

**THE FEAR OF ETHNIC DOMINATION AND ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY IN
NIGERIA**

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Of the forty-nine years of independent Nigeria, individuals from the north have occupied the office of the Head of State or President for about thirty-seven years. The principle of population based representation originated northern political domination of Nigeria. Southern politicians accepted this principle at the 1958 Ibadan Constitutional Conference on two miscalculations. First, they expected that their political parties would win substantial number of seats in the north's first direct elections and thereby neutralize northern political dominance. Second, they calculated that the proposed second legislative chamber to be based on equality of Regions would serve as a check on the rise of northern political power. (Dudley 1968) But in the 1959 parliamentary elections, the north won sizeable majority that only solid alliance of the east and west could prevent north's political ascendancy.

Throughout the first republic (1960-1966), the north's political party, Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) maintained the north as a "closed system" while pursuing expansion into the south to solidify north's hold on power. Dudley (1968:267) sums up the north's strategy and its success:

This monopoly not only guaranteed to the NPC the overall control of the North but also domination of the federal government, a domination which it has sought to preserve through an 'expansionist' orientation in seeking parliamentary allies at the federal level whilst retaining the North intact.

By the time of the fall of the first republic, the north had positioned itself for the monopoly of federal power by its domination of the military. It achieved dominant presence in the military through the quota recruitment principle which the NPC-led federal government caused to be adopted in the early 1960s. The north was thus easily able to use the military to keep her grip on political power for as long as it was fashionable to do so; and so much so that the northerners considered all electoral victories were null and void unless they sanctioned the north's political supremacy. That was the basis for the annulment of the Chief M.K.O. Abiola's 12 June 1993 presidential election victory.

By 1992, when the north had held this highest office for over twenty-seven years out of thirty-two years, some northern political leaders spoke in support of a shift of power to the south. If the west had taken a shot albeit by chance when General Olusegun Obasanjo (Yoruba/west) became Head of State following the assassination of General Murtala Mohammed in 1976, in the tripartite, regional, north-east-west (Hausa-Fulani/Igbo/Yoruba) struggle for power from pre-independence party politics in Nigeria, it was naturally the turn of the Igbo. However, the only legally sanctioned political parties, National Republican Convention and Social Democratic Party featured Alhaji Basir Tofa (Hausa/north) and Chief M.K.O. Abiola (Yoruba/west) as presidential candidates.

What does the foregoing show about Nigeria's democracy? More specifically, what does it show about political equality and representation? It shows that Nigeria's democracy is still in its early transitional phase being governed by oligarchic rules. Eligibility and support for persons and geo-ethnic region for elective offices are predetermined. The nomination of individuals for elective offices is mostly the prerogative of powerful individuals – 'godfathers' and incumbents in high political office.

The hierarchy of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) actually overruled the people of Abia State by deciding not to feature a governorship candidate in the 2007 general elections because it could not stop Senator Ike Ararume who successfully defended his nomination up to the Supreme Court. In a similar vein, the PDP unilaterally replaced Mr. Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi who won the state primaries with Mr. Celestine Omechia as the governorship candidate of Rivers State. Election primaries are to that extent pseudo exercises. As regards presidential office and in some states of Nigeria, governorship office, geo-ethnic groups are the primary units of the determination of eligibility and support. And because the alternation of most important political offices is restricted, what is now euphemistically referred to as zoning or rotation among Nigerians, is partial and goes to illustrate the pre-determination of eligibility for political office of individuals and ethno-regions. But how are whole groups affected by the above forms of political behavior and the illustrations in the first-past-the-post electoral system of Nigeria? The proposed project will explore an answer to this question with regards to the chances of an individual from among the Igbo, one of the three major ethnic groups standing for and winning the contest for the office of president of Nigeria.

Fear of Ethnic Domination and National Democratic Space

The fear of ethnic domination has actually shrunk the national democratic space. This fear began as the fear of economic domination of the south by the north while the reality of the Nigerian political entity was unfolding. Coleman (1958:400) outlines the foundation of this fear as "the gross disparities in the level of development in all fields; the heavy concentration of educated southerners at strategic points of control in the administrative, commercial and transportation sectors of northern society; the condescending and exploitative attitudes and behavior attributed to southerners living and working in the north; and the leveling and disorganizing impact of southern ideologies and patterns of politics on the highly stratified and aristocratic northern social system." The south's head start in educational development ensured southerners' overwhelming presence in the colonial civil service.

The need to checkmate this underlined the preference of northern political leaders for the federal system of government. They began implementing "northernisation policy", jobs in the Northern Region's civil service for northerners, through the federal structure, which entails autonomy in local administration. Their language of mobilization was "One North, One People." They pushed for and got quota system, then 'federal character principle' for filling federal civil service posts. (Dudley 1968, Whitaker 1970).

