

# Opinion

## Understanding the current situation

By Edwin Madunagu

*(As I was completing the rough draft of this essay, the announcement came of the official registration of the new "merger-party", the All Progressive Congress (APC). If this means – as I think it does – the effective dissolution of three previously existing main parties and their incorporation into the new party, together with fractions of some other parties then it is a new development in mainstream politics in Nigeria. Projections will follow after this opening segment).*

BEFORE I went on my last short break, I was trying to catch up with, and making meaning of, the current political situation in our country. One of my objectives was to isolate the various elements of this crisis and see how they are linked to produce the current conjuncture. My refrain, I said, was: "Laugh not, weep not, but understand". In the course of that exercise, I recalled (in the last piece before the break, *Tales from our political history*, July 18, 2013) two tragic-comical political events (1992 and 1999). I intend to continue from there.

From 1999 until a couple of months ago, the Nigerian Governors Forum was united: it had all the 36 state governors as members. In the group were state governors produced by the ruling party, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and five opposition parties: Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN); Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) and the Labour Party (LP). The forum is a voluntary association. It is not mentioned in the Nigerian Constitution and therefore has no constitutional role in this political dispensation. I don't know if it was even registered with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC).

Until recently, I did not know that the forum had a Constitution, a Secretary and a Director-General. I did not know how the forum selected its leaders and spokespersons, but had observed that they had almost always been PDP governors who dominated the group numerically. But sometime last year Governor Peter Obi of Anambra State, a product of opposition All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA), addressed the press after a meeting of the forum. Then I said to myself: "These people must be very liberal". It was recently, during the current crisis that I knew that Peter Obi was the Deputy Chair of the forum and had addressed the press in that capacity.

Even now, as I write, I don't know which came before the other: the national governors' forum or the regional party forums. However, in spite of my ignorance of, and disinterestedness in, the organizational details of the Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF), I had recognized it as an informal group created to exert collective pressure on the "big brother", the Federal Government. That made sense to me in a multi-tier hierarchical governance structure and a strong presidency that the country now operates. I also knew that the forum could, and would, be used for other things, and that new friendships and alliances, across party lines, could develop within the forum. The two projections have come to pass – transforming the Nigerian Governors Forum (NGF), an informal gathering, into a powerful factor in the current political crisis and power struggle in Nigeria.

The various conclaves of Nigerian governors, including the Nigerian Governors Forum played a critical role in General Obasanjo's re-nomination as presidential candidate of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the 2003 general elections. I understand Obasanjo had to beg (some say, prostrate before) the PDP governors before he was adopted. Informed by experience, Obasanjo first had to "settle accounts" with the forums and their leaderships before imposing his choice of successor president on his party and the nation in the 2007 presidential election. The governors' role in resolving the problem of successor to late President Yar'Adua is well known.

What was the secret of the Nigerian Governors Forum or, rather, the PDP state governors' power? There are two sources. First, PDP state governors are the *leaders* of the party in their respective states. They stand not in the state structures of their party, but above them, above the state executive committees of the party. In fact the PDP state governors largely determine the composition of the party's state executives. As executive governors they have the "financial muscle"; this translates to having immense powers of patronage. The state governors largely control state delegates to national conventions and this translates to dominant influence in the composition of the National Executive Committee.

These powers are not possessed by governors of other parties. This is one of the differences between the PDP and other political parties active

in this political dispensation. These differences were not deliberately created by anyone; they were compelled by the unique origin(s) of the party (as a ruling class party) and its motive force. An understanding of this uniqueness, – which I may call the existence in the PDP of *multiple centres of gravity*, rather than a single one (like in other mainstream parties) – will help us see, more clearly, the power struggle going on in the country – in particular what happened in the Nigerian Governors Forum and, above all, what is happening in, and to, the ruling party. I may here propose that the immediate political future of Nigeria will be determined more by how the current crisis in PDP is resolved, or resolves itself, than by any other factors we can see now, just a small error or tactical miscalculation or accident may suddenly produce this resolution or self-resolution even as I write.

A certain ideological trend, strong and transcending class boundaries, has existed in Nigerian politics since the period of decolonization, that is, from around 1950. This trend has existed both on the Right and on the Left. On the Right it takes this form: "The country needs unity to overcome underdevelopment; thereafter we can talk of ideologies and ideological differences; for now there is no need for ideological politics because the country is not ripe for it. For this desired unity we need a *non-ideological national party*". On the Left this ideology of "national unity" is expressed this way: "This is a period of *National Democratic Revolution* and not *Socialist Revolution* or even *Popular Democratic Revolution*. This period calls for a *national party* of all virile social classes and forces, a *national party* in which the Left should strive to play active role and work very hard – preferably silently – for the next stage of the revolution, namely, a socialist revolution".

