

ROTATIONAL PRESIDENCY AND ITS AFTERMATH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The issue of rotational presidency from the North to the South of Nigeria has dominated the political discourse in Nigeria in recent time, particularly after the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election. The election was poised to be won by a Southerner; Chief M. K. O. Abiola but was annulled by a Northerner; Military President Ibrahim Babangida. This agitation materialized with the installation of a Southern President; Chief Olusegun Obasanjo in May, 1999 to usher in the country's fourth republic. This paper therefore, surveys the effects of the aftermath of rotational presidency in Nigeria. The paper concludes that there are no tangible changes in the socio-economic indices of the country; instead the maintenance of the *status quo* prevails. The paper suggests that if the rotational presidency is an acceptable method of solving Nigeria's political problem which the author does not believe, then its *modus operandi* should be entrenched in the country's constitution.

Introduction

The issue of power shift or rotational presidency from North to South has been a burning one right from the commencement of Nigeria project. From independence in 1960 to 1999 the rationale behind the Northern domination of leadership particularly at the national level (the President/Head of State) either as military or civilian has been questioned. This development was further fuelled by the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election which was poised to be won by a Southerner and was annulled by a Northern military President. That development created the impression rightly or wrongly that the North did not want a transfer of power to the South.

This paper therefore surveys those arguments for rotational presidency in Nigeria and the rationale behind the agitation. The paper thereafter assesses whether those arguments have been justified or not and concludes with the implication of using wrong premises to reach conclusion and proffers suggestions.

The Rationale

Right from Nigeria's independence in 1960 the North has been accused of dominating the leadership of the country particularly at the Federal level. This agitation was buttressed by the fact that in the first republic; 1960-1966, a Northerner; Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was the Prime Minister. When the Military took over in 1966 apart from about three months tenure of General Aguyi Ironsi; a Southerner, General Yakubu Gowon, a Northerner assumed the mantle of leadership up to 1975 when another Northerner; General Murtala Mohammed took over up to 1976 when he was killed and his second in command; General Olusegun Obasanjo; a Southerner continued with his programme up till 1979. During the second republic (1979-1983) another Northerner; Alhaji Shehu Shagari won the election as the President. After the termination of the second republic with the military take over of 3rd December, 1983 another Northerner. General Muhammed Buhari became the Head of State till 1985 when there was a palace coup. The result of the palace coup brought in General Ibrahim Babangida, another Northerner as I lead of State until 1993 when there was a serious debacle caused by the annulment of presidential election in that year that was poised to be won by a southerner. Chief Mashood Abiola. Similarly, the interim government put up by Babangida when he stepped aside in August, 1993 which was headed by Chief F. Ernest Shonekan; a Southerner was toppled by another Northerner; General Sani Abacha.

Based on this development, the North had been accused vehemently as monopolizing power in Nigeria. That, the British colonialists who colonized the country assisted in the perpetuation of Northerners in power in order to continue their exploitation of the country. This Ibrahim (200:52) attested to in the following words:

In Nigeria, the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy was maintained in power by the British during colonial rule through the Indirect Rule system of Native Authority administration. During the First Republic, the Northern People's Congress, a party considered as an instrument of the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy won both the Federal and Northern Regional elections. Since then most succeeding regimes, civilian and military, have been monopolized by the Hausa-Fulani, and there have been serious concerns in the country about the perpetuation of Hausa-Fulani domination.

Even among the Northerners there are those who believe in this thesis. But if analyzed critically it would be seen that this development of Northerners dominating the country's polity is not designed but accidental due to many factors but mainly distrust among the various ethnic groups in the country particularly the major ones; Yoruba and Ibo in the south. Each of them could not trust the other to assume the mantle of leadership instead they prefer the third; Hausa/Fulani under which they prefer to be a deputy particularly the Ibo. On this Yahaya (1994:3) says:

The Haiisa Muslims of the far-North appear to be the target of the frustration of all other Nigerians. They are hated for the reasons of the political leadership imposed on them by the mutual suspicions of the other Nigerians. They are subjected to humiliation by the South-western Yoruba powerful media by which their culture, religion and leadership are daily treated to insults.

