



CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICAL ZONING IN NIGERIAN DEMOCRACY FOR PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This study examines why and how the current political tensions in Nigeria can be managed and how such measures may place the country in the path of peace, progress, and sustainable development. The Findings reveals, that the prevailing insecurity and lack of unity in the Nigerian nation-state are traceable to leadership struggles and political tussles that have persisted since independence. The paper argues that this quagmire can only be addressed by ensuring a sense of belonging and equitable political for all groups. While religious and ethnic bigotry contribute to the crisis, they are considered secondary factors. The primary cause of instability in the Nigerian state is identified as the excessive quest for political power and leadership control. The Methodology adopted for this study is historiographical, employing an interdisciplinary approach. This paper contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on the factors militating against national unity and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, Constitution, Zoning and Development.

1.0 Introduction

Tracing the evolution of human civilisation, particularly between the third and the fifth millennia BC, indicates the early emergence of principles that later shaped modern democracy. The concept of democracy has evolved over time and continues to be reshaped as a progressive form of governance in contemporary political systems. Its earliest structured development is commonly traced to the ancient Greek city - States, particularly Athens where a form of participatory governance were practiced, although, often limited to a segment of the population. Following the decline of Greek political dominance, elements of republican governance were further developed in ancient Rome, where institutional structures such as Senate and system of checks on executive authority contributed to the

evolution of representative principles. These early experiments in governance laid important foundation for modern democratic theory, which has since been refined through constitutionalism, representative institutions, and the expansion of political participation in the modern era.

Interestingly, democracy can thrive in an atmosphere only when the society create their own model just like Greeks and Romans in the ancient and the medieval times, just like how the British created the British model and the most populous model recreated out of the past models and packaged it amongst other things as the United States of America model after their epic war of independence from imperial Britain (1775-1778) as the Presidential



model¹. This new model came with the full regalia of the 'Roman Veto Power²' in a modernised form, civil and mass oriented. Nigeria as a nation-state has passed through these stages since independence when the British model was imposed on them. Consequently, the result was marred with all sorts of violence and social, economic and political malaises which prematurely ended the Nigerian First Republic (1963-1966) consequently, the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970)³.

In Nigeria's democratic development, significant reforms have been shaped by both colonial legacies and post-independence military intervention. While Nigeria's initial political structure largely reflected the British Parliamentary model, successive constitutional changes and reforms have gradually incorporated elements of other governance systems, including aspect associated with presidentialism. A notable administrative restructuring occurred under the military government in Nigeria which was started by the late General Murtala/Obasanjo regime but was fully implemented in the 1976 constitutional reforms that eventually contributed to the adoption of a presidential system in the Second Republic⁴. Hence,

democracy by all intense and purpose is the concept of and existence of the people. The call to ventilate the people and their peaceful coexistence came to the front burner in the 1950s with the Colonial Masters who set up the *Commission of Inquiring* headed by Sir Henry Willink. From findings, after the thorough inquest by the Commission recommendations were made and top-notch was built on consideration of the rights and the protection of minorities within the framework of Nigeria's major regional blocs, namely Hausa/Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. Nevertheless, a significant portion of these recommendations was not fully adopted in later constitutional development.⁵

Subsequent military administrations in Nigeria undertook significant structural reforms aimed at addressing issues of governance, unity, and administrative efficiency. These reforms included the gradual restructuring of the Nigerian federation from 4 regions into 12 units (states), later 19, 21, 30 and finally 36 accompanied with the relocation of the Federal Capital from Lagos to Abuja just like USA when she relocated her capital from Philadelphia to the former District of Columbia and renamed it Washington DC. Within this short period of experimentation (1979-1996), another radical dictator

¹ The British model of democracy is the one that the veto power is reserved for the Prime Minister in a unicameral legislature called the Parliamentary democracy.

² The veto (a Latin word: I forbid) power was started during the Republican age during the rise of Rome but was officially repackaged by the late Julius Caesar and was constitutionalised by Augustus Caesar, Caesar's successor after his brutal assassination.

