularly acclaimed to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola from the South-West geo-political zone. The election was annulled by General Babangida and it created a lot of political problems for the country. There were outrage and public demonstrations against the annulment, especially from the South-West. The pressure mounted on Babangida from both the national and international communities following the annulment of June 12 forced him to step aside on August 27, 1993. The Interim Nation Government headed by Chief Ernest Shonekan, which Babangida had set up to succeed him was short lived as General Sani Abacha from the North-West seized power in November, 1993. Abacha established his own transition programme also but people had no faith in his transition programme since he was busy scheming how he could succeed himself. Instead, several demands were made on Abacha's government by pressure groups with the intent of terminating his government. According to Erne (2002:193), three demands stood out and they include the following:

Firstly, the military was asked to quit power immediately, Second, a government of National Unity headed by Bashorun M.K.O. Abiola, the presumed winner of the annulled June E2 Presidential election was demanded. Third, the new government was asked to convene a sovereign national conference which would determine the continued existence or otherwise of the country itself.

This was the political situation in the country before the sudden death of Abacha on June 8, 1998, Abacha was succeeded by General Abdulsalami Abubakar from the North Central Zone. Abubakar on assumption of office embarked upon a policy of national reconciliation. He released all political prisoners and Nigerians who were on self-exile abroad fighting the Abacha government were asked to return home. He dismantled all existing political structures on ground and came up with a new transition programme which was to terminate on May 29, 1999. It was on the basis of the spirit of national reconciliation begun by Abubakar that the three political parties during his own transition programme presented their presidential candidates from the South-West, probably to compensate the Yoruba over the annulment of June 12. The PDF presented Chief

Olusegun Obasanjo as its flag bearer while APP and AD jointly presented Chief Falae. Obasanjo won the presidential election that following and was re-elected for a second term in the April, 2003 presidential election and that is why he has continued to be president till date. His second term of office is expected to terminate on May 29, 2007.

Zonal Claims to 2007 Presidency

As 2007 gets around the corner, there are various zonal claims to occupy the presidency of Nigeria in that year. Notable zones that have laid claim to the 2007 presidency are the North, South-East, and South-South. Expressing the claim of the North to the 2007 presidency, a member of the House of Representatives from Bauchi State Alhaji Modibo Abdulkadir said:

...Since President Oludegun Obasanjo, a Southerner was already serving his second term in office the Northern region by law of equity and fairness, should produce the next president (Abdulkadir, 2004:8).

To the Igbo of the South-East Zone, the president of the country has eluded them for long and therefore 2007 is their turn to produce Nigeria's next president. The Igbo view was clearly stated by a traditional ruler from Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, His Highness, Igwe Martin Ezeh who said:

...Such orchestrated plan for denial and exclusion of the Igbo was what forced them into the civil war from 1967-1970. Having gone to war and having continued to contribute towards the development of Nigeria, I wonder why an Igbo president should not emerge in 2007, after almost 40 years of continuous struggle for the seat. It is said that a fool at 40 remains a fool forever. Therefore ignoring the agitation for a president of Igbo extraction in 2007 invariably means that they are not required in the system called Nigeria (Ezeh, 2004:28).

It can be seen from the above that each of the three zones laying claim to the country's presidency in 2007 has strong reasons why it should produce Nigeria's next president. However, the issue of where the president will be zoned to in 2007 is yet to be resolved. Though the zoning and rotation of political offices in the country is the responsibility of political parties, those of us in academics and indeed other Nigerians can make an input by presenting arguments and suggestions that will help the political parties to take a good decision on the matter. This explains the need for this chapter in which the author is suggesting that the South-East zone or the Igbos should produce the next president of Nigeria.

Rationale for Nigerian President of Igbo Extraction in 2007

It is true that each of the zones contending for the country's presidency in 2007 has good reasons to do so. If sentiments are put aside, one will discover that the South-East zone inhabited predominantly by the Igbos, has the strongest claim to the country's presidency in 2007. The reasons for this point of view are not far fetched and they include the following:

Firstly, politics is a game of numbers and so that Igbos are one of the three principal or dominant actors in Nigerian politics. Among these dominant groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and the Igbos, the Igbos have held power least at the level of the presidency. Apart from the six months which the late Major General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi was the Head of State from January-July, 1966, no other Igbo man has been head of government in Nigeria. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe was a ceremonial president while the real Head of Government was the Prime Minister, Alhaji Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. If we take the North as a whole, out of the 44 or 45 years of Nigeria's independence, it has held power for 34 years. Therefore in the spirit of 'eat and give your brother', the Igbos should be allowed to produce the president in 2007.

Secondly, the evolution of Nigeria as a nation state was accidental. Bette (2004:50) puts it succinctly:

The natives were not consulted in May 1905 when Frederick Lugard sent a memorandum on the administration of the Northern Protectorates to the Secretary of State for the colonies in Britain. The amalgamation that followed in 1914 which gave birth to Nigeria was an arrangement by British imperialists for political control and economic exploitation.

As a result of the accidental nature of our coming together as a nation state, deliberate efforts have to be made to give each of the component units a sense of belonging, especially the major groups, that are capable of going it alone as a nation state. Zoning and rotation of political offices is a step in this direction and it has to

be done in a manner that will be fair to all the groups. In this regard therefore, the Igbos should produce the next president in the spirit of fairness.

