

THE SOUTH-EAST AND THE 2023 NIGERIAN PRESIDENCY: A POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is not only the most populous country in Africa it is also one of the most heterogeneous and also one of the most factious. The country's heterogeneity has often given rise to ethnic tensions more so in the struggle for state power. Consequently there has been an ardent desire both under the colonial and post-colonial state to fashion out political instruments which would allow the component units to be a part of the political process. However despite the far reaching effects of some of these political instruments in dousing ethnic tensions occasioned by the struggle for state power, a significant portion of Nigeria's population still continue to feel politically marginalized. A prominent section of part of this marginalised population is the Igbo who have produced just one head of state in over 60 years of political independence in Nigeria. However certain factors such as the increasingly effective international Igbo lobby and effective domestic mobilization, the self interest of the northern oligarchy and the very logic or principle of the zoning/power rotation formula are increasingly making an Igbo presidency likely in 2023.

Key words: Presidency, Ethnic Tensions, Zoning, Igbo

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, since 1999, hardly is one electoral cycle concluded than the country's political elite, the media (traditional and social media) enmesh themselves in yet another feverish speculation concerning the country's next electoral cycle. Currently, there are complex permutations with respect to the possible geo-political origin of the next president of Nigeria.



This paper, which is a scholarly contribution to the ongoing discourse, argues that the next president of Nigeria is likely to emerge from the south-eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria due to a number of pertinent reasons. These reasons include; the increasingly effective international Igbo lobby and effective domestic mobilization, the self interest of the northern oligarchy and the very logic or principle of the zoning/power rotation formula as it is informally practiced in Nigeria. These factors will be briefly discussed below in no particular order.

Political zoning in Nigeria: the road to institutionalisation

The first major factor which would likely work in favour of the emergence of an Igbo president in 2023 would be the main logic inherent in the principle of zoning and power rotation, extant, though informally, in the country's political process since 1999. The zoning and power rotation principle as it is theoretically conceptualised and informally practiced in Nigeria refers to the breakdown of the Nigerian federation into geo-political zones for the purpose of allocating political power among the six informal regions (North-east, North-central, North-west, South-east, South-west and South-south) of Nigeria. To be sure,

these geo graphical zones correspond roughly to the six cultural zones (emirate states, Borno and environs, Middle-Belt minorities, Yorubaland, Igboland, and southern minorities) derived from the original assessment of British colonialism, which became rooted in Nigerian society. These six cultural zones are indeed central poles around which much recent ethno-regional mobilization has occurred (Ibrahim, 1999:13).

Zoning and power rotation is also a variant of shared executive under the consociational power sharing system. In its essentialities, zoning and power rotation is closely linked to the classical Aristotlelian postulation that,



those who are by nature equals must have the same natural right and worth, and that for unequals to have an equal share, or for equals to have an unequal share, in the offices of the state is as bad as for different bodily constitutions to have the same food and clothing. Wherefore it is thought to be just that among equals everyone be ruled as well as rule and therefore that all should have their turn (Aristotle 1995).

In Nigeria the zoning principle is a direct outcome of its ethno-regional/religious configuration and past turbulent political history. To be sure, until 1993 the zoning/power rotation formula had basically existed on the fringes of the country's other long litany of ethno-conflict ameliorative instruments i.e. federalism, federal character etc. For example as early as 1979 the Constitutional Drafting Committee rejected political zoning on the grounds that under the then 19 states structure it will take no less than 144 years for some states to produce a president even as some ethnic groups within a state might never be able to produce a president (Dudley, 1982:162). In the same vein as recent as 1987 the zoning principle was officially scorned on the basis that it suggested an open admission of the "acceptance of our inability to grow beyond ethnicity" (Political Bureau, 1987: 23). The apex conflict ameliorative instrument within the period under review was the federal character principle; previously known as the quota system. To be sure the underlying reason behind the adoption of the quota system in colonial and immediate post colonial Nigeria had been to prevent political hegemony by the significantly more developed South. Thus, speaking at a senate debate on May 1, 1965 the minister of state for army affairs, Tanko Galadima gave expression to the 'philosophy' behind the quota system when he asserted that:

We introduced the quota system in the army thus preventing the possible fear that the army would become unreliable. If any part of the country is not



represented in the army, we may harbour some fears that it is being dominated (Adekanye, 1989: 237).

