

DISCORDANT CHORDS IN NIGERIAN POLITICS

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Introduction

Consider the following news headlines:

- “The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has summoned the Premier of Ukraine to Moscow.”
- “The Supreme Military Council of Nigeria has summoned the Military Governor of Bendel State to Lagos.”
- “The National Executive Committee of the People's Democratic Party has summoned the Governor of Edo State to Abuja.”

The above news headlines have one thing in common. They demonstrate a dictatorial, monolithic political construct. While we can readily excuse item 2 above, given the unitary command structure of the military, that of items 1 and 3 would demand more serious analysis in order for us to understand and expose the fallacies of their presumed federalism.

As we all can recall, the Soviet Union had a federal constitution which recognized the sovereignty of its fifteen constituent units - republics. At the same time, the constitution also recognized the supremacy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in state affairs. Thus, the sovereignty of a given republic was subsumed under the supremacy of the CPSU. In other words, there was no sovereign political entity besides the CPSU, irrespective of the federal constitution of the Soviet Union. For more than seven decades, Sovietologists grappled with this contradictory phenomenon in their analyses of Soviet government and politics. The Soviet Union created and nurtured a political culture that expedited its collapse and disintegration.

The Problem

Like the defunct Soviet Union, Nigeria's Fourth Republic is described as a federal polity. Unlike the Soviet Union, however, Nigeria is a multi-party state. This dissimilarity is a misconception, because, in actual fact Nigeria's political parties are unitary institutions that are imposed on a supposedly federal political system. Though described as federal, the constitution of Nigeria has more in common with unitarism than federalism. The need to forge “national unity” and establish false national consciousness has eroded any semblance of a federal political system in Nigeria. Unlike the First Republic (1963-1966) and the Second Republic (1979-1983), the current regime of President Olusegun Obasanjo has done severe damage to the fabric of federalism in Nigeria. Because of his military background, and being a former military dictator of Nigeria in 1976-1979, we are compelled to explain his tenure as a civilian president through the prism of his military command system, which is antithetical to dialogue and reasoned debates in a democratic federal polity. His undue interference in the governance of constituent states of the federation is not the hallmark of a federalist, but that of a military dictator. It is instructive to note that his two principal aides, Chief Anthony Anenih and Dr. Ahmadu Ali are products of the command system, being

former police and military officers respectively. He presides over a political party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), that exhibits all the attributes of the CPSU. The constant intrusion of the PDP into the affairs of governance (federal, state and local), is a discordant chord in Nigeria's political system.

No political party has a constitutional right to interfere in the legislative matters of either level of government - local, state, or federal - in Nigeria. It is an anomaly that an organ of the PDP should determine the composition of government boards and agencies. The intrusion of the PDP in the impeachment of the deputy governor of Akwa Ibom State established a dangerous precedence in Nigeria's legislative process. Furthermore, the "command" of the PDP that the governor of Edo State reinstate the chairman of the Irukepken local government council was an unwarranted intrusion in constitutional matters in which it had no jurisdiction. Recently, the governor of Delta State revealed that he was compelled by the PDP to dissolve his cabinet. In all of these infractions, the PDP argued that it was within its rights to act the way it did because of the party's constitution. Which constitution is supreme in Nigeria? The 1999 Constitution of the

Federal Republic of Nigeria or that of the PDP?

The recent local and state congresses of the PDP demonstrate the debility of thought and the bankruptcy of democracy in the party. Instead of conducting free and fair elections, contending factions of the party's headquarters and their allies in the respective states were circulating lists of candidates for harmonization, a euphemism for imposed candidates. The inability of the PDP to conduct a free and fair election did not surprise Nigerians. The Nigerian Vice President, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, recently stated that there were no elections but selection of candidates in 2003. His statement merely confirmed what Nigerians had known for decades. Neither was it a surprise to "Mr. Fix-It" who is alleged to be an expert at fixing elections. Thus, against this background, it is baffling how democratic practices can be nurtured in such a corrupt political system.