³ Damola Awoyokun, "Biafra: The Facts, the Fiction, American Secret Files, Biafra, the Facts, the Fiction Part 3, *The News Magazine*,) 16-18

⁴ Shaibu Ibrahim and Obeya N. Bernard, "Nigerian Military and the Challenges of Nation Building 1960-

1979: Involvements, Achievements and Failures" in *Labar: Journal of Military History and Peace Studies (LJMHPs)*, Maiden Edition, Vol 1. No 1, A publication of the Department of History, Nigerian Army University, Biu, 2019) 1-8

⁵ Kenneth T. Azaigba and Benjamin W. Yio, "Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle for True Federalism: Rethinking the Federal Character principle" in Victor Egwemi et.al.(eds.) *Federalism, Politics and Minorities in Nigeria: Essays in Honour of Professor G.N Hembé*, (Bathiti & Dalila Publisher: Lagos, Nigeria, 2014) 377-389



emerged on the scene of the Nigerian politics in the person of the late General Sani Abacha who organised a Constituent Assembly in Abuja. The *ad hoc* but democratic Assembly with valid term of reference had contingents drawn from the crème of First-Class Traditional Rulers, professionals, technocrats, politicians retired and serving in Nigeria and top-notch recommendations were made amongst others. The Assembly informed the then Head of States to balkanise Nigeria Federation into six geo-political zones against the conflicting status of three dichotomies hitherto entrenched by Colonial Britain into North, East and West and advocated for a new Nigeria to be based on North-East, North-West, North-Central, South- South, South-East and South-West geo-political divides⁶.

Furthermore, the emergence of the idea of political zoning is largely rooted in efforts to promote fairness, inclusiveness, and a sense of belonging among Nigeria's diverse groups, particularly in relation to the distribution of executive political offices across the three tiers of government. Overtime, the principle has been viewed as a mechanism for reducing political tension and managing competition for power among Nigeria's major ethnic and regional groups. During the Abacha administration, renewed attention was given to the idea of power rotation and political inclusion as part of broader constitutional reform discussions. Zoning was increasingly presented as a practical approach to mitigating the intense struggle for political office that has characterised Nigeria's political history

since independence. This paper therefore seek to historicise the concept of political zoning and examine its evolution from informal party arrangements to a proposed constitutional principles. It further considers the argument for its institutionalisation as part of Nigeria's governance framework, with the aim of contributing to political stability and addressing enduring challenges of national integration that have persisted since the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates.

Origin of Zoning in Nigerian Democracy

Zoning is the process of designating specific areas or positions for particular uses or purposes. The concept of 'purpose' in this context may be economic, politics, culture, sports amongst other things of human endeavours. The concern of this chapter is the sharing formula of politics and its dividends in Nigeria and the view to mainstream it to the question of zoning in Benue State since 2007 and in the federal Government of Nigeria especially, since 2015 when things started to fall apart with the exit of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria.

Zoning as a political practice in Nigeria gained renewed prominence during the transition programme of the administration of the late General Sani Abacha 1993-1998, where it featured as part of broader discussions on political inclusion and power rotation. Abacha organised a Constituent Assembly which brought together crème de la crème of technocrats, professionals and political leaders of thoughts from all the 774 local government areas of the country and representatives of all professional bodies, pressure groups, retired top members of the Armed Forces, Police and other services. Various suggestions and recommendations were made. The late Head of States was taking practical steps to towards

⁶ This geographical grouping in Nigeria is on paper still maintained but the rationale behind the classification which was more of power sharing is hanging and almost defeated.



implementing the various policy proposals when he died unexpectedly while in office.

These pragmatic steps taken by the late Military administration included delineation of Nigeria into six geo-political zones. As stated elsewhere in this paper, Abacha divided the former Southern Nigeria into three namely: South-South which historically was the old Mid-Western Region today as Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Delta, Edo and River states respectively otherwise known as the 'Niger Delta'. The former Western Region, he named the South-West with states like: Ekiti, Lagos, Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, and Osun. And the former Eastern Region, Abacha named South-East which houses five states and the only zone with five states namely: Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Imo states respectively. The vast North, Abacha balkanised into three namely: North-Central with six states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) namely: Abuja, Benue, Nasarawa, Niger, Kogi, Kwara and Plateau. He divided the core North into North-West zone which has the largest number of states like: Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Kastina, Kebbi, Sokoto and Zamfara states respectively. To the East he named the North-East with states like: Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba and Yobe states respectively⁷.

