

Task of Nation Building Series Volume 1

CORRUPTION

&

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



Ayandiji D. Aina
Editor

A Publication of the Program on Policy, Conflict & Strategic Studies, Babcock University

TASK OF NATION BUILDING SERIES

VOLUME 1

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Published, August 2007 by:
School of Management & Social Science,
Babcock University Press Ltd.

ISBN: 978-35130-8-7

Printed by:
EMAPHINE REPROGRAPHICS LTD
Somolu, Lagos
E-mail: emaphinenig@yahoo.com
Tel: 01- 4353882; 08023266681, 08028026494

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Perspectives on the Tenure Extension Bid in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

Hassan A. Saliu
&
A. A. Muhammad

There is no denying the fact that democracy has taken root in Nigeria. At least, the successful conduct of a civilian to civilian transitional election is a pointer to gradual institutionalization of democratic processes. This, however, is not to suggest the absence of strains and stresses on the system that are capable of engendering democratic regression. A major source of stress in the current administration was the issue of tenure extension which apparently polarized not only the political class but equally, the entire citizenry. Consequently, the polity was pervaded by a kind of intransigence between proponents and opponents of tenure extension. Against this background, this paper examines contending perspectives on the issue of tenure extension in Nigeria's fourth republic. Taking a cursory look through history as well as recent happenings, the paper argued that political opportunism of some sort underlies the issue of tenure extension. Above all, the undercurrents and its dimensions pose a serious threat to the country's stability and democratic sustenance. Is Nigeria's democracy on the retreat?

INTRODUCTION

Central to the deepening and consolidation of any democratic process is respect for the rules of the game. These include the conduct of periodic elections to allow citizens express their preferences; respect for the rule of law and constitutionalism including acceptance of constitutionally imposed limitations on tenure of political office holders. Indeed, terms limit for political office holders is essential to safeguard the sovereignty of the people by constantly reminding political office holders that they are servants and not masters of the people (Muhammed 2006:1). Ironically, however, there have always been attempts by some leaders to subvert this constitutional safeguard through overt or covert attempts to elongate their tenure beyond constitutional provisions was recently the case in Nigeria under incumbent President Olusegun Obasanjo. Since the rumoured term extension came to the fore barely three years ago, several dimensions to the issue have been revealed. This paper, however, concentrates on arguments and views of both the pro-tenure extension and anti-tenure extension proponents. Indeed, so charged was the issue that opposing movements emerged at the National Assembly such as the Unity Forum, a group of pro-tenure extension legislators and the 2007 movement, members of which were basically anti tenure extension (see, Tell March 13, 2006:24-26). These are in addition to other groups among the populace that either drew up support for or mobilized Nigerians against the tenure extension bid.

The significance of the tenure extension issue was underscored by the fact that a sitting Vice President assumed the role of opposition in mobilizing support against what was generally perceived as third term agenda in Nigeria. Although the National Assembly may have thrown out the issue of tenure extension when it discontinued further debate on the constitutional amendment bill on 16th of May 2006, the dust it raised is, however, yet to subside. Indeed, the issue of tenure extension or otherwise did not only polarized the political class but it also caused some concerns among citizens and their foreign friends. It is in this connection that this paper examines the various perspectives on tenure extension in Nigeria. This is done with a view to determining the driving force(s) behind the various view points and to establish possible impact which the controversy has made on the country's democratic process. The paper has six sections beginning with the introductory remarks. The second section provides a theoretical background for our argument while the third is on historical perspective on tenure extension. The fourth section examines contending perspectives on tenure extension in Nigeria and the various justifications offered by the proponents and antagonists, while the fifth examine the undercurrents of the trend and its implications for democratic growth. The sixth section concludes the work.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Broadly speaking, the idea of tenure extension represents a universal phenomenon among countries of the world although it is more prevalent in developing countries of Africa than developed democracies. The attempt to explain this trend has therefore given rise to some theoretical explanations by scholars. For instance, Olurode (2006:6) has advanced four different explanations. According to him, it could be argued that the reluctance of some African leaders to voluntarily vacate office might arise out of a genuine concern for good governance and accountability. This argument, perhaps, may be hinged on the thinking that African leaders are genuine statesmen whose love for their country is of paramount interest to them. Thus, it may be said that their desire to perpetuate in office beyond constitutional limitation is borne out of the nationalist zeal to develop their societies and advance the general interest of the people which they fear a new hand may be unable to do. However, the un-tenability of this assumption has been proven by a legacy of mis-governance and personal rule, poverty and stagnation that are often left behind by such regimes and administrations. A second explanation at the theoretical realm is hinged on the traditional