Not too long ago, President Obasanjo publicly expressed his bewilderment at the absence of roads to show for the N300bn his government had allocated to roads. He knew whom to ask that question, the person who was his minister of works at that time, but he did not ask. Nigerians knew who was the minister of works at that time. When he established the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) as an agency to combat corrupt practices in Nigeria, he was hailed in several quarters, especially in foreign countries, as an anti corruption crusader. While the EFCC is a welcome institution, its close relationship with President Obasanjo has raised serious doubts about its objectivity. The fact that the EFCC reports to the President, and not to the National Assembly, further lends credence to this doubt. It has been argued in several quarters in Nigeria that the EFCC is a tool of intimidation employed by President Obasanjo against his real and imagined political enemies. Those who maintain this position point to the fact that none of the president's close associates and family members, including the top echelon of the PDP with questionable wealth, have been investigated by the EFCC. The role of the EFCC in the ongoing saga in Bayelsa State, in allegedly facilitating the signing of impeachment papers in Lagos, by some legislators of the Bayelsa House of Assembly against Governor D.S.P. Alamieyeseigha, exposes the dubious function of the agency. That the EFCC is engaged with a group of Bayelsa legislators in counter recriminations over this issue casts a dent on the reputation of the anti fraud agency. Without prejudice to the illegality of Governor Alamieyeseigha's bail skipping from London, the alleged

involvement of the EFCC in the impeachment proceedings of the governor makes a mockery of the entire legislative process in Nigeria .

Will the Nigerian Constitution be amended to permit President Obasanjo to serve a third term in office? Is the presidency encouraging legislators to amend the constitution in his favour?

Irrespective of the insistence by Obasanjo's spokespersons that he will leave office at the end of his constitutional two term in May 2007, there is a strong suspicion in the population that the legislative process to amend the constitution could not have been initiated without the president's approval.

Similarly, the unscheduled injection of a draft constitution containing variants of term extensions for the president (and the governors) into the deliberations at the National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) in Abuja could not have been without the tacit endorsement of the President.

For the President, the NPRC was a testing ground for his future political ambitions.

The president's spokespersons continue to argue that, proponents of the third term agenda are merely exercising their constitutional rights in a democratic polity. A review of the principal actors in the third term drama reveals a troubling phenomenon in contemporary Nigerian politics. Many of them were involved in the campaign to keep previous military dictator, Sani Abacha in power. In a melancholic dramatization of political sycophancy, the five political parties vying for power in Abacha's transition to civilian rule unanimously endorsed the military dictator as their preferred presidential candidate!!! In their view, Abacha was the only credible candidate to govern Nigeria . In the same fashion, the proponents of a third term for Obasanjo, who are recycled Abacha sycophants, are now presenting Obasanjo as the only credible person to govern Nigeria at this time of her history. How History repeats itself. We have elevated sycophancy as a prized attribute of governance. The corridors of power at Aso Rock, and in other centres of political power in Nigeria , have been infested with sycophants making it impossible for reasoned debate to prevail. Dissent is exiled.

Much has been said about Obasanjo being the first military dictator to hand over power to a civilian administration in Nigeria , a feat which earned him the statue of a statesman and a democrat in the international arena. Did he willingly hand over power to a civilian administration in 1979, or was he compelled to do so by the circumstances that brought him to power following the assassination of his predecessor military dictator, Murtala Muhhamed in 1976? Will Obasanjo accept a third term, if the constitution is amended? It is highly probable that he will accept a third term, once the constitution is amended in his favour. Like a "true democrat," he will be doing so in response to the overwhelming pressure by the population!!!

Concluding Remarks

Some key factors are responsible for the discordant chords in Nigeria 's current political system.

First, the military command construct of the 1999 Constitution. Second, the preponderance of graduates of command institutions (the military and the police) in key positions of power at both the party and government levels. Third, the unitary institutions in a supposedly federal polity. Fourth, the non existence of credible opposition parties in Nigeria . Fifth, the behaviour of elected officials - governors, etc. Let us briefly examine these factors.

The 1999 Constitution

This is a unitary constitution, irrespective of the injection of "federal" in its name. The so-called federating units are mere administrative organs of the central government. By listing the states, local governments and state capitals in the constitution, for example, the central government assumes jurisdiction in areas of exclusive state jurisdiction. The centre dictates the composition of

the periphery, as the latter is transformed into an obedient servant of the former. Areas of exclusive state jurisdiction, like oil and gas and natural resources are usurped by the central government. Even areas of concurrent jurisdiction enjoy the paramountcy of the central government.

Graduates of Command Institutions

We preface our comment by recognizing that not all graduates of command institutions would exhibit the characteristics of the Obasanjos, the Anenihs and the Alis. But, at the same time, we recall that, prior to his conscription from prison to contest the presidency in 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo was considered a democrat, an appellation which lost its values once he became the President of Nigeria. He has not been able to disrobe himself of his military overcoat. With very few exceptions, it is difficult to expect products of military command institutions to excel in a democratic political environment defined by reasoned debate and logic. Obasanjo's attitude at press conferences clearly exhibits the primacy of the military command structure in his leadership style. Most of those around him, including non graduates of command institutions, have been assimilated by the military command structure.