Several years later a similar philosophy was advanced to rationalize the institutionalisation and considerable systematisation of the quota system as the Federal Character principle in the 1979 constitution.

Federal character *simpliciter* is a 'provision for public institutions to reflect the "linguistic, ethnic, religious and geographic diversity of Nigeria"' (Nwaubani, 2020). In more formal terms the, "federal character of Nigeria" refers to the distinctive desire of the peoples of Nigeria to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every citizen of Nigeria a sense of belonging to the nation as expressed in Section 14(3) and (4) of this Constitution' (Ayoade, 1986: 85).

However in contemporary times, the federal character principle has been a major source of division rather than unity as many Nigerians often complain that it has "done more damage to our country than good" (Nwaubani, 2020). Indeed some of the 'damage' done by federal character to the fabric of the Nigerian state has been noted in scholarly literature; thus Charles Uroh has acridly observed that, in the final analysis, 'when one weights the principle and practice of federal character on the scale of social justice and fair play one finds it weighting so low' (Uroh, 1998: 197). Similarly, Eghosa Osaghae's detailed study of federal cabinets in Nigeria from 1951 to 1984 revealed quite clearly that the North had a preponderant share of the most powerful portfolios – a clear indication of where state power actually lay (Osaghae 1989, p. 147). Moreover, in addition, in the implementation of the federal character principle in Nigeria there:

was a religious bias in favour of Muslims who obtained about 70 percent of all executive and board positions. Surprisingly, and as if to satisfy a religious qualification, some southern Christians who were appointed to such positions considered the idea of taking Muslim names. However, they wore southern



dresses and caps. What this desire to identify with the North showed is the dominant influence of that region in the federal government. While it is true that individuals from different states were appointed to positions, the North continued to control such strategic ministries as Defence, Trade and Industries, and Internal Affairs. Since independence in 1960, these ministries have remained the preserve of northerners (Ayoade, 1986: 86).

Consequently, due to this brazen ethnocentrist manipulation of the federal character principle by successive northern led military regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, the instrument was gradually drained of its political efficacy. The highpoint of the perceived northern domination of the federation was the annulment in 1993 of what is still popularly regarded as the fairest election in Nigeria's political history by a northern led military regime. As Ropo Sekoni (2013: 111) succinctly observed the annulment of that election 'created a major crisis that caused the switch from the belief that post-colonial political power belongs to the north to rotational arrangement between the north and the south'.

The long process to the informal institutionalisation of the rotational/zoning principle in Nigerian politics began with the convocation of a Constitutional National Conference between 1994 and 1995 by General Sani Abacha in order to discuss political representation in Nigeria and other issues arising in the wake of the annulled elections. In that conference, the southern political elite feeling besieged staunchly refused to compromise on the issue of the rotation of political power between north and south. Despite the equally trenchant northern opposition to the zoning proposition the political resolution of the south which was nourished by the memory of the annulled election allowed the south to carry the day. The zoning/formula was subsequently codified in the 1995 draft constitution (Ibrahim, 1999: 13).



In 1998 June 8th Abacha died suddenly and the successor northern Muslim led military regime promulgated a new constitution, now generally referred to as the 1999 constitution, with the zoning/power rotation principle expunged. However, the abrogation of the zoning principle by the military was in reality an exercise in futility. The spirit of rotation and zoning of state power was already abroad and thriving not only in the hearts and minds of southerners but also of northerners as well. This state of affairs which was made realisable through the traumatic impact of the annulment on Nigeria's already highly ethicised social fabric forced the application of the zoning principle away from the locale of politics into civil organisations. And so it came to be that the zoning arrangement was deployed in purely professional and civil bodies like the Nigeria Bar Association, the Nigerian Union of Journalists, the Academic Staff Union of Universities etc (Ololajulo, 2016: 156).

