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Again, in defence of history

(**The Guardian**, August 5, 2010)

Sam Oyovbaire, a professor of Political Science and former Federal Minister of Information, was justifiably angry in his piece, "**How they 'govern' Nigeria**" (**The Guardian**, July 15, 2010), a title he borrowed, with due acknowledgement, from Reuben Abati's earlier article, **How they "govern" Nigeria** (July 9, 2010). Oyovbaire's article was provoked, I believe, by a passage in Luke Onyekakeyah's column, **Before zoning tears Nigeria apart** (July 13, 2010). In reacting to that passage which was, in fact, one of the foundations on which Onyekakeyah's article was based, Sam Oyovbaire rose to the height I enjoy in public discourse: articulate, logical and truthful, even if harsh.

I would begin with a point of correction. The question of "zoning" and "rotation" of core political offices in Nigeria – as is currently understood and practised in Nigeria – did not originate from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in 1998 / 1999 as is widely claimed and, I fear, equally widely believed. The question arose during General Ibrahim Babangida's tortuous transition programme (1985 – 1993) when the candidates of the two state – formed, and officially endorsed, political parties – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC) – that

emerged for the presidential contest were both from the North. There were protests from several political factions and sections of the media not only against the open and shameless riggings in the primaries which produced the candidates but also – and indeed in particular – against the fact that the two candidates that emerged were both Northerners.

Before I proceed, let me say that as much as I hate using the terms “North”, “South”, “Northerners” and “Southerners” in discussing our politics, I have to use them if I desire to be understood. And I fervently wish to be understood. The military regime of General Babangida cancelled the presidential primaries – perhaps, for one or both of the two reasons listed above, or perhaps for other reasons, or perhaps for several reasons including the two I have listed. Several politicians, including some presidential aspirants and “old breed” political players, were banned. New presidential primaries were then organized for both parties, the SDP and the NRC. The new primaries produced Chief M.K.O. Abiola for the SDP and Alhaji Tofa for the NRC. Abiola was from the South and Tofa was from the North.

This satisfied the geopolitical side of the favoured equation. But the religious equation was not satisfied as both candidates were Muslims. And Abiola “worsened” the situation by choosing, as a running mate, a gentleman who, though cosmopolitan, urbane and intelligent, happened to be a Muslim. Petit-bourgeois expectations at the time were something like this: **For NRC:** A Northern presidential candidate who is a Muslim, with a running – mate who is a Southerner and a Christian. **For SDP:** Southern presidential candidate who is a Christian with a running –mate who is a Northerner and a Muslim. Either this, or another “permutation and combination” that was equally “mixed” and “balanced”, although we all know that heavens would have broken loose in some sectarian quarters if a Northern presidential candidate had been a Christian.

Am I being cynical here? Or perhaps, satirical? I don’t think I am either. All I am trying to do here is to describe (not analyse, let alone justify) historical facts, processes and sequences of events, and articulate the mainstream political thoughts and expectations in Nigeria. And I may add, for completeness, what is already known, namely, that I do not endorse the processes, neither do I share the

mainstream political thoughts and expectations. To continue: Although mainstream political expectations were not realized in full, Nigerian politicians accepted the line-up for the June 12, 1993 presidential election. Abiola won the election, but it was annulled. The rest is history, as the saying goes. But this history insists on remaining active and current, as we all know.

The truth must be told whether or not it brings us temporary comfort. Nothing enduring can be built on falsehood. In particular, our mainstream power – blocs and politicians must know that they cannot construct the new Nigeria on falsehood, or falsification and distortion of history, not even the falsification of their own acts. It is in this latter regard that I sympathise with Oyovbaire and share his anger over the description, by Onyekakeyah, of the “zoning and rotation” principle adopted in 1998/1999 by the present ruling party, the PDP, as a “gentleman’s agreement”. It was stronger than that. It is also not true that PDP’s zoning principle was simply “a child of necessity... introduced by the PDP in 1999 to compensate the Southwest for the annulment of the 1993 general election by Babangida.” No, Sir.

The zoning principle or, rather, the form and content given to it in 1999 by the PDP was the party’s response to the agitations for “power-shift” and “power-rotation” which started before Abiola came to the stage. The annulment of Abiola’s election and the winner’s death in detention could only have made this type of response more urgent, and, indeed, inevitable, for any party whose platform was not revolutionary or popular-democratic. At least two factors, not one, accounted for the starting of PDP’s zoning and rotation principle from the Southwest. These were Abiola’s ethnic origin and the “discovery” of General Olusegun Obasanjo.

If Obasanjo, or someone like him, had not been found, if Obasanjo had not survived General Abacha’s incarceration to do the post-Abiola job for Nigeria’s power blocs and the “international community”, I don’t know what would have happened – for these two decisive entities, the Nigerian power blocs and the “international community” needed to ensure the “Nigerian unity”, which had been seriously threatened, to be restored **in a particular way** and **by particular means**. And Obasanjo eminently satisfied the conditions. This point can be put more directly: The starting of the zoning and rotation principle from the Southwest by the PDP was

determined by two coincident factors, namely: to “compensate” the Southwest, as Onyekakeyah proposed, and the “discovery” of Obasanjo, who is not only from Abiola’s geopolitical zone, but from his hometown.

I was, to put it mildly embarrassed when I read in Onyekakeyah’s article that PDP’s “zoning and rotation” principle was not in the party’s constitution. He ought not to have made that type of categorical statement when he was not sure. I share Oyovbaire’s anger. In particular, I share his admonition that “good columnists normally engage themselves in some level of research” and should not rely too heavily on gossips collected from “pepper-soup” and “beer-parlour” joints. Having sharply rebuked the erring columnist, Oyovbaire cited the relevant sections of the current PDP Constitution: “In pursuance of the principle(s) of equity and fairness, the party **shall adhere** to the policy of rotation and zoning of party and public elective offices and it shall be enforced by the appropriate executive committee at all levels” (Section 7(2)(c)).

Let me say straightaway that given Nigeria’s multi-ethnic character, given the federal character, and given the current violent character of primitive capitalist accumulation in Nigeria, the existing PDP constitutional provision on “zoning and rotation”, two different, but closely connected movements, like the revolution and rotation of the earth, is both brilliant and democratic. I doubt if Nigeria’s power blocs can find a more brilliant formula to remain in power. The thieving competitors may do away with the present zoning formula, but they will come up with another one. I share and endorse Sam Oyovbiare’s anger in describing the latter-day “democrats” who now oppose “zoning” as opportunists. This does not, of course, uphold the opportunism of some of the supporters of the principle.

Only Nigeria’s genuinely revolutionary and patriotic forces can do away not only with “zoning and rotation” but also the need for it. They can do this and convince the popular masses of the correctness of this abolition in concentrated actions within six months.