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OBASANJO



The Lust for Power and Its Tragic Implications For Nigeria

Abubakar Siddique Mohammed

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And
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By

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Evil is not reformable, it must be removed...We must never be tired of demanding that any government should chasten itself and give us the foundation and the example to propel us forward. We must demand that any government should deal honestly with us and level with us. We must have the programme and timetable to be able to assess its performance. We must have accountability and transparency that we are not getting now. If any administration is turning evil we should spare no efforts and no sacrifice to remove it.

General Olusegun Obasanjo, Keynote Address to the participants at the Workshop on Nigeria: The State of the Nation and the Way Forward, Arewa House, Kaduna, 1994, p.29

Introduction

One of the basic conditions for democratic rule anywhere in the world is the acceptance of constitutionally imposed limits to the holding of elective office. As many political philosophers have argued over the ages, such limitations are necessary in order to safeguard the sovereignty of the people by constantly reminding those who offer themselves for public service that they are servants of the people, not masters. This is why many political observers are astonished by the sinister move to transform the

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Nigerian presidency into a civilian dictatorship by a clique around President Olusegun Obasanjo. They are all the more flabbergasted that our President, who has of recent been going round Africa insisting on respect for democracy and the rule of law (for example his intervention in Sao Tome and Principe; in Togo after the death of President Gnassingbe Eyadema; in Guinea Bissau, etc), is seemingly behind this move. They are shocked that such a move is being spearheaded by the first military head of state to successfully conclude a military-civilian handover of power, in 1979, when the dominant trend in Africa was one-party or military dictatorship. Such people are all the more dumfounded when they are told that General Obasanjo ushered in democratic civilian administration despite subterranean pressures on him from eminent personalities both within and outside Nigeria to prolong his stay beyond 1979.

All across the country there is popular and widespread anger against this attempt being made by President Obasanjo and some Governors to prolong their stay beyond 2007. In the Northern States in particular, the anger has even taken the form of blaming political leaders as well as certain retired senior military officers for engineering the candidature of General Obasanjo in 1999 in the first instance. This is because the two terms of the Obasanjo administration have failed to revive the economy, create jobs and stabilise the polity. Consequently,

poverty and insecurity have become the order of the day in the last six and half years.

This paper will first of all demonstrate that there were justifiable reasons for the initial support given General Obasanjo by politicians and retired military officers from the Northern States both in terms of securing his release from Yola prison as well as his ascending the presidency in 1999. However it is the contention of this paper that, despite the justification for their actions, those Northern politicians behind General Obasanjo's re-emergence misread him. They did not correctly interpret his perception of power and also failed to take note of what he had dangerously come to believe was best for Africa since he left office in 1979. This misreading stemmed from another misreading of the circumstances under which General Obasanjo had operated after the death of General Murtala Ramat Muhammed. I shall also look at the circumstances which have made it possible for General Obasanjo to contemplate amending the constitution to serve his purposes and why this move is fraught with danger for both himself and Nigeria.

The Emergence of General Obasanjo

Any attempt to understand what has become one of General Obasanjo's important decisions as a leader, that is, the singular act of respecting the timetable drawn by the military regime which he led from

1976 to the handover in 1979, which earned him considerable respect in Nigeria and the world at large and which transformed him into a statesman, has to take into consideration the circumstances of his emergence as the Head of State, the mission of the military which he was a part, and the major actors in that administration.

The Circumstances

After being in power for nine years, General Yakubu Gowon, the Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria from 1966 to 1975 had at the end of the civil war in 1970, promised the withdrawal of the Nigerian Armed Forces from active politics. He had in 1973 set up a committee to work out the modalities for the handover. But unexpectedly, the General made an about-turn on October 1, 1974 when he said in a broadcast to the nation that the handing over would be tantamount to “a betrayal of trust.” That pronouncement generated intense discussions and apprehension in the country and contributed to the acceleration of the erosion of the legitimacy of the regime. There is no doubt that the government headed by General Gowon saved the country from disintegration and laid the foundation for its economic development and political stability. While these were generally acknowledged, however, General Gowon’s unexpected renegeing on his promise was a

major factor that precipitated the coup by middle ranking officers that overthrew his administration. General Murtala Mohammed stated the reasons for the overthrow of the Gowon regime very clearly:

“Event of the past few years indicated that despite our great human and material resources, the Government has not been able to fulfil the legitimate expectations of our people. Nigeria has been left to drift. This situation, if not arrested, would inevitably have resulted in chaos and even bloodshed. In the endeavour to build a strong, united and virile nation, Nigerians have shed much blood; the thought of further bloodshed, for whatever reasons must, I am sure, be revolting to our people. The Armed Forces, having examined the situation, came to the conclusion that certain changes were inevitable.

After the civil war, the affairs of State, hitherto a collective responsibility, became characterised by lack of consultation, indecision, indiscipline and even neglect. Indeed, the public at large became disillusioned and disappointed by these developments. This trend was clearly incompatible with the philosophy and image of a corrective regime. Unknown to the general public, the feeling of disillusion was also evident among members of the Armed Forces

whose administration was neglected, but who, out of sheer loyalty to the Nation, and in the hope that there would be a change, continued to suffer in silence. Things got to a stage where the head of the administration became virtually inaccessible even to official advisers; and when advice was tendered, it was often ignored.

Responsible opinion, including advice by eminent Nigerians, traditional rulers, intellectuals, et cetera was similarly discarded. The leadership, either by design or default, had become too insensitive to the true feelings and yearnings of the people. The nation was thus being plunged inexorably into chaos.”¹

As we shall try to show in due course, this statement is still relevant given the current state of our affairs.

The Transition time table

Three months in his administration, on October 1, 1975, General Murtala Muhammed, in a broadcast to the nation, unveiled the programme of the regime and gave specific dates for the military

¹ Federal Ministry of Information, **A Time For Action: Collected Speeches of General Murtala Muhammed**, Federal Government of Nigeria, Lagos, 1976, pp. 1-2.

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handover of power. The five- stage programme was as follows:

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1. Appointment of a Constitution Drafting Committee in October 1975, to produce a preliminary draft.
 2. Creation of new states and the take-off of the newly created states by April 1976; completion of the first draft of the Constitution by September, 1976.
 3. Election into a Constituent Assembly in October 1977.
 4. Ratification of the Draft Constitution by the Constituent Assembly by October 1978, and the lifting of the ban on political parties.
 5. States and Federal elections by October 1979.
-

This programme was followed strictly. Even after the assassination of General Murtala Muhammed, the regime, now led by General Obasanjo, adhered faithfully to the agreed programme. The reasons for this were not farfetched. The coup that brought the government into power was organised and executed by middle ranking officers, whose primary goal was to restore the dignity of the armed forces by removing them from active politics and governance. Instead of taking over power for themselves, they brought in their respected senior officers and entrusted them with the responsibility of steering the country back to civilian rule. Initially, they were not interested in holding political positions in the government which they had brought into power.

It was, rather, the senior officers who actually dragged them into it.²

The government was a team made up of people with a mission and a vision for the country and who were honourable officer-gentlemen. Their conduct after the assassination of General Murtala Muhammed which bore them out in this regard was captured by the Secretary of the Supreme Military Council, Chief Alison Ayida thus:

I was shell- shocked at his death (General Murtala Muhammad) because my car was about ten cars ahead of him when Dimka's bullets gunned him down. I heard the gunshots loud and clear and saw the confusion and public panic that followed.