Furthermore, all of these allegations of Northern domination are to an extent unfounded. This is because in the 1959, 1979, 1983, and 1993 elections the so-called Hausa/Fulani has never voted enbloc not to talk of the whole North voting enbloc. On this, Muazzam (1994:8) while reviewing the 1959, 1979, 1983 and 1993 elections demonstrated that the Hausa/Fulani had been consistently involved in issue voting rather than sectional as follows:

In 1955, the Northern People's Congress had to go into coalition with the National Council of Nigerian and Cameroon to form a Government. In the 1979 elections, Shehu Shagari's National Party of Nigeria's votes were higher in the areas defined as "Minority" than in the traditional "Hausa Fulani" enclave. It was in fact Kano that provided the test case on the legal interpretation of the 1993 elections. In June 1993 elections, the Hausa- Fulani from Kano, Jigawa and Kaduna voted for Abiola of Social Democratic Party (and) not their son and indigene, Tofa of the National Republican Convention.

On the contrast, the Yorubas of the South West have never had such a record in their voting pattern in the Nigerian project. For instance, the Yorubas of South-West had never voted for any candidate or party outside the Yoruba enclave right from the time of emergence of Action Group; an offshoot of Yoruba cultural group; Egbe Onto Oduduwa in the early 1950s. From then on they have been voting enbloc for their parties; Action Group (A.G.) in the first republic, Unity Party of Nigeria (U.P.N.) in the second republic and Alliance for Democracy (A.D.) in the fourth republic. But despite this fact, the voting pattern of the North had been wrongly manipulated for criticism. This could be due to the strong propaganda instrument the South West has in her support; the media of Lagos- Ibadan axis.

Fortunately or unfortunately the bigger opportunity came in 1993 with the annulment of presidential election that year. Based on that development various agitations came up from different angles of the western Nigeria for either rotation of presidency, restructuring of the federation, power shift or even Sovereign National Conference. Mass organizations essentially based in the South West of the country, with the so-called vibrant civil society including the mass media and other cultural infrastructure (Afenifere, NADECO) and later OPC as well as university students and intellectuals/academics with their knowledge power were mobilized for the course. In a related spirit, Olaitan (1998:141) submits that:

The crisis of June 12, 1993 presidential election had brought up questions as to the perpetual marginalization of some segments of the Nigerian polity in the political and power equation in Nigeria. Indeed; the annulment -—
- was perceived by not an insignificant number of the Nigerian polity as a conscious attempt at denying a segment of the Nigerian polity the control of the Nigerian presidency.

The scholar thereafter suggests that the solution to the perceived injustice lies in devising a framework for the working of the polity called Nigeria whereby all-segments would have a sense of belonging by providing access to all important positions and offices in the country. That, there is need to ensure balancing in filling political offices especially the presidency as the arrow head of all structures of leadership. Even the focus of the often publicized Sovereign National Conference is restructuring with its centre point of power shift specifically shift of the presidency from the North to the South. Also, Amuwo and Herault (1998:6) wrote that;

The main drive towards institutional reforms in a federal system is the recognition that existing state institutions, particularly at the centre are inadequate to apprehend, comprehend and resolve immediate and new challenges. Restructuring is meant to serve as a steering mechanism to properly give focus and locus to attempts at collective identity and distributive politics. The aim is to correct perceived structural defects and institutional deformities. It is intended to lay an institutional foundation for a more just and a more equitable sharing of the political space by multinational groups cohabiting in a federal polity.

This type of agitation could not be more than the struggle by the elites for acquisition of power and wealth. Thus, the restructuring effort of Nigerian polity under General Abacha regime through the National Conference of 1994 was informed essentially by factionalism of the elite as well as by the persistent demand by pro-democracy and human right groups and the call for a Sovereign National Conference. Those actions were not more than means of getting a share of the resources of the country through access to political power.

There is no wonder then that even in the Constitutional Conference of 1994 there was no issue that received greater attention than the issue of rotational presidency. The issue generated a very sharp division in the committee on power sharing of the conference with the southern members massively supporting it while their northern counterparts largely opposing it. This resulted in a deadlock; therefore, the matter was referred to the conference at large for resolution. In the conference itself, there was serious division on the issue which led to the setting up of a consensus committee for resolution and was attained through North/South rotation of the presidency. This resolution was accepted but amended by the military led by General Abacha by making the rotation to be on the basis of six zones and six positions. North Central, North East, North West, South East South South and South West and President, Vice President, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister. Senate President and Speaker House Representative respectively.