I hasten to add that this "Left" ideological formulation of political necessity has been stoutly rejected by the Marxist Left – although I would concede that the trend has been able to cause disruptions and win "souls", that is, co-opt prominent leftists, for "non-ideological" national politics. I shall not pursue this matter here – since it is not the focus of this article – beyond saying that it did not take long before the merger of the Right and Left formulations of "national unity" ideology. This "non-ideological" national ideology took a leap after the Civil War (1967 – 1970) which its ideologues on the Right and on the Left claimed vindicated their positions. The ideologues rejected

ethnic, tribal, regional, religious and socialist parties. Of course, they arrogated to themselves the exclusive capacity to identify "undesirable" political parties. The ideology of "national unity" was claimed to have informed the formation of the Second Republic's National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and the present Peoples Democratic Party (PDP).

How did the inspirers, founders and promoters of NPN and PDP go about their tasks? Basically the same methods although their formations were separated by 20 years (1978 and 1998): Political groups and prominent Nigerians of all ideological tendencies and regional or ethnic colourations were invited to join the "national effort". Negotiations were conducted with every group or personage that came along. The usual question was: "What is in this thing for us and for the people we represent?" Something was always promised. If a group wanted "assurances" they were given; if a signed agreement was demanded, the group would be obliged.

What were the "somethings" that were usually demanded for the purpose of negotiation? Generally they included party and government positions and positions in institutions and parastatals already existing or to be specially created. In particular cases where a group or individual was bringing along a large and strong constituency, it could be promised a geopolitical sphere to control at certain levels. These latter promises were usually documented and signed. Groups and individuals given promises of "control" constituted jealously guarded interim *centres of gravity* of the new party – to be confirmed at pre-inauguration caucuses.

As expected, disagreements and splits often occurred at pre-convention caucus meetings or even as late as at inaugural conventions. Splits occurred at the final stages of the formations of NPN and PDP, but the damage in each case was quickly repaired. Other mainstream political parties in the two political parties (that is, other than the NPN in the Second Republic and the PDP in this dispensation) were not formed the way these two ruling parties were formed: the former were usually fully-formed, with *leaders, leaderships and structures, programmes, main organs, – and sometimes presidential and gubernatorial candidates* – before open invitations for membership. Each of them had a *single centre of gravity*.

• To be continued next Thursday

# Opinion

## Understanding the current situation (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

ONE of the central propositions of last week's opening segment of this new series may be reformulated and expanded: To understand the current rapidly developing political situation in our country, Nigeria, you have to understand the crisis in the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP); and to understand the latter crisis, you have to go back to the origin(s) of the party, particularly the ideological conceptions of "national unity", "national movement" and "national party" that informed PDP's methods of organisation and the structure of leadership and control it adopted.

The last part of this proposition can be put differently: the current crisis in PDP is bound up with the party's foundation and structure; the crisis cannot therefore be resolved - or, rather, it can be resolved only to be replaced by another crisis of greater seriousness - unless and until the very foundations of the party are revisited. This is a logical condition, but not the end of practical possibilities. In the meantime, while the party is battling with its problems, the other political forces cannot "wait". In fact, PDP's crisis accelerates developments in other political forces (especially in the opposition forces). The emergence of All Progressives Congress (APC) is a testimony.

The core of PDP's ideology, said to have been strengthened by the lessons of the Civil War, can be expressed as a compound formula: "National unity - the unity of the ruling classes; and the unity of the ruling classes is rooted in equitable and fair distribution of, or access to, the national wealth". In this ideology "classes" - which are rooted in the political economy or the mode of production and distribution - are reduced to, or rather disguised as, "leaders" and "elites". In Nigerian political lexicon "national wealth" is rendered as "national cake".

In the course of examining this proposition, an effort which began last week, we saw the logical emergence in the PDP (just as in the party's antecedent, the Second Republic's National Party of Nigeria, NPN) *multiple centres of power and control*, rather than *single centres* (as in most of the other mainstream ruling class political parties). We may add here - for analytical completeness - what may be taken as obvious: the multiple centres of power and control that emerged in the PDP

were not and could not have been) of equal strength. The strength of a centre is measured and fully appreciated in times of internal party crisis; but each centre had remained a centre nonetheless. I am also assuming that the multiplicity of centres did not, could not, and was not expected to, dissolve or neutralise the power blocs. In fact the reality of Nigeria's power blocs (which reduced to two through the Civil War) lies at the root of the inequality of the centres.