The following day when the SMC met to elect a successor, I was the only civilian present. As secretary to the Council, I had come to the meeting to throw in the towel. I had enough of bloodshed. But because of the mature way the Council appointed General Olusegun Obasanjo, as the next in line of succession in spite of protestation that...he did not want to be gunned down

² See Joe Garba, **Diplomatic Soldiering: Nigerian Foreign Policy, 1975-1979**, Spectrum, Ibadan, 1987.

like a fowl, I told Council I was prepared to continue”³

Moreover, the situation in which General Obasanjo operated was made good by the fact that the military government he led had the benefit of the advice of a crop of seasoned and patriotic civil servants who respected the institutions of state and resolutely implemented the transition programme. He acknowledged this fact in a key note address at Arewa House. He said:

I have had the fortune of working with distinguished individuals from every corner of our country. Let me single out two of such men from the North, for mention here; one worked immediately above me, and the other below me. I am referring to my immediate predecessor, the late General Murtala Mohammed and the Secretary to the Federal Military Government and Head of Service for the substantial part of my administration, Mallam Liman Ciroma. They are by any standard accomplished leaders.”⁴

³ Quoted from Mathias Okoi-Uyouyo, **M. D. Yusufu: Beyond the Cop**, Profiles and Biographies, Ibadan, 2005, pp. 65-66

⁴ Abdullahi Mahadi, George Amale Kwanashie and Alhaji Mahmood Yakubu (eds) **The State of the Nation and the Way Forward**, Arewa House, Kaduna, 1994, p. 22

In his book, **Not My Will**, General Obasanjo revealed the qualities of another important personality from the North Alhaji M. D. Yusufu, who was the Inspector General of Police from 1975 to 1979 and who also played a major role in stabilising his regime. On Alhaji M.D as he is popularly known, he wrote:

I had known M.D. Yusufu while we were both in Kaduna in the early sixties...I came to respect him when I was in charge of Ibadan Area Command of the Military. The politicians, as mischievous as ever were making all sorts of bad reports and playing all sorts of dirty tricks against themselves through petitions and reports to the head of the Special Branch. M.D Yusufu behaved maturely, responsibly and was even-handed and fair to all politicians, no matter to which party they belonged. He was a good Nigerian.

Although we were all caught unawares by the Dimka coup, Alhaji M.D Yusufu, the Inspector General of Police, felt particularly a sense of inadequacy because, as the nation's head of security, he believed he should at least have had more than just an inkling that there was a coup in the making and he should have advised us accordingly. But as it turned out, the police were just as indifferent, as the rest of us in government to the rumours that were circulating. Alhaji M.D

Yusufu came to me and offered his resignation, explaining that he believed that he had failed the nation for his inability to forewarn us of the coup. I declined to contemplate considering his resignation since the fault for complacency must be shared by all of us even though he had greater responsibility, as the official Chief Security Officer of the government. He was the first senior officer in the administration to so act in accepting responsibility for the inadequate performance of his department.

I did not accept Alhaji Yusufu's resignation because I genuinely believed that the fault was not anymore his than that of anybody else in government. Besides, his organisation was in no way implicated in the coup. Alhaji Yusufu himself was an important and loyal member of the Supreme Military Council and the government. He was a dependable and a thoroughly detribalised Nigerian and does not relate to people on the basis of religious, ethnic and geographical considerations. I found his advice invaluable and in my tenure as Head of State. We had become close and I grew to like and respect him more in spite of his ascetic behaviour at times.

His decision to resign confirmed that Alhaji Yusufu was a man of high calibre and principle and contradicts the

prevailing opinion that in Nigeria people in position of authority rather than take the honourable way out when they have been found negligent even fraudulent, often wait to be forced out.”⁵

I have quoted this section at length not only to show the calibre of people who worked with General Obasanjo to ensure that he did not derail but also to bring out the disdain with which he viewed politicians, a perception that largely influences his condescending treatment of them in his second coming.

The quality of the members of the Supreme Military Council, the Federal Executive Council and the Civil Service, largely explained the resolute implementation of the programme as announced, even after the assassination of General Murtala Muhammed.

The Transition Schedule.

October 4, 1975	A 50 man committee was set up under the chairmanship of Chief Rotimi Williams to produce the first draft of the constitution.
September 14, 1976.	Chief Rotimi Alade Williams, the Chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee presented the draft Constitution to the Head of State Lt General Olusegun Obasanjo
November 15, 1976,	The Head of State inaugurated the Federal Electoral Commission, FEDECO.

⁵ Quoted from Mathias Okoi-Uyouyo, **M. D. Yusufu: Beyond the Cop**, Profiles and Biographies, Ibadan, 2005, pp. 67-69.

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September 11, 1977	Justice Udo Udoma was appointed chairman of the Constituent Assembly, charged with scrutinising and re-examining the Draft Constitution, amending individual articles where necessary, re-wording and touching up difficult passages.
June 1978	The Constituent Assembly finished its work.
September 20, 1978	Constituent Assembly was formally dissolved.
September 21, 1978	The Head of State signed Decree No. 25 which promulgated the Constitution into Law and the ban on political activities was lifted.
December 23, 1978,	Five political parties were registered. They were the UPN, NPP, GNPP, PRP and NPN.
July 7-14 1979	Senatorial and House of Representatives Elections were held.
August 11 1979	Presidential election was held.
September 26, 1979	After litigations up to the Supreme Courts, Alhaji Shehu Shagari was declared the winner.
October 1, 1979	Alhaji Shehu Shagari was sworn in as the President and Commander –in-Chief of the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

General Obasanjo as a Statesman

This singular and commendable act of handing over power to a democratically elected civilian government on 1st October, 1979 transformed General Obasanjo from a military dictator to a statesman who has made democracy a meaningful concept in Nigeria, after about 14 years of military rule. He became a member of the Eminent Persons Group and was courted by Western governments and foundations such as the Ford and Carter Foundations.

He was even urged and promoted by some people to contest for the coveted position of the Secretary General of the United Nations. From his Otta farm where he retired to, he led a patriotic public life, making comments, oftentimes irritating to the leaders of the time, on important public issues. And Nigerians looked up to him in times of difficulty.

In his bid to become the Secretary General of the United Nations, General Obasanjo tried to distance himself from African despots by writing a book critical of them.

Analysing the institutional patterns in post colonial Africa he noted that,

In most Africa languages, the word opposition has the same meaning and connotation as the word enemy. Can we possibly conceive of a loyal enemy? Yet, the institutionalisation of opposition was one of the pillars upon which the structures and processes that were bequeathed to us were supposed to rest.⁶

Democracy in Africa, according to him, faced many challenges. These challenges were the reluctance of political leaders to share power, strive to build consensus and show respect to those who challenge them. He urged African leaders to do away with over-

⁶ Obasanjo Olusegun, **Hope for Africa: Selected Speeches of Olusegun Obasanjo**, ALF Publications, Abeokuta, 1993, p.111

centralisation of power and try to build legitimacy by promoting the principle that ,

“the people’s participation must find expression in the political process”⁷

Castigating the “new crop” of African leadership who tend to lose their bearing almost immediately they come into power he wrote:

The new crop of leadership that is emerging must avoid the pitfalls and undoings of their predecessors. I say this because recently, someone observed that while it took the former president, an African, ten years to begin to lose his bearings, his successor took less than six months to lose his own”⁸

He further added that not only do these leaders loose their bearing rapidly but unlike their predecessors, they were also bereft of a vision which is rooted in nationalism.