orientation of African leaders whereby leaders once appointed are expected to rule for life. Indeed, in traditional African societies, ruler-ship is in most cases based on kinship ties or consanguine affinity. Equally, leadership succession comes only after the death of an incumbent, except in few cases where the leader is forced to abdicate his throne following the committal of a grievous offence. This traditional practice of succession, however, holds no water in modern nation-states which conversely, is characterized by limited rule, responsive and accountable leadership through periodic elections. Unfortunately, the traditional orientation still tends to reverberate in modern African leaders who, in spite of not being appointed based on traditional considerations, see their election and assumption of power as an opportunity to achieve, in a modern context, what they, perhaps, may not be entitled to in traditional Africa. While this may be a plausible argument, it could be argued still that, the extent of modernization and transformation that has taken place in Africa coupled with the need to ensure accountability of rulers to the ruled, such orientation ought to have faded away, giving room for a more dynamic and responsive leadership. Yet, another explanation is hinged on the fact that the phenomenon of military intervention in politics has weakened an orderly transfer of power and elevated the use of force in political succession (Olurode, 2006:6). Indeed, it is a fact that the mentality of the average African has become militarized especially for those who have experienced prolonged military authoritarian rule. But realities have shown that not all cases of tenure extension or reluctance to hand over power have been preceded by an experience in military rule. This was the case with leaders such as Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, among others. While these leaders have extended their tenure in one way or the other, they lacked military background as advanced.

A fourth theoretical argument, advanced by Olurode lies in the failure of African leaders at institution building in place of leadership that is centred on a personality cult. According to him, African leaders, being naïve tend to see themselves as *Baba* (father) of their nations and thereby indispensable. Thus:

They readily submit to flatterers and sycophants who constantly hover around corridors of power. Since they hope to be in office for life, no form of exit strategy was in contemplation which in turn makes them to be frightened of life after office. In all these, the material factor in the desperation to continue in office is critical (Olurode, 2006:6).

The significance of this explanation lies in the fact that it recognizes a pecuniary advantage in the desperation of leaders to remain in office. This is significant because such pecuniary considerations are universal rather than being peculiar to Africa. However, the above arguments canvassed by Olurode can be accommodated under a wider term called 'political opportunism'

As defined by Saliu (2001) political opportunism is a tendency which relegates principles to the background in the conduct of political affairs. That is, a situation whereby political actors abandon their initial or professed political cause in favour of some other unwholesome practices including the desire to perpetuate themselves in office. He noted further that in most cases, political actors exhibit political opportunism against the background of the expected material benefits. In other words, we may conveniently argue that political opportunism lies at the heart of tenure extension or elongated rule by leaders.

A leader typically, would want an elongation of tenure not necessarily in the interest of good governance and accountability but primarily because of the advantages conferred on him by the office. Similarly, even where there is genuine necessity for extension of tenure of the incumbent (though rare), this would also meet with opposition from those already aspiring to take over such office based on the perceived advantage of being there. The opportunity cost of not being there therefore usually produce discordant tunes between incumbents and aspirants. In essence, the driving force behind such lies in the fact that political offices are often loaded with various forms of perquisites at the disposal of the office holder. In this context, political succession usually provoke crises between the incumbent and aspiring political actors, a situation which in most cases

constitutes threat to the democratic process. Herein lies the Nigerian malady. Nigeria regained democratic rule in 1999 after long years of military authoritarianism following the successful conduct of a general election in April. It organized another general election in 2003 which gave the incumbent President a second term tenure of another four years - the maximum allowed by the constitution. Against the expectation of another round of election in 2007 which is expected to produce a new President for the country, emerged the controversy over extension of tenure for the present administration. This, no doubt, pitched members of the political class against one another. Before exploring this further, a historical perspective on tenure extension across the world and in Nigeria is essential.

TENURE EXTENSION IN COMPARATIVE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A peep into history reveals that the trend of regime elongation is neither new in Nigeria's history nor in the governance of nations, the world over. For instance, even the U.S. which is renowned for being an architect and preserver of current democratic wave, has had cause to battle with the issue of tenure extension in its political history. The lists of its leaders that have attempted it include President George Cleveland; Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt (see, Adedipe 2006:18-19). George Cleveland ruled between 1885-89 and 1893 to 97 but sought a third term in the 1896 elections. He however failed because his party refused to nominate him. Second was Theodore Roosevelt who ruled for two terms between 1901 and 1909. Three years after leaving office (1912) he wanted to return to power but could not persuade his Republican party to nominate him. He thereafter floated his own Progressive party to realise his ambition of a third term but was defeated in the elections. Thirdly, was Franklin Roosevelt. Franklin was America's President from 1938 to 45. He desired to make history as first American president to rule for three terms and assumed that the on-going World War II then would likely persuade Americans to endorse his tenure by another term. However, he also failed in this endeavour.