Zoning: From Theory to Practice

Given the pervasive distrust in the body politic on the threshold of the transition to the Fourth Republic in 1999 and in the face of strident official repudiation of the zoning principle together with rampant secessionist agitations from the Yoruba Southwest and elsewhere, it became incumbent on Nigeria's political elite to informally adopt the zoning and power rotation formula in order to assuage feelings and dispel the widespread cynicism surrounding the transition. Thus in the preparations for the first democratic elections since 1983, all the political parties contesting the 1999 elections zoned state power to the Yoruba south-west in compensation for the annulled 1993 elections which another Yoruba had won but was denied by a northern led military junta (Suberu & Diamond, 2002: 422). It had therefore become necessary based on natural justice and political pragmatism (the Yoruba were threatening secession) to make political restitution to the Southwest by privileging the region the presidency via the zoning formula. Thus by this singular accession by the rest of the federation to the Yoruba demand for state power in 1999 in



atonement for the annulled 1993 elections (Sekoni, 2013: 111), the convention was forever established in Nigeria's political space that political power may be expeditiously zoned to any region in the country in atonement for a political injury. Consequently, it was in fact, on this very basis of 'political exigency' idea inherent in the zoning principle that an individual from the hydrocarbon rich but minority Niger-delta (South-south) region gained the vice-presidency in 2007 and eventually gained the presidency in 2011; and the North itself had regained the presidency in 2015, after the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua after just two years in office in 2009.

Zoning: Issues Arising

The informal praxis of the zoning principle from 1999 onwards has produced some near cataclysmic situations in Nigeria. However it must be pointed out that these challenges only ended up in furthering and solidifying the idea of the zoning principle across all stratum of society. The first and most direct challenge to the praxis of zoning was the death of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in office. The second was the attempt by the Fourth republic's inaugural president, Olusegun Obasanjo, to breach the tacit concordant between north and south on zoning by amending the constitution in order to run for a third term in office.

Indeed, President Olusegun Obasanjo's less than subtle attempts in 2006 to amend the constitution in order to run for a third term in office elicited considerable furore in the body politic. This national outburst was due to the increasingly popular idea that zoning encompassed the alternate rotation of state power between north and south in a sequential fashion; in Nigeria's case after every eight years. Thus the attempt by Olusegun Obasanjo to 'gatecrash' the system by amending the constitution to run for a third term was generally felt to be an act of bad faith and an open affront against the spirit of the 'turn by turn' idea inherent and ingrained in the zoning principle. Consequent upon this, an unprecedented national front arose to challenge the ambitions of Obasanjo. According to Jean Herskovits, 'Nigerians all over the



country, and especially in the north, had given their representatives an ultimatum: take bribes and allow Obasanjo to run for a third term, and you will not be welcome back home' (Herskovits, 2007: 120). The national repudiation of Obasanjo's 'third term agenda' was not only critical in the neutralisation of his ambition but more importantly it was also at the same time a popular acclamation of the zoning idea – that power must rotate among the geo-political zones without bias. Subsequently, the major political parties, in line with the schedule, zoned the presidency to northern Nigeria for the 2007 general elections.

However, it was in the aftermath of the 2007 elections which produced Umaru Musa Yar'Adua as president that the zoning principle witnessed its biggest challenge so far in the fourth republic. The two main candidates in the 2007 election Umaru Musa Yar'Adua and Abubakar Atiku were from the north (just as the two candidates in the 1999 elections were from the south). Yar'Adua who emerged from the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) won the elections and it was expected that the north would hold power for another eight years. However things did not quiet work out as the political architects had sketched them out. Umaru Musa Yar'Adua developed health complications and died in office and his southern vice-president, from the oil rich Niger-delta region (the South-South) of the country, Goodluck Jonathan immediately resumed as president.