General Obasanjo then advocated, strongly, for democracy and good governance as the basis for our socio-economic development. The fundamental elements according to him are as follows:

⁷ **ibid** p.111

⁸ **ibid** p.117

- 1) *Periodic elections in which the electorate review the performance of their leaders and renew or terminate the mandate they had given them.*
- 2) *A real democracy is one in which people have choices between competing alternatives.*
- 3) *A viable democracy is one which is fostered and strengthened by effective and independent non-governmental organisations; the civil society.*
- 4) *An independent judiciary that imposes sanctions on unconstitutional transgressions of social and political norms and regulations and also puts premium on protecting the rights and liberties of citizens against overzealous and highhanded officialdom is necessary.*
- 5) *A free, independent and responsible press is a critical element.⁹*

Having articulated these essential elements of democracy and good governance, General Olusegun Obasanjo warns that:

*An irresponsible, arrogant or
careless leadership breeds
disenchantment, antipathy and
disenfranchisement in the followership”¹⁰*

He therefore recommended very strongly that:

⁹ See Jibrin Ibrahim, “Leadership, Responsibility and Good Governance: The Executive and Legislature in the Fourth Republic”, Paper presented at the Roundtable on the War Against Corruption Organised by the Forum for Democracy and Good Governance, Yar’Adua Centre, Abuja, 16th May 2005, p.2-3.

¹⁰Olusegun Obasanjo op cit, p.133

*A democratic government protects the different and most times, conflicting interests of the various segments of society. Democracy must strive to include most, if not exactly all segments of society in the run of things. Consensus or compromise, must always be sought. A society that is run otherwise risks antipathy from within it.*¹¹

But as we shall show later, President Obasanjo is trying to do exactly what he has accused the new crop of African leaders of doing.

General Obasanjo: The Second Coming

Between 1993 when General Abacha seized power and 1998 when he died, there was political tension in the country. The cancellation of the June 12 presidential election and the mishandling of the political situation by the military were partly responsible for the tension. The flagrant violation of Nigerian army regulations which forbid a serving military officer from contesting elections further complicated the murky political waters of the time. Through intense propaganda, June 12 was transformed into a sectional, indeed ethnic, Yoruba affair by those who in the first instance were opposed

¹¹ *ibid* p.135

to the elections and the candidature of Chief Moshood Abiola and had decided not only to *siddon look* but had gone ahead to urge the electorate not to go and vote. The perception that the Yoruba people had been cheated was resolutely pushed by most of the print media based in the South-western part of Nigeria. The military regime led by General Abdulsalami Abubakar, appeared to accept this crude and narrow interpretation of the whole development and therefore decided to appease the Yoruba elite. The death in captivity of Chief Moshood Abiola widely believed to have won the June 12 presidential election further complicated the situation for General Abdulsalami Abubakar's transition administration. It was in these circumstances that General Obasanjo was released from prison and made to contest the 1999 presidential election.

The interpretation given to the annulment of the June 12 presidential election, no doubt was an important factor instrumental in catapulting General Obasanjo from Yola prison to Aso Rock. It also appeared, however, that the General's credentials, which were well known to the government and its advisers, equally played a crucial role in the decision. Indeed, on October 1, 1979, it was General Abdulsalami Abubakar, then Colonel Abubakar, who commanded the parade at the Tafawa Balewa Square, where General Olusegun Obasanjo handed over the reigns of power to Alhaji Shehu Shagari as the elected

civilian President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria after 14 years of military rule.

Obasanjo: The Man of the Moment

The General Abdulsalami transition administration saw General Obasanjo as the man of the moment. Other important personalities from the North had the same perception. They were fortified in their belief by the leadership the General had given the nation after the death of General Murtala Muhammed. The late Alhaji Liman Ciroma for example, gave a series of interviews extolling the leadership qualities of General Obasanjo, in an attempt to convince the North that the latter will be fair to all.

Other political leaders from the North who helped in selling General Obasanjo to the people also believed that he was a man the nation could rely upon once again to deliver. They set about, through the subtle use of stick and carrot, to persuade credible presidential candidates from all over Nigeria to quietly renounce their presidential ambitions. Some were even harassed and manoeuvred out of the contest.

The All People's Party (APP), which could have given the PDP a good fight, was messed up. Using the Chairman of the Party, Alhaji Mahamud Waziri, who turned out to be a mole. Those vying for the party's presidential ticket, Chief Olusola Saraki, Alhaji Lema Jibril and Alhaji Umar Shinkafi were

outmanoeuvred. And an unknown political quantity Ogbonnaya Onu, was imposed as a presidential candidate. This candidate later had to give way to some political concoction, an Alliance for Democracy presidential candidate and an All People's Party Vice Presidential candidate. There was no punch in their campaigns. Chief Olu Falae, the presidential candidate of the concoction, was a political neophyte in relation to General Obasanjo. His own nomination as AD's presidential candidate against a well-known, articulate and formidable politician in the person of the late Chief Bola Ige, was steeped in controversy. A group of octogenarians met in the absence of Chief Bola Ige who, sure of clinching the AD ticket, had flown out of the country to canvass for support and resources from the Yoruba Diaspora, gave the ticket to Chief Olu Falae, known to the public as Mr SAP, which is a pejorative nickname associated with hardship. He earned this name when he was serving as the Minister of Finance in the military administration headed by General Ibrahim Babangida.

It was this weak candidate who was made to compete with a former head of state who had successfully handed over power to civilians; who was regarded as a man of honour, who had public sympathy due to his incarceration, together with the late General Yar adua, by the Abacha regime and who had formidable array of politicians and foreign backers who were willing to spend money to make

him President and has considerable international goodwill.

Changed Circumstances

The formidable politicians from the North and elder statesmen who took the front seat in mobilising politicians in other parts of Nigeria to support General Obasanjo, believing that he would once again move the country forward, were wrong. They were wrong because they did not take into consideration the environment in which General Obasanjo operated between 1976 and 1979, which ensured that he behaved according to the laws of the country. The crucial ingredients, which determined that environment - teamwork, a mission and credible state institutions - had apparently made it difficult for General Obasanjo to reveal his true colours.

In 1976 when General Olusegun Obasanjo was made a military head of state against his “wishes and desire”, there was a coherent programme for disengagement firmly in place and a formidable team of military officers and technocrats who believed in the programme and were determined to implement it. In contrast, his second coming as president in 1999, at the head of a civilian administration was rather chaotic. The People’s Democratic Party, the platform under which he contested elections was not a political party in the right sense of the term. It was an amalgam of money bags. The sole preoccupation of many of

them was to take-over power and feather their nests. The party had no coherent programme and there was the absence of the involvement of the people. The minimum programme which was hurriedly drawn up for him by an amorphous group of politicians and retired and serving technocrats and retired army officers, was not implemented. At the state level many governors did not even bother to have a programme and still have none, and do not see any reason why they should have any.

Furthermore, the Northern elites who laid their credibility and sold General Obasanjo to Nigerians, particularly their own people, were oblivious of the fact that soon after leaving office, General Obasanjo had written a book propagating the idea of a one-party state, which according to him best suited the African conditions. This was what he wrote:

In essence my present suggestion that we adopt a one-party system is very much in consonance with a possible and logical outcome of our political development. All I am saying is that we give nature and history a gentle push in the right direction. This appears to be the only procedural mechanism through which we can transcend the divisive and centrifugal forces tearing us apart and diverting our attention from the monumental task of integration and

nation building. For it is within such purview that ultimate unity is always to be hoped for the subordination of sectional opinions to the criteria of rationality.

In some countries, it seems to me that their one-party structure has been responsible for the enduring political and governmental continuity they are enjoying. It also enabled them to move along a path of harmony, political stability, political unanimity and unity of purpose with a durable structure.¹²

He went on:

The one-party system like a knife is a technique. I am sure we will all agree that a knife is a knife, whether in the hand of a butcher, carver or farmer. It is a technique for achieving a set goal. It is the use to which we put it that matters. Too much opposition that is opposition that is pushed to the extremes will tear the political system apart.¹³

On the dangers of one party system he offered these unconvincing safeguards:

¹² Quoted from Abidina Coomassie (ed), **Democracy and Political Opportunism in Nigeria: A Documentary Source Book**, Sputnik, Abuja, 1998, p. 88.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 89.

