

POWER ROTATION AND POLITICAL STABILITY IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of power rotation in Nigeria. It argues that the concept has become a popular cliché in the country and continually reflects in political discourse. It has also become a major cause of friction among the different ethnic groups and geo-political zones in the country. The paper concludes that power rotation is not particularly democratic and the proper mechanism is for power to rotate to the best candidate.

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Introduction

Political stability forms the fulcrum upon which the society stands and all other things - developmental efforts, economic aspirations and human fulfillments - rotate round it. But one noticeable phenomenon inherent in the modern nation-states, especially in the third world, is political instability and this has continually stymied their social, economic and political developments. Giving the myriad of unending communal conflicts, civil strife, youth restiveness, leadership succession crisis, economic downturn, underdevelopment and insecurity plaguing it, the Nigerian state epitomizes a state under the throes of political instability. Perhaps, it would not be a misnomer to describe Nigeria as a ready case study in political instability.

Attempts to understand the spate of political instability in Nigeria have elicited divergent perspectives, with most of them subscribing to power configuration and/or arrangement as one of the causes. The point here is the belief of pattern of power configuration as a bane of political stability in the Nigerian state, which then suggests the very idea of power re-arrangement, referred to as power rotation. But this raises some key questions: why is power configuration a source of instability in the Nigerian state? What is the nexus between composing groups in a polity and power configuration? Has the idea of power rotation made much impact on political stability in Nigeria? This chapter attempts to answer these posers. It is divided into five segments. The first, the introductory, the second, the conceptual discourse, the third an interrogation of the historical antecedent of the struggle for power rotation, the fourth the rationale behind

power rotation, the fifth a discourse of the idea of power rotation in the Nigerian polity and the sixth, the conclusion.

Power, State, and (In) Stability: A Conceptual Discourse

Embedded in the Weberian classical definition of the state is the imperative of power. Weber sees the state as “a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical power within a given territory”. Inherent in this perspective is the notion that the state is the only entity that is conferred with exercising power over the people. In other words, a state justifies its *raison detre* by the ability to exercise power over the people within a specified jurisdiction and the people are compelled to obey. This is premised on the fact that state power is seen as legitimate with the availability of necessary apparatuses of enforcement. Specifically therefore, power is central to the state without which its ability to discharge the basic duties expected of it becomes effete. Suffice is to say that power is central to the state and by this nature, the most sought after.

But the state is never a human form. In reality, it is an abstract entity (Johari, 1989:63) that exists only in the consciousness of the people. It is some people that exercise power over other people on behalf of the state. Therefore, and as argued by Richard Synder, the behaviour of the state is more or less the behaviour of the people put in charge of managing the state affairs (Synder, 1963:106-171). These people, who form what is referred to as the government, emerged out of the people that make up the state. So, when we say a state exercises power, what is meant is that some people exercise power over other people on behalf of the state. We can even stretch the argument further

to say that the government is nothing but a group of people legally sanctioned to 'lord' it over other members of a polity.

The notion of "other members" of a polity leads us to the nature of the modern state. The contemporary state system has a major defining attribute in its multinational status (Otubanjo, 1988). With the exception of a few, most states are amalgams of assorted nationalities; differing in history, culture, orientation, temperament and idiosyncrasies. Some have emerged by design and most by accident; the former a product of deliberate coming together as evident in such countries as Trinidad and Tobago, Tanzania and the putative European Union; the latter a product of force as in the case of many African states, clobbered together by colonial powers. Apart from ethnic composition, the modern state is also characterised by duplicity of competing socio-political forces, which continually jostle and scramble for control of the state.

The poly-ethnic natures of the modern states, the competing social forces and the growing self-consciousness have made the concept of power even more imperative. Power is needed to enforce rules over the variegated human populace as well as allocate resources. Therefore, for being the major defining factor in human society, it is the case that groups and social forces in a polity would, naturally, want to have access to state power. But, at no time in history has all members of a polity ever directly held power at once. The convention is for power to pass from one group to the other. However, contemporary realities have also shown that most groups or forces exercising state power, apparently out of the allure and perquisites associated with it, seldom want to let go of it easily; a development that has resulted in some groups and forces being excluded from power configuration. And these set of people, using their exclusion as trump cards,

readily become the arrowhead of agitations, antagonism, rebellion, civil strife and sabotage, which are all indices of political instability, which invariably bear negatively on inter-group relations and development in all spheres. The reality that no group can hold power in perpetuity as well as the need to maintain peace among differing groups in a polity, for the purpose of achieving the all-important political stability, has necessitated the idea of power re-arrangement, also referred to as power rotation.