Now this development was particularly nettlesome to the Northern elite. In fact the crude political shenanigans which were witnessed during the period of illness and eventual death of President Yar'Adua were linked to the zoning system and the collective determination of the northern elite that power, either he was dying or living, must remain in the hands of Yar'Adua and hence the north (Agbo, 2010: 16-20). After all, northerners opined, it was all part of the 'gentle man's agreement' between the north and south that state power should alternate between the two great dichotomies of the country. As the country dithered on the edge of a precipice it needed an ingenious legislative manoeuvre – the so-called 'doctrine of necessity' – to ease power away from the



dying northern president and into the hands of his southern deputy much to the chagrin and dismay of many a northern elite. The ensuing tumult in state and society (including the boko haram insurgency) during the tenure of the southern president have been linked even by powerful government officials to the failure of the zoning formula within the PDP.

The opposition party in the 2015 general elections the All Progressive Congress (APC) generally made huge political capital out of the failure of the PDP to abide by its own constitutional precept regarding the zoning of key political offices. Even as the southern PDP president was simultaneously hobbled by northern elements within his own party who felt he should not stand for elections any longer as it was not yet his zone's 'turn'. Now even though Jonathan won the elections of 2011 his perceived political interloping balkanised his party as a sizeable proportion of influential northern elements angrily withdrew from the party. In 2015, in order to contest against Jonathan, the opposition had cobbled together an unwieldy platform – the APC (All Peoples Congress) – and pushed forward a populist northern candidate who carried the elections and the presidency. In the 2019 general elections the PDP sufficiently chastened by its earlier error in 2015 fielded a northerner to contest against the northern APC president thus inadvertently signalling the zoning of the presidency to the north by both parties.

Zoning: Politics of 'Turn by Turn' Solidified

And so in the 2019 general elections for the first time since 2007 the country utilized the zoning principle as its proponents had originally conceptualised it; which is that the main political contenders for the presidency should emanate from the same political zone in order to dissipate ethnic tensions. A key writer on zoning and power rotation, Anthony Akinola, referred to this political phenomenon occasioned by the application of the zoning formula as the 'encagement' of ethnicity (Akinola 1986). For Akinola this is the key advantage of the zoning instrument.



Now it is quite apparent from this brief historical foray into the meaning, theory and praxis of the zoning/power rotation principle in Nigeria's fourth republic that all the zones in the south have produced a president as a result of the zoning formula except the southeast geo-political zone. The next important deduction from the foregoing is that power can be zoned to a region due to 'political exigency'. This exigency could present as national interest or unfair treatment of a zone thus the need arises for the creation of a sense of belonging through zoning or it may be to propitiate a restive and secessionist inclined region. The southeast currently meets all these criteria.

Northern Nigeria and the Politics of 'Safety First'

The next point to consider is the defence of the self-interest of the northern oligarchy and the north in general. The north has always jealously guarded its interests; first in its interactions with the colonial state and subsequently against the southern political elite in the post-colonial state. In order to achieve its aims it has often resorted to dealing through pliable southern politicians or to 'tactical withdrawals' when confronted with an overwhelmingly formidable opponent. This approach involves the deliberate softening of a hard-line policy (some examples include the negotiated settlement with Fredrick Lugard to keep out western and southern missionaries in exchange for political submission; the demand by the north for half the seats of the federal legislature at the constitutional conference in Ibadan in 1950; the withdrawal of its secessionist bid in 1953 after the Kano riots or when it again withdrew from a determined secession bid after the bloody July counter-coup of 1966. In 1999 the north also agreed to allow power to 'shift' to the south through the zoning formula as a result of the annulled 1993 elections in order to dispel strident popular political agitations in the south). The second aspect of northern tactics is the skilful manoeuvring of pliable southern individuals into positions of authority in order to protect its regional interests. This particular approach has largely been successful because of the fragmentary and mutual suspicions attending political interaction



