

FEDERAL 'IMPERIALISM' AND THE EROSION OF IGBO IDENTITY IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IGBO POLITICAL CLOUT IN THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

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Introduction

Harold Laswell's definition of politics in terms of allocation of values and resources in the society fits well to the Nigerian context. Nigerian politics since the colonial period has been characterized by ethnic chauvinism, hence it means 'who gets what, when and how'¹ to each ethnic group. Nigeria is made up of over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups² of which three, namely; the Hausa /Fulani, the Igbo and Yoruba appear to be the most dominant. The structure of Nigerian federation appears lopsided; there is a concentration of power and authority at the center. As a writer described it, "The Nigerian federation is deformed; the system has been skewed in such a way that the center has been so loaded to the detriment of states and local councils"². Consequently, its attractiveness has made the ethnic groups to shun politics at the periphery and fervently crave to be at the center so as to preside over the 'sharing of the national cake'.

The effort of the Igbo political elite in this direction has, at best been rewarded with second fiddle positions. No Igbo politician has wielded real power at the center, albeit, the Igbo have remained an essential factor in the political equation of Nigeria. Certainly, the Igbo clout in Nigerian politics is quite enormous, and as a popular Igbo adage goes, 'the presence of a big fish must be felt in the river'. Yet the Igbo appear not to fare so well in the political scheme of the Fourth Republic. It does seem their previous forays into the epicenter of Nigerian politics are being gradually and systematically reversed.

i. The Problem

That the Igbo are emasculated politically by the imperious tendencies of president Olusegun Obasanjo led administration is indeed very obvious. This could be gauged from some of his policies that tend to inferiorize them, assault their sensibilities and erode their dignity. The Igbo political ideals have been abused and its genuine leaders brazenly rubbished. The federal 'imperialism' has created a new class of political elite from the ranks of miscreants in the society. Again, federal Government patronages have been used to raise scoundrels and dregs to positions of authority and influence.

These no doubt have negatively impacted on the psyche of the

genuine and committed Igbo leaders and a vast majority of the people. This paper seeks to unravel the underlying reasons for this state of affairs, it also attempts to identify the role of the President, his cronies and henchmen in Igbo society in the perpetration of this situation. Finally, it suggests remedies for this untoward situation.

In order to address these issues; this paper will first highlight the contribution of some notable Igbo statesmen to the emergence of the fourth Republic. Second, It explores the reasons for President Obasanjo's splenetic hatred and strong antagonism for the Igbo and his machinations to undermine them. Finally it recommends solution to the problem of Igbo political emasculation and presents the summary and conclusion .

B. Contributions of the Igbo to the Emergence of the Fourth Republic

But for the short-lived Interim National Government (ING) of Chief Ernest Shonekan, Nigeria was under the spell of military dictatorship from 1984 - 1998, during which three Army Generals, namely: Muhammad Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha, fired the shots. But Sanni Abacha's regime appears to be the most controversial because of his intent to transmute to a civilian president. The stage appeared set for its actualization as all the five registered political parties except the Movement for Democracy and Justice (MDJ) led by M.D Yusuf, had adopted him as their presidential candidate. Organizations and movements were floated to blow the trumpet for Abacha's civilian presidency. Abacha's cronies sponsored marches and rallies to further this goal. Even notable politicians had vowed that it was "either Abacha or anarchy"⁴ Again, retired Army Generals who, Abacha perceived as threats to the actualization of his ambition were incarcerated in jail on trumped up charges of coup plot. Notable among them were Olusegun Obasanjo, and Shehu Yar'Adua. His Second-in command, Oladipo Diya was also indicted for a coup plot. Shehu Yaru' Adua later died in prison because of alleged injection into his body of lethal substance.

It was in the midst of this confused atmosphere that some notable statesmen, led by Dr. Alexander Ekwueme under the umbrella of the G.34 rendered the most redoubtable opposition to Abacha's self succession bid, through guided criticism and sensitization of the public on the need to resist such attempt.

However, fate appeared to be on their side as all the brouhaha of Abacha's presidency and self-succession ended abruptly with his sudden death on June 8, 1998. This loosened the tensed and charged political atmosphere that pervaded the country.

