

Opinion

Perspective on 'power distribution'

By Edwin Madunagu

OUR discussion starts from a rural local government area (LGA) in one of the states in the Southsouth geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Those who describe the LGA as semi-urban, or semi-rural, rather than rural, base their description solely on the LGA's proximity to a city. Otherwise, our point of departure is a typical rural setting. The LGA is quite small in comparison with neighbouring LGAs, but its small size is "compensated" for, in a negative way, by the difficult terrain which has recently been worsened by erosion. I use the term "negative compensation" because, owing to the harsh terrain, it takes a much longer time to traverse the LGA in question than it takes to traverse much bigger, but "luckier," LGAs.

The terrain is, however, not the focus of my story. I am only including it for the completeness of the background. I am also not commenting on Federal and State "presence," or lack of it, in the area. That is not the issue here. The focus here is on "distribution" of political power in that LGA. During the preparation for the elections which ushered in the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo in May 1999, the traditional rulers, educated elite, elders, opinion leaders and "leaders of thought" from the LGA under discussion met and decided that, for the purpose of political representation at all levels, the LGA would be recognised as being constituted by two communities. Although the two communities are not equal in land area or population, they were accorded equal political weights. The division, and the criteria used, were agreed upon.

I did not press the question of who initiated the meeting or meetings; but I confirmed that the deliberations were inclusive, "balanced", and gender-sensitive. Men and women in both communities were well-represented. The agreement that there are two separate, but non-antagonistic, communities, that are equal in political status, was the basic principle. Other agreements

simply followed logically. I may summarise the other agreement: At every point in time, the Chair of the Local Government Council would be from one of the communities, while the Deputy Chair would come from the other. The two can never come from the same community or zone; and there is no "second term" for any elected official. In the next election or dispensation the zoning of Chair and Deputy Chair is reversed.

Superimposed on this arrangement is the male-female zoning. The Chair rotates between the male population and the female population. So is the Deputy Chair. I asked a crucial question: What happens if a zone cannot produce an "appropriate" candidate? I was told, and I convinced myself, that each zone has many qualified and competent persons - male and female - to vie for any office. A female politician, the current Deputy Chair of the Council, told me she faced stiff competition from several other educated and competent female aspirants.

The next direct question was what happens to this political arrangement if the Chair or Deputy Chair dies in office. I was told that that eventualty would be an "act of God," though they had not given much thought to it. But should any of the officials die in office, or become permanently incapacitated, or unable to perform his or her functions, they expect the appropriate local government law to be followed and the vacant position to be filled according to that law. They believe that the state government would respect the fundamental principle that they had established and practised for eleven years. In any case, since there is no second term the situation would be "normalised" as soon as possible with the return of the normal political rhythm of zoning and balancing.

Finally, since the LGA is too small to be given a separate seat in the State House of Assembly, it shares a seat with a contiguous LGA. For the purpose of benefiting from the joint seat, our LGA entered into an agreement of rotation, on equal basis, with the sister-LGA. Again, there is no "second term" so that "the thing can go round faster."

The political philosophy described here goes down to the ward level. When I asked how the country's multi-party system does not appear to affect this local arrangement, I was told that a fundamental agreement was that so long as "democracy," or "civilian dispensation," or "party system," prevails, their people will support, or belong to, the "government party," where "government" here refers to the state government.

The logical questions arising from this assertion, which I asked as subtly as possible, were described as academic, and I had no great urge to pursue them - having successfully and pleasantly completed the investigation I set out to make. *Last line:* Before I left the area after the three-day exploration, I was told, and I convinced myself, that the LGA even has sufficient number of academically and politically competent and qualified persons to constitute the executive and legislative arms of the state government. Technical personnel can always be employed from the outside, if there is a shortfall, I was "assured." This was in response to my recurring questions on skill, competence, qualification and experience.

