

# Towards the 2011 elections

By Edwin Madunagu

I HAD almost concluded the draft of this article when the very sad news of the death of President Musa Yar'Adua was broken. I had to make the necessary revisions. The subject matter is the impending general elections. I shall be dealing with general, but preliminary, observations on the rehearsals of what promises to be an exciting – I hope not ultimately tragic – competition between those that a commentator has called “predators.”

Let me preface my observations with what I said in this column, not long ago, on the involvement of the government of the United States of America in our contemporary politics. The particular reference here is the super-power's intervention in the resolution of the political crisis provoked by the late President's prolonged illness. I am doing this at the risk of boring some readers. But I plead for patience, because this matter will come up again and again as we approach the elections – and even during and after the elections. In the piece: *On the state of the nation* (March 18, 2010) I drew attention to the fact that America intervened twice in the process of making, and confirming, Goodluck Jonathan the Acting President.

The first intervention had its climax on February 9, 2010, the very day Jonathan was proclaimed Acting President. It came in the form of a widely published visit to Nigeria by a senior American official to advise Nigerian rulers on how to resolve the dangerous political situation. The official also used the opportunity to see, or pay “courtesy visits” to, a number of prominent Nigerians. Some of these Nigerians have since announced their participation as candidates, in the 2011 elections. The second American intervention came exactly two weeks later, on the day Yar'Adua was brought back from Saudi Arabia. You will recall that some state functionaries took actions that would have resulted in a *coup d'état* against Acting President. That time around the American government, acting through its Nigerian Embassy, issued a stern

warning to those state functionaries whose actions it said it suspected were aimed at “destabilising” Nigeria. This intervention aborted the attempted *coup*.

Just as these critical interventions escaped the notice of many Nigerians, or did not carry any weight with them, so is the fact that at least three of the politicians who have so far announced their presidential ambitions first did so, not in Nigeria, but in America. President Goodluck Jonathan announced the possibility of his contesting the 2011 presidential election while in America. The announcement that former Cross River State Governor, Donald Duke, would vie for the presidency was first made in America by his campaigners. A presidential candidate in the 2007 election, Pat Utomi, announced his decision to contest the 2011 presidential election while on a visit to America. All the other mainstream, or establishment, or “right-of-centre”, presidential aspirants have their own American connections. But I have, so far, not come across any other explicit “American declarations.”

That is my *first* observation on the 2011 elections: significant American “interests.” My *second* observation relates to PDP's “zoning arrangement” especially as applied to the office of President of the Federal Republic. It would appear that this arrangement has now entered a terminal crisis. By this I mean that PDP's arrangement whereby the Presidency of the country is rotated, every eight years, between the South and the North, is most unlikely to survive its present crisis. It will collapse; but it will be succeeded by another “sharing” formula or understanding, since, for the ruling classes of Nigeria, being in office is like being a repository of war booty which must be shared between the “victors.” To fail to reach a workable agreement on the mode of sharing the booty – the wealth of Nigeria – is to risk their hold on power.

It must not be forgotten, however, that the “crisis of zoning” started, not in 2009 or 2010, with the illness of President Yar'Adua, not in 2006, before Yar'Adua was elected, but in 2003, as the nation was nearing the end of the first term of President Olusegun Obasanjo, the first beneficiary (on behalf of the South) of PDP's “rotational presidency” agreement. According to that agreement – the existence of which Obasanjo has continued to deny – it was expected that either Obasanjo would be re-nominated for the second and final, term or another Southern candidate would be chosen to serve for only one term of four years – because each rotation is for eight years. But the expectation was challenged by the PDP governors – always a powerful bloc in the PDP – who wanted Obasanjo's deputy, Vice President Atiku Abubakar (from the North), to challenge and defeat Obasanjo in the primaries.

President Obasanjo had to beg Atiku and the governors, and make pledges and promises, before he was allowed a safe passage to the second term. Some historians of Nigerian politics may even remind us that the zoning arrangement was challenged by a small bloc of foundation members of the PDP right from the beginning, that is, from 1999. It is easy to predict that PDP's “rotational presidency” agreement cannot survive the 2011 elections. And my conclusion is not predicated on President Jonathan contesting the election. My argument is that a rotational arrangement that is fundamentally threatened by an unforeseen but, in my view, uncomplicated, development like the incapacitation of the president (in the case of late Musa Yar'Adua) or by “presidential misbehaviour” (the charge against Obasanjo in 2003) is either cynical and deceptive or simply fails to take account of the political culture of the country and the character of its ruling classes. It has to col-

lapse.