While we do not suggest the exclusion of these graduates from participating in Nigerian politics, it is imperative that they disrobe themselves of the military mentality if they aspire to govern in a democratic environment.

Unitary Institutions

A national executive committee of a political party has no jurisdiction over the executive committee of that party in any state in a federal political system, except, as we all know, in the defunct Soviet Union and other communist countries. The constitution of a political party subjugating its state "chapters" to the dictates of the national executive committee is an erosion and an evasion of the federal principles. Thus, the unitary construct of Nigerian political parties is a major hindrance to the development of democratic practice in the country. The intrusion of party organs in the affairs of governance (local, state, and federal), as demonstrated by the PDP in Anambra, Akwa Ibom, Delta, and Edo states, for example, is an unwarranted activity. No political party has the jurisdiction to interfere in the legislative process of an elected assembly - local, state, or federal - in a democratic society, except of course if Nigeria is emulating the Soviet model.

Why should Nigeria have a unitary salary structure in a federal political system? In a federation, each state (or province) determines its own salary structure based on its resources. It is imperative, therefore, that the unified salary structure be scaped in Nigeria. Similarly, other unitary institutions, including the Nigeria Police, the electoral commission, etc, need to be abolished in order for states to establish their respective institutions to provide these services.

Non-existence of credible Opposition Parties

A vibrant opposition party with credible policy options is a prerequisite in a democracy. The eternal disarray in Nigeria's opposition parties since May 1999 has weakened the political system, as the PDP has no credible checks on its policies. Soon after the May 1999 elections, for example, several non PDP candidates who had contested for the presidency and other elective positions immediately decamped to the PDP, in obedience to the Nigerian dictum: If you cannot beat them, join them. Factions of several opposition parties are alleged to be fronting for the PDP. How can democracy be nurtured in such an environment when scores of political leaders readily abdicate their responsibilities for a pot of porridge?

The behaviour of Governors, etc

The focus here is on PDP governed states. Most of these governors and elected representatives in the states houses have acquiesced to the undemocratic demands of their party, as witnessed in Akwa Ibom, Delta, and Edo states, for example In Akwa Ibom, where the duly elected representatives of the population in the State House of Assembly had impeached their deputy governor, the national executive committee of the PDP sequestered those representatives in Abuja and compelled them to withdraw the impeachment. Why did Governor James Ibori capitulate to the “pressures” of the PDP to dissolve his cabinet? Will the premier of a Canadian province or the governor of a US state behave in the same way? In fact, none of the political parties in either the US or in Canada will pressure a governor or a premier to dissolve his cabinet. But why in Nigeria , and why did Governor Ibori capitulate? And why did Governor Lucky Igbenedion acquiesce to the command of the PDP national executive on the Irukepken matter?

When elected public officials compromise democratic principles and surrender to non democratic pressures, they weaken their respective offices and lend credibility to non democratic institutions and practices. By lending credibility to the practices of such undemocratic institutions, elected public officials give legitimacy to corrupt policies with profound impact on the political culture of the country. The cases of Akwa Ibom, Delta, and Edo states, for example, epitomize the injection of considerations alien to good governance and democratic practice. But the guilty is not only the one that demand a subversion of democratic principles and processes (the PDP national executive committee), but also the party that capitulate to such demands.

In conclusion, we lament the fact that the three-tier government structure of Nigeria has been a misnomer, when viewed from the perspectives of federalism. Just as the federating units in Nigeria are mere administrative organs of the central government, state governors have converted the local government councils in their respective jurisdictions into political divisions in the governors' offices. As a rule, a local government council chairman holds his office at the discretion of the governor of his state. He or she is a political messenger of the state governor, just as the President perceives governors as his representatives in the respective states. The deplorable dictatorial authority of the national executive committee of the party is inherited by a state governor in his relations with local government councils and party constituencies throughout the state. Thus, we have an organized system of dictatorial transfer of power and authority which produces a dysfunctional political system.

All across the federation - from local government councils to state houses of assemblies to the federal assembly - the concept of “ Ghana bag” has come to determine the conduct of elected public officials in the execution of their legislative responsibilities. Nigerian political elite is engaging itself in a self-destructive game, one that is capable of causing the disintegration of the country. How do we expect democracy to grow in such an environment? The response of Nigerians to this dangerous development will define the survivability of the country. Let us hope that, unlike the Soviet Union, Nigeria has not created and nurtured a political culture that will expedite its collapse and disintegration.