In Africa, the trend is not significantly different but more often than not characterized by crude and unconstitutional pathways. Thus, in most of the countries, rulers have often had their way in elongating their tenure beyond constitutional approved limits. Instances of this include, President Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo; Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe; Mobutu Sese-seko of the Democratic Republic of Congo; Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; Museveni of Uganda, Idris Derby of Chad and a host of others (see, Muhammed 2006: 41-51; Adejugbe 2006: 15-16 and Olurode, 2006: 2-3). Indeed, as Olurode (2006:2) noted, 'the sit-tight in office syndrome is the rule among African leaders' as they continue to manipulate the constitution to achieve their ambition. In the case of Nigeria which has spent most part of its history under military rule, the first attempt at tenure elongation was in 1974 under General Yakubu Gowon who took the mantle of leadership following the counter-coup of July 1966. After series of failed promises, he promised to hand power over to a democratic civilian government in 1974. However, he reneged in this by claiming that the 1974 date was no longer realistic. The aftermath of this was his overthrow in August 1975 after spending close to nine years in power (Osaghae 1998; Oyediran 1984). Second was the attempt by General Ibrahim Badamasi Babagida to continue to hold on to power after annulling the June 12 1993 presidential election. The politics of his transition programme and the eventual annulment have been aptly documented. What is, however, important for our purpose here is that 'rather than ride into historical glory' by handing over to a democratically elected civilian government, General Babagida got infected by the virus of autocracy and personal rule (Ibrahim 2006:3) and had to step aside in August 1993 following domestic and international pressures on his regime. Babagida's exit paved way for the short-lived Interim National Government headed by Ernest Shonekan which was also changed barely three months in office. Consequently, the mantle of leadership fell on General Sanni Abacha who promised a quick transition. But as noted earlier, the sit-tight in

office syndrome seems an appealing consideration for many African rulers. The Abacha government soon realized it could prolong its tenure by intimidating and coercing his opponents into submission. He was on the verge of transmuting from military to a civilian head of state through manipulation of the electoral process when he suddenly died on June 8 1998. His death paved way for General Abdulsalami Abubakar to come in as head of state and the subsequent transition to civilian government in May 1999 which produced the current administration headed by the incumbent, President Olusegun Obasanjo.

While the essence of the above historical insights is to sharpen our understanding of the issue under consideration, it must be acknowledged that there are some differences in their outcomes much as there are some similarities. A common chain in issues of tenure extension across continents is that there are usually protagonists and antagonists with political elites advancing arguments from either side. Equally, it is usually preceded by attempts to manipulate constitutional and political process in favour of the incumbent. This, however, often record varying degrees of success. Therefore, while some attempts at tenure extension may not be successful in some contexts, in others it has become a reality. This is the paradox in most African countries where incumbents have succeeded in elongating their tenure in office above initial constitutional limits. It must be observed that in Nigeria, previous attempts at tenure elongation were by different military regimes. Perhaps due to the fact that military rule dominated most part of Nigeria's governance or because none of the previous civilian governments attained their maximum constitutional limits, the recent attempt by a civilian government was therefore unique in the history of the country. The next section examines contending views on this issue under the current civilian administration.

CONTENDING PERSPECTIVES

Before embarking on a discourse of the various perspectives, it is necessary to note some issues which were central to the discourse. The first issue relates to the need to amend the 1999 constitution of Nigeria and second was what has been referred to as 'controversial sign posts' (Anifowoshe, 2006: 56) to tenure extension or better still, third term agenda. Agitations for a review of the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria dated back to the beginning of the Fourth Republic. The enthronement of democracy no doubt, gave many Nigerians the opportunity to express themselves. Thus, Nigerians were unanimous in their dubbing the constitution as a military contraption that lacks legitimacy due to its non-inclusiveness. Thus, citizens and civil society organisations were vociferous in calling for a review. Critical issues advocated in the review included citizenship and residency rights, gender equality, enhancing the federal system and, access to justice and rule of law, among others (see, Ibrahim 2006:3). However, the review could not be achieved during the first phase of the Fourth Republic (1999-2003) due to what has been referred to as 'somewhat pugnacious posture of that legislative era in its relationship with the executive and, the seeming endless crisis that was part of the learning experience of that era...' (Mantu 2006:38). The calls for review, however, persisted until the federal government convened a National Political Reform Conference (NPRC) in February 2005 to consider it and other political issues facing the country. The NPRC later submitted its report containing about 185 items to the President who immediately turned it over to the National Assembly for further consideration. Interestingly, an amendment of tenure of the President and state governors was one of the 185 recommendations. As it will be revealed shortly, it became most controversial and over-shadowed other aspects of the report.