It has been argued that within the one-party system, there is the plausibility of the government dominating and possibly hijacking the party, through an increasing distribution of largesse and government patronages. This can be significantly marginalized by entrusting the National Council of State with fundamental responsibilities in the functioning of government. This will act as a check on the possibility of the abuse by the chief executive. Again it will be incumbent upon the parliament to vitiate such development by acting as a check on the activities of the executive, while the party congress would act as the vital check on the organs of government and party officials.¹⁴

Insisting on one-party rule he added:

My insistence is that one-party system as our national rallying point would give us continuity and structural change, continuity and stability as regards fundamental policies and objectives and dramatic (but peaceful) change of our dramatis personae.¹⁵

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ ibid, p.90

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A former head of state, who registered five parties and handed over power to a democratically elected government, had suddenly made an about-turn and come to believe in despotism.

Similarly, unlike the seventies when he became the military head of state, his first and second term as President witnessed an unprecedented flow of revenue into the public treasury. But in the absence of coherent economic, social and political programmes, both federal and state governments became spendthrifts. Many State Governors and chairmen of local governments became wastrels, and looting became the central purpose of government. As advanced by Alkasum Abba,

“If the availability of resources is such a powerful instrument of transformation, then this government led by Chief Olusegun Obasanjo and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar can count itself one of the luckiest in the history of this county”¹⁶

In three years; from June 1999 to May 2002 the federal government collected from the Federation account the sum of N1.6 trillion naira. For the same period the 36 state governors and the Federal Capital Territory, collected from the same source the sum of

¹⁶ Alkasum Abba, “The Soaring Revenue of the Federal Government” *Analysis*, Vol. 1, No. 3 September 2002, p.10

N1, 4 trillion. For three years from 1999 to 29th May 2002 each of the 774 local governments had received N1 billion. All in all from June 1999 to May 2002 more than N700 billion was collected by the local governments. Chairmen who were paupers at the time they assumed office had become super rich capable of hiring thugs to rig the next elections while the majority of our people wallow in abject poverty.

The Third Term Agenda

The clamour for the third term by the sycophants around the President and the President's acquiescence cannot be understood without taking the factors discussed above into consideration. Since the administration of President Obasanjo and those of the Governors of most of the states of the Federation were inaugurated in 2003, their preoccupation had been to force an amendment to the Constitution, not because of any fundamental progress made in Nigeria but to pave the way for them to sit tight in office.

The justification for this greed for continuing in office beyond 2007 was advanced, in the case of the President, by two of his henchmen, Femi Fani-Kayode, the Presidential Special Assistant on Public Affairs and retired Colonel Ahmadu Ali, the Chairman of the People's Democratic Party, who was handpicked by the President and crudely imposed on the party. Colonel Ahmadu Ali was Minister of Education in the military government headed by

General Olusegun Obasanjo, 1976-1979. In 1978 there were violent students' demonstrations across the country against his educational policies, which were repressed. Many students were killed by the police and the army. In Ahmadu Bello University alone about seven students lost their lives. The "Ali must Go" repression is still fresh in the memories of Nigerian University students.

Femi Fani-Kayode and Col. Ahmadu Ali's rationalisations of the diabolical third term project were not any different from those being advanced by emissaries of the President during their subterranean visits to community leaders, in their bid to garner support for it.

According Femi Fani-Kayode, there is no one amongst the millions of our compatriots qualified to lead Nigeria, who could give the "quality performance" that President Obasanjo is currently giving the country. He was quoted as having said that:

"The point today is not how many of these people can take over from the government, but how many of them are really capable of running the country in an efficient, just and equitable manner as being done today? How many are capable of running the economy and fighting corruption the way it's being done today? How many could have boosted foreign reserve, increased agricultural production, consolidated the banks, and revived the

*manufacturing sector as its being done today?...We can't allow ourselves to be taken back to the rot and degeneration of the past by anybody. We must cultivate the courage to insist on the very quality of leadership and on matching the very high standard that this administration has set, no matter what that takes"*¹⁷

In similar vein, Col Ahmadu Ali argued that he did not see the rationale for President Obasanjo leaving office at the expiration of his current and final tenure as stipulated by our constitution. In an interview he granted *Thisday*, he asked,

*"Why are we so cynical in this country? If really, we want this country to move forward and we have found somebody who can really make it move forward, for God's sake, let him move it forward for us, ok."*¹⁸

When Col Ahmadu Ali was reminded that democracy was anchored on the rule of law and that any attempt to prolong the tenure of the administration will subvert the system, his answer, in typical sycophantic style was;

¹⁷ *Vanguard*, Wednesday, December 28, 2005, pp.1-14

¹⁸ *Thisday* January 2, 2006. p.3

“You know your problem the “alakowe group”, you read big English and you literally lift it and you say it will work, it doesn’t work. It is the people, the social norms, the cultural norms are what you must extrapolate. The way democracy works in America is different from the way it works in France, Britain, and Russia today and even in Germany. Because their cultural context have had something to do with it. I have just told you the story of Ibadan. Don’t waste your time bringing democracy if you are not going to take that cultural context into the equation. We are suffering from bad leadership, this man we identified before for good leadership, he has come back and we have seen evidence of good leadership again, do you just change a gown when it is not dirty?”¹⁹

Typical of veranda boy arrogance of the spokespersons of African despots, nobody, no matter his or her position in our country, is spared the odious venom of the Presidential Special Assistant on Public Affairs Femi Fani Kayode. When General Yakubu Gowon, a former Head of State and highly respected statesman advised that:

¹⁹ *ibid.*

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“We have to avoid the tendency of leadership prolonging itself or over staying its acceptability- my experience, that of General Babangida and Abacha should be a good lesson for all leadership in Nigeria today and tomorrow”²⁰

Femi Fani-Kayode had the licence to say:

...you look at the credentials of the person that is offering the so-called advice. If we are to take stock of those who are qualified to give advice in terms of democracy and democratic process, among those that have ruled the country as military Head of State, the only two that are qualified are General Olusegun Obasanjo (as he was then) and General Abubakar Abdulsalami, because they were the ones that voluntarily handed over power at the time they said they would hand over. That cannot be said of General Gowon, Babangida and Abacha. I think it is very strange that somebody who did not leave power when he was supposed to, someone who kept on extending his handover date until he was pushed out is now the one telling others not to prolong tenure. General Obasanjo as he then was, left power in 1979. He did not have to do

²⁰ **Leadership**, January 22, 2006, p.22

so. It was the late General Murtala Muhammad that pledged that the administration would hand over government, but when Obasanjo succeeded him, he ensured that the hand over was actualised. A man that was thrown out of power is now advising someone who voluntarily relinquished power...²¹

But there is now little doubt that President Olusegun Obasanjo is bent on amending the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to pave the way for him to remain in power beyond 2007. When asked by a viewer of his monthly live television programme, “The President Explains”, to tell Nigerians whether he intended to seek for a third term in office, President Olusegun Obasanjo refused to answer the question. Instead, he went on talking about the energy sector and the so-called achievements of his government in that sector.