Furthermore, the north made sure that the south did not add to its economic advantage, political advantage, which would have translated into southern political domination. At the Ibadan General Conference of 1950, the northern political elite sought

and procured population based representation, exploiting their colonial government sanctioned numerical superiority to the south. Thus granted 50 per cent, later increased to 52 per cent representation with its 'closed' regional politics, the north was on its way to the political domination of Nigeria. (Osaghae 1998) But the north's permanent majority was not to be a given. It was to depend on the unity or disunity of the south. As Ayoade (1998:104) put it, "the polarization of the East and West increased Northern political significance." This began with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the National Council of Nigerians and Cameroons (NCNC) leader's rejection of the Action Group (AG) Chief Obafemi Awolowo's offer of the post of prime minister with himself as opposition leader after the 1959 independence elections for fear that independence could be postponed. The AG leader had made the offer to wrest Nigeria from a possible north-led conservative leadership pliant to British interests. The north consolidated their hold on political power through the domination of military administrations from 1966 to 1999. By the 1993 Presidential polls, the north had succeeded in instilling the belief in southern ethnic groups that federal power is her own share of Nigeria to the extent that even Yorubas initially doubted Chief Abiola's chances against Alhaji Tofa, a northern opponent.

The north's aim in holding on to political power is simply to use it to ameliorate their economic disadvantage. Thus the north's *de facto* claim to power has now assumed a *de jure* claim even in the context of democratization. The aspiration to presidential power by all southern groups combined is correspondingly reduced by half. Accordingly, Yoruba, Igbo, and all southern minority groups have been reduced to one unit since the north conceded power to the South via the Yoruba ethnic group in 1999 under the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo. It is not surprising that only the north practically contested the 2007 presidential election at the expiration of President Obasanjo's second term tenure and is insisting on keeping power for at least two terms. Northern contestants of the 2007 presidential election were President Umar Musa Yar' Adua (PDP), General Muhammadu Buhari (All Nigeria Peoples Party), and Atiku Abubakar (Action Congress).

With the forceful entry of the Ijaw ethnic minority of the south into political reckoning, an Igbo chance in the contention for presidential power has further shrank. The two strongest political platforms in the presidential contest in the second republic, National Party of Nigeria (NPN) and Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) featured Igbo running mates. In the aborted third republic, while the Social Democratic Party (SDP) had Yoruba (South-West)/Kanuri (North) ticket, its only opponent, National Republican Convention (NRC) had Hausa (North)/Igbo (South-East) ticket. Because two Yorubas were contesting for the presidential office in the making of the forth republic, their running mates were northerners. As Ijaw militancy was too strong to be ignored, PDP - the heir apparent, given the constellation of forces for it - to presidential office in the 2007 presidential election, presented a north/south (Ijaw) ticket. The PDP had destined itself to continue to hold on to power at the centre with all conceivable arsenals including incumbency.

Perspectives on fear of Igbo ethnic domination

The fear of ethnic domination between Nigerian ethnic groups is traced virtually to the posturing, political and constitutional preferences of key ethnic leaders or factions of the Nigerian political class. Albert (1998:52) traces the Yoruba's fear of the Igbo to

provocative utterances of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the budding Nigerian-cum Igbo political leader. He quotes Dr. Azikiwe as saying:

It would appear that the God of Africa has created the Ibo nation to lead the children of Africa from the bondage of the ages...The martial process of the Ibo nation at all ages of human history has enabled them not only to conquer others but also to adapt themselves to the role of preservers ...The Ibo nation cannot shrink its responsibility from its manifest destiny.

Albert (1998:52) quotes a response of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the acclaimed Yoruba leader: "It seemed clear to me that [Azikiwe's] policy was to corrode the self-respect of the Yoruba people as a group; to build up the Ibo as a 'master-race.'" Similarly, the late Yoruba intellectual and politician, Chief Bola Ige wrote that the remarks by Igbo individuals instilled fear of ethnic domination in the Yoruba. He recalls in particular, the remarks by Mr. C. Dadi Onyeama who later became Supreme Court judge and judge of International Court of Justice in praise of the Igbo. According to him, the Egbe Omo Oduduwa, a cultural organization, which gave birth to AG political party was formed to unite the Yoruba and ensure their resilience. (Ige 1995) Both mention the ethnic mass only as choristers of hate speech and not as creators of messages of fear of political domination.