The second pertinent issue was the controversial sign posts. This relates to determining actual intention of Mr. President over the tenure extension agenda. While it was true that Mr. President did not make any categorical statement on his willingness or otherwise to go for another

term, actions and utterances of his aides without rebuff from Mr. President indicated his willingness to have an extension. These included the purported circulation of a strange document by Prof. Jerry Gana, then Special Adviser on Political Affairs to the President, at the NPRC; Open support for third term by the PDP national chairman, Dr. Ahmadu Ali and other party stalwarts; sharp reactions to opponents of third term by the government; purported attempt to bribe the National Assembly over the issue among others (see Anifowoshe 2006: 56-88; Idowu 2006: 15; Archibong 2005: B5). With the above occurrences, the general feeling was that the president was actually nursing the ambition of elongating his tenure in office. Consequently, it provoked deep reactions from Nigerians as well as the international community. Even where there was still an iota of doubt, the disclosure by the Vice President Atiku Abubakar at an anti-third term forum in Abuja eloquently gave insight into what the President's mindset was (see, Saturday Sun, April 8 2006: 11). From this cacophony emerged different perspectives either in support of or antagonistic to the third term bid. It should be noted that several arguments have been advanced on why the President and Governors should have an extension of tenure beyond the constitutional provision of two terms of four years each. But in this paper, our emphasis shall be, only, on the cogent ones.

For the protagonists, the bulk of support for tenure extension chiefly was from the President's advisers and party chieftains. This also included some governors and members of the National Assembly. According to them, the incumbent has recorded tremendous achievements in both the domestic and international policies and therefore needed an extension of tenure in order to consolidate on the gains. To them, therefore, Nigeria would experience stability because there would be continuity of leadership at the top (Muhammed 2006: 40). Among the achievements which proponents noted were untiring efforts to combat corruption, road construction and structural development, reforms in different sectors of the economy and commendable efforts at fiscal discipline (Tell, May 8, 2006). For these achievements to be sustainable required the President spending more years in office. Moreover, given the background and quality of persons who had expressed interest in being the next President, proponents fear that such personalities may not be able to consolidate on the gains so far made which are capable of piloting Nigeria's future development. For instance, there was the general feeling among Nigerians that the ambition of people who have for once being in the corridors of power, including two former military head of state, Generals Muhammadu Buhari and Ibrahim Babangida, to occupy the number one position in the country come 2007 will do the country no good. The argument was that previous experiences with these leaders pointed to the fact that they were not the messiahs needed to propel Nigeria's future development. Moreover, they have at one time or the other been indicted for corrupt practices and abuse of office.

Corollary to the above was the issue of Nigeria's economy which has been undergoing reforms. Statistics were given to indicate that the economy is performing better under the current administration than previous ones.

Thus, proponents of the tenure extension were using the 'economic performance' argument to justify the need for extension. As noted by Nwaogwugwu (2006: 66-67), the economic performance argument of proponents of tenure extension stems from stability in macro economic variables, realization of high growth rates, high inflow of foreign direct investment, prudent fiscal management and efficient public debt management. Others included, monetization of fringe benefits of civil servants to minimize wastage; poverty reduction (which has been contested) from 70% in 1999 to about 50% presently; increase in foreign reserves; consolidation of the banking sector which have removed Nigerian banks from the realm of insolvency; telecommunication sector reforms and host of other reforms going on. Consequently, these achievements must be guarded jealously to avert policy reversal by extending the tenure of the current administration which can better anchor the policies. Indeed, it was contended that the economic team of the President which has played a major role in propelling the economy for development after decades of poor economic performance should be preserved while the President continue in office in order to provide leadership for the team.

Also, part of Mr. President's curriculum vitae that qualified him to continue in office as canvassed by proponents of tenure extension was the favourable debt relief terms secured from the Paris Club to whom Nigeria was indebted. At inception of the current democracy, Nigeria's external debt stood at over 30 billion dollars while over One billion was being committed to servicing it annually. However, through negotiations, the country was able to achieve some relief in 2005 with cancellation of half the amount while the balance was to be paid in a period of six months. Although negotiations with the bank had been on since the debt crises assumed a disturbing dimension especially beginning from the 1980s, it was to the credit of President Obasanjo that the debt relief was successfully accomplished under his administration. As at present, Nigeria has exited from the Paris Club while monies previously used for the servicing can now be channeled towards provision of amenities. For the proponents of tenure extension, the gains from this relief can be whittled away by the successor government which may not appreciate the pains that accompanied such a relief much as the impact of debt relief on the social sector will be washed away.

By the same token, among others, the present administration was said to have beefed up the country's external reserves to well over 30 billion dollars and has an excess crude oil reserves of over 16 billion dollars, with a target of about 50 billion Dollar external reserves before 2007(see Tell, April 3, 2006:21). This development from the perspective of pro-tenure extension group is legendary which shows that the President is doing well. They fear, therefore, that succeeding administration may waste the crucial savings on frivolities. The President should therefore continue in office.