in southern politics. However by endeavouring to deal with complicit southern politicians, the northern elite have been remarkably successful in achieving its political ends. For example in 1976 after the assassination of Murtala Muhammed, the northern elite took special care to ring Olusegun Obasanjo with officers from the northern establishment. According to Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe (1985: 619), ‘after the murder of the then military head of state, Murtala Muhammed, the “Mafia” was only prepared to back Obasanjo (Muhammed's deputy) as the new head of state if one of its leading figures in the army (Yar'Adua) was appointed deputy head of state. This was duly acceded to by Obasanjo’. Whether Olusegun Obasanjo repaid his political debt to the north in 1979 by handing power back to a northerner is not our concern here (see Ugbanu Okpu (1985) ‘Inter-Party Political Relations in Nigeria 1979-1983’). However what we do know is that amidst the clamour for power shift in southern Nigeria, exactly two decades later, the northern elite again earnestly sought out Olusegun Obasanjo to be the southern recipient of that clamour.

Consequently, it would appear that with respect to the 2023 elections the politically astute northern elite should have apprehended the need to seek a complacent candidate from the south to protect its interests (a major interest is the earnest desire to keep Nigeria a united entity). As Nasir el-Rufai the governor of Kaduna and a key figure of the northern establishment, had unabashedly pointed out: ‘as a group, the Northern APC will have to sit down and endorse someone, most likely someone from the South’ (Daniel, 2020). He noted further that:

The general political consensus in Nigeria is that the Presidency should rotate between the North and the South. It is not written but everyone understands it. In some of the parties, like the PDP, it is even written down in their constitution but it was breached in 2015. I think that every politician of honour should understand and abide by that consensus ...because after eight years of Buhari, I don't think the



Presidency should remain in the north unless there are some extenuating circumstances. But all things being equal, we will honour our agreement and we keep our words (Daniel, 2020).

The fore going statement following the logic of the zoning/power rotation formula is evident. The question now is which of the zones in the south should accede to state power in 2023 or to put it even more starkly which of the zones between, the south west, south-south and southeast, would best protect the interest of the northern elite which, as noted above, is synonymous with the preservation of Nigeria as a united entity?

It would appear, to our mind, that the regional interests of the northern elite, which centres mainly on keeping Nigeria as one state, would best be protected after 2023 by an Igbo president. The South-South region produced the last but one head of state so it is clearly not a front runner. The front runner from the Southwest (which is a strong contender), Bola Ahmed Tinubu, is too unpredictable and progressive for the traditionally conservative northern political tastes. As a northern insider noted Tinubu is, 'politically connected but with baggage' (Aziken, 2020). The baggage alluded to here but not explicitly mentioned has to do with Bola Tinubu's integral relationship with NADECO (National Democratic Coalition) a largely Yoruba organised concern which advocated the exit or at the very least regional autonomy of the southwest in a federal Nigeria due to perceived political marginalization and systematic repression of that region by successive northern dominated military regimes. In fact until the demands of practical politics necessitated a political merger with Buhari's northern political machinery in 2014, Tinubu had been politically orientated toward a radical restructuring of the Nigerian state – the so-called 'True Federalism' – through a constitutional conference. Witness some of Tinubu's statements on Nigerian federalism:

We must talk and the time is now! There is no crisis in talking with one another and discussing our problems



as a people towards finding workable solutions ... The nation balances at the edge of precipice while standing on its weaker foot. Nigerians in my view, need a conversation or what has been canvassed as national conference (Sekoni, 2013: 94).

Development can be felt by the people, if they are allowed to take their place in true federalism. People who serve at the council level should serve with diligence ... rather than concentrate power at the centre, resources should be deployed to the states and councils for proper development (Sekoni, 2013: 94).

These declamations are anathematic to the political sensibilities of the northern establishment who have repeatedly warned that ‘political restructuring and establishing of state police are likely to lead to disintegration of the country’ (Sekoni, 2013: 16).