Dr. Anthony Akinola, a Nigerian living in Oxford, United Kingdom, is a thoughtful and articulate contributor to political dialogues and debates in Nigeria. He comes forth easily as a patriot, a democrat, a federalist and a liberal. He has been advocating what he calls "rotational presidency" long before the current round of the zoning debate. But I do not agree, as Akinola appeared to be saying in one of his latest contributions, *Ethnicity as a permanent phenomenon* (*The Guardian*, Wednesday, November 3, 2010) that he is alone in this advocacy. Some other persons have been making variants of this advocacy. I, myself, have been writing on the desirability of a deeper variant of "rotational presidency" since 1987. Next Thursday, in the concluding part of this article, I shall be revisiting one of my past propositions on this subject.

The author cites four particular countries where ethnicity, as a permanent phenomenon in our

world, has been creatively and, for now, successfully managed. These are Britain, America, Belgium and Switzerland. The last three are of immediate relevance in the present discussion. Ethnicity, according to Akinola, is not as acute in America as in Nigeria. This is so for several reasons, including the fact that "the ethnic population in America is dispersed." Nigeria's ethnic groups are concentrated. Here, America is "luckier" than Nigeria. But the decision to create a bicameral legislature and make all constituent states send the same number of delegates to the Senate helped to strengthen the American state. We have already copied this.

Quoting from some sources, Akinola said of Belgium: "Political power is shared between communities, regions (The Flemish, the French and the German-speaking groups) and the Federal State. The power to make decisions is no longer the exclusive preserve of the federal government and the federal parliament. The leadership of the country is now in the hands of various partners, who independently exercise their authority within their domains." On Switzerland, he said: "The rather small country, as one once highlighted in an article, has the second oldest written constitution in the world. Its political arrangement, especially the *collegiate executive* with a *rotating presidency every year*, is the adaptation of the American presidential system to Switzerland's own peculiarities" (emphasis mine). The present system has made the country "the world's most stable democratic system."

I would endorse and recommend, with creative modifications, the system operating in Switzerland, that is: Collective Presidency and (yearly) rotation of the Chair of that Collective. But the critical question for me, is: Who represents the working and toiling masses in this arrangement? Or, put more politically, how do the working and toiling masses get themselves represented in that Collective? I shall attempt an answer in the concluding installment. I shall also revisit an old debate on the subject.

• To be concluded next Thursday

Opinion

Perspectives on 'power distribution' (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

INDICATED at the end of the first segment of this piece that I would attempt to answer the question: Who represents the working and toiling people, the "common" people, of Nigeria, in the collective and rotational presidency that some Nigerians, including myself, have been proposing for the country? Put differently, how will this large but presently marginalised fraction of the Nigerian population be represented in the proposed collective and rotational presidency? Specifically, what do I mean by *rotational collective presidency* and in what context am I proposing it for Nigeria? I shall answer the question by revisiting the key proposals I have made on the subject in the last 13 years.

By December 1997, five political parties had been formed to contest the general elections fixed for the third quarter of the following year, but nobody appeared to be interested in the presidency of the country. Why? Because no-one knew if General Sani Abacha, the head of the ruling military junta, was interested in the job and no one was prepared to be named an electoral opponent of the general. I was told then that no one in any of the five parties was prepared to become a candidate for assassination or disappearance. The absence of presidential aspirants then became another weapon in the hands of those Nigerians – politicians, traditional rulers, business people and military officers – who were "persuading" Abacha to become a presidential candidate and succeed himself as Nigeria's ruler. Eventually the general became the "consensus" candidate of each of the five political parties.

In an exclusive interview with *Newswatch* magazine in late October, 1997, a frontline Abacha "persuader" challenged any Nigerian politicians, courageous enough, to step out and face Abacha at the polls. The man thundered: "I have looked around. I have not seen any challenger. Have you seen any? Where are the presidential candidates? The fact is, we have no alternative to Abacha. We have to draft him. Other presidential candidates have abandoned us. He (Abacha) cannot abandon us

now." He continued: "I don't want another civil war. Any mistake now can lead to an unpalatable scenario like in Congo Brazzaville. So, we must support Abacha. General Abacha has direction. He has (already) won peace for Nigeria. Without peace and security, I cannot be here and you cannot be here... Everything will crash."