Again, the character and personality of the President was also advanced as a reason why he needs to continue in office beyond 2007. The thinking was that, the President has a strong character, he is firm on his positions, has a wide range knowledge of social, political and economic issues having served as a military Head of State between 1976 and 1979 and above all, possesses the intellectual prowess to excel. Given this background, it was thought that for a country that has been raped and badly governed by successive military regimes, only a strong character like Obasanjo can successfully put it back on track. This has been justified by his firm stance on numerous issues such as increases in pump price of petroleum products even in the face of opposition from various quarters and his investigations and assault on governors and top state functionaries who have penchant for corruption but who before now were considered "sacred cows" in the country. Indeed, the President's role in the removal from office and subsequent arrest of former Bayelsa state governor, Dipreyie Alamsiegha, to answer corruption charges was commended. So also was he on the exposure of corrupt practices involving some members of his cabinet and leadership of the National Assembly as well as former Inspector General of Police, Tafa Balogun.

In addition, Nigeria's increasing international profile under President Obasanjo was advanced as another factor which ought to have made tenure extension desirable. Indeed, Nigeria's image has continued to improve from that of a pariah state under the military to one of indispensability in the comity of nations. This is to the extent that any major international event especially concerning countries in the southern hemisphere will have Nigeria as a major player. For instance until recently, the President combined headship of the Commonwealth of Nations with that of the African Union. This was in addition to discharging several other responsibilities for the international community especially in the areas of conflict management and democratic advancement. Instances of these included the role played in 'exporting' democratic tenets to Sao Tome and Principe; Togo after the death of Gnyasingbe Enyadema and roles played in restoring peace to war torn Liberia and Sudan. While one is quick to point out that the performance of these roles has always been identified with Nigeria, the significance of the Obasanjo's touch cannot be totally washed off. Thus, the changing international perception of Nigeria which is gradually taking root was considered a major factor that called for tenure extension for Mr. President. In fact, so determined and optimistic were proponents of tenure extension that they felt that the conclusion of the Peace Agreement on Sudan (facilitated by Nigeria) in the presence of Seniour

American Officials would send a signal to Washington that President Obasanjo is a steady hand in resolving conflicts on the continent and therefore deserves another term in office to sustain the regime of peace (see, Daily Sun, May 10, 2006:4).

While the debate lasts, the major instrument that was available to this group to achieve the tenure extension was the review of the 1999 Constitution. This further increased the tempo of opposition to the third term bid and indeed, the review of the constitution.

Largely, antagonists of the third term bid cuts across different facets of the Nigerian society. This included prominent political actors including the Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, some members of the PDP, other political parties and civil society organizations. In a recent national survey by Afrobarometer, an overwhelming 84% agreed that the President should obey the spirit and letters of the constitution including serving no more than two terms limit in office (quoted in Olaniyan 2006:15). But while this is a question of number, it is important to probe further on this perspective in order to determine merits of the argument.

Antagonists of the third term bid did not only puncture the economic performance argument but as well saw tenure extension as an invitation to anarchy. On the economic performance argument, while opponents of tenure extension seem to agree with the proponents that this administration may have done its best in taking the economy out of doldrums, they tend to disagree on whether the statistics being paraded actually reflect the reality. In other words, they suspected that most of the statistics paraded have been unduly exaggerated and distorted. Thus, it was noted that 'a critical examination of the trend of economic variables is indicative of a misplaced perception of economic performance' under the current administration (Nwaogwugwu 2006:67). This was informed by the fact that in spite of claims of economic improvement, inflation rate have remained on the high; poverty have continued to aggravate while unemployment crisis have continued to deepen, all of which are giving indications that the economic reforms have not been successfully delivered. Opponents of the tenure extension argued further that even the so much noise about increase in wages of civil servants has been counterbalanced by persistent inflation likewise, the much advertised huge foreign reserves have not led to any appreciation in the value of the Naira which is supposed to be a major gain of increased foreign reserves (see Tell, April 3, 2006:22). Equally, current exchange rate is far higher than where it was in 1999. Indeed, exchange rate of the Naira to the Dollar has witnessed over 200 per cent increases between 1999 and now. In essence, there have not been significant improvements in the microeconomic performance. They therefore argued that a change of leadership is necessary in order to inject new life into national development programmes. Similarly on the issue of debt relief, the view of the opposition was that Nigeria may have been reaped off. It is confounding to think that a debtor nation anywhere in the world could cough out 18 million dollar within a year to pay some questionable debt to the Paris Club. Thus, the general thinking was that Nigeria may soon find herself in another debt crisis arising from contradictions contained in the debt forgiveness effort of the Paris Club (see Tell, May 8, 2006:61). Above all, such an amount should have been channeled toward some revenue yielding ventures for the country which in turn would lead to increase in GDP and more income for the country.

Opponents of tenure extension also noted that as a fall-out of the harsh economic environment at home, the country's image in the international system is rather being battered. It was their view that the sapping economy at home is making Nigerians seek menial job abroad and to engage in prostitution, business scams and corrupt enrichment. All these coupled with the spate of insecurity in the Niger Delta cannot but dent Nigeria's external image. An extension of tenure consequently will only aggravate the situation.