However, if by some stroke of political fate (the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once noted that a week is a long time in politics), Bola Tinubu does ascend to the presidency in 2023 the southeast which would be considerably ruffled (given that the Yoruba has held the presidency from 1999-2006 and the vice-presidency from 2015-2023 all things being equal) will definitely make a more determined bid for either a radical re-organization of the post-colonial state or even embark on bolder schemes toward achieving political exit. The collective anger from the continued exclusion of the Igbo from the presidency is rapidly dimming the memories of the trauma left over by the internecine civil war of the 1960s. If a politically dispirited southeast offers a robust challenge against a Yoruba led federal government, would such a government offer the same resistance as successive northern-led federal governments have evinced, against eruptions of ethnic nationalisms across the federation since the end of the war? It does not seem very likely. It must be noted that if the Yoruba and Igbo, who are mutually antagonistic (Ibrahim, 1999: 14), are agreed upon anything at all it is that the Nigerian



federation is heavily skewed in favour of the north. Furthermore, ethnic nationalism in Yoruba western Nigeria is only being momentarily stalled by that region's participation, as junior partner, in the current power sharing deal with the north. Consequently, if the Yoruba finds itself in full control of the levers of state power it may to all intents and purposes decide to pursue a wholly different political agenda which may be 'injurious' to the interests of the north. What this translates to is that if the southeast offers a robust and sustained challenge to a Yoruba led federal government it is unlikely that such a government will resist as energetically as a northern led federal government. Thus such a government may in all likelihood 'succumb' without much pressure either to a complete dissolution of the Nigerian union or to a radical reorganisation of the state. In order to pre-empt such an outcome it therefore becomes inevitable for the north to settle for or reach a negotiated settlement with the southeast to produce a president.

However in acceding to an Igbo presidency the north will seek for a pliable south eastern candidate to support. From an outsider's view point, the three most visible Igbo candidates for the presidency within the ruling party Ogbonnaya Onu, Chris Ngige and Rochas Okorocha cannot avail in the northern elite's grand political master plan for 2023 and even beyond. The one who is a long time political associate of Buhari, is not sufficiently trusted otherwise he should have attained a role more visible, under the Buhari administration, than minister of science and technology which in itself is an insignificant portfolio; the other is a radical made famous by his singular overthrow of the political 'treaty' with his political patron which brought him the governorship of Anambra state (Smith, 2007: 180). The third who is presently a senator is largely discredited even within the ambit of his native Igbo southeast. In the face of these developments the northern elite may search out a political outsider. A suggested 'viable' candidate is the present minister of foreign affairs, Geoffrey Onyeama, whose relationship with Abba Kyari (Abba Kyari had been Onyeama's best man at his wedding) the late very



powerful chief of staff to the president suggests to us a close relationship with the northern elite. More important however is the fact that Onyeama is an outsider. He is a virtual unknown in Igbo and Nigerian politics. He also appears politically dour and conservative.

From unknown entity to national fame: the ‘making’ of folk heroes in Nigerian politics

In this wise it is important to point out here that political outsiders and neophytes who attain high office while lacking effective political structure, connectivity and capital are not a rarity in Nigeria’s political history. Rather their emergence has more often than not been facilitated by the careful ‘management’ of elections by their patrons. Thus we find Shehu Shagari in 1979 and 1983, Olusegun Obasanjo in 1999 and 2003 and Musa Umaru Yar’Adua in 2007 acceding to national office through some of the most controversial, contentious and divisive elections in post colonial Nigeria. On Umaru Yar’Adua, Andrew Walker (2016: 103) recounts that ‘Obasanjo forced all other state Governors who were eager to contest to stand aside at a late night meeting, leaving his chosen successor, Umaru Yar’Adua’. However lacking in the political capital necessary to string together a viable national coalition Yar’Adua’s handlers had no other alternative but to resort to blanket electoral malfeasance to ensure his electoral success. According to Herskovits (2007: 123) the election which brought Musa Umaru Yar’Adua to power in 2007 were to put it mildly and succinctly ‘flawed’ and ‘a charade’. In fact given the political depravity which attended that election and the consequent crisis of ‘legitimacy’ which inevitably surrounded his administration, Yar’Adua freely committed himself to carrying out an extensive reform of the country’s electoral process. If an Igbo outsider is picked by the ruling party, as it is increasingly likely, one must then anticipate a ‘managed’ election in 2023. The groundwork appears to have been laid for such an eventuality; available evidence show quite clearly that even though Buhari has made the combating of economic and financial crimes a primary



plank of his politics he has paid very little attention to the reengineering or energising of the electoral system. In fact after the 2019 general elections in Nigeria, the US state Department noted that democracy had taken a significant step backwards.