Moreover, there are State Governors who claim that they have been appointed by the president as zonal co-ordinators for the third term agenda and who are going round emirs and chiefs trying to sell the plan to them. Some of the governors have even come out openly to endorse the third term for the

²¹ See Gowon not competent to advise OBJ, **Sunday Tribune**, January, 2006, p.4

President and the Governors. In an interview granted the *Daily Trust*, Governor Bukar Abba Ibrahim of Yobe State was quoted as having said that

*“On the issues of tenure in the Constitution, we have been divided, with different signals coming from the governors. Well, majority of us support the extension on the basis of continuity; on the basis of the devil you know is better than the angel you don’t know., on the basis of so far, there are no better candidates than the ones on the seat to complete some of the good things they have started”.*²²

In similar vein, Governor Victor Attah who had in the past been a fervent supporter of the shift of the presidency to the South-South, which in effect had meant opposition to the third term agenda, has made political somersault and now justifies the plan. According to him,

The people that are waiting have a very good reason to wait because they know that it will be good that this person has been able to start this reform that we

²² See Many Governors in Support – Bukar Abba, *Daily Trust* Thursday, February 16, 2006, p.1-2.

never had. How many years have we had independence? We could not dream about those reforms, we could not get debt relief, we could not get the kind of respectability we are now getting in the international community, we could not accumulate the kind of foreign reserve that we are accumulating now.

So, it is even good for him to continue, let us learn a bit more from him before we take over. May be, that is why nobody is jumping to say I want to contest the presidency for the simple reason that if you know something, please continue for a bit longer.²³

The admission of support for the third term agenda by Governor Victor Attah merely confirms what Governor Kure of Niger State said earlier, on the same issue, namely that,

“I am afraid to tell you that several of my colleagues cannot be trusted on this third term agenda...And it’s a matter of regret because it’s a breach of the trust our people have in us²⁴

²³ See Governors in political somersault, **The Guardian**, Thursday February 16, 2006, p.8

²⁴ See PDP Governors may endorse third term. My colleagues can’t be trusted –Kure, **Daily Trust** Tuesday, January 24, 2006, p.1-2.

Another strong indication that the President and some Governors are determined to push for a third term came from Senator Uche Chukwumereji. Speaking recently on behalf of some of his colleagues in the National Assembly the senator said:

We, the concerned legislators of the National Assembly hereby oppose, reject, detest and denounce unequivocally the third term ambition of Mr President and some governors. We do so because it is self-serving, unconstitutional, undemocratic and retrogressive step into our sad historical experience. President Obasanjo is a lucky beneficiary of the long struggles of our people against despotic self-perpetuation in office.

We wish to use this opportunity to alert Nigerians that the third term project is real. It presents a clear and present danger to the unity, stability, security, development and progress of Nigeria and our nascent democracy. We want Nigerians not to accept any longer the half truths, lies, deception and manipulations of the Presidency on this issue. They use coercive forces and resources of state to blackmail, intimidate, harass, manipulate and threaten elected public officers at all

*levels towards achieving this satanic project*²⁵

The warped mindset of those pushing for the third term, was brought out by Honourable Usman Bugaje in a statement he made to the media, at Arewa House Kaduna, shortly after the police and other security agencies had taken over the place to prevent a symposium on the third term which was organised by Save Nigeria Movement, from holding.

According Honourable Bugaje

*The people who are canvassing for this (third term), at the National Assembly are making promises. One of them is a return ticket. It doesn't matter the party. They will make sure you return to the National Assembly. They will make sure that you have a choice plot of land in Abuja with N100 million that you will now build a villa of your choice. If you choose not to go back to your constituency, you can stay in Abuja and enjoy the rest of your life.*²⁶

²⁵ Third Term: Will the N/Assembly Stand Firm? **Thisday, The Sunday Newspaper**, February 19, 2006, p.117.

²⁶ **Daily Trust**, Monday February 27, 2006, pp1-2. See also **Thisday**, Monday February 27, 2006 pp1-4

It is not difficult to understand why some of these legislators can easily be swayed to move deeper in the direction of evil. As Honourable Bugaje again pointed out,

“Some of them are just imposed candidates and they know they do not stand a chance except they go through this kind of process the President is trying to create. That is a breach of the process that will impose them on the people.”²⁷

It is clear then that from the actions of the President and the pronouncements of his close lieutenants, the foisting of authoritarianism on the country will be a reality sooner than later, unless Nigerians mobilise to resist.

Settled Issues

There is nothing wrong in constitutional amendments per se. Indeed, since 1816 Thomas Jefferson, one of the foremost American political thinkers and statesman, argued that,

“Laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of human

²⁷ *ibid.*

*mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truth disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also and keep pace with the times”.*²⁸

Jefferson was, however, quick to add that he was:

“Certainly not an advocate for frequent untried changes in laws and constitutions”

For the reason that,

“Moderate imperfections had better be borne with, because, when once known, we accommodate ourselves to them and find practical means of correcting their ill effects.”

The framers of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria did also envisage that one day there might be the need to amend the constitution, hence they inserted section 9 dealing with the Mode of altering provisions of the Constitution.

²⁸ Edward Dumbauld (ed) 1966, **Freedom and the State. The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson**, Pyramid Publications Inc, New York, p.149.

However, to make us live with the constitution's "moderate imperfections" they made its amendment laborious. Nowhere was it implied in the constitution that it could be amended to satisfy the lust for power or the whims and caprices of an individual apparently totally drunk with messianic illusions of himself.

This issue of whether an incumbent could benefit from the amendment of the constitution of a country the government of which he or she leads was settled long ago. As Thomas Paine argued in the 1770s, constitutions create governments and give them their powers. They also regulate and restrain the powers so given. Therefore, as he argued,

"It is not for the benefit of those who exercise the powers of Government that Constitutions, and the Governments issuing from them, are established. In all those matters the right of judging and acting are in those who pay, and not those who receive. A Constitution is the property of a nation, and not of those who exercise the Government...a Constitution is a thing antecedent to the Government, and always distinct therefrom"²⁹

²⁹ Thomas Paine, **The Right of Man**, Wordsworth Classics, Hertford shire, 1996, p.147.

Hermann Cohen, former United States' Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, recently echoed this position when he correctly argued that,

It's very undemocratic to change constitution to benefit the person in power. If people want to get rid of the two-term limit, they should do it for the next president. The same goes for the president's salaries. Not long ago our president's salary was increased by Congress but the law went into effect for the next man in office.³⁰

The Terrible Precedents

One of the justifications often put forward for the attempt to keep President Obasanjo in power for as long as he wished is the nonsensical argument that Nigeria would experience stability, simply because there would be continuity of leadership at the top. This argument is not only nonsensical but dangerous because as we have seen in Africa, wherever it had been advanced the result had been repression, bloodshed and stagnation. This is because desperate leaders, who are bent on "turning evil" can do desperate things.

³⁰ See **Daily Trust**, Friday, December 23, 2005, p.3

In the sixties right through the seventies, African leaders modified their constitutions to keep themselves in power. The process itself was marked by repression and in some cases violence. Those who opposed the amendments were termed traitors and arrested on trumped up charges of treason. They were either put behind bars for as long as the dictators wished, or given some kangaroo trial, hanged, or executed. In some cases opposition leaders or their supporters were simply eliminated.

The Example of Mobutu

What happened in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), under General Mobutu is particularly so gruesome that it merits recalling here. Mobutu transformed cruelty into a gory spectacle. For instance in May 1966, he ordered the arrest of four of his opponents namely, Evariste Kimba, a former Prime Minister, Mahamba, Anany and Bamba, on charges of treason. They were given some “trial” and sentenced to death by hanging. General Mobutu decreed that the hanging took place in the open, at Kokolo Camp on May 31, 1966. People were mobilised to go and watch. He invited all important dignitaries, including foreign diplomats stationed in Kinshasa, to the horrific “show”, which he was to personally chair. Evariste Kimba and the three others were hanged one by one. General Mobutu, in an

interview, which he granted Belgian radiotélévision, justified his actions in an equally horrendous manner:

"For me it was necessary to carry out the execution. That will appear perhaps illogical to you, but you reason, you Europeans, with your Cartesian spirit. But we are Bantus. The respect for the head is sacred and it was necessary to strike for example (...) I decided (...) that we will be in power for five years...that is all"³¹

General Mobutu never kept his promise. He remained in power until he was violently pushed out by the forces of Laurent-Desire Kabila. Using the party he founded, in 1967, *Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution (MPR)*, he perfected the art of divide and rule while heavily relying on the army he recreated to repress his opponents and keep the people in check. He also used the considerable mineral wealth of the country to consolidate his power and to co-opt his rivals. Repression and corruption were the hallmarks of his administration. Estimates in 1984 placed his personal wealth at four billion US dollars which was almost equivalent to the country's national debt. With

³¹ Les Seigneurs du Congo Democratic, Fraternet.com

such misrule, development was obviously never a priority. As was observed by Roel van Dr Veen:

...most areas of political and economic activity had actually deteriorated. By the end of the regime, state institutions had been reduced to a husk and hardly any were still functioning.