Furthermore, historical examination of General Sani Abacha's Political agenda for modern Nigeria, when viewed against the available variables prior to his death, suggests an attempt to restructure the Nigerian state through his transition programme. This vision was aimed at fostering a reconfigured national order that would move away from the entrenched

regional and ethnic divisions historically rooted in colonial administrative structure. He wanted a Nigeria where all the six geo-political zones are equal partnership in the politics of Nigeria irrespective of religious inclination or ethnic status or size as majority carries the votes, it is only factual that the minorities also have their ways. The presidency which is the biggest and highest executive office in Nigeria by this arrangement was supposed to rotate amongst the six without interruption of majority of Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba or the Igbo as the case is till day.

In that regards, offices such as the President, Vice President, Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Chief Justices of the Federation, Military Heads, Security Services, amongst others are supposed to be shared amongst the six as its rotation was supposed to be constitutionalised. In the states he divided into three zones namely: The Northern, Southern and the Eastern Senatorial Districts respectively where this template was supposed to be adopted hook-line and sinker down to the local governments' areas and even in the Council Wards. This all important project started by the late General Sani Abacha was discontinued by his immediate successors and the remains of the project of zoning is today a mere 'gentleman agreement'. For instance: The People's Democratic Party (PDP) started it but could not sustained it. Obasanjo was President for eight years (1999-2007, South-West), Atiku Abubakar was Vice President from the North-East for eight years, Senate President was a political war but in the South-East for eight years (Late Distinguished Senator Evans Ewere (Imo State), Chuba Wilberforce Okadigbo (Anambra State), Adolphus Nwabara (Abia

⁷ The results of the sub-division and delineation of the body polity of Nigeria by the late General Sani Abacha's Constituent Assembly in 1995.



State), Kennedy Nnamani (Enugu State) and Ayim Pius Ayim (Ebonyi State)⁸.

The implication was that the lack of political cohesion among the Igbo speaking states resulted in a situation where leadership opportunities rotated across the five states, reflecting efforts to manage internal political competition within the region. In similar situation, Speaker of the House of Representatives was in the North-West for eight years and three leaders benefited (Hon Sanusi Buhari from Sokoto was thrown out of office for certificate forgery, Gali Na'Abba from Kano succeeded him and later replaced over an alleged executive-legislative battle by Aminu Masari and later Executive Governor of Kastina). The position of Deputy-Senate President was in the North-Central along Party Chairman for eight years. South-South was holder of Deputy-Speaker and overseeing the Petroleum Industry for eight years. The political beauty was sustained by the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, GCFR and Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, GCFR until the emergence of the All Progressive Congress (APC) that the abuse of the sharing formula started⁹.

⁸ An interaction with Chief Engr., Benson Abounu, FSE, (former Deputy Governor of Benue State and then Secretary for the Movement for the Creation of Apa State) at his residence at Upu-Otukpo during the transition period from Suswam administration to the APC leadership in the State led by his principal, Governor Samuel Ortom in 2015)

⁹ During the Yar'Adua/Jonathan era, PDP maintained some critical zoning. For instance: The calmed political atmosphere in the North-Central Produced Distinguished Senator David Alechenu B. Mark GCON who was Senate President for 8 (2007-2015) years uninterrupted, after the demise of Umar Musa Yar'Adua Jonathan GCFR as a product of the 'Doctrine of Necessity' became Acting President and eventual President. He chose his running mate (a then serving Governor who was appointed from Kaduna to replace the Yar'Adua). Speakership was with the

Importance of Zoning in Nigeria's Democracy

Zoning principle is not only germane but could also serve as a foundation for the realisation of a new Nigeria in which all citizens are critical shareholders and it would have formed the new Nigeria of our dream where everyone are critical shareholders. If given legislative backing as a law of the Federation, the following are some of its likely benefits.