Antagonists of tenure elongation also hinged their opposition on the need to protect the sanctity of the democratic process in Nigeria. As canvassed by the Zamfara state Governor, Sanni Yerima;

...democracy is a system that ensures continuity, that brings about development and progress....And it is only when there is election and re-election, and election, that gradually we will reach a stage where Nigeria will have focus, has an agenda, so that whoever comes will have to do his best and see how he can improve on the performance of the previous administration (Yerima 2006: 2).

It was thus reasoned that should the current administration succeed in getting a third term, the tendency will be there for another President to succeed in getting life presidency (Omobaba 2006:5). This is because a dangerous precedent would have been set which another leader that is determined to perpetuate himself in office could explore. Happenings around the world, especially in Africa, are a pointer in this direction. This view was also shared by international community, members of which expressed deep concern over tenure elongation in Nigeria.

Opponents of tenure extension also opposed the attempt on the grounds of inappropriateness of the instruments and modalities. As noted earlier, a major instrument to achieve tenure elongation was the attempt to review the 1999 Constitution. Its coming six years after the agitation for it started and barely one and a half year to the end of tenure of the incumbent was adjudged to be very opportunistic and anti democratic. They therefore argued that President Obasanjo should go in 2007 after which Nigerians can then have a constitutional amendment (see Tell, March 6, 2006: 31-34).

Similarly, tenure extension was perceived by opponents to be a breach of a "tacit agreement" among political actors that after the President's tenure of eight years, power will shift back to the north. Thus, the north was not only expecting President Obasanjo to quit come 2007, but as well, expect a northerner to assume leadership of the country. This expectation was re-echoed recently in an interview granted by the Zamfara state governor Alhaji Sani Yerima when he was asked where power should go in 2007. According to him: It was automatically supposed to go to the north... South had taken eight years, and the North should have eight years (Yerima 2006:2). Little surprise therefore that northerners mobilized heavily to confront what they perceived as threat to the political future of the north.

The antagonists also rejected the assumption that it is only President Obasanjo that can successfully run the country. They submitted that from a population of about 150 million, it is absurd to think that only one person can deliver the dividends of democracy. So much anger was generated over this issue of messiahism that people had argued that should the President die in office, would Nigeria not continue to be as a nation. She would because another capable if not better hand can easily be voted for among the long list of qualified Nigerians.

Ironically, while the debate raged on and virtually all political actors seemed to have clubbed into either side, there were some who never belonged to either side. The perspective of this group made up mostly of some National legislators was that President Obasanjo would be sincere to his oath of defending the constitution and would not bow to pressures on him to continue in office beyond 2007. On the contrary, they maintained that the President was merely using the campaign to divert attention of the opposition while scheming to plant his choice in office as successor in 2007 (see, Tell, March 13, 2006: 25 - 26). Although this group was never conspicuous, the debate over the issue at the National Assembly in which some senators abstained from voting on the floor of the senate was quite revealing.

In general, this section has been an attempt to survey the various perspectives on tenure extension in Nigeria. Both proponents and antagonists have hinged their arguments on several social, political, economic and moral considerations. However, there are some who are still wondering whether the conclusion of the debate on the tenure extension, following discontinuation of discussions on the constitution review process which was expected to be an harbinger for tenure extension by the National Assembly on May 16 2006, would permanently kill the idea? Notwithstanding, what is apparent for now is that the idea has some implications Nigeria's democratic process.

UNDERCURRENTS AND IMPLICATIONS

From our discussions so far, needless to argue that at the heart of the current controversies over term extension lies what has earlier been referred to as political opportunism. Indeed, the underlying basis of groups and individuals' reactions to the issue was the anticipated gains from regime change viz – a viz real and imaginary frustrations with the present administration. Equally, for the incumbent and his kings-men to want to continue after the constitutionally imposed limitations of two terms cannot be divorced from the sweetness of that office. Underscoring this, Olurode (2006:2) noted that 'a typical political office holder has free or highly subsidized access to housing, food, means of mobility, prestige, overseas travel, quality education for children, dispensation of patronage, financial security and other tangible and intangible means of good life'. For this reason, a particular political actor would naturally want to have this for life. Thus, at the slightest prompt of sycophants who have been courting the political officeholder, elongating his tenure would naturally become an attractive option. Expectedly, this would meet with opposition from those already itching to come in. Else, how do one define the interest of the incumbent Vice President, Atiku Abubakar, who having occupied the position since 1999 is interested in contesting for the presidency or retired General Ibrahim Babangida and Muhammadu Buhari, been former military Heads of State, but who are also interested in occupying the topmost seat come 2007. This helps explain why all have been vociferous in their campaign against tenure extension. Also, one may reason that there is a gradual generational change in Nigeria's political terrain. While younger generations of political actors are coming up, most of the present front liners are ageing out. Yet, many of them still nurse the ambition of ruling the country. The inference one can draw from this is that, given the age bracket of most of those who have signified interest in being the next president, any extension of the incumbent's tenure may be a way of shutting them out as they would have been affected by the frailty of human nature before the expiration of the extended period.