Take the Ministry of Interior. This would have ordinarily been important institution in a country that is four times the size of France and has more than fifty million inhabitants. Instead, it was housed entirely within a single villa in Kinshasa. State institutions with larger premises, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had many empty rooms. Even the most basic activities were no longer carried out there. If Western Ambassadors needed landing permits for emergency aid flights from their countries to Zaire, for example, they had to type them up on their own typewriters. However, since they were unable to place an official Zairean stamp on the permits, they had to comb the empty corridors and rooms of the ministry for a remaining official who could do it for them'³²

³² Roel Van Der Veen (2004), **What Went Wrong With Africa. A contemporary History**, Amsterdam, KIT Press, pp.142-143.

The pressures for democratisation which became intense with the end of the cold war and dwindling of foreign aid forced Mobutu, in 1991, to agree to a national conference to chart a new course for the country and to allow for multiparty politics. Mobutu ensured that none came to pass. By 1994 Congo Democratic Republic, was ranked 168 out of 177 countries in the *United Nations 2004 Human Development Report*.

It was obvious that a little push could sweep the regime from power. This was because, despite General Mobutu's extreme authoritarian rule

“His control of the country had become tenuous, ‘as state power was too weak for the purpose. At a distance from the capital and the provincial centres of power, local leaders were able to make their limited influence felt. But they were unable to influence national politics, which would remain in the hands of the president until he died or driven out of the country.’”³³

³³ Roel Van der Veen, *What Went Wrong With Africa. A Contemporary History*, Amsterdam, KIT Publishers, 2004, p.142-143³³

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General Mobutu was ousted in May 1997 by the forces of Laurent-Desire Kabila with the aid of the RPF government in Kigali. Between 1999 and 2005 over four million people were killed by disease, war and ethnic violence in the DRC and 1.8 million people were displaced.

The seemingly uncontrolled war in the country claims 1,000 lives per day. According to Jan Egalang,

“Measured in human lives lost, I think that Congo is the number one problem in the world today...a tsunami every month, year in and year out, for the last six years.”³⁴

The human tragedy does not end there. According to Rowan Gilles of the Doctors Without Borders,

About thirty to forty women per week have been coming to us ... telling us they have been raped. And the majority have been raped by two or more perpetrators. The majority of rapes have ...involved weapons, whether it be again machetes or guns: it's quite an horrific story, and its not just when there's fighting. Often you see an increase in when there's...at the

³⁴ Jan Egalang, **Crisis in the Congo**, Online NewsHour, April 5, 2005, p.1

*time of fighting, but this even during the times of supposed peace. So there's widespread level of violence, and its grave concern*³⁵

The Example of Felix Houphouet Boigny

Cote d'Ivoire, under Houphouet Boigny is another example. While Houphouet Boigny did not descend to Mobutu's level of bestiality, when he arrested his opponents, nevertheless, he made sure that they were given some trial in a court located in a section of the presidential palace and given long prison sentences. He was able to silence the opposition for a long time and some progress was made in the economic and social spheres.

A World Bank report on Cote d'Ivoire went like this:

Few countries, DEVELOPED or DEVELOPING, can match the growth record of the Ivory Coast. Its annual growth rate in real terms of over 7 per cent during the past years is unique on the African continent. With no mining activity to speak of cocoa, coffee and timber have been and still are the pillars of the economy.; 1975 export of these commodities were respectively four, five,

³⁵ Crisis in the Congo, Online NewsHour, April 5, 2005.

and thirty times the 1950 exports in volume. In 1950, with a per capita income of around \$70, the Ivory Coast ranked among the poorest nations. At independence in 1960, income had risen to \$145, and in 1974 it had reached \$450.³⁶

It went on,

The government's liberal and pragmatic economic policies, and its emphasis on political stability and the creation of an image of modern growth-oriented economy, were instrumental in attracting even more capital and labour from abroad....Foreign private investors were impressed by the political stability and continuity in policy the government was able to provide.³⁷

Still on political stability the Bank added:

"To mould a nation out of more than fifty groups with different identities and interests is a major achievement. Continuity in policy has probably been as important as the kind of policy followed. A recent poll among foreign industrialists

³⁶ Ivory Coast, The Challenge of Success, Report of a mission sent to the Ivory Coast by the World Bank, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1978 p.1

³⁷ *ibid* p.4-5

in the Ivory Coast indicates that political stability rank highest in the list of factors governing choice of location abroad. In the election of November 1975 the president, at the age of 70, was given a mandate for another five years³⁸

What this report failed to add was that there were no contestants. The charade continued until Houphouet Boigny died in Switzerland in 1994. For years before his death he was virtually residents in France.

Despots hardly come out with a clear line of succession for fear of wetting the appetite of the designated successor for power. Houphouet Boigny was no exception. In response to pressures from the international community over his succession, he requested the National Assembly, on 25 November 1980, to create a deputy position. However,

In 1985 although he was supposed to be nominated with a vice presidential running mate, the constitution was amended in an eleventh-hour meeting of the National Assembly so that he could, once again, appear alone on the party ticket. Article 11 of the constitution was revised so that if a vacancy should occur, the President of the National Assembly

³⁸ *ibid.* p.13.

*will act as interim Head of State and Chairman of the PDCI, for 45 days until the people have voted for their next leader.*³⁹

His justification for this action was that

*“In a chief’s lifetime, whether he be chief of a region or of a family, no one must know the name of his replacement”*⁴⁰.

All opposition candidates including the current President of the country Laurent Gbagbo were not allowed to contest despite provisions in article 7 of the constitution allowing them to do so.

Months before his death it was clear that Cote d’Ivoire was heading for a disaster. In 1992 and 1993 the President embarked on a series of trips to France for medical treatment. Relying on article 24 of the Loi Fondamentale (The Fundamental law) of Cote d’Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, the Prime Minister tried to deputise for him. The President of the National Assembly, Henri Konan Bedie, also was determined to do the same according to article 11 of the same Loi Fondamentale. The problem here is that while Article 24 stipulates that the Prime Minister deputises when the President is out of the country, Article 11

³⁹ Jeanne Maddox Toungar, “The Apotheosis of Cote d’Ivoire. Nana Houphouet-Boigny” *The Journal of African Studies*, 28, 1 (1990) p.42.

⁴⁰ *ibid* pp.42-43

stipulates that in the event of the incapacity or inability of the President to fulfil his duties, the President of the National Assembly takes over. Despite this glaring contradiction President Houphouet Boigny and those around him did not make any effort to solve it. They also conveniently ignored the dangerous division it had created in society. A few months before the death of President Houphouet Boigny, he had travelled to France, again to seek medical attention. Prime Minister Alassane Ouattarra decided to convene a meeting to consider the budget for the year. Supporters of Konan Bedie immediately accused him of constitutional coup d'Etat.