My *third* observation is on the presidential candidature of the former military president, Ibrahim Babangida. Going by the Nigerian media, no presidential “hopeful” has drawn even a tenth of the opposition and “public anger” that the announcement of Babangida's candidature has so far provoked. This opposition was recently dramatised by the public withdrawal of some prominent Nigerian politicians and civil society activists from a non-party rally on a national democratic issue as important as free, fair and credible elections. Those who withdrew from the rally have explained why they did so. Those who invited Babangida have also explained why they invited the general. Interested and perceptive observers have advised us to separate “convenient” reasons for opposing Babangida from the “serious” reasons. I have also observed that political “cracks” have begun to appear in the blocs of professional politicians and “leaders of thought” – on account of Babangida's campaigns. The debate serves Babangida perfectly well.

A newspaper reporter asked Babangida, recently, what he would do if his party, the PDP, fails to nominate him to carry the party's flag in the presidential election. The former military president simply reminded the reporters that there are 51 registered political parties in the country. The implication is clear. I recall that when someone asked one of Donald Duke's campaigners how Duke would realise his presidential ambition in view of the zoning arrangement of his party, the PDP, which has allocated the presidency to the North, the campaigner asked rhetorically “Who says that Duke would contest under the PDP?”

We however note that several commentators have expressed the view that Babangida is not serious about contesting, that he is just “testing the waters”,

as he did the 2007, and would withdraw at the appropriate time, as he did in 2007. My feeling is that Babangida's candidature, serious or unserious, has already become, and will remain, an interesting phenomenon in itself. My admonition to opponents of Babangida is that they should not forget that, like Obasanjo, Babangida fully understands the axioms and indices of power. Beyond that, Babangida also fully understands the political economy, politics and character of Nigeria's ruling classes. And most importantly he knows how to use these varieties of knowledge.

The *fourth* observation is the possible presidential candidature of President Goodluck Jonathan. He has already expressed the possibility. This he did in America, and need not go beyond that now. That is the Nigerian style. We may also assume that he has already obtained the endorsement of America, a critical factor in our present historical conjuncture. Everyone knows that the struggle to present him as the presidential candidate of the ruling PDP is a major factor in the current crisis the party is going through. Already, “pressures” are being mounted on him to contest and his (so far “unauthorized”) campaign posters have started to appear. High-powered inter-bloc negotiations on who should get what under his presidency have also started. Assurances are being sought, and are being given – or denied.

If Jonathan obtains the presidential ticket of the PDP, this will, as a minimum consequence, mark the end of the party's zoning principle. I cannot predict the more serious consequences. If he tries to obtain PDP's ticket and fails, there will be serious consequences. And if the party breaks into factions in this attempt there will also be serious consequences. All in all, Jonathan's entry into the 2011 presidential race, in any form, carries deep consequences for the polity. I say for the polity and not simply for the PDP, because the party is such a dominant, in fact over-dominant, establishment party in the country. The situation may change rapidly, but that is the way things stand now.

• To be concluded next Thursday.

IN the first part of this article, published last Thursday, I made four general observations on the preliminary skirmishes before the real campaigns for the 2011 general elections. But the list of observations was not exhausted. The present piece concludes the exercise.

The *fifth* observation is the failure of the "mega party" attempt, that is, the attempt to pull together, or merge, opposition political parties and disaffected members of the ruling party. The reasons given for this failure, by protagonists, as well as sympathisers and observers, are the usual ones: selfishness, ambition, promotion of personal interests above the interest of the nation, sabotage, incompatibility, infiltration by the enemy, etc, etc. This is a repetition of what happened in the First Republic (1960-1966) and the Second Republic (1979-1983). You may wish to re-visit the crises that severely weakened the First Republic's United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) and the failure to transform the Progressive Parties Alliance (PPA) of the Second Republic into the Progressive People's Party (PPP). The failure of the merger endeavours in 2007 is recent, and we can still remember.

The *sixth* observation is that a foreigner going through local and national media reports, analyses and commentaries on the current campaigns would think that there is only one party in Nigeria, namely, the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP; or that the struggles for power in 2011 have reduced to struggles within the PDP; and, hence, that the overall winner in these struggles would capture the presidency. But, at the last count, there were 50 other political parties in existence. Each of five of these parties controls at least one state government.

A closely related, but a bit more obscure, observation is that for most (if not all) of the "heavy weighty" presidential aspirants – and to some degree, gubernatorial aspirants in the states, and national and state legislative "hopefuls" – the PDP is merely

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the party of first choice. In other words, if anyone of them fails to get the party ticket he or she may move almost effortlessly – provided the material means exist – to any of the other 50 or more parties and ask for adoption. It does not require a genius to establish why, and how, this is so: there are minimal ideological differences between most of the parties; but, beyond this, most of our professional politicians are cynical careerists and opportunists. But this has always been the phenomenon in Nigeria's electoral politics, one may cut in. Yes, but the 2010/2011 edition of this phenomenon promises to be particularly spectacular. This is my *seventh* observation.

