

Rotational Presidency as a Veritable Tool for Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria

¹Anyanwu, Christianus
Izuchukwu &

²Basil Akpan Ekot

^{1&2}Department of Political Science
and Diplomacy,
Veritas University, Abuja

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Abstract

Countries ideally fashion out a form of government that best reflect how they are constituted. In no doubt, democracy is considered the best form of government that could accommodate the heterogeneity of countries. In Africa for instance, ethno-religious politics emanating from struggle over political power and fear of dominance has continuously threatened and truncated democratic governance. The sustainability of democracy in a heterogeneous context, like Nigeria with large number of ethnic groups, languages, cultures and religion become paramount. This paper considered rotational presidency as a veritable tool for sustainable democracy in Nigeria, thereby, as a charter of equity given all the constituted geo-political zones equal opportunity to contribute in the national project. The paper adopted qualitative methodology, while relevant data were accessed through secondary sources. Findings revealed that Nigerian democracy has suffered numerous threats that undermine its existence. The paper recommends constitutional amendment to enshrine the principle of rotational presidency.

Corresponding Author:

Anyanwu, Christianus Izuchukwu

Background to the Study

The challenge of nation building has bedeviled most African countries, and Nigeria is not an exception. Since the end of colonialism, marking the independence of most states, political instability, social conflicts, misery and underdevelopment have shown the poor governance structure in the continent. Some African countries sadly were involved in genocidal war at the emergence of new political class. As a response these challenges, African countries engaged in activities on how best to fashion out a socio-political order that could entrench political stability and functioning system in their various states. With regards to Nigeria, it has passed through the crisis of civil war, through several military incursions into politics, to election annulment that led to mass protest and local and international condemnation. In all, the sense of popular disenchantments, mutual suspicions and the fear of political domination as against the minority constituent units have been at the center of national discuss. The attempt in forming the best socio-political arrangement that would allay the fears and guarantee political stability has resulted in the practice of regionalism to federalism, yet there are still a number of conferences and confabs, all in the attempt of ensuring political stability (Anyanwu, 2023). Regrettably, these endeavours have failed in curtailing or ameliorating threats and counter-threats wracking various parts of the country. It therefore indicates that democracy is fragile in a country that is heterogeneously constituted, thereby underscores the need to innovate a strategy that sustains democracy. Against this backdrop, there has been renewed call by some citizens for the introduction of rotational presidency as a panacea to the threat to democracy in Nigeria. The paper therefore, emphasizes rotational presidency as key to sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

Sustainable Democracy – A conceptual discuss

Sustenance of democracy involves the process by which democracy becomes generally acceptable and legitimate among the citizens that it is strong enough to breakdown. It does not only consist in behavioural changes but also institutional changes that normalize democratic politics and narrow its uncertainty. Normalization reflects in the expansion of citizens' access, development of democratic citizenship and culture, broadening of leadership recruitment and training, enhancement of national integrative instruments and other functions that civil society performs (Egbefo, 2014). In any case, the sustainability of democracy basically requires political institutionalization. Akinola (2014) argues that democracy is best sustained mainly in situation where there is good reason to believe that it is capable of withstanding pressure or shocks without abandoning the electoral process or the political freedom on which it depends, including those of dissent or opposition. However, this argument cannot be realized within the need for a deep institutionalization that goes beyond the electoral process.

It is important to note that series of different components have been proposed in the literature that shows a sustained democracy. Egbefo (2014) acknowledges the role of election and its process in strengthening democracy. For him democracy is sustained when a government that has been elected legitimately is subsequently defeated in an election and defeat is conceded. The importance of this component lies on the fact that the

test is not on winning an election by opposition but the incumbent conceding defeat, which demonstrate that political actors and their supporters are disposed to heed to the rules and respect the process rather than consolidating their stay in power. This component of democratic sustenance can be said to be counted only when such scenario occurs repeatedly at the point of being seen as a normal phenomenon. The second component is longevity of election in the state. Egbefo (2014) holds that regular competitive elections are sufficient to judge a democratic sustenance, even without a change of the ruling political party, since habituation to the electoral process would make any alternative method for appointing rulers unthinkable. Though this remark may not be complete on its own as the demonstration for dissatisfaction of the electoral process may take long to gather devastating momentum.

Apart from the two components, Egbefo sees the last component as not just the principled commitment to democratic norms, but when the top political actors see sufficient common interest in establishing electoral procedures and subsequently see that their interest in keeping to the rules of the game outweighs the costs to them of their being undermined. This therefore shows that the sustainability of democracy is a function of many factors or conditions working together. Onwudiwe (2005) subscribes to this point, opining that in sustainability of electoral democracy, no one condition is sufficient but an accumulation of facilitating conditions. It is therefore very clear that the concept of democratic sustenance can be understood in different angle. This paper considers it as the ability and capacity of the polity to nurture and consolidate democracy with little or no threat of its collapse.

