

THE picture is now clear and complete: The ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) intends to retain President Olusegun Obasanjo and most of the present state governors in office beyond May 2007. Ideally, the party would prefer to do this "legally", that is, according to the constitution and state laws – of course, as read and interpreted by the party. More concretely, the PDP wants to amend the 1999 Constitution to allow its elected officials of state who will be completing their second and final term in May 2007, to seek re-election. And, unless the unforseen or unforseeable happens, they will win the "election."

The PDP's implicit suggestion therefore, is that the coming battle will not be a legal one. Whatever other colourations it may wear, the battle will not be decided in the courts, except for matters arising from the detention of "enemies". So we are left with propaganda, blackmail, sophism, bribery and fascist violence as main internal means of executing the project of self-perpetuation. The external weapon is the support, or endorsement or "neutrality", of the international community. My main concern in this piece is with the weapon of sophism.

Protagoras, a profound thinker in ancient Greece, was the first person to call himself a Sophist. His self-appointed task was to go around delivering lectures on politics, philosophy and culture. He received payments for this and was respected. Those that came after him were not so respected as they focused only on the development of political skills. Away from ancient Greece, a sophist will, today, be defined as "someone who reasons adroitly and speciously, rather than soundly". Sophistry is a "subtle, tricky, superficially plausible but generally fallacious method of reasoning; a false argument". And sophism is a "specious argument for displaying ingenuity in reasoning or for deceiving someone; any false argument fallacy". And to complete the picture, "specious", used as an adjective,

The sophism of self-perpetuation

By Edwin Madunagu

is defined as "visually pleasing; having deceptive attraction or allure; having a false look of truth or genuineness". A modern sophist is, therefore, a smooth charlatan, a smooth liar.

As form of misinformation, sophism or sophistry, is more insidious than propaganda or ideology. For, sophism does not, like propaganda or ideology, seek to exaggerate partial truth (propaganda) or present partial truth as universal truth (ideology). Rather, it seeks to present falsehood as universal truth, approaching the status of science. This it does by the employment of what appears like high-powered erudition. Sophism has taken a vanguard position in the array of political weapons currently being used against the Nigerian masses. Over time, political sophistry has developed and taken shape, in the campaign to extend the constitutionally prescribed tenure of President Olusegun Obasanjo, or to perpetuate him in power. I call this the sophism of self-perpetuation. It proceeds along three main lines.

The first line of argument is that President Olusegun Obasanjo's antecedents as a commander during the Civil War (1967-1970), as a military Head of State (1976-1979), and as a civilian president since May 1999, eminently put him ahead of every other Nigerian, at any time, as a presidential candidate in the scheduled 2007 election. The second line is that if the 1999 Constitution is amended to allow President Obasanjo to stand as a presidential candidate in 2007, and if he subsequently becomes the democratically chosen presidential candidate of the PDP, then he would not be running for the third time, but for the first time under an entirely new Constitution. And the third line is that constitutional provisions notwithstanding, it will be stupid and unpatriotic to send a good President away from the Presidency at a critical point in the history of the country. Put dif-

ferently: one should not be in a hurry to change a good thing – just for the sake of change. In any case, who, and where, are the other presidential candidates?

These sophistic lines of argument ignore the settled democratic principle that a ruler should not be the immediate beneficiary of a constitutional amendment enacted under him or her. This principle becomes even stronger in the context where the ruler is the inspirer of the amendment. Also ignored is the view supported by significant events, that the Civil War would have ended much earlier, and the nation would have been spared the immense human cost exacted by it, if certain military officers and politicians had been less conservative. Finally, I think it is generally known that if we define the period (July 29, 1975 – September 30, 1979) as Mohammed-Obasanjo period, then the sub-period (February 13, 1976-September 30, 1979), following the assassination of General Murtala Muhammed on February 13, 1976, was in relative terms, a period of de-radicalisation. A young student of history may be permitted to draw an analogy between Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin on the one hand and General Muhammed and General Obasanjo on the other.

The governors of PDP-controlled states are in the vanguard of third-term sophism. In the second weekend of February 2006, the governors held a long-awaited meeting with their party leaders. At the end of that meeting, Governor Peter Odili of Rivers State was reported as having said that he would support a third term for President Olusegun Obasanjo "if the Constitution allowed it". Almost immediately, Chief Matthew Mbu, the veteran politician and Chairperson of Southsouth Peoples Assembly (SSPA) of which Peter Odili is a prominent member described the governor's

statement as his personal opinion which did not reflect the position of the Assembly. The governor, he said, was not speaking for the people of the Southsouth. Mbu re-stated the Assembly's core demand on that question, namely, that the Southsouth geopolitical zone should produce the country's President in 2007. The SSPA is also canvassing for rotational presidency, and the urgent review of the 1999 Constitution to give effect to it.

It is worthy of note that the Assembly is also campaigning for "30 per cent affirmative action for women in appointive and elective position at all levels of which five per cent should be for women with disability or physical challenges, joint control by the Federal Government, the resources-bearing states, the local administration and the communities where these resources are found of all minerals, mineral oils and natural gas in, under or upon any land in Nigeria or in, under or upon territorial water, continental shelf and exclusive economic zone of Nigeria". This must be one of the Assembly's latest formulations of the "resource control" demand. I wonder how Governor Odili reconciles these categorical positions with the support for the third-term agenda. We should not forget that Port Harcourt, the capital of Peter Odili's Rivers State, is the de-facto headquarters of the South-South, a geopolitical zone of ethnic minorities.

Earlier, on December 19, 2005, a meeting of prominent politicians from the three southern geopolitical zones – Southwest, Southsouth and Southeast – took place at Enugu. Southern governors made a significant presence at the meeting which had meanwhile, adopted the name Southern Forum (SF). One of the resolutions of that meeting was that the next President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to be elected in 2007, should come from either the Southsouth or the Southeast geopolitical

zone. The Saturday, February 11, 2006, gathering according to *The Guardian*, was "a joint meeting of the Board of Trustees, Council of Elders and National Executive Council of SSPA". Immediately after the meeting, Governor Odili declared in a Cable News Network (CNN) programme: "If there is a legitimate constitutional amendment that permits him (President Obasanjo) to contest, I will be one of the people that would beg him to run". You see now?

On his own part, Governor Victor Attah of Akwa Ibom said, after the SSPA meeting: "The people that are waiting have a very good reason to wait because they know that it will be good that this person has been able to start this reform that we never had. How many years have we had independence? We could not dream about these reforms, we could not get debt relief, we could not get the kind of respectability we are now getting in the international community, we could not accumulate this kind of foreign reserve that we are accumulating now". He continued: "So, it is even good for him to continue, let us learn a bit more from him before we take over. Maybe, that is why nobody is jumping to say, I want to contest the presidency, for the simple reason that if you know something, please continue for a bit longer". You see now?

Finally, hear Governor Nnamani: "So, if the constitution is amended and a situation arises where the PDP offers President Obasanjo nomination, he accepts and runs, I believe he is a good product. I believe he is certainly a good candidate and I doubt, when you consider the stature of the personality involved, the role he has played as a detribalised Nigerian, his constituency: former military constituency and now, civilian constituency. There are certain things you cannot buy, I believe he would be a candidate that can stand against any other candidate any time any day". Compatriots, you see how our governors, the political leaders of the Southern Forum, are battling to state a simple position: commitment to retaining President Obasanjo and themselves, in office beyond May 2007? Reading them is a study in sophism.