Zoning Rejuvenates Patriotism

A critical examination of the development of the Nigeria nation-state and the gradual evolution of patriotism among Nigerians reveal clear challenges including a decline in national cohesion. As far back as 1992, the then Military President, General Ibrahim B. Babangida, GCFR, cried out when he opined, "It would be catastrophic to allow time-consciousness to override the preservation of the unity of our pluralistic society¹⁰". From the 1930s when the sense of patriotism and nationalism was triggered-off by the late Sir Herbert Macaulay,

South-West, South-East got the position of Deputy Senate President in the person of Senator Ekweremadu for 8 years, South-South held the President amongst others. From the APC days the zone that got Vice-President also got the Speaker: Prof Yemi Osinbanjo and Femi Agbajamila, North-Central was almost left barren, South-East got nothing. Under President Bola Tinubu failed to study the psyches of Nigeria and Nigerians as very sensitive people to the issue of religion and he also forget about the debacle of Abiola/Kingibe's ticket. Since 1960, the two most exhaustive seats are shared amongst the two front line religion: Christianity and Islam. For instance: 1959-1966: Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe (Christian) was President and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (Muslim) Prime Minister and down to the days of the Military through to the 2023.

¹⁰ Ibrahim B. Babangida on the fragile unity of Nigeria during his abortive transition to democracy, "On the Marble", *Newswatch Magazine*, November 9, 1992) 5



Nigerians were indivisibly united like a well-trained military battalion whose objective was to paddle the canoe of nationhood to its destination at the time of war. The result of this unified struggle was the easy clinching of the Nigerian independence and the birth of the nation on October 1, 1960. Things began to fall apart as from the period of the republican status of Nigeria in 1963. From findings, sectionalism, nepotism, corrupt practices, ethnicity and other non-national interests nailed the young Federation¹¹.

It Enhances Security, Competition and Rapid Development

Studies on political zoning in Nigeria suggest that it could contribute to political stability and strengthen the polity, thereby enhancing intergroup relations as well as promoting peace and security within the state. If Nigeria can go back and dust the documents the late General Sani Abacha intended to change the narrative of the Nigeria's politics in the 21st century and made them laws of the Federation. Particularly, the issue of zoning as a template for the sharing of power in Nigeria just like the Federal Character and quota system in the recruitment and enlistment into the Federal Services since the First Republic. The 'Federal Character' and 'Quota System' have since received legislative backing or an act of Parliament¹². For instance, in the wisdom of this paper, the Nigerian democratic power should be shared in the following way: President, Vice President, Senate President, Speaker House

of Representatives, Chief Justice of the Federation, and the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) for category A. Category B may include: Deputy Senate President, Deputy Speaker, Chief of Army Staff, Chief of Naval Staff, Chief of Air Staff and Inspector General of Police and afterwards the rest others can simply follows the Federal Character structures which has seriously been abused since the beginning of the Fourth Republic (1999-2023) in Nigeria¹³.

The best approach to modern development, security, mobilization and healthy competitions are found in the United States of America amongst the various races and interest groups and these are the rationale for their being first in almost every global politics. United States is always dynamic, flexible and people's oriented. It started from the input of the concept of Community, District, Council, State, and eventually at the Federal level. These strata are always respected in the USA and are never overlapped in the schemes of things. For example, former President Barrack Obama was not a product of the bourgeois like the late John F Kennedy, George W. Bush and the others of this world but rather, a product

¹¹ Tobs Agbaegbu, "The Politicians as a Problem" in *Newswatch Magazine*, October 6, 1997) 12-24

¹² Kenneth T. Azaigba and Benjamin W. Yio, "Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle for True Federalism: Rethinking the Federal Character principle" in Victor Egwemi et.al.(eds.) *Federalism, Politics and Minorities in Nigeria*: 377-389