The Nigerian State, Power and (In) Stability

The Nigerian state epitomizes a state in perpetual flux, strife and agitations over power arrangement. Right from the days of colonial suzerainty to the present order, the clamour for access to power has been rife. Therefore, it is convenient to argue that the roots of power arrangement and or rearrangement are located within the interplay of forces operating at the realms of the socio-political and historical formation and operation of the Nigerian state.

That Nigeria is principally an external imposition is already a *fait accompli*. It is a colonial creation composing of different nationalities (Nwolise, 2005:117, Olowu, 1995:207) and its boundary, composition and nomenclature shaped by three personalities: Otto Von Bismarck, who presided over the Berlin Conference that partitioned Africa among the European powers in 1885, Sir Frederick Lord Lugard, who fleshed up the skeletal proposal of the Selborne Commission, which had in a 1898 report recommended the conjoining of the erstwhile two separate halves into one (Ballard, 1970: 333, Tamuno, 1989:4); and lastly, Lady Flora Shaw Lugard who, in what could be interpreted as an ‘imperial pillow talk’, coined the word Nigeria, and succeeded in influencing its adoption. The point here is that Nigeria is a conglomeration of variegated nationalities,

imposed by foreign personalities and powers and such groups were held together by the power of force (Crowther, 1976:1), until a combination of external realities and internal struggles succeeded in putting an end to overt colonial system in the global milieu.

But before the departure of the colonial rule, a federal arrangement had been instituted. This was borne out of the exigencies of the time, what Arthur Richard described as creation along “natural divisions” of the country (Osaghae, 2002:7). In other words, the resort to federalism was not really a clamour for state power. As a matter of fact, the creation of regional government led to dispersal of power to the extent that some politicians prefer to remain in the regions. However, no sooner had the colonialists left the shores of Nigeria than the scramble for power ensued among the ethnic groups. This was essentially at the behest of the nationalists who had fought the colonialists to a standstill but who, in the final analysis, were more interested in realizing their own personal desire for power.

However, the clamour for power has shifted to agitations for rearrangement, which now operates under the rubric of power rotation. The concept of power rotation connotes, as it implies, allowing state power percolates to all strata of ethnic or regional groups in the country, in such a way that state power will cease to be a an exclusive preserve of a particular or selected group (s). This simple definition presupposes the presence of a monopoly in the access to such, which has been found unacceptable to the Nigerian people.

From Transfer to Balancing and to Rotation: The Changing Stricture of Power Rearrangement Agitations in Nigeria

The clamour for power rearrangement has been a topical issue of discourse in Nigeria since the 1990s. However, this is not to be oblivion of the fact that it is a concept that is rooted in the distant past. In their epic struggle against the colonialists for independence, the nationalists had employed the usage of power transfer as a weapon of action and as a weapon of mobilisation. The transfer concept has assumed two forms: the transfer for involvement and a transfer for total control. The initial demand of the nationalists had been the opportunity to be involved in the colonial affairs (Onabamiro, 1983). Later, however, the request changed to a quest for transfer of power to the indigenes for total control of heir destinies. This was to play a dominant role in the struggles until independence was achieved.

The attainment of independence however changed the language to that of power balancing between the north and southern states. Then succeeding governments made it a convention to ensure ethno-regional and even religious balancing in their composition. In this wise, portfolios were shared based on the principle of balancing. Examples include the emergence of Nnamdi Azikiwe, a southern Christian as the partner to Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, a Northern Muslim; the emergence of General Murtala Muhammed, a Muslim from the north and General Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian from the south and later, General Olusegun Obasanjo and Genneral Shehu Yar'adua, a Muslim from the north. The emergence of Ibrahim Babangida as a Military President also led to the appointment of Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe and later Augustus Aikhomu, a Christian, as the second in command. Ditto for the government of General Sanni Abacha, a northern Muslim and General Oladipo Diya, a southern Christian as the deputy as well as that of

General Abdusalaam Abubakar, a northern Muslim and Admiral Mike Akhighe, a Christian from the southern part.