The death of Houphouet Boigny brought about further intensification of the rivalry and bitterness between the two. Immediately after the announcement of his death by Alassane Ouattarra, Konan Bedie declared himself the president and addressed the nation and set about a process that was to inexorably take Cote d'Ivoire into an uncertain future. In 1995 he prevented Alassane Ouattarra from contesting the presidential elections claiming that the latter was not an Ivorian. Konan Bedie came out with an ideology which also became a policy, *ivoirite* (pure ivorian pride), which made anybody with a non-ivorian parentage a foreigner no matter how long he or she had stayed in the country. Those who have acquired land were denied permanent right of

occupancy. Ivorians with Muslim names were the obvious targets. The last straw was a constitutional amendment that enhanced the powers of the President. In September 1998, thousands of people took to the street to demonstrate their displeasure about the state of affairs. Many of them were protesting against the xenophobia that the ivoirite ideology had stimulated in the country. The instability that engulfed the country finally led to a military coup d'etat which in turn set off series of terrible developments that finally culminated into a civil war. Cote d'Ivoire today is in dire straits. The country has been divided into two. The North is controlled by the Nouvelle Forces while the South is in the hands of Laurent Gbabo and his Young Patriots. The economy is dislocated.

Consequences of sit-tight leadership

Sit-tight African leaders also created extreme personality cult such as is beginning to rear its ugly head in Nigeria today. In the case of Mobutu for example, every Zairean bank note had his image, all public buildings displayed his photograph, most businesses and billboards also had his image.

At the behest of those leaders, their sycophants kept drumming into the ears of those who cared to listen that they were guarantors of stability and the best things that had happened to their countries. The praise singing infused some messianic illusions in

those leaders. They began to interpret their dreams to mean revelations. They became isolated from reality and ended up believing their own lies. They became Papa or Baba or Nana such as our President has become. The danger is that Baba is never wrong. In such circumstances, expert advice is dispensed with and the dreams of the dictators became the policy. Such is the fear they instil in the people including their hangers on that even in their senility or insanity, they keep on clinging to power until violently overthrown, as in the case of Mobutu, or overpowered by death in the case of Houphouet Boigny.

A factor in the instability that befell their countries is rooted in the fact that while alive they created the illusion of their immortality and, therefore did not groom anybody to take over. Inevitably, instability engulfed their countries when they could not defeat death, because the struggle that ensued to fill the vacuum they had created became violent.

The peace those leaders boasted they had given their countries had turned out to be the peace of the graveyard. The reason for this is not farfetched for, in the first instance, the very process of effecting the constitutional modification that kept them in power, was tainted with repression. But their repression could not continue unchallenged.

In many African countries, political, economic and ethnic tensions which despotic misrule had generated did not spare the security agencies, even

though they were the last to be affected by the inevitable decay or the disintegration of the state. The constant use of the personnel of the armed forces and other security agencies in illegal and quite often terrible operations of detention without trial, torture and the physical elimination of opponents, transformed them into private instrument of coercion of the despot. The choice postings given to some of these security personnel as rewards for their actions, the disparity these postings and special treatments created in living conditions within the security agencies and the corruption of the privileged few finally eroded their professionalism.

As corruption became pervasive the states sank deeper into despotism. The shrinking economy and the greed of the power elite made it impossible for them to maintain the networks of patronage common with despotic and authoritarian rules. The consequence of these was the inability of the same power elite to finance the security agencies. It was just a matter of time for alternative centres of power to emerge and boldly stake their claim to power. As the balance of power changed so also the state monopoly of violence was challenged.

The Dangers Ahead

The attempt by President Obasanjo to stay put in Aso Rock beyond 2007, is pregnant with similar consequences for Nigeria. For one, if it succeeds, it

will truncate the country's transition to democratic rule and entrench civilian dictatorship. For another, if care is no taken, the very process itself, whether successful or not, could lead to the same end. So far the President and his henchmen have advanced no convincing arguments to justify their inordinate desire to cling to power. Their actions however, are strong pointers to the dangers ahead. Some of these actions and the dangers they portend are discussed below.

Bad Governance

To say that only President Obasanjo has the experience and foresight to give quality leadership to Nigerians is as preposterous as it is irresponsible. Indeed, it is an admission of failure. One of the major aspects of good governance is the elimination of undue reliance on the political will and the personality of a leader. Good governance is achieved by improving the quality of government organization and service delivery, the respect for the rule of law and accountability. Unfortunately, since President Olusegun Obasanjo came to power, the country has witnessed the deepening of centralisation of power around him and the Presidency with the attendant consequence of the weakening of governmental institutions. His control of important state agencies like the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and its parent ministry, the Ministry of Petroleum Resources, the Independent Corrupt Practices

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Commission (ICPC), the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC), the Office of the Accountant General of the Federation, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to mention only but a few, has strengthened his hands in that regard. It is no secret that virtually all the Presidents of the Senate, who were removed, suffered their fate at the behest of President Obasanjo. Indeed the President behaves as if he is above the reach of the law. Like it happened in other African countries where despots are or were in charge, the Presidency has become the dominant arena of decision-making. The only discernible difference between President Obasanjo's Aso Rock and that of General Abacha is the time it takes for a minister to see the president. It is shorter now. But Aso Rock has firmly remained a state within a state. Most State Governors as well as ministers shudder when summoned by the President. And he delegates little or no authority and takes most decisions.

To argue, as these sycophants do, that it is only President Obasanjo who is the sole repository of the wisdom and experience capable of taking our country out of its doldrums or its dire straits, is an admission that for the almost seven years that President Obasanjo has been at the helm of affairs in our country it has been business as usual. At the PDP level, it is also an admission that the party has failed woefully to perform one of the major functions of

political parties namely, that of political recruitment of future leaders, training them and equipping them with skills, knowledge and experience. Indeed as again noted by Cohen,

“It’s extremely important in Africa to respect term limits because it allows for the grooming of new leadership, (and) supports the rule of law. In contrast, “societies...countries that have had ...20 to 30-year presidents have not developed. Having regular turnover of power actually engrains, it institutionalises a democratic process”⁴¹

The Parallel With Abacha

In 1994 General Olusegun Obasanjo and General Shehu Musa Yar’adua insisted that General Abacha should hand over power at a date to be determined by the assembly he constituted to draw up a new constitution for the country. Typical of dictators who are quick in finding excuses to lock up or dispose off their opponents, the duo, together with some serving officers, were arrested on charges of treason, given some trial and jailed. General Yar adua was to pay with his life in Abakliki prison, while General Olusegun Obasanjo languished in Jos and later Yola prisons until he was released and pardoned

⁴¹ **Daily Trust**, Friday December 23, 2005, p.3

by General Abdulsalami Abubakar who also made sure that he was parachuted into Aso Rock as our President.

While the duo were in prison, the same forces led by Chief Tony Anenih, now sycophantically trumpeting the need for President Obasanjo to clutch at power, gallivanted round the globe rationalising the actions of General Abacha. Despite the tension in the country at that time, they crafted a diabolically unique scheme of getting all the registered political parties to adopt General Abacha as the sole candidate in his self-succession bid. It was only the cold hands of death, which snatched the general that spared the country the calamity their actions would have triggered. Like General Abacha, President Obasanjo is also keeping mute about his third term agenda. He has left his boys to do the shouting and growling.

It is noteworthy that while political parties are known to attract members, the reverse is the case with the PDP. As part of the diabolical plan to get himself re-nominated by the PDP for the third term, President Obasanjo and his acolytes hounded the chairman of the party, Audu Ogbeh out of office, proceeded to sack all the other members of the executive, and dismissed all the members of the party and asked them to re-apply. In the process, only the supporters of those who will do the bidding of the president and his henchmen were given new cards. Some governors even had to pay personal allegiance

to the President before they and their supporters were given membership cards.