¹³ It is on record that during the civilian administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, GCFR, the All Progressive Congress been the ruling party abused the sense of zoning hitherto in place. The sharing of the offices of Vice President, Speaker Federal House, most strategic military and other services positions in question were grossly chosen on the basis of party loyalty, religion and ethnic inclinations. The South-West, North-West and North-East were loaded and whilst, the North-Central, South-South and South-East were begging for remnants from the Federal distribution. For instance: Buhari gave the South-West both Vice Vice-President and Speaker Federal House of Representatives obviously on detect of Bola Tinubu (now a President) and it is wrong for the two offices to be in one zone. Most Service Chiefs were of either of one zone, religion, ethnicity amongst other anomalies.



of the community¹⁴. He moved from a mobilizer to a State Senate, Federal Senate and eventually the President of the United States of America against all odds. Nigerian nation-state can borrow a leaf from the USA's politics hence, modern politics should be on the basis of sense of equity and fair play and not on the madness of population and majority which in Nigeria can only procreate mediocrity and corruption. These fear was captured in the late Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu's speech after the unfortunate January 15, 1966 *Coup D'état* in Nigeria as he stressed: Our enemies are the political profiteers, the swindlers, the men in high and low places that seek bribes and demand ten per cent; those that seeks to keep this country permanently divided so that they can remain in office as Ministers or VIPs at least¹⁵.

Nigerians are the one that will make their democracy work. Democracy from the simple understanding by this paper is a system suitably designed by the people for the comfort and benefits of the multifaceted country like Nigeria. Nigeria has no central monarch like the British and the Arabs world. French had similar British political background but had to dethrone corruption from the French society. The French society rose above the bench mark and destroyed the system during the French Revolution of 1789 and instituted the Republic that opened-up France. The United States of America Continental Army followed suit and destroyed what the conservative British

started on their island and further produced one of the finest democratic model which today stands as a beacon of hope for every common man in the world¹⁶.

In Nigeria, the late Sani Abacha as a military strategist has carefully thought along the line and concluded that every parts of these country that participated in the building of modern Nigeria since 1914 amalgamation are qualified as partakers in the sharing formula of the national cake. Henceforth, the need for the six geo-political divides as against the colonial tripartite dichotomies which is not a true reflection of federalism and consequently, in Nigeria, it an incubating machine for breeding conflicts and corruption since 1960¹⁷.

Conclusion

It is important to note that history is shaped by human actions, and long-standing political patterns can be altered by decisive leadership. The journey of man on the earth planet is the process of history and the ability of the character and personality to proactively interrogate and impact the process is the measurement of his or her contribution. Interestingly, history is deaf, she is dumb and blind but ironically, history that is denied by nature on the grounds of the tripartite deformity still sees all, hears all and talks all when she judges¹⁸. The question now is, how will the history of Nigerian politics will judge the crop of leaderships that believes Nigeria and the share of the goodies are only reserves for the majority?

¹⁴ Nancy Gibbs, "Ready and Waiting", Eric Pooley, "Can Bush Bring Us Together? In *Time Magazine*, (Vol.1, 56 No. 26, December 25, 2000- January 1, 2001) 35-54

¹⁵ Dele Omotunde, "Why the Young Majors Struck", *20 years of Military Rule, Newswatch, Special Report*,) 26

¹⁶ John W. Hall (Gen Ed.) *History of the World from Earliest Time to the Present Day*, (World Publications Group: North Dighton, USA, 2005) 298, 300, 472-780

¹⁷ Janet Mba-Afolabi, "Tribalism of Tongues and Tribes" in *Newswatch Magazine*, October 6, 1997) 31-35

¹⁸ This is because history is objective and impartial.



The institutionalisation of political zoning in Nigeria may be compared, in a limited analytical sense, to decisive historical moments in which significant political transitions reshaped existing state structures, such as Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, which marked a turning point in Roman political history. In this context, the formalisation of zoning is viewed as a mechanism capable of contributing to political restructuring and national cohesion in Nigeria. The implication, therefore, is the possibility of a more inclusive and stable political order.

This paper further calls on the leaders in Nigeria's fourth republic to critically review earlier constitutional reform proposals, including those associated with the Abacha transition programme, particularly on power rotation and zoning, with a view of assessing their relevance to contemporary governance challenges.

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