Thirdly, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo's second coming-as president in 1999 was made possible through the policy of national reconciliation. Nigerians were unanimous in their resolution that the injustice of the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election done to Abiola as a person and the Yoruba as a group, had to be addressed. It was because of this resolution that the three political parties namely POP, APP and AD zoned the presidency in 1999 to the Yoruba or South-West zone, This circle of national reconciliation will be incomplete if the Igbos are not allowed to produce the president of Nigeria in 2007 after the Yorubas have produced in the person of Obasanjo. The Igbos have to be reconciled and fully integrated into the Nigerian state after a bloody civil war 35 years ago.

The fourth reason is that the Igbo man has to be rewarded for his contributions to the struggle for Nigeria's independence, for its continued existence as a corporate entity and especially for its progress or socio-economic development. Many prominent Igbo sons such as the Late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Dr. Michael Okpara, Sir Akanu fbiame and Jaja Nwachukwu, just to mention a few, contributed greatly to the attainment of Nigeria's independence in 1960. According to Kalu (2004:7), the contributions of Zik in particular to Nigeria's independence were outstanding:

The great Zik came all the way from Pennsylvania University in America to join the struggle for Nigeria's independence. He founded the Morning Post in the then Gold Coast (now Ghana) and later the West Africa Pilot. These two newspapers played a prominent role in the fight to win independence for Nigeria.

After independence was won, the Igbos entered into political alliances with other groups, especially the Hausa-Fulani, to form and stabilize government in Nigeria. Reference can easily be made here to the NPC-NCNC alliance during the First Republic and NPN-NPP Accord of the Second Republic. Furthermore, the Igbo man has contributed greatly to the socio-economic development of Nigeria as a country. The Igbos are mostly traders and craftsmen, and they are found in every nook and crannies of this country buying and selling and offering other essential services. Through their commercial and business activities, they have opened up the remotest of places in Nigeria. The Igbo man is more Nigerian than every other Nigerian because he is prepared to settle and establish in any part of the country.

Lastly, the South-East zone also has worthy men who can provide effective political leadership for this country. Some Igbo sons and daughters have been tested and can be trusted to offer good political leadership for the country. Nas in Ashaka (2004:34) spoke on the good qualities of the Igbo man that can be harnessed and put to use to provide Nigeria with effective political leadership when he said:

The Igbo are among the most resourceful, intelligent, educated, imaginative and hardworking people in this country who are far ahead in invention and industry and therefore have the required brains to produce a leader who can rule in this country.

Therefore, for the sake of social justice, national unity and political equality of the component groups, it is imperative for the Igbos with such outstanding qualities as highlighted above to be allowed to taste power at the highest level of government in the country in 2007. After all, it is not that the other groups who have produced the country's presidents on a number of occasions have special leadership qualities which cannot be found among the Igbos.

The above analysis on the outstanding qualities of the people of the South-East zone does not suggest in any way that other zones do not have people with such qualities. In fact, people from other geo-political zones have made their respective contributions to the development and corporate existence of the Nigerian state. The task of building Nigeria as a formidable, strong and united nation rests on all citizens of the country and is therefore a collective responsibility. This means that other zones have also been contributed their quota to the development of Nigeria in many ways. In view of this fact, they have equal rights to lay claim to the presidency of Nigerian in 2007. As a matter of fact, the South-South zone has never produced the country's president even for once and so stands a good chance in 2007. However, as argued earlier on in this article, if the political arithmetic is to be based on equity, fairness, national reconciliation and on the spirit of 'ear and give your brother', other zones should exercise patience and allow the South-East zone to produce the presidency in 2007.

The Need for Political Education for the Masses

The need for political education for the masses of this country is highly desirable. It is urgently

needed to help remove certain stereotypes from the masses which have contributed to the retardation of the country's politics. Political education for the masses will lead to political enlightenment of the generality of the citizens and create the necessary political awareness in them which is needed to help move the country forward politically.

In addition to the teaching of normal political education in Nigerian schools, colleges and universities, political education for the masses can be achieved through the following means:

Firstly, government should organize mass literacy adult political education classes at designated centres all over the country. The centres should be created in such a way that proximity to the people will be ensured.

Secondly, political education programmes should be frequently organized on the television and the radio for the political education of the citizens.

Thirdly, established institutions and organizations such as the National Orientation Agency, Federal and State Bureaus of Information, Federal and State Ministries of Information etc. should carry out massive political educational campaigns through public lectures and the printing and distribution of political pamphlets and handbills.

Conclusion

Political education is necessary for the citizens to understand the basic rudiments of politics and the importance of certain national political issues. Such understanding of the basics of politics will enable the citizens to handle sensitive national political issues in a manner that will ensure political stability and promote national unity, equity, political equality and peaceful co-existence among the various Nigerian groups. Zoning and rotation of political offices in the country, especially that of the president is a good decision that should be observed by all the political parties and it should be done in a manner that will ensure fairness to all the six geo-political zones in the country. It is in view of this fairness that the South-East zone has been suggested to produce the country's next president in 2007.

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