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Incumbency Factor and the Politics of Succession in Nigeria: Travails of an Emerging Democracy

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Abstract:

This work is a periscope on the incumbency factor and the politics of succession in Nigeria especially as it affects her second and third tiers of government as provided in her federal system. The work highlights the syndrome as one of the major problems plaguing Nigeria's nascent democracy particularly that of the fourth republic. It showcased the various manifestations of its visible presence within the country's democratic corridor and at best, underscores the direct consequences of the interplay on the country's socio-economic and political development. Employing the Marxian class theory of the state as the framework of analysis and a content methodology, the work was able to discover amongst others that the interplay of the incumbency factor and the politics of succession have exacerbated most of the post-election violence in Nigeria. More so, it has rekindled political instability, overheated the democratic space while at the same time reinforcing corruption and mismanagement of the state scarce resources. Based on the foregoing, the work recommends amongst others that since no meaningful development can take place in a rancorous environment, Nigeria's political class must imbibe the spirit of democratic principles so as to allow the general will of the people to prevail at any given time in order to stabilize the country's nascent democracy. Secondly, the country's electoral