As expected, or perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, this regime of multiplicity of centres of power and control that emerged in the PDP (as it did in the NPN 20 years earlier) soon - even before the 1999 elections - ran into several contradictions and internal crises. The party leadership responded to the most immediate and open contradictions or problems (as the NPN did) with the dual principle of "zoning" and "rotation" of party and government positions. This was a theoretical resolution which, even if it was strictly and honestly followed, could not, nor could it have been expected to, resolve the problems continuously thrown up by primitive capitalist accumulation, ethnicity, religious bigotry as well as personal "attributes" of philosophical cynicism and insincerity.

Every serious political party is expected to be conscious of the fact that Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation which is, additionally, endowed with multiplicity of religions. It is also expected that, in every serious party, these national characteristics will be reflected - even if instinctively, even if the country's constitution does not mandate it - in its organizational structure and leadership. Such a party is also expected to know that if it wins power at any governmental level, these national characteristics will be reflected in the composition of the government it runs - even if this is not explicitly demanded by the Constitution as the latter actually does. The difference between PDP (and NPN before it) on the one hand, and other postwar mainstream ruling class parties, on the other hand, is that the former announced to the world that it had raised this constitutional requirement (which the Constitution calls "federal character") to the level of core and irreducible ideological and organizational principle. The history of PDP's

zoning and rotation principle is well known.

A *protocol* on the other hand, is a secret addendum attached to an *agreement*. It is a secret "explanatory note": the contents are known only to the authors who are the powers behind the *agreement*. A *protocol* tries to indicate what should be done in case the *agreement* runs into difficulties; this secret clause may, in essence, differ from the letter and spirit of the agreement; in extreme cases, a *protocol* directly contradicts the agreement to which it is attached. There may also be one or multiple *protocols* to an *agreement*.

To illustrate from world history: During the Second World War (1939 - 1945), the Allied Powers (America, the Soviet Union, Britain and France) signed several *agreements* on how to guarantee "world peace" after the war. But attached to the agreements were *protocols* on carving the world into "zones of control". Just before that war broke out the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed an *agreement* called a "non-aggression pact"; but attached to that agreement was a *protocol* on how to divide between them, and absorb, Poland and the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.

The Nigerian Constitution of 1999 was an agreement rapidly put in place to meet the requirements of General Abdulsalami Abubakar's short transition programme. The protocol attached to it was a series of secret agreements on transfer of power from the military regime to a civilian administration to be headed by General Obasanjo and how this country would be run after military disengagement. Behind the protocol were the military high command, fractions of the power blocs and our foreign "friends". The 1999 Constitution was necessary but not too important at that stage. I joked to a late comrade about a year after General Olusegun Obasanjo assumed the office of President on May 29, 1999, that the retired army general might not have read or even seen the Nigerian Constitution.

Long after this the comrade publicly said that what I thought was a joke was not a joke after all, that he was convinced the President had not read the Nigerian Constitution. But he was a key signatory to the *protocol*. Like other party constitutions, the PDP's 1999 constitution was also an *agreement*. Attached to it, however, were several,

mutually - contradictory *protocols*. The party constitution talked about "federal character", "zoning" and "rotation". But it would appear that either the drafters of this constitution were oblivious of the country's new Constitution especially the two-term provision and the article on unanticipated vacation of the presidential seat.

The PDP began its life as a *ruling party* in May 1999. Before the party's core leadership were two *agreements* - the country's Constitution (the supreme law of the land) and the party's Constitution. Beyond these there were two sets of *protocols*: one set attached to the country's Constitution, and the other attached to the party constitution. In and between all these were many contradictions and silences. For instance, the country's Constitution had, and still has, no provision for zoning and rotation. It talks of federal character and maximum of two terms for President and State Governors, but nothing more. The party *protocols* that are by definition secret created the most difficult problems: the protocols, rather than the party Constitution, rule the party in actuality. But since they are secret, the existence of some or all of them can be denied, and disputes between them only be resolved by the creation of new protocol whose existence can also be denied as soon as it is cited.

Most of the committees or individuals often appointed to settle party disputes are completely ignorant of the existence or contents of the protocols from whose interpretations disputes had arisen in the first place. In consequence, they achieve nothing. So, whenever you hear or see that a serious dispute between party centres or important personages has been "resolved" what had happened, in effect, was that a new protocol had been created. Finally: All the power centres in the party publicly accept the *supremacy* of the country's Constitution. But in practice the PDP and, indeed, in all the existing successful mainstream political parties operate, with disdain, on routine violation of the letter and spirit of this same "supreme" Constitution. Yet the political system continues to ride!

• *Concluded.*