

15

History and “political intervention”

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The “stakeholders” in the politics of our country are in various categories. And I am employing this popular term even when I am not very sure of its meaning, beyond the idea that a “stakeholder” is someone who has a conscious and active interest in a matter. At least 90 per cent of Nigerians are not stakeholders in the politics of the nation, while at most 10 per cent are. Of the 10 per cent, about half are current politicians and political office holders; and about half of the remaining 5 per cent are those who, for various reasons, follow the politics of the country with varying degrees of understanding. The remaining 2.5 per cent are those I call political interventionists: elder statesmen and women, successful businessmen and women, frontline traditional rulers and religious leaders, retired politicians and public servants, and prominent “community leaders” and “leaders of thought.”

Literally speaking, millions of people intervene in politics in various ways; but those I give the title are those whose interventions have acquired the status of professionalism and who take themselves seriously in this business. Although they benefit immensely from political processes, political interventionists claim they are not acting as politicians or partisans and do not want to be so identified. But they want, with some justification, to be taken as seriously as they take themselves when they intervene in political crises. They are generally past middle age - beyond 60 years, in fact. Their declared aim, each time they intervene, is to preserve the unity of the Nigerian nation. If you run through our political history as an independent nation, you will find numerous cases of our political interventionists at work. Prominent interventions would include those made in the crisis leading up to the Civil War (1967-

1970) and those made during the Abacha distatorship. Collating, analysing and assessing these cases will be a worthwhile research project. I only wish to look at one particular pre-Civil War intervention under the regime of General Yakubu Gowon and a recent one under President Olusegun Obasanjo.

On Saturday, May 6, 1967, Chief Obafemi Awolowo led a delegation of an interventionist formation, the National Conciliation Committee, to Enugu to persuade Lt. Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu to allow representatives of Eastern Region to join the committee to find a peaceful solution to the crisis generated by the bloody coups and massacres of the preceding 16 months. The main concern of the committee, said Awolowo in his introductory remarks, "is to ensure that Nigeria does not disintegrate." He then added his own personal opinion, namely, that "I would like to see Nigeria bound together by any bond because it is better than wrecking the whole place up because I think each unit will be the loser for it." He argued: "The economy of the country is so integrated that I think it is too late in the day to try and sever them without risking the death of one or both of them. We have come, therefore, to appeal to you to let Eastern representatives attend the meeting of the committee."

The mission, very predictably, failed. Three weeks later, on May 26, 1967, a joint meeting of Eastern Region's "Consultative Assembly" and "Leaders of Thought" met in Enugu and passed a resolution asking Ojukwu to declare the Eastern Region of Nigeria an independent state of Biafra. Ojukwu did exactly that four days later, on May 30, 1967. And on July 6, 1967, war broke out. Chief Awolowo's mission failed for a couple of reasons. First, it came too late: the two sides had already taken positions which were not easy to dismantle at the stage. It is like an aircraft preparing for a take-off. There is a point at which the take-off can no longer be aborted. The best an interventionist can do is to allow the plane to take-off and recall it thereafter. In the second place, although Awolowo's delegation was composed of eminent people (all male!) - just like the Eastern Leaders of Thought - it was not trusted by Ojukwu as a genuine peace-maker. Specifically Ojukwu believed that the "peace mission" was pro-Gowon. In the third place, everyone knew that apart from its moral authority

(which some people would even question), the peace delegation had no power to guarantee any promises made or agreements reached.

That was over 35 years ago but the culture has not changed. The politics of the present dispensation, including the crises it has been generating, is built around President Olusegun Obasanjo. This is not strange. Even the most democratic presidential system of governance is built around an individual, the president, who, in that capacity, is the executive head of the committee that administers the affairs of the ruling blocs as a whole. Furthermore the strategy that produced Obasanjo's regime in 1999 was concerned principally with putting the former military Head of State back in office. The present politics still carries its birth-mark. It is for this reason that I call the present political dispensation in Nigeria Obasanjo's Republic: a political order where every major issue is about Obasanjo and where every major crisis has Obasanjo at its centre.

Thus, at the very beginning of his tenure, the president was at the centre of the crisis over Buhari, the Speaker of the House of Representatives - the critical question being not whether the embattled Speaker should be impeached or not, but whether Obasanjo would allow him to be removed or not. The same applied to the first President of the Senate, Evans Enwerem. Although the battle-cry was raised in the Senate the removal of Enwerem's successor, Chuba Okadigbo, was a successful test of President Obasanjo's will and power, since Obasanjo has been the motive force behind every attempt to impeach or "shake up" principal officers of the National Assembly. The president is central to the crises not only in his party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), but also in other governing parties. The other major political crises have developed from disagreements either between the President and the people or between the president and the National Assembly. The impeachment crisis is in the latter category. It has provoked major interventions.

At present, one of the leading organisations of the political interventionists is **The Patriots**. Before The Patriots made their intervention last month two former Heads of State, General Yakubu Gowon and Alhaji Shehu Shagari, who ruled Nigeria in the periods (1966-1975) and (1979-1983), respectively, announced an intervention. The two former rulers - one military, the other civilian - wrote a joint letter to the

National Assembly requesting it to freeze the impeachment process against President Obasanjo so as to create a conducive atmosphere for them to “reconcile” the two parties, or rather, to save President Obasanjo. This intervention looked feeble. Why? For the three reasons I gave in the case of the pre-Civil War intervention. Beyond that, there were serious questions of political and moral credibility which the former Heads of State had to answer. In any case, we did not hear again from Gowon and Shagari for a long time.

Shortly after the former Heads of State’s intervention, **The Patriots**, an organisation of prominent Nigerians, predominantly southern and, predominantly, if not exclusively male, intervened in the impeachment crisis to save the “unity of the nation” which was being threatened by the National Assembly’s impeachment notice. **The Patriots** offered three proposals for resolving the crisis. First, the president should drop his re-election plan. Secondly, the present four-year presidential tenure, renewable once, should yield place to an unrenovable term of five years. Thirdly, the presidency should rotate among the six geo-political zones. And finally, the National Assembly should drop the impeachment proceedings against the President and settle the matter politically. It is clear that the last proposal was the most important, the most critical and above all, the most urgent.

The first proposal can be carried out any time before the 2003 election; the second and the third entail long processes. But the last is a question of **now**. From what I read in the media it was not clear if **The Patriots’** proposals were elements of a deal or independent proposals, some of which could be rejected and others accepted. In any case, it is clear that The Patriots’ intervention suffers two of the weaknesses identified in the pre-Civil War intervention, namely, the group could not be trusted by all the sides, and it had no power to guarantee compliance with any possible agreements. Hence, it had to collapse. And it collapsed.

At the beginning of November 2002, Gowon and Shagari surprised the nation by announcing a successful hosting of a “reconciliation” meeting between the presidency led by the President, and the National Assembly, led by its leaders. An agreement whose only substantive element was the dropping of the impeachment proceedings was announced. My reading is that having quietly resolved the money

issue — which was the main, if not the only, real issue - the two sides (the Presidency and the National Assembly) wanted anyone or anything to publicly end the “struggle” between them. And the two former Heads of State came handy! In my entire life, I have seen only a few other instances of this level of political opportunism and lack of principle.