As late General Abacha's successor, Gen. Abdusalami Abubakar initiated programmes for a return to genuine democratic rule and encouraged the formation of political parties; Dr. Alexander Ekwueme became the hero and symbol of the emergent democracy.

He contributed immensely to the formation of the ruling People's Democratic Party, articulated its manifesto and is believed to have designed the party logo. These explain his choice as the first Chairman, Board of Trustees of the party.

However, he lost the contest for the party's presidential flag bearer to Rtd, Gen Olusegun Obasanjo, due to the activities of retired military officers who hijacked the party's convention at Ilo-Ilo for the choice of a presidential candidate. Be that as it may, it was the leading role of Dr. Alexander Ekwueme in the formation of the party that it earned it the grass root support it enjoyed in several states, most especially in Igboland.

The Igbo contribution to the emergence of the fourth Republic is symbolized in Dr. Ekwueme's role.

C. Reasons for President Obasanjo's Splenetic Hatred and Strong Antagonism for the Igbo
Retired General Obasanjo's emergence as Nigeria's president in the 4th Republic is an irony of fate. He was not instrumental to the formation of the political party under whose platform he ran the election. Secondly, he was the most ill prepared and equipped for the post because of the psychological impact of prolonged incarceration in jail which, many argued, may have affected his balance. To such people, his psychological rehabilitation was of foremost imperative. However, no sooner than he took the mantle of leadership did he start to initiate policies and programmes to consolidate power. The way this affected the Igbo is the focus of this section of this paper. Some of them are discussed below:

(i) The need to stem Dr. Alexander Ekwueme's soaring political profile

As has been indicated, Dr. Ekwueme could unarguably be described as the symbol of the emergent fourth Republic, who had also enjoyed an illustrious political career. These credentials it would appear, could pose a threat to President Obasanjo's future political ambition and he therefore ingeniously elbowed him out from the PDP mainstream by stripping him of the post of the Chairman of the PDP Board of Trustees, alienating his loyalists from government and raising a new set of Igbo political elite for the PDP.

This could be best appreciated against the backdrop of events at the Abuja conventions for the choice of PDP flag bearer in the 2003 presidential election.

(ii) The MASSOB Scare

The return to democratic rule in 1999 saw the birth of several ethnic organizations and resurgence in the activities of the existing ones. One of such new movements that has become an incubus to Obasanjo's administration is the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). Its well-articulated programme, coordinated activities and nonviolence stance distinguish it from others. It reigns in the minds of both the young and old in Igboland. It has been unequivocal in its condemnation of the continued marginalization and dehumanization of the Igbo in Nigerian politics because of its desire for self-survival and determination that had culminated in the Nigerian civil war.

Perhaps the plank of the movement's goal that has given the Obasanjo-led administration the greatest night mare is the demand for an independent and sovereign state of Biafra, which appears to enjoy some measure of international support.

(iii) The APGA Threat

The Independent (?) National Electoral Commission's (INEC) decision to register more political parties, prompted politicians, whose vision programme and policies could not find space in the existing parties to make collaborative efforts with like minds to register their associations as political parties. One such party whose cardinal objective was to provide a platform for Igbo political expression was the All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA). Its registration generated so many furores in the high quarters of INEC. The Director of legal Services of INEC Barr. Mrs. Obegolu's travails in the commission were not unconnected with the party's registration⁵. The Obasanjo led administration saw the party as a wing of MASSOB, which must be clipped. President Obasanjo's cronies and henchmen in the Igbo speaking states mounted series of propaganda and disseminated vilifying information to dissuade the people from embracing the party. The Igbo states' governors were assured second term tickets, regardless of their abysmal performance, in order to forestall APGA consolidation in Igboland. These efforts, however, yielded no fruit as the Igbo voted massively for the APGA candidates in all the elections.

But the president Obasanjo's rigging machinery (INEC) returned PDP candidates as winners in the election. In order to play down on the magnitude of fraud in the election, Igbo political opportunist were engaged and freely given access to National electronic media to defend the apparent PDP victory at the polls in Igboland. One of them, Mr. Rochas Okorocha attributed PDP victory over APGA to lack of grass root support and structure for winning elections. Nothing can be farther from the truth.