The Igbo nationalist behemoth

The final reason why there is likely to be an Igbo president in Aso Rock in 2023 is because of the increasing vociferousness of the Igbo lobby both locally and internationally. The Igbo nationalist agitation has ridden in recent times on the wave of the rise of the new nationalisms worldwide. In the aftermath of the suppression of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) movement and the forced flight and subsequent arrest of its leader Nnamdi Kanu the Igbo secessionist lobby has assumed an unprecedented prominence in the international realm. The Igbo lobby specifically the IPOB has managed to infiltrate several powerful organizations such as the United Nations. Moreover, the need for occasional rebuttal of the allegations and innuendoes made by the IPOB against the Nigerian state by high ranking government officials is significant reason to infer that the Nigerian government has been placed on the back foot. Should the southeast be passed over for the presidency in 2023 the backlash from the IPOB and indeed the organized Igbo lobby internationally and domestically will require an immensely imaginative Nigerian government to contain. This is because after 2023 any Nigerian government led by a president from any zone other than the Southeast zone would be, based on the very logic of zoning and power rotation which we have just x-rayed, illegitimate.

Certainly the current northern-led federal government and indeed the northern establishment is alive to the reality of an upsurge of new nationalisms across the world. In Spain – there is Catalonia, in the US – the America First Ideology, in Europe – there was BREXIT, in Africa itself specifically in Ethiopia – there is presently (as at 2021) the Tigray crisis. In fact the Tigray regional government, with considerable international sympathy, delivered a devastating political TKO on the Ethiopia central



government by going ahead with regional polls which the central government has ruled illegal: it also went further to mobilize a regional army in preparation for a federal invasion. As at the time of writing both sides are engaged in a furious armed struggle. Indeed there are credible reasons to fear for the corporate stability of Ethiopia.

It is now quite apparent, given these nationalistic eruptions, that the current international environment is quite different from the international environment of the 1960s with respect to ethnic nationalism and ethnic self determination. In the 1960s the temper of world opinion ran against secessionism most especially among the new states of Africa because of the fear that accession to ethnic determinism in one state would precipitate a domino reaction in other states thus invariably leading to a rash of irredentist wars across the continent. Consequently, in alignment with the spirit of the age, the Organization of African Unity propounded in 1964 the so called principle of *uti possidetis* – which translates that colonial boundaries were ultimately sacrosanct and therefore unbreachable and inalienable. For Sandra Joireman the, ‘justification for this policy was that, even though they were colonial creations, to disregard the established boundaries of African states would mean war’ (Joireman, 2003: 141). Today, however, the worldwide horror of chain secessionist reactions has considerably receded. In fact since the democratic transitions of the early 1990s a number of prominent nation-states in Europe and elsewhere have collapsed under the weight of their own internal contradictions into their constituent parts. In Africa itself Eritrea became free from Ethiopia in 1991. These realities have largely erased the opprobrium with which secessionism was once viewed in the collective consciousness. There is even, presently, far greater international sympathy for ethnic nationalities which are locked into ‘loveless marriages’ with other ethnic groups.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, since the end of the civil war in 1970 a balkanized Nigeria has never been in the interest of the northern elite. Thus more often than not when faced with contentious national issues the north has always preferred to reconcile and conciliate rather than agitate and aggravate. Consequently, on the issue of an Igbo presidency the northern elite would seek recourse once again in conciliation politics in the classical Crickean fashion. When taken together with the zoning system and aggressive Igbo nationalism it greatly increases the likelihood of an Igbo presidency in 2023. However an Igbo presidency is not a given, the Igbo political elite must also have to reach across divides in order to build the consensus necessary to the attainment of this objective.



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