The modality for its implementation was not concluded before the demise of General Abacha. General Abdulsalami who took over the mantle of leadership did not carry on with this issue but adopted the 1979 constitution which has no provision on rotational presidency and left the idea with the parties. Indeed, the parties that operated during the period; Alliance for Democracy (AD). All Peoples Party (APP) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) made the issue of rotational presidency a key factor in their campaign. And during the presidential election they all featured southern presidents. Thus, the agitating of a southern president in the name of power shift or rotational presidency was achieved in 1999.

Assessment

Not many scholars subscribe to the adoption of rotational presidency in Nigeria. Some oppose it on ideological basis while others do so, on other grounds. Therefore, this section of this paper intends to examine the implication of rotational presidency on the Nigerian polity.

Indeed there is no gainsaying in the fact that the notion of rotational presidency has the potential of doing more harm than good to the polity by further complicating the search for good governance, national integration and democracy. This is because the operators of the concept are those characters that have been participating in the Nigeria enterprise right from her inception as an independent state or even beyond. They have participated actively in the running and ruining of Nigeria enterprise. They comprise of representatives from every interest group in Nigeria be it tribal, religious, social, professional etc.

Therefore, in that type of situation little or nothing is expected from them other than their previous ruinous characters. No matter the name it is called parliamentary, presidential, French indicative, rotational presidency, power shift, power sharing, democracy, military, democrat in uniform etc. there could be no improved changes in the lives of great number of the masses who are in majority. And this exactly is what is happening in Nigeria today despite power shift from North to South. Even the situation looks worse. This is because the production method has not changed. It remains that of primitive accumulation with wide spread poverty and corruption in the land. With rotational presidency, Nigeria is the 3rd most corrupt nation of the world, and over 70% of her population is below poverty line:

The notion of power sharing (shift) then becomes an ideology, an exercise in false consciousness meant to create a feeling of power dispersal in the face of power concentration. A feeling of symmetry even as the formation and perpetuation of asymmetrical relations between people, groups, institution—
--- in which one partner in the relationship dominates or exploits the other continues (Human and Zaiman, 1995:40).

Even the ethnic boundaries that could be perceived in the political practice of Nigeria as symmetric, regional and religious division could make the Nigerian polity even more hostile to rotational presidency arrangement. In this vein, the 1986 Political Bureau noted that “a constitutional provision for rotation - amounts to an acceptance of our inability to grow beyond ethnic or state loyalty” (FRN, 1987:23). The observation of the Bureau is a fact because when a country’s political elites are exhausted of ideology definitely issues such as ethnicity and religious considerations would dominate the polity. Thus, the issue of power sharing is not more than a means of consolidating the hegemonic class in another way:

As with every drive for hegemony in the context of resource competition, the more successful the hegemonic enterprises becomes, the narrower its recruitment base gets and the more exclusivist the monopolistic its hold on power. When bandied around the idea of power sharing (shift) then it assumes the status of ideological cement for concretizing the unity of the hegemon and deepening fissures separating the various interests comprising the non-hegemonic. In any event, to talk about power sharing in the increasingly exclusivity and monopolistic structure of the Nigerian political process is to raise hopes about a more pluralistic future (Agbaje, 1998:130).

Therefore, the notion of power shift cannot produce more than an oligarchic situation and existing power structure of inequalities if not worse under a situation of asymmetrical relationships in a deeply divided society such as Nigeria as we have seen from 1999. This development could make the attainment of democratic situation not beyond “its normalist pretensions more tenuous if not impossible” (Ibid: 122). Agbaje has even predicted that the notion of power sharing (shift) is not likely to work as we have seen since 1999. That the notion is not necessary and that it could injure the polity. This is because:

Nigeria exhibits at least three characteristics which traditionally identified in the comparative literature as toxic to power sharing arrangements. One, is a network of deep social and territorial divisions, corresponding roughly with political loyalties, engaged in asymmetrical political relationships and with very little cross-cleavage allegiances. This structural network is under written by political memory distilled from historical experience informed

more by the politics of domination than by the politics of group equality as well as by contemporary political culture, including attitudes that tend to concede rather than contest the existing power equation (ibid).

Unequivocally, the notion of power shift is unnecessary not only because its dictates have been taken care of by constitutional provisions on federalism and its twin sister in Nigeria: Federal Character but because it could be taken care of efficiently by transparency in the implementation of ~) democratic principles.