D. President Obasanjo's Machinations to Undermine the Igbo

Two personal traits that President Obasanjo has ceaselessly displayed since assumption of office are vindictiveness and love to extract a pound of flesh for any single hair uprooted. Dispassionate assessment of his human relations is replete with events and instances to justify these assertions. Since the focus is on the Igbo, the author deems it fit to limit his instances to the president's relations with them. The case of Dr. Alexander Ekwueme has been stated else where in this paper and therefore needs no repetition. President Obasanjo vindictiveness on the Igbo for embarking on secession in 1967 is expressed in the inflammatory and scandalous remark he made at the reconciliation meeting with the people of Odi. According to him:

If Biafra had won, the resources would have been in the hands of Biafrans. If Nigeria had lost that war, Ojukwu would have cancelled River State, which gave birth to Bayelsa. It was the victory over Biafra that ensured that

the natural resources were deployed for the use of all Nigerians. If Ojukwu had won, I know I will be dead by now and so many other people will be dead too.⁶

The travails of the Anambra State governor, Dr. Chris Ngige in the hands of his abductors and the President's reaction on the matter is quite disappointing. The fear that he had fore knowledge of the dastardly act has been confirmed.⁷ Instead of allowing the law to take its full course on the abductors, he insisted on a political settlement, describing it as a PDP family affair. His action has been described as an attempt to "complete his unfinished business in Igboland in the last general election".⁸ Dr. Ngige's unyielding and uncompromising stance on the issue, prompted president Obasanjo to remind him that "we know how you became governor" to which Dr. Ngige retorted "the result of our elections were written on the same table"⁹. This unusual display of courage has further compounded Dr. Ngige's problem, as it would appear the presidency has attempted to employ all means-legal and extralegal to oust him from office.

(i) Rigging and manipulation of election results.

Another method that the president has employed to emasculate the Igbo in Nigeria politics is a systematic rigging of elections and manipulation of election results. The reports of Independent observers on the conduct of the 2003 general elections were unequivocal in stating that results returned did not reflect the votes cast and that there were several instances of intimidation of voters. They went further to report that elections did not hold in the states in the South east. Yet results were returned which favoured PDP. Related to this is the use of the police to intimidate voters.

(ii) Destabilizing Igbo political cohesion

Igwebuike - There is force in collective action:- This is the philosophy behind Igbo collaborative action. Wherever it is punctured or deflated, Igbo unity is undermined. This appears to be the stock-in-trade of the presidency against the Igbo. It was variously employed to destabilize Igbo political cohesion. In the first place, there has been an unwarranted meddling in the position allocated to the Igbo in the PDP government zoning arrangement. The choice of Chief Evan Enwerem as Senate President was masterminded by the president against the wishes of the senators from the zone. When eventually he was impeached on grounds of incompetence and inability to assert the independence of the senate from the executive. Dr. Chuba Okadigbo, the preferred candidate took up the mantle of leadership of the senate. However, he was impeached on grounds of financial impropriety, even when he had received a clean bill from the Committee that investigated the charges levelled against him. Finally Chief Anyim came on board and piloted the affairs in the Senate till it wound up. Again, 'Abuja politicians' were pitched against the

state governors. This made the Igbo politician to dissipate their energies on affairs at the state to the neglect of those at the federal level.

iii. The Elevation of miscreants to positions of authority and influence.

The marginalization of the Igbo in Nigeria politics has eroded the norms and the values which sustained Igbo society. Unemployment occasioned by the obnoxious quota system has kept many employable young stars in Igbo society out of job. How be it, Igbo land can boast of notable statesmen, successful professionals and academia. Unfortunately, it does seem that these notable figures have been sidelined in the politics of Igboland, due to the desires of the powers that be at Aso Rock to empower individuals who they would use to destabilize Igbo nation. A typical case in point is Chris Uba, whose nuisance value in Anambra State is now a source of concern to the indigenes of the state. Pini Jason a columnist in one of the leading national newspaper had this to say" ... President Obusanjo did not create Chris Uba, but has continued to use him"¹⁰ So disgusting has the trend of elevating nonentities and miscreants to influential position become that the writer laments;

Igboland ... boasts of some of the best Nigerians, and we all know them. If people in Aso rock continue to be friend and empower miscreants in Igboland, it cannot be blamed on the Igbos. Ndigbo have never presented these miscreants to Nigeria as their representatives none of them has won a credible election in Igboland",¹¹

He concludes by saying "Aso Rock chose to work with them for obvious reasons",¹² These reasons are not far-fetched; To undermine Ndigbo and destroy their political clout.