However, towards the photo finish of the General Ibrahim Babangida's military presidency, the clamour had changed from power balancing to power rotation. This agitation eventually resulted in the emergence of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian from the south and Atiku Abubakar, a Muslim from the north. Perhaps, we may ask: why the clamour for power rotation? This answer shall be attempted presently.

Rationalizing the Quest for Power Rotation in Nigeria

Specifically, the clamour or struggle for power rearrangement had been fought on a number of reasons. The first is the perceived domination of a particular group and or region. Umaru Shinkafi alluded to this in his statement that

Power shift arose from the notion that political power in Nigeria has remained in one section of the country for too long and to the exclusion of other sections of the country, hence the need to deliberately reserve the presidential slot for a section of the country perceived to be most politically marginalized (Shinkafi, 2003:1).

Specifically, the factor of perceived domination has an historical antecedent, which is located in colonialism. The colonial power, in their bid to maintain the stronghold over the people and prevent them from forming a united front, had resorted to the use of divide and rule tactic. This thrived in the propping up some groups as the most superior or dominant to others, and the making of others the underdogs (Gandu, 2004:72-87). This situation, naturally, is a recipe for feelings of superiority in the propped up groups and feelings of resentment in the dominated groups. And this was to play out in the post independence political game plan, because, while the 'superior' groups wallow

in the mentality of ‘born rulers’, the other groups also sought a stop, if not an outright reversal, to such. In other words, the feelings of ‘master-servant’ relationship, which the divide and rule had brought up, had to be resisted, which is epitomized in the clamour for power rotation.

The second factor is the spates of marginalization, oppression and injustice allegedly being perpetrated by the group controlling the levers of state power. It has continually been argued that the group, precisely the Hausa/Fulani ethnic group, had used power to fleece, as well as oppress, the rest. From this perspective therefore, the clamour for power rotation is a clamour for emancipation from alleged domination, economic privation and socio-political oppression in the hands of the ‘oppressor’ group. In many instances, this has been achieved with violence. In justifying the usage of violence in this instance, Dr Frederick Fasehun, the prime mover of the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC) and a known agitator for power rotation argues that

If the Yoruba people were involved in the struggle for independence of their nation and we achieved independence and we were relegated to the background so much that Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the most erudite Yoruba politician was denied power, the richest Yoruba man who was associated with the caliphate on everything, business, religion, mention it, he won an election equivocally and was prevented from attaining that position, that means no Yoruba person could have attained that position if we didn’t fight (Personal interview, 2005).

The third factor, which is a corollary to the previous, has to do with the location of power. In the Nigerian political environment, power is centralized in the number one position and all others, including the second in command, exercises power only at the discretion of the number one. Therefore, to be a partner may not necessarily translate to

exercise of power. In that wise, the concept of partnering in power allocation has been found inadequate in assuaging the feelings of the agitators. This has made the quest for power rotation in such a way that the number one position would go round, a matter of intense struggle.

The fourth factor has to do with the fortunes of the Nigerian state after independence. The discovery of oil just at the twilight of colonial rule and its sudden importance in world economy, especially following the crisis in the Middle East in the 60s, had brought about a sudden fortune for the Nigerian state and the groups in charge have used it to advance their personal fortunes. Therefore, it became obvious that access to state power is synonymous with access to stupendous wealth. In interrogating this perspective, Claude Ake argues that

The wealthiest people in Nigeria are generally people who have acquired wealth through state power: by political corruption, by access to state contracts, agency rates or concessions such as import licenses – which do not usually involve them in direct productive activity (Ake, 1996:29).

The realization of state power translating to easy wealth has therefore triggered quest for power rotation. It is the belief in this sense that once one's ethnic group is in power; it will facilitate one's access to the nation's till.