Rotational Presidency and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria

Rotational presidency is seen as a mechanism designed by states (especially heterogeneous states) to ensure political stability among the various contending sub-nationals for the seat of president. Eboraka (2016) holds that rotational presidency has the potentials to address contentious issues of ethnic politics in Nigeria, put an end to the perennial cry of marginalization, curb extreme sectionalism and set the country on the path of nation building. This is similarly captured in a simple way by Iloka (2018) that rotational presidency consists of power sharing among the zones or federating units that make up the country. Nigeria is made up of six (6) geo-political zones where all the ethnic groups are captured within the zones which provide the platform for easy rotation of power. Sirikah (2020) remarks that if Nigeria is a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-national society, one would have thought that power sharing must reflect the shared visions and aspirations of the variegated groups and nationalities that constitute Nigeria. This reflects what could be seen as the vision of democratic practice where the beauty of participatory democracy lies in creating equal opportunities for different people from different ethnic groups and different geo-political zones to meaningfully partake in running a government that would affect their destiny. Okoye (2022) views this as an unwritten principle, a child of necessity and moral imperative just to state an obvious and indispensable fact.

The reality of true people of Africans and indeed Nigerians cannot be suppressed. This reality is the values and what Nigerians cherish – indigence, kinship, family lineage, community life, ethnicity, religion and so on. These undeniable cherished values cannot be wished away or glossed over. Non-recognition and acknowledgement of the reality of these values amounts to pretense and lack of willingness to confront the question of governance in Nigeria and the move for national peace-building. The existential reality of 'who we are' has continued to make rotational presidency a national discourse, a path to national peace-building and a tool for sustainable democracy.

The political card of equity, rotational presidency along zonal and ethnic lines has been deployed in most cases when the country confronted political brick wall. The card was played in the June 12th saga of 1993. Okoye (2022) observed that Nigeria could have dismembered were the South West, Yoruba people not placated and compensated for the unlawful and unjust cancellation of the June 12th 1993 presidential election, with Chief Olusegun Obasanjo emerging as a president. It is in the same vein that Aniefiok and Udoudoh (2018) argued that rotational principle has always been resorted to at every given point of political cross-roads. Indicating the indispensability of this principle, they remarked that the first appearance of the word “rotation” in the Nigerian political lexicon was in September, 1975. This was part of the official document tendered by the northern Nigeria delegates which opposed that there should be a central legislative council to coordinate the affairs of Nigerian, that the four regions of Nigeria as then constituted should be autonomous and the chairmanship of the central executive should rotate among the four autonomous states of Nigeria, namely – the East, North, West and Mid-West states. This is further portrayed by Ekweme (1995) that the next appearance of the word was in 1975/1976 as the constituted committee on executive and legislature of the Constitution Draft Committee (SAN) made a strong recommendation that in the practice of presidential system of government, Nigeria should be divided into four geographical zones, each should constitute a group (groups A and B) where the position of the president and vice president should rotate among the zones/groups (cited in Aniefiok and Udoudoh, 2018). This fact is equally acknowledged by Ekeng (2000) that it was in recognition of the ethnic divert of the country that made the defunct NPN came out with the model of zoning that alternates the geo-ethnic origin of the party's presidential, vice presidential and chairmanship candidates from one election to the other (cited in Ekot, 2011).

It is therefore seen that rotational presidency has always been a key principle which the country resorts to in every period the unity of the country is threatened. At the level of political parties, this has been seen and adopted as practical norm thereby captured in constitutions of some parties in zoning political offices within the parties, but it is yet to be given a constitutional backing at the national level. To ensure national integration, sustainable democracy and national peace-building, the country cannot continue to avoid accepting the reality of power rotation, mainly between the six geopolitical zones – North East, North West, North Central, South East, South West and South South. This is echoed in the work of Ekot (2011) citing the applicability of rotational principle especially

considering the six geo-political zones that is already in existence. For him, if the issue of rotation of the presidency should have credibility in the Nigerian political process, it has to be considered from the perspective of the six geo-political zones of the country; the six geo-political zones currently operating in the country will give a pragmatic applicability of the idea of zoning. In other words, the rotation of presidency within the zonal structure will give the diverse ethnic groups an opportunity to leadership and avoid what has become characteristic of Nigerian politics, that is, ethnic monopolies of political leadership.