Some Igbo intellectuals explain the fear of Igbo ethnic domination in terms of Igbo high business drive. As Okolocha (1992:175) put it, Hausa-Fulani fear the Igbo 'as an economic, especially commercial colossus in the north' despite their political domination of Nigeria. For other Igbo intellectuals, the problem of Igbos' access to Nigerian presidential power lays with the Igbo elite. The prolific Igbo writer on Nigerian political issues, Dr. Agwunch Arthur Nwankwo dubs it as the "decay of collective Igbo leadership" (Nwankwo 1999:74). Nwachukwu and Akpuru-Aja (1993: 197) depict it as "lack of Igbo ethnic coherence." Ethnic factionalism is hardly peculiar to the Igbo ethnic group. The Yoruba is also afflicted by it. Not all Yoruba political elites joined in the struggle to revalidate the 12 June 1993 presidential election victory of Chief M.K.O. Abiola. It is instructive that most of the "civic associations" aided and funded by General Sani Abacha to counter that struggle were led by Yoruba political elites (Isumonah 2003). Long before this time, AG crisis, the archetypical Yoruba ethnic factionalism, set in motion unnerving events in the Yoruba territory and the rest of Nigeria, leading to the fall of the first republic in 1966. Yet, by democratic means, the Yoruba gained and kept presidential power for eight years from 1999 to 2007.

A category of the literature on the Nigerian civil war sees limited chance of support for Igbo presidential office in terms of lack of sufficient good will of their closest neighbors: ethnic minorities of eastern Nigeria. This is based on the 'almost irreconcilable differences with political, economic and cultural undercurrents that existed between these minorities and the Igbo' before the civil war (Isumonah 2002: 36/37). First, the Igbo were not supportive of the minorities' quest for autonomy when they mattered. Second, under Professor Eyo Ita-led National Independent Party (NIP), the minorities were humiliated in the 1953 Eastern Regional Elections. The derogation of political influence of NIP was completed when prominent Igbo members deserted it for the mainstream Igbo political party – NCNC. It cannot be said with certainty that this minorities' past with the Igbo still counts for much in the determination of political support thirty-nine years after the civil war.

It is therefore necessary to explore present social and economic forces for their role in the continuation of restrictive democracy with restrictive possibility of the emergence of an Igbo president of Nigeria in the near future. In this connection, this article focuses the market place culture to unearth its role in the limitation of the chance of the Igbo's access to presidential power.

Post-independence causes of fear of Igbo ethnic domination

Of the ten [prominent] people who were killed in the course of the coup, only one, Col. Unegbe was Igbo, the other nine casualties were non-Igbo – five from the North, three from West and one from Mid-West. (Onyeoziri 2002: 95)

The ethnic patterns of casualties of the 15 January 1966 Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzogwu-led coup de 'tat were glaring soon after the dust settled. While the coup claimed prominent Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani political and ethnic leaders, it spared Igbo's own, notably, Drs. Nnamdi Azikiwe and Michael Okpara. Hausa-Fulani's main casualties of the coup were the Prime Minister of Nigeria, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa, the Premier of Northern Nigeria, Alhaji Ahmadu Bello, Brigadier Zak Maimalari and Lt. Colonel Abogo Largema whilst prominent Yoruba casualties were the Premier of Western Region, Chief S.L. Akintola, Brigadier Ademoyega Ademulegun and Colonel R. Shodeinde. Madiebo (1980), the last commander of Biafran army explains that some of these casualties, for instance, Brigadier Maimalari resulted from personality differences. Whatever their causes, the ethnic patterns of the casualties gave the attempted coup away to the interpretation by especially the northern political class as Igbo coup de 'tat.

As if the bias in ethnic casualties was not enough, the Igbo man, General Aguiyi Ironsi, the coup threw up as Head of State, through politically inexpedient decisions and policies furthered the fear of Igbo ethnic domination. Take just two examples. First, northerners saw General Ironsi as prevaricating on the trial of the mainly Igbo coup plotters, led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu. Second, the northerners saw his Unification Decree No. 34 of May 1966, which intended to dismantle the federal structure and the local autonomy it conferred on geo-ethnic groups as definitely "biased against the north." (Amuwo 1998:77) Northerners have come to see the coordinated killings of Igbos and the overthrow of General Ironsi in a bloody counter coup de 'tat in July 1966 as their own response to "signs" of Igbo ethnic domination rather than as provocations of the Igbo attempted secession under the leadership of Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu. For the Igbo, it is double tragedy that their own response to provocations, which culminated in the civil war (1967-70), is now part of the fear of the north that they will use control of presidential power to actualize secession from Nigeria.

Conclusion

As can be seen from above, the elites of other ethnic groups especially the Hausa-Fulani fear to see an Igbo emerge as president. Do ordinary Nigerians of these other groups also entertain the same fear? In other words, if the fear of ethnic domination in Nigeria is pervasive, it remains to be proven that it affects the quality of Nigeria's electoral system. Put differently, it has not been shown that Nigeria's electoral system fails to guarantee basic democratic principles of political equality and participation even up to the right to seek to represent at the highest level by being unresponsive to the fear of ethnic domination.

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