Added to the foregoing factors is the nature of the Nigerian federal practice, especially after the long rules of the military, which, following its capture by the military elites, has been reduced to a top-heavy arrangement in which power resides in the central government to the disadvantage of the states (Agbu, 2004). In such arrangement, there is the tendency for people to gravitate to the central government, where the power is. Adebayo Adedeji alluded to this as much when he argues that

Thirty years of military government did succeed in turning Nigeria into a highly centralized polity. Whatever may be the theory of federalism and however federal Nigeria may formally be in its constitution, it is in operational reality far from being federal. The sharing of power and responsibility and the independence of action guaranteed to the state governments against an overbearing federal government have all but disappeared (Adedeji, 2003: 3).

As a result of centralisation of power, there arose the clamour for access to the state powers by the various groups and forces in the country, hence the struggle for power rotation.

But it is not at the federal level alone that power rotation is rife. In fact, it percolates to levels of the Nigerian state, i.e, state and local governments. The major factors adduced for its clamour at the federal level also apply for the others; i.e., the variegated composition of the states and local government levels and the penchant for domination by particular groups and the desire for an end to continued domination and oppression.

Power Rotation and the Nigerian Polity

Discussions on the idea of power rotation in Nigeria can be subsumed under two major diametrically opposing perspectives: the inevitability of power rotation and the hollowness of power rotation, which fits into the realist-idealist debate. The first perspective, as the nomenclature implies, borders on the argument that the continued survival of the Nigerian state as an entity is hinged on power rotation. This argument is premised on the variegated nature of the Nigerian state in terms of population and contending social forces and the need to allow them have access to control of state power. The analysis here is that continued domination by one group, which translates to

continued exclusion of others, will lead to crises that could consume the Nigerian state. The argument then is that power should rotate to the ethnic groups and social forces in turn. This is the most popular view amongst Nigerians.

From the idealist perspective, we see the idea of power rotation as hollow in the sense that it is undemocratic. In an ideal political system, the democratic process, not zoning or rotating, determines who wields power. In this wise, power should rotate to the best candidate on merit and not by excluding others on the basis of accidents of ethnic or geographical location. By all implications, the idea of power rotation smacks of inferiority complex as clamour for power rotation is an advertisement of relative weakness and helplessness, hence the need for the 'superior' groups to 'step down' for them. Since power conferment is not based on the logic of rigorous competition but on allocation, then power rotation, from this perspective, could breed incompetence. In capturing this sense of power rotation, Nafute Igho was of the opinion that

Power rotation is a dynamic of social, economic and political process in a democratic polity. To legitimize this dynamic is to adulterate a fundamental tenet of democratic principles. We should allow the electoral process to determine the issue. The cry by a given ethnic group of marginalization under the Obasanjo presidency will not be resolved by itself, if that ethnic group is legislated to produce the next president. The cry is also noticeable in each of state of the polity, irrespective of its ethnic composition. E.g., the recent confirmation of Chief Onyema Ugochukwu as chairman of the Niger Delta Development Corporation was opposed by senators from his Abia state, who argued that their respected constituencies in the state had been marginalized by the government (Igho, 2000:5).

The strength of the two perspectives lies in the logic and plausibility of their propositions. Those who argue for power rotation on the basis of divergent and

competing forces in the Nigerian polity are being realistic and in line with meeting the exigency of the moment while those who opposed it are applying the democratic ideals, which tend to be universal. However, the fact must be made that democracy; though universal, has environmental imperatives, which dictate that each society must come up with its own ways of domesticating democracy according to its own experience and environmental dictates. The idea of power rotation is thus a response to environmental imperatives.

Therefore, giving the fact that Nigeria is a *pot pourri* of diverse groups and forces, with some relative weak in terms of size and strength, and with rivalry cum suspicions amongst them, it is likely that power rotation would help to restore sense of belonging, reduce restiveness and hence ensure stability.

Conclusion

This paper has been devoted to the analysis of power rotation and political stability, using Nigeria as a reference point. It has been demonstrated that political stability is central to any state system in its bid for development. Also, it has been established that the concept of power is central to any state, thus emphasizing the fact of its being the most sought after. A connection was made between group and the clamour for power in any political system, which made the quest for power a matter of intense struggle. This struggle, in Nigeria, resulted in the resort to power rotation as a way out of the quagmire. Most importantly, it was established that the Nigerian state is in a state of political instability as a result of faulty or unjust power rearrangement. This paper is in support of power rotation but with the proviso that merit must not be sacrificed.

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