Again, political opportunism and material benefit can be advanced for the geopolitical dimension of the third term controversy. It is apparent that while most of the protagonists are from the southern region most antagonists are from the northern region. An Afro barometer survey on the issue in Nigeria revealed that:

The strongest opposition was found in the north-central, the north-west and the south-west (outside of Lagos) while the greatest degree of acceptance was expressed by those in the south-east, south-south, Lagos state and the north east (quoted in Olaniran, 2006:15).

In other words, the high rate of opposition from the north, for instance, may not be unconnected with the clamour for power to return to the region come 2007. This position was recently underscored by Governor Sani Yerima of Zamfara State when he said power 'is automatically supposed to go to north... south had taken eight years, and the north should have eight years' (Yerima 2006:2). Of course, a careful observer of Nigerian politics would easily recall that struggle for ascendancy between the north and the south which predates Nigeria's independence in 1960 have always been informed by self interest of the two regions. Mutual suspicion and the desire of one group to dominate the other have been the hallmarks of inter group relations. Needless to stress that, a common denominator of the present geopolitical dimension of the tenure extension controversy lies in the perceived advantage of political power.

What is more is that political opportunism, defined in terms of self or group interest is a major factor in the dimensions of controversy over the issue of tenure extension under the current administration. But above all, it has some implications for political process in the country.

The first implication arising from the controversy was that it marred a genuine clamour for reform in the country. This relates to the amendment of the 1999 constitution which has been

at the forefront of agitations by civil society groups since 1999. Indeed, amendment of the constitution along the lines suggested by various groups and as articulated by the NPRC would have been a major landmark in constitutional reforms and democratic advancement. But elevation of the third term problematic above all other issues contained in the proposed amendment apparently made a mess of other genuine concerns such as issue of revenue allocation, citizenship, equity and justice among others. Articulating the civil society perspective and confounded expectations over the issue of third term vis-a-vis the need for constitutional reforms which it has championed since 1999, Ibrahim (2006:2) noted that:

It is now obvious that President Olusegun Obasanjo has embarked on a sinister agenda to change the constitution so that he can have a third term in office against the spirit and letter of our grand norm.... Some of us who have been in the forefront of the campaign for constitutional reform now find ourselves in the dilemma of challenging the process, because it has been reduced into an antidemocratic agenda for the country

In other words, what happens to the genuine calls for review of the constitution?

The second obvious implication is that the attempt constitutes a dangerous trend for Nigeria's political future. Already, it has casted a shadow of doubt over the credibility of the forthcoming 2007 general elections. This is because, where the president is hell bent on elongating its tenure or putting its cronies in place, this would entail manipulating the whole electoral processes, massive rigging, buying of votes and bribing of electoral officers and other stakeholders. The outcome of such an election can be predicted; a government that lacks legitimacy and, a deepening crisis of democratization. Already, there is no gainsaying the fact that the government is currently suffering credibility problems as every move and policies are subjected to scrutiny by citizens. This high suspicion is no doubt, fallout from what they considered to be an attempted rape of the constitution in order to achieve tenure elongation.

Third, following the legitimacy crises which the government would have suffered should tenure elongation be a reality, there is no doubt that the government would have been committing huge resources on crises management. Resources that generally could be committed toward developmental projects and engendering good governance would have ended up being used to douse tension, pacify and suppress oppositions. This in turn would have reinforced the emergence of several antagonistic groups with some becoming vociferous in their opposition and others, sycophants of the government. Indeed, observing the dynamics of Nigerian government and politics under the Babangida and Abacha military regimes, one would have discovered that quite a huge amount of resources was committed on dousing tension resulting from attempts to perpetuate in office. These included bribing of oppositions; resettlement and compensation for victims of crises among others.

Fourth, the palpable peace currently being enjoyed in the country may have become threatened if tenure elongation had been achieved. This is because of frustrations and poor perception of the current administration's policies in some quarters and an expectation of a leadership change come 2007. With this, a large number of people are already hoping for a change come 2007. Where the expected change becomes shattered, violence would naturally become an attractive option. The Niger Delta crises are a case in point. Indeed since inception of the current democracy in 1999, there has been an unprecedented rise in ethnic militias especially in the Niger Delta area, whose demands revolve around control of resources in the area and opportunity to produce the next president. Coupled with the perception of the current administration as being hostile to the region (For instance with the Odi Massacre and other military attacks on the militants), it could be predicted that hostility in the area would escalate should President Obasanjo's tenure be extended beyond 2007. Already, the Niger Delta area is charged with militants taking oil workers hostage in order to express their frustrations with the Nigerian state (see, *The Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2006:32; *Thisday* April 13, 2006:1).