The *eighth* observation pertains to constitutional and electoral reforms now being considered by the National Assembly. It now appears that the country will get a revised Constitution and an amended Electoral Law before the elections. If this happens it will be the result of the campaigns of sociopolitical organisations of the civil society, their leaders and their allies in some opposition parties. But what effects the changes will have in the struggle to "recreate" Nigeria is a different question. Of course no one knows – sorry, I do not know – what type of electoral umpire President Jonathan will construct to replace the caricature under Maurice Iwu.

The last statement may be re-stated and elaborated. A new electoral law in line with what Justice Uwais and his committee suggested is a necessary and irreducible condition for 2011 elections. But however satisfactory the new electoral law may be, the people's wishes will be subverted if an umpire remotely resembling the disbanded one is put in place. The question of the type of electoral commission to conduct the 2011 election is therefore decisive. Fortunately, both election riggers and campaigners for free and fair elections know

this. President Goodluck Jonathan is also aware of it and has so openly declared in several public speeches.

My *ninth* observation relates to local politics. A friend of mine was recently invited as a "community elder" to a political meeting to select candidates for the forthcoming local government election. He consulted with me and I advised him to attend, but to come and "gist" me after the meeting. I had asked him what political party was organising the meeting and he had replied that he did not know. I had criticised him for not asking the name of the party but had agreed with him, eventually, that it did not matter: all the parties are the same, we had joked. I received the real shock when, in the course of his "gisting" me of after the meeting, he still was not sure what party meeting he had attended. But we reasoned that it must be the local caucus of the ruling party since the prevailing assumption at the meeting was that whoever was chosen as candidate would win the primaries and, if endorsed by the party hierarchy and the government, would go on to win the real election and become the ward councillor.

The meeting had been called to persuade two "small boys" who were eyeing the council seat to wait for their turn and allow an older man to "enter". The meeting achieved this objective. The only other item on the agenda was peppercorn and beer. My friend who had planned to raise issues of community welfare, including sanitation, feeder roads, and security, did not have the opportunity to do so. When, later, he asked the youngman who had invited him to the meeting why issues were not discussed my friend was told that such matters were "old-fashioned" and were no longer discussed at party meetings. He was however "assured" that after the elections, and the councillors

"enters", they would know what to do if they still have funds after "settling" themselves and their sponsors and bosses.

Another local politician told him that he, my friend, belonged to the "old school of politics;" that issues of people's welfare were no longer discussed even at state and national levels. In any case, how did my friend expect them at the local level, who only receive a fraction of what is due to them, to discuss people's welfare? My friend was sorry for himself. I was also sorry for him, for the common people and, of course, for myself who had to listen to him and console him.

The *tenth* observation is the growing suspicion that apparatuses of the state, including those of security and law-enforcement, are being employed to prosecute struggles in the ruling party. This method of struggle was viciously employed in the ruling party throughout the eight-year tenure of President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007). I have, for long, held that in the type of capitalist political economy which operates in Nigeria – especially at its middle and upper levels – and the legal system upholding it, there is a very thin line – and often no line at all – between "legitimate" appropriation and "corrupt" appropriation. The result is that almost every senior public officer or political office holder can be legitimately charged with corruption, any time. The records and witnesses are there and a government, if it so wishes – for whatever reasons – can always apprehend and produce them.

The *eleventh* observation is the militarisation of private and public life and the existence of hundreds, if not thousands, of armed groups that are employed to enforce private decisions, including political decisions. They will be increasingly

employed as the elections draw near. Some of these groups are set up and retained by powerful individuals; others are "free-lance", and are available for hire. *The Guardian* of Saturday, May 1, 2010, carried a lead story on the front page captioned: "Ahead of 2011 polls: Customs impounds weapons, military wears at Lagos airport". Kidnapping has already confirmed itself across the nation as a "refinement", and complement, of armed robbery. It is also being experimented as a weapon of "political persuasion".

We have been living with political assassination since the beginning of this dispensation. So nothing is new. But the real fear now is that given the political background of strong indications and symptoms of a threatening *failed state*, the phenomenon described above can hasten the realisation of what we all dread. By the way, some people call the dispensation the Fourth Republic and others call it the Third Republic. I use either name, but whenever I fear I might confuse the readers I use "Obasanjo's Republic" since we all know when the period started, and under whom it started.

The *twelfth* observation is the continuing debate on what I may call the "shating of Nigeria's Presidency". This problem arose, for Nigeria's ruling classes and power blocs, from the *national question* and its particular aspect, the *minority question*. But it has now been thoroughly abused, bastardised and completely derailed. Several suggestions have been offered to resolve this problem. Some people have suggested that the North – South rotation be abolished. Some others have suggested the opposite: the inclusion of the rotation principle in the Constitution. And yet others, proceeding from the second suggestion, have proposed that once the Presidency is zoned to the North or South, all the three zones in that area should be allowed to compete for it. My own suggestion, which is by no means new, is that, instead of President and Vice-President, the rulers should have Presidential *Council*, with a member from each of the six geopolitical zones.

• *Concluded.*