On the clamour for a southern president, the "persuader" said: "Those talking about a president from the south are spoilers. They are faceless people. They don't want to be president, they want confusion. They will not succeed." (*Newswatch*, November 10, 1997, page 9). The "persuader" in question is from the southern part of the country. As he spoke, Chief Moshood Abiola, the winner of the annulled June 12, 1993 presidential election was spending his fourth year in detention.

On November 11, 1997, *The Guardian* published a statement issued by the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) on the state of the nation. NADECO was a leading opposition group in the country. In the statement the anti-military organisation made the following demands: the "actualisation" of the result of the June 12, 1993 presidential election – that is, the formal announcement of the result and the inauguration of the winner, Chief M.K.O. Abiola, as president; or, in the alternative, the formation of a "government of national unity" to be headed by Abiola; the inauguration would be followed by the setting up, by the "government of national unity," of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to restructure Nigeria to reflect true federation."

It was against this background of threat, blackmail, fear, apathy, pockets of patriotic resistance, and perhaps, preparations to remove Abacha by force, or secede from the country, that the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Cross River State Council, organised a public seminar in Calabar on the future of the country. The seminar opened on Wednesday, December 3, 1997.

In my written contribution to the seminar, titled: *The national question, the power blocs and the popular democratic transformation of Nigeria*, I proposed, among other things: "There should be an eight-member *Collective*

Presidency at the federal level. Each member of the presidency will represent a zone and there are to be eight zones in the country. A zone will be constituted by a number of states. The Chair and the Vice-Chair of the Presidency or Presidential Council should be *rotational*, six months per session. Every act of the presidential council should be based on a unanimous, three-quarters, or majority decision, depending on the nature of the act. Every member of the *Collective Presidency* will be a member of the Cabinet responsible for a strategic ministry or government department."

Further in my presentation I proposed the "creative" extension of the principle outlined above to other levels of government, namely, state and local government area. For Cross River State, for instance, I proposed the division of the state into three language groups or three ethnic clusters "corresponding to the three senatorial districts (South, Central and North) into which the state is presently divided. There should be a state governor and the deputy governors, each of the three representing a senatorial district. The three will constitute a governor-in-council which will exercise, democratically, the functions hitherto assigned to the governor."

On May 25 and 26, 2000, about 12 months into General Olusegun Obasanjo's presidency, the Institute of Public Policy and Administration (IPPA), University of Calabar, organised and hosted an International Seminar, *Civil society and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria*. In my contribution to the seminar I said: "The proposition on the restructuring of the Nigerian Federation into eight functional zones and the creation and activation of neighbourhood and community organisations below the local government area are aimed at creating the most effective geopolitical framework for the realisation of the population-democratic interests and aspirations of the Nigerian people. Restructuring is not, and should not be, aimed at creating zones of control and exploitation for power-blocs and the various ethnic fractions and factions of the ruling classes. The type of restructuring we are proposing is (also) aimed at terminating the existing pockets of internal colonialism, and

decentralising the location and exercise of political power."

Five years later, in my column of February 16, 2006, titled: *The Collective Presidency*, I proposed: "Instead of electing a single president for the country, as has been done hitherto, a member of the Federal *Collective Presidency* will be elected in each of the six geopolitical zones in the country. The six members so elected will form the *Collective Presidency*. While the tenure of the *Presidency* will be four years, each of its elected members will be eligible for re-election for a maximum of one more time. The Chair of the *Collective Presidency* will be held in rotation between the six members starting from the Southsouth and moving in anti-clockwise direction." This proposal differs from the preceding one only in one essential respect: the prescription of the starting point of the rotation, namely the Southsouth, to be followed, in anti-clockwise order, by the Southeast.