The fifth implication of the tenure extension if it had succeeded is that it would amount to violation of a "gentleman agreement" among political actors to rotate the country's Presidency between the North and the South. Given the asymmetric territorial association between the two regions, there is no denying the fact that one region will always be ahead of the other on issues of joint deliberation especially one involving numbers. To ensure fair balance therefore, rotation of the country's presidency between the north and south geo-political zones was muted out at the 1995 constitutional conference. Although this was not expressly stated in the constitution but it has been a working principle among political elites. Hence, an attempt to extend tenure of the current administration beyond eight years would amount to a breach of this arrangement. Specifically, it would project the south-west which currently produces the President as a greedy and an unreliable people just as it would send the north to doom. As noted by Ali Hamid, Secretary of the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), the aborted constitutional amendment, which was to perpetuate President Obasanjo in office was the final blow that would have sent the North to canvass for ever (Tell, May 8, 2006:23). Little surprise therefore, that the north was much more up in arms against extension.

Perhaps another implication of the tenure extension bid could be gleaned from Nigeria's external relations. As noted earlier in this work, Nigeria is currently enjoying an improved international profile compared to when it was under the military. What marked the difference from before was the embrace of democratization by the country. This coupled with Nigeria's engagement in promoting democracy particularly within the West African sub region, no doubt, swells its ego in the comity of nations. For instance, Nigeria played commendable roles in restoring democratic rule in countries such as Sao Tome and Principe, Equatorial Guinea, Togo among others. With these commendable roles of exporting democracy to other places, how and where then would the country rank should the tenure extension bid had come true? The reality is that Nigeria's image would have been battered within the comity of nations and may no longer have the moral justification to speak or preach democratization elsewhere. Little surprise therefore that defeat of the tenure extension bid was applauded by many including the international community.

In addition, we must also state implications of the tenure extension bid on personality of the President himself. On the one hand, given the fact that the president will be over 70 years when his second tenure will lapse in 2007. Having an elongation of tenure beyond 2007 will no doubt be tasking on his health. In other words, fatigue arising from demands of the office is most likely to set in. Needless to stress that this would impact negatively on his leadership and by extension, he may not be able to make the impacts for which an extension of tenure was sought in the first place. On the other hand, the president's personality and image as a nationalist and democrat which made Nigerians voted him into power in 1999 would have been tarnished should the extension bid scale through. Three of his credentials as identified by Ibrahim (2006:4) are worth mentioning here. First, his war records demonstrated his nationalist zeal. Second is that, his religiously guarded transition to civil rule programme even after the death of General Murtala Mohammed in 1976 and consequent hand over of power to elected Shehu Shagari in 1979 showed his capacity to respond positively to democratic demands and third, his engagement in civil society activities with the African Leadership Forum (ALF) and Transparency International. All the above coupled with his unjust treatment under the late General Sani Abacha, made Nigerians to place much confidence on him as a nationalist and statesman who can rescue Nigeria from the doldrums it was before 1999. a successful attempt at tenure elongation, therefore, would have eroded these credentials and portrayed him as someone with a selfish and inordinate ambition.

Lastly, if the general trend in Africa especially where there have been regime elongation is anything to go by, Obasanjo's stay beyond 2007 constitutional limit may provoke crises of succession whenever he leaves. First is that, tenure elongation is usually a precursor to life presidency (Egypt is currently a case in point) and second, at the point of exit of the beneficiary of tenure extension, crises usually explode because there will be too much contentious forces struggling to capture power. In the case of Nigeria and given its socio-political settings, any extension beyond

eight years may aggravate politics of ethnic mobilization and its attendant consequences for the country.

CONCLUSION

Our endeavour in this work has been to probe the contentious issue of tenure extension in Nigeria's fourth republic. Our findings reveal that an attempt at regime elongation by incumbents is not a new phenomenon and is common to both developed and developing democracies as the US and other African countries' examples have shown. Equally, previous attempts in Nigeria unlike the U.S. and some other African countries were recorded under different military regimes. The recent controversy therefore represents the first of such under a democratically elected civilian government. Above all, it is realised that central to this raging controversy is material benefits of both protagonists and antagonists. This, in a nutshell, amounts to opportunism since political actors have tended to abdicate their expected role in sustaining the system in favour of pursuing diverse personal and group interests. The bottom line is that these practices portend grave danger to the democratic process as well as the country as an entity. Stemming this tide therefore requires restraint on the part of political actors while citizens alike must eschew divisive politics and work together towards enhancing democratic practice in the country. Achieving these is a recipe to avoid democratic regression.

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