Rotational Presidency and the Challenge of Nation Building

Supporters of rotational presidency as a principle maintain a common ground that it has the capacity to address one of the major issues of ethnic and religious politics in multi-cultural country, confronting the vexing issue of marginalization, mitigating extreme sectionalism, thereby repositioning the country on the path of nation building (Anyanwu, 2024). In discussing this assertion, it is considered important to first clarify the concept of nation building. Often times, both sociologists and political scientists apply the use of the concept interchangeably with national integration which has to do with the process of promoting inclusiveness among the sub-nationals that make up the country. In larger understanding, nation building consists of measures taken towards arranging a system that guarantees development, security and stability to the betterment of the citizens. This aligns with the position of Ake (2001) and Mylonas (2012) as that which encompasses both the notion of national integration and socio-economic development of the country.

Following the conceptual discuss on nation building and integration, rotational presidency is therefore identified as a key ingredient for its actualization. This is not far from the position of Akinola (2014) and Nwaneri (2013) that rotational presidency is one of the most outstanding innovations of political arrangements in Nigeria that will help minimize conflicts during presidential election and promote equity, justice, fairness and stability in the country. This is corroborated by Ekot (2011) that the re-positioning of power can be affected through what is called rotational presidency. This is stressed by Anyanwu (2019) that this is the best option for Nigeria and should form a policy agenda for the federal government and any national conference that may be constituted.

Some scholars however have raised fear over sustainability of rotational presidency which could affect the socio-economic, democratic and political advancements of the country. Nwaneri (2013) pointed out that rotational presidency is not enshrined in the constitution and therefore not binding by law; it would create conflict within political parties and among ethnic, regional and political zones when it is time for power to rotate to another part. Bangura (2013) and Nzongola-Ntalaja (2007) added that adoption of rotational presidency will limit democratic space, making it less participatory, shrinking people's choices and alternatives as against democratic postulations. It is pertinent to note critically that the issues raised by the scholars do not inhibit the instrumentality of rotational presidency to sustainable democracy and national peace-building. However,

the above scholars failed to note the number of lives lost out of non-recognition of rotational presidency in Nigeria. Among the death figures recorded in Nigerian election since independence, the 2011 election has the far highest figure which the violence was predominantly on issue of non-recognition of rotational presidency between the north and south. The Human Right Watch, and African Watch presented the figures as follows –

Table 1: Number of Lives Lost in Election Violence in Nigeria since Independence

S/N	Election Year	Number of Deaths Recorded	Percentage Contribution of Zoning
1.	1964/65	200	10%
2.	1993	100	7%
3.	1999	80	2%
4.	2003	100	43%
5.	2007	300	20%
6.	2011	800	95%
7.	2015	100	35%
8.	2019	150	7%

Source: Human Right Watch, and African Watch (2020).

The above statistical table indicates that failure to institutionalize rotational presidency has contributed to the election violence and deaths recorded in the country. The 2011 presidential election which was heated up clearly by issue of zoning between the north and south has the highest number of deaths recorded in the history of the country, which is 95% caused by lack of institutionalization of rotational presidency.

The fear raised by Nwaneri, Bangura, and Nzongola-Ntalaja are based on the constitutionality and limiting the space for democratic practice and range of people's choice, which if enshrined in the constitutions will address the challenges of constitutionality and generation of conflict within and among political bodies. Also, is the fact that the sub-nationals or geo-political zones that constitute the country are larger enough with good number of qualified persons to be presented and contest for the choices of the electorates, thereby not shrinking democratic space and alternatives for the citizens, and ultimately promote national cohesion, inclusiveness and peace-building.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on rotational presidency as a vital instrument for sustainable democracy in Nigeria. It argues that, given the largeness and multicultural nature of Nigeria and its attendant challenge of struggle over political power by various ethnic and political zones that constitute the country, the call for adoption of rotational presidency will usher in an inclusive political arrangement that will address the country's peculiar problems. As an instrument that guarantees political equilibrium, it will foster sustainability of democratic practice and accelerate the process of national peace-building, development and national cohesion. It is a pacifist strategy that strengthens democratic postulations of inclusivity, participation, equity, equality and justice among

the federating units, thereby inhibiting the fear of marginalization, dominance and eventual conflict and struggle over political power and control.

Recommendations

The paper recommends the following:

- 1) An amendment of the constitution that guarantees rotational presidency which will be operational among the six geo-political zones. This will give a constitutional backing to this arrangement and become binding to all political parties and the geo-political zones.
- 2) Adoption of a single term of five (5) years. This will help mitigate the tension that comes with periodic elections, and will enable government to concentrate on governance as against the politics of re-election.
- 3) Political parties should be re-orientated to encourage and institutionalize internal democracy as against the imposition of candidates, and will help to open up democratic space for the citizens.

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