I listed the objectives of my proposals: "The particular variant of *Collective Presidency* which I am proposing is directed at achieving three minimum objectives. First, to resolve, in the interim, the question of distribution of "federal power" between various claimants, and perhaps by so doing, save the country from being plunged into greater chaos whose victims will be the long-suffering, impoverished and defrauded masses. Second, to resolve the question of "fiscal and true federalism" and resource control, also in the interim. And thirdly, to create the minimum framework for the popular masses to enhance their struggle to ameliorate their present material conditions. I hasten to add, however, that if the masses are not organised and mobilised, they cannot take advantage of even the most favourable political conjuncture. Conjunctions will come and go." (February 16, 2006).

The only essential addition I would, today, make to these proposals flows from the preceding two sentences. It is the categorical imperative of forming a revolutionary popular democratic movement and a revolutionary socialist party to mobilise and organise the working people and all the truly dispossessed of Nigeria.

• To be concluded next Thursday.

Opinion

Perspectives on 'power distribution' (3)

By Edwin Madunagu

I WOULD like to begin this final installment with some explanatory notes on the preceding parts. First, it is more appropriate to say "office distribution: (that is, sharing of political offices) than "power distribution" because, as one political analyst remarked rather angrily many years ago, "political power" is not like a tuber of yam that you can cut into small pieces and hand out to several hungry people. Political power, properly so-called, is indivisible. It is political offices, the creations of political power, that can be shared or distributed. The only occasions where you have "shared power" are transition periods where issues are decided not only politically but also militarily. And such periods are normally very brief.

I was aware of this point while drafting and revising the earlier installments of this piece, but I decided to retain the current popular usage in our country's political discourse, and then supply explanatory notes at the end. Unfortunately the notes could not be squeezed into these earlier installments. In any case – and I am not being cynical – many political discussants mean "office" when they say "power" even when they and their readers or listeners know the difference. My current effort is like Comrade Biodun Jeyifo's frustrating campaign against the misuse of the word "penultimate."

Now, I would like to re-articulate the objectives of this series. It was my intention to show that, in politics, the ideas of "rotation," "zoning," "collectivity" etc, are not in themselves either revolutionary or reactionary, conservative or radical, rightist or leftist, popular or power-bloc-driven, democratic or undemocratic or indeed socialist or capitalist. All depends on the political and historical context. To illustrate: The support for the campaign for true federalism, fiscal federalism, self-determination, resource control, geopolitical restructuring, Sovereign National Conference (SNC), creation of more states and local governments, etc, in Nigeria, will be conservative,

in fact reactionary, if it predicated on the perpetuation of the current balance of power between pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist forces on the one hand and the anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist forces on the other.

Even if the campaign, and the support for it, are silent on the current balance of power they are still conservative and reactionary – perhaps more dangerously so. But the campaign, and the support for it, will be progressive and revolutionary if they are prosecuted in the context of a programme of struggle to radically alter the balance in favour of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist (and *ipso facto*, patriotic) forces. Let me put this thesis differently by breaking it down. It will be silly, to say the very least, for anyone to advocate the creation of more centres of primitive accumulation, exploitation and corruption, or the expansion of the existing centres of tyranny, and then go and sleep. Without the dialectic of qualified support the whole campaign for more decentralisation is reactionary. The correct platform is: *Support for restructuring, but in the context of deeper popular struggle.* This, by the way, was the two-pronged resolution of the famous Luxemburg-Lenin debate on national self-determination.