Closely related to the elevation of miscreants to places of influence is the choice to work with some Igbo politicians with questionable credentials. One major feature of this administration is the use of people's antecedents to cow them. The controversies that surround the electoral victory of the incumbent senate president is an open knowledge. But let it be truly stated that he came into the senate through the 'back door'. And this the president has used to mortgage him and secure total subservience. He may not be too eager to oppose or criticize his obnoxious policies against the Igbo , as any such attempt may incur the president wrath and cause the invocation of his back door entry to the senate.

(iv) Rubbishing Genuine Igbo leaders,

Leadership question has been a raging one in Igbo land. Authors and commentators have postulated a theory of absence of kingship in Igbo society due to its acephalous and Republican nature. The merits and demerits of this theory need not bother us so much. But suffice it to say that Igbo society has never been bereft of authority,

leadership and all what not. In addition to inherited authority and leadership in primogeniture, leaders in Igbo society have also spontaneously emerged in response to the spur of the moment. It would appear the detractors of Ndigbo have capitalized on this to rubbish Igbo leaders by undermining their authority and influence. The result of the 2003 presidential election testifies to this. Chief Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, who unarguably is the most popular Igbo leader had his ambition of leading Igbo politically, aborted through massive rigging and manipulation of the election result.

E. Solutions to Igbo Political Emasculation

i. The need for a common vision and common Agenda in political pursuit of the Igbo.

The Igbo political elites appear not to have presented a common agenda and vision in the pursuit of a political programme that will empower them. Personal interest and personality complex have made the Igbo not to close ranks and present a common fronts Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu monumental statement while flagging off president Obasanjo's second term campaign at Enugu suggests that some purported Igbo leaders are still politically naive. According to him, his campaign for Obasanjos second term bid was because no Igbo had indicated serious interest for the post of the presidency. This is self-contradictory because Dr. Ekwueme had run for the PDP primaries without Chief Iwuanyanwu rendering any support for his bid. This again shows inferiority complex because he has better credentials to run for the presidency than Obasanjo whom he was supporting. Tony Mornoh's admonition to the Igbo is quite instructive.

The Igbo are being laughed at and they should know it -. They are falling for a scheme worked out in the consultation rooms of those who see a larger picture than personal fights, for the republicanism has its fortune, but where individualism subject every thing else to personal interest, then the consequences of failure should be borne without pointing to directions outside the home base. Nigerians want the Igbo people to rise to any level of their choice,¹³

He finally uses the metaphor of the broomstick to drive home his point; "... our brothers should work as brooms, not strut around the national stage as broom sticks, Others entitled to the same interests they are pursuing can only be too happy to pick the broom sticks to pieces"¹⁴

ii. The need to build alliances with the two concentric circles of the Igbo immediate neighbours and that of the large Nigerian.

Achike Udenwa aptly captures this need when he said "perhaps a fresh way to look at new alliances is for Ndigbo to look inwards first, and strike enduring political friendship with their minority brothers" 15. This could then offer Ndigbo an enlarged pedestal with which to reach out to other ethnics groups.

iii. The need to de-emphasize pecuniary benefits in the political relationship entered between Ndigbo and other ethnic groups.

The Igbo propensity for pecuniary advantages has made them objects of ridicule and caricature. It is on record that most Igbo politicians have sabotaged the Igbo political agenda simply because of the contract patronages and the servile act of picking the crumbs from the table of those in authority, thereby losing their pride. Unfortunately also, these self-seekers have been used to destabilize the Igbo and disorientate the youth towards the love of money and lust for lucre.

F. Summary and Conclusion

This paper has established that the Igbo clout in Nigerian politics has been eroded due to the imperious politics of the president Obasanjo led government. This has been reinforced by the activities of some self seeking Igbo politicians who have served as willing tools for the actualization of this plan. It further argues that the deliberate effort to raise new leaders from miscreants and nonentities in Igboland was to suppress opposition and rubbish the genuine Igbo leaders state. It established that the scare for the activities and mission of the MASSOB and perceived threat from the APGA were instrumental to the massive rigging that characterized the last general election as it concerns Igboland.

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