The Dangerous Division

Leaders who are bent on enthrone authoritarianism are known to be both as ruthless as well as reckless in the pursuit of their inordinate ambitions. Unfortunately, our President is increasingly shaping into that frame. While he flaunts his credentials as a patriot who has fought to keep Nigeria one, his recent actions cut him in the mould of those who easily forget the lessons of history. Ironically, it was the same President who recently said that history does not repeat itself but rather it is people who forget the lessons of history. To quote him:

Dictators who rule by the force of power, oppression and intimidation seldom relinquish power and control voluntarily to others. Sadly, one of the greatest tragedies of man is that he never learns from history, hence the saying that history repeats itself.⁴²

When Vice President Atiku Abubakar, accepted the invitation to attend the meeting of the Northern Senators' Forum, held in Kaduna on the 4th of

⁴² Quoted from the article Birds of a Feather, **The News**, March 27, 2006 p.45

December, 2005, the President, wrote him a letter warning him against attending, arguing that it was a sectional meeting and that the major plank of his administration was to deepen national unity. But the same President failed to apply the same logic to his ministers and all his advisers from the South who attended the Conference of Governors, Legislators, Ministers, Traditional Rulers and Socio-political Leaders of Southern States of Nigeria, held in Enugu. At the end of that meeting on Monday, 19 December, 2005, a communiqué reminiscent of those of the sixties, which finally plunged our country into a 30-months civil war was issued. Part of the communiqué read by Chief Matthew Mbu states,

“iv. that Conference demands that the process of Constitutional Amendment/ Reform must commence immediately and be concluded and effected prior to the 2007 elections, failing which the South shall boycott the 2007 elections and consider the reconstitution of the Country as Confederation on the basis of the six geo-political zones, with each zone retaining its resources and contributing to the centre on the basis of agreed principle, failure which the south shall stop forthwith resources derived from its geopolitical zone... that an immediate review of the revenue allocation which should emphasize derivation be

immediately undertaken, inclusive of all revenue from petroleum, solid minerals, VAT, seaport, and airport usage, and that in furtherance, we restate the principle of inalienable right of States/Zones to control their own resources, consequent upon which we demand and insist on 25 per cent, graduating, in five years, to 50% per cent derivation, to rightfully accrue to States/Zones”⁴³

Imagination does not have to be stretched too far to discern the objectives of this open attempt to polarize our people. It is obviously aimed at creating a state of tension to justify President Obasanjo’s continued stay in office. This was brought out clearly in an interview given by Senator Mantu the Senate’s spearhead for the third term agenda. Castigating Nigerians who have exercised their legitimate democratic right by opposing the nefarious agenda he said:

The issue is straightforward. The question is, why are we making mountains out of a mole hill? These issues are just the creations of people who just want to promote tension unnecessarily in the land and what they are doing may actually provide reasons for Obasanjo to continue because if they

⁴³ Newswatch, January 9, 2006, p.21.

*create tension and there is chaos in the land, there is break down of law and order, then a state of emergency would now come in.*⁴⁴

But this strategy is fraught with serious dangers especially during a period of transition such as this for, if care is not taken; the extreme political tension it is likely to generate could lead to chaos and possibly military intervention. Indeed, taken together, the two paragraphs of the communiqué cited above are euphemisms for the dismantling of Nigeria. Such kind of pronouncements had in the past led to the intervention of the Nigerian Armed Forces, who, since independence have sworn to fight for the indivisibility of Nigeria and have often used as the excuse for their intervention, political tensions such as is being roused by President Obasanjo and his hangers-on.

The dangerous signals are already beaming, for even the blind to see. Reacting to the third term controversy, the Chief of Army Staff, Lieutenant General Martin Agwai was quoted as having said:

“We hope and pray that politicians will understand the importance of having this country as one entity. We hope they will not allow their political differences to do anything that will threaten the

⁴⁴ Weekly Trust, January 28 – February 3, 2006, p.41

*corporate existence of Nigeria as one united country.*⁴⁵

One could draw parallel between this statement and that of the General Officer Commanding the Third Division of the Nigerian Army, Major General Muhammadu Buhari, just before the coup d'Etat that overthrew the civilian administration of the country in December 1983. In the wake of the controversy that accompanied the 1983 elections and the tension it generated, General Buhari alerted the nation to the effect that the Nigerian Armed Forces will intervene to save the territorial integrity of the country if the situation degenerated. Few weeks later the civilian administration was toppled, ushering in a long period of military rule. Indeed, in his address to the nation on assumption of office, as Head of the Federal Military Government, General Buhari said,

*...a government that itself created conditions that promoted insecurity was obviously not in a position to check those activities.*⁴⁶

Disloyalty to the Constitution

While swearing in six new Federal Permanent Secretaries on 4th January 2006, President Obasanjo

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⁴⁶ Alkasum Abba et al, **The Nigerian Economic Crisis: Causes and Solutions**, ASUU, Zaria, 1985, p.171.

emphasised on the need for loyalty to the government and the nation. He said:

“To me, there is no 99 percent loyalty. It has to be total. If you cannot give total loyalty, then you should look for another job. You have heard of something they call military loyalty. If that means total, then there is no other thing except military loyalty. Because if you do not give military loyalty, you endanger the lives of not yourself but the lives of others when you are in battle.”⁴⁷

This statement is interesting as it is very instructive when linked to the third term agenda for the simple reason that before assuming office, the President and the 36 State Governors swore to protect and abide by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Despite this, the President and some of the governors are manoeuvring to coerce the National and the State Assemblies to hurriedly amend the Constitution in order to accommodate their third term ambitions. It is ironic that the President would demand 100% loyalty from all his subordinates but fail to give 100% loyalty to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria the authority under which he was elected into office. For, a President who violates the constitution of his country when it suits

⁴⁷ See the **New Nigerian**, Thursday, January 5, 2006, pp1-2.

him is certainly on slippery grounds when he demands 100% loyalty from his subordinates.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that President Obasanjo and a tiny clique around him are trying to steer Nigeria into murky waters full of political bombs. All well meaning Nigerians should, therefore, rise up, as they have done in the past, to nip in the bud this cynical and dangerous move. As for Obasanjo, he could do well by heeding the advice of President Matthew Kerekou of the Republic of Benin that :

“If you show your wish to remain in power or try to insist on staying there and the people don’t want you, you are heading for the sort of trouble, which Benin managed to avoid in 1990.”

Because anyone,

“Who fails to leave power, power will leave him.”

However, should President Obasanjo choose to ignore this brotherly advice, he may very well be reminded of what he is believed to have told former President Ibrahim Babaganda, in a speech at a 1992

Council of State meeting, in response to the calls by some groups for him to prolong his stay in power:

“As someone who was in the battlefield during the Nigerian Civil War and who unexpectedly but providentially assumed the mantle of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria and the leadership of the government, I beg you in the name of Allah not to mistake the silence of our people for acquiescence or weakness and the sycophancy of the greedy and opportunistic people who parade the corridors of power as representative of the true feelings of our people.

Nigeria needs peace and stability. It is too fragile to face another commotion. In God’s good name drag it not into one. This is the time for you to have some honourable exit. May God help you and help our country.”⁴⁸

⁴⁸Quoted from Okey Ifionu, “3rd Term: History Echoes”, Thisday, Thursday March 2, 2006, p.14

“ All across the country there is popular and widespread anger against the attempt being made by President Obasanjo and some Governors to prolong their stay beyond 2007. In the Northern States in particular, the anger has even taken the form of blaming political leaders as well as certain retired senior military officers for engineering the candidature of General Obasanjo in 1999 in the first instance. This is because the two terms of the Obasanjo administration have failed to revive the economy, create jobs and stabilise the polity. Consequently, poverty and insecurity have become the order of the day in the last six and half years”