One other inspiration for my present exercise was Dr. Anthony Akinola's article: *Ethnicity as a permanent phenomenon* (*The Guardian*, Wednesday, November 3, 2010) where the author had, again, argued for the adoption of collegiate and rotational presidency in Nigeria. Akinola had, in that article, talked about his being a "voice in the wilderness" which I interpreted to mean either that he had been alone in this advocacy or that he was writing from outside the country – or both. My response to the former interpretation was to demonstrate that I have been writing openly about collegiality and rotation, in relation to the presidency, for at least 13 years. But, as far as I can remember, I first proposed it in the parallel report I wrote in April 1987 as a member of the bureau which organised the National Political Debate. However, as can be seen from an examination of Akinola's articles and mine, the context of my advocacy has been quite differ-

ent from his.

I read that when Alhaji Atiku Abubakar was announced as the consensus PDP presidential aspirant from the North, there were jubiliations from the camp of his main, or even only opponent: President Goodluck Jonathan. I still cannot understand the reason for this jubilation, and I am happy that I am not the only person in this ignorance. I think the feeling in that camp ought to have been the opposite. The only point took away from the jubilant reaction of the Jonathan camp was the argument that Atiku Abubakar was the choice of the Northern Political Leadership Forum (NPLF) and not that of the North. I would even add that Atiku Abubakar was not the consensus aspirant of "Northern PDP" or in the North." But these statements are merely rhetorical, formalistic or academic. The reality will be known in the days and weeks that follow.

I was, perhaps, not the only Nigerian who was getting tired of NPLF's seemingly endless search for a "consensus" aspirant. And yet this subject dominated both politics and media reports in the country for so long. I was becoming bored and depressed – in spite of my devoting so much time looking at the subject and attempting to address it. But, in just two days, Saturday, November 20 and Sunday, November 21, 2010, two particular interventions lifted my spirit, so to say. In its issue of Saturday, November 20 *The Guardian* published its interview with Professor Eskor Toyo in Calabar. The story the paper constructed from the interview was titled: *Eskor Toyo laments national woes, seeks "socialist revolution"* (page 8). The interview itself came under the long caption: *"Nigeria is not being underdeveloped by the West, but by the slaves ruling it."* (pages 9 and 10).

I read the story and the interview very carefully. As I said they lifted my spirit because there the "Nigerian question" was refreshingly re-formulated, presented differently. The re-formulation came most forcefully in the last question-and-answer. The interviewer had asked Eskor Toyo: "Do you see former Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) pres-

ident, Professor Attahiru Jega, now Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) making any difference in the coming election?" And Eskor Toyo had replied: "I have written a paper on Jega. He is irrelevant. There had been people of integrity in INEC before. What is relevant is the politics which Jega cannot control." Eskor Toyo's last sentence in the interview was by the way of illustration: "It is the ASUU president who asked the question Nigerians have not asked, which they should. That is, assuming you have a free and fair election, does that mean you will produce a good Nigeria?"

The first thing I look for in every Sunday edition of *The Guardian* is Biodun Jeyifo's column, *Talakawa Liberation Courier*. The day after the publication of Eskor Toyo's interview, on Sunday November 21, Jeyifo came out with *Parables of a great catastrophe foretold: Nigerian Election 2011 (2)*. Again, the idea here is most forcefully summarised in the last paragraph: "The war drums are being beaten about what will happen if the North is denied the presidency in Election 2011 or if the Niger Delta is told that it cannot and will never produce our president. These two slogans are profoundly revanchist, conservative and apocalyptic, precisely because they are emanating from the same political party which, before our very eyes, is rapidly unraveling and as it unravels is threatening to bring the country down with its looming demise."

Last line: The import of these reports (on Eskor Toyo and Biodun Jeyifo) is simply this: Any Nigerian progressive, or leftist, or revolutionary socialist, who says that he or she is still looking for a coherent, viable and revolutionary platform to intervene in the political process is simply not serious. There is now more than sufficient body of information, perspectives and analyses to construct a programme, a manifesto and an organisation of *national rebirth*, to use a 1949 slogan of the nationalist movement.

• *Concluded.*

• *This column is proceeding on a short break.*