Power shift or rotational presidency could not work because given that in the best times, consociational government including an arrangement for power sharing is largely a holding operation with an inherent tendency to maintain the socio-economic status, to emphasize closed door negotiations, encourage governmental immobilism with the consequent growth of cynicism toward the political process and ultimately accentuates the oligarchical predilection of revisionist democratic theory and practice (Nnoli, 1996:226).

There is no wonder then that the Nigerian experience with rotational presidency from North to South since 1999 has brought nothing other than continued oligarchic tendencies with no improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the citizenry. Indeed, terror of armed bandits, assassins and student cultism, overwhelming hunger and disease in rural and urban areas, mass rush to new breed religious homes as well as traditional herbal/ritual centres and the like for solace are featuring prominently in the contemporary Nigeria despite power shift.

Furthermore, mass organizations essentially based in the western part of the country with the so-called vibrant civil society including the mass media and other cultural structures (Afenifere. NADECO) as well as the university students and intellectuals/academics with their knowledge power have vanished despite the fact that nothing substantial has changed in socio-economic life of the majority of Nigerians as they claimed it has been the basis of their struggle. Or could it be that their

struggle was ethnically oriented and regionally based and as soon as that is realized through a tribe's man occupying the highest position in the land the fruit of their labour has been reaped?

Specifically, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) has been “crushed” without salary for months as a result of strike that emanates from the trade dispute between it and Federal Government, the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) and the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) that have been in forefront of struggle against injustice previously are no where to be seen presently. This includes the various human right groups and the labour union particularly the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) which is only barking but could not bite despite various facets of injustice in the land presently.

Concluding Remarks

From the foregoing, this paper is not condemning the concept of rotational presidency or power shift in its totality, but it has argued that it cannot solve the socio-economic problems of Nigeria. At least if it attains nothing it has shown that the so-called Nigerian radicals and human right fighters are nothing other than tribal cabals and sectional jingoists. In essence, the solution to Nigeria's socio-economic problem should be searched for in other areas and not in rotational presidency. Like Jega (2000:27) observed:

The role of the post-colonial state in Nigeria has been drastically affected and conditioned by essentially three major factors: its colonial origin, excessive factionalism amongst the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and regionally segmented elite and prolonged military authoritarian rule, and (democratic dictatorship). These define the pattern and the character as well as the essence of its role in the capitalist development process in state-civil society relations, in international relations, and in the dynamics of resource utilization and accumulation in the Nigerian political economy.

Unless those factors are addressed no matter what methods adopted in the country, it would take the country to no where as we have seen recently with power shift. Scholars and journalists alike as molders of the thinking and behaviour of the people have not helped in that direction because they have been repeatedly reminding Nigerians about varying forms of identity, differences and conflicts in the polity and little or nothing about how to develop a Nigerian nation. Thus, making government to be “they” which has nothing to do with you or me, an alien institution whereby “people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble” (Achebe, 1960:33). In this type of situation “the real tragic hero is the Nigerian state. No one has any commitment to it and everybody is seeking for access, not to bake the cake, but to eat it” (Jega, op cit:44). Another important factor that needs to be addressed is that:

Nigeria has a patrimonial as well as a rentier character. Patrimonial means that the distinction between the public and the private domains has become blurred and power, which has become a major source of wealth, has become personalized. The major characteristic of a rentier state is that it’s main relationship with the society is mediated through its expenditures on the military and state security, development projects, consumption subsidies and construction (Ibrahim, 2000:47).

Conclusively, it seems that only a comprehensive democratic culture with all its intricacies that can take Nigeria closer to the emergence of stable, meaningful, purposeful and beneficial polity. If that is attained there would hardly be any need for an ideology such as power sharing or power shift. But if it is the rotational presidency that could bring the necessary platform for entrenching democratic culture in Nigeria with her pluralistic structure it could be adopted and entrenched in the country’s constitution. Such an arrangement should also state the modalities for its operation, either on two zone basis; North and South or three zones; East, North and West, or four zones; East, Far North, Middle belt and West or even six zones; North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South and South West as well as how it would oscillates. This is necessary because the method adopted by the south west should not be repeated by other zones before power could shift to them. This includes black mail and even ethnic militia which is damaging. This is because the effects of the 1993 destructions of public utilities in the name of call for power shift are still with us till today.

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