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## The agreement that produced Obasanjo

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Recent pronouncements on the agreement that produced Obasanjo's presidency in 1999 have filled some serious gaps in my own understanding of the foundations of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, as the present transitional political dispensation inaugurated on May 29, 1999 is now called. I should however, say that I do not believe all the details fed to the public through the media; but I believe that Olusegun Obasanjo could not have been adopted and persuaded to become a presidential candidate (in fact the president) without some agreements and protocols. I hope no one believes the opposite, namely, that a man could be plucked from the jaws of death and packaged by the power wielders for a political position as strategic and contentious as Nigeria's presidency without some understanding between the various groups involved in the project. I ask: Does anyone honestly believe that a position over which Nigeria nearly descended to civil war and for which several people were murdered and several incarcerated and dehumanised could be awarded unconditionally, so to say? I answer for all adult Nigerians and say **no**. Therefore we

should be clear on what we are disputing: the very fact of the agreement or its alleged details. I submit that if there are disagreements they could only be over the details.

I had, right from the time Obasanjo was sworn in as president, insisted that his regime was produced by an agreement between four political forces: the Nigerian state, the Northern power bloc, the Western power bloc, and the new imperialism (popularized as international community). It did not at that time, and does not now require a genius to come to this conclusion. What is required is, first, a careful study of Nigeria's political history between the annulment of the presidential election of June 12, 1993 and the death, five years later, of Moshood Abiola, the man who won that election which was conducted according to the rules; second, an honest application of logic; and third, the invocation of historical antecedents. Obasanjo's presidency was a compromise between contending forces. This much was known and said in May 1999. The only footnote I may add here is that like all political compromises, the one that produced Obasanjo's presidency was a tentative or provisional agreement - whether or not the parties recognised it as such - to be abrogated unilaterally as soon a decisive shift in the balance of forces that produced it occurs. Political compromises never last for ever, nor are they dissolved by agreements. What we are witnessing are vigorous attempts to abrogate the 1999 agreement or change its terms - which boils down to the same thing.

With this preamble, we may now go to the agreement, as alleged. But before then I think I should make a number of points to guard myself against possible charges of naivety and prejudice. There is no officially authenticated text like the Aburi Accord of 1967. If the crisis becomes really serious, the "international community" which knows all, sees all and influences all, can release the authentic text - provided that act will be of help to the faction it supports or wishes victory. Furthermore, I take what I have read in the newspapers on this matter as a strong hypothesis: strong because they are plausible (in essence, not necessarily in details) given what we know of the political history of Nigeria. From what I have gathered from the media, the political agreement under discussion, that is, the one that produced Obasanjo's presidency, must have been entered into sometime between June 1998 when Abacha died and Obasanjo was released from prison and May 1999

when the latter was sworn in as president. Let us examine the content of the agreement I can reconstruct from what I have read.

The agreement involved some prominent personages, a number of witnesses and a guarantor. The personages were General Abdulsalam Abubakar, the then military Head of State and the president - elect; the former acting for the Nigerian State and the Northern power bloc, the latter acting for the Western bloc. The witnesses were the three registered political parties. The guarantor of the agreement was the "international community". The body of the agreement can be divided, for easy assimilation, into four parts. Part one: Obasanjo would be president for only one term, that is, (1999 - 2003). He would not seek re-election; he would be succeeded by someone from the south-east political zone; the latter would also be in office for only one term (2003 - 2007); the South-East president would be succeeded by someone from the South-South zone: the latter would also be in office for only one term (2007-2011). Part Two: The three political parties would take turns in producing the president for each of the three sub-periods into which the entire period covered by the agreement was divided, Part Three: Obasanjo's government would clear all outstanding debts owed contractors, uphold accountability and fight Corruption. Part Four: If President Obasanjo violated any of these provisions, then the Nigeria Army should feel free, and indeed obligated, to overthrow his government. This final part is what is sometimes called protocol.

Let us try to make some sense out of this agreement. I have a strong feeling that some parts of the agreement have not been revealed, or are unknown to me. I think there should have been some undertaking on political appointments and commitment to some decisions taken by previous governments. Perhaps these missing parts are contained in the protocol which, in high-power agreements, are usually not part of the main texts and sometimes not even written. I also feel that the second part of the agreement, the one dealing with party rotation, makes no sense. Given the relative strengths of the parties in different parts of the country, how can the APP produce an Igbo president and AD a Southsouth president? Furthermore, if this provision was actually made, then the assumption was that the three parties would exist for at least 12 years. This would be political nativety of the

highest order. Or, perhaps, the provision was inserted simply to show some respect for the leaderships of the three parties and nothing more. We must realise that the forces in the agreement are located above the political parties and act, only in part, through the parties when it is convenient to do so. The forces own the parties as instruments.

My third observation (or rather speculation) is that the core of the agreement is the first section of the first part, namely, that Obasanjo would be president for only one term and that the presidency would move from the South West to the South-East. This makes sense to me because given that the front runners in the struggle for the rulership of Nigeria have been the Northern and Western power blocs, it would be in the interest of the northern bloc, once the presidency had been conceded to the west, to get it out as quickly as possible from that zone. Put differently, the northern power bloc would want the presidency to move as quickly as possible from its rival, the western bloc, to the South-East not because it loves the latter but because it would want power to move away from the West before it is consolidated the way the hegemony of the northern power bloc was consolidated before the crisis of June 12 annulment. I may enter a final speculation: appointments into the commands of the armed Forces by President Obasanjo were part of the *protocol* attached to the main agreement.

I sympathise with those whose patriotism and democratic instinct are assaulted by this agreement. But I must confess that I was not shocked by it. Why should I be shocked by the logic of a situation we know so well? I hold, however, that this agreement does not constitute an additional cause for worry. It is an element of Obasanjo's transition and will dissolve with the end of the transition. My proposition is that all democratic and non-hegemonic forces, including the labour movement, should enter the struggle for 2003 - at all levels and in their different ways - so that it does not resolve into a two-cornered or three-cornered fight. With this entry any group that plans to take the country back to the immediate past will have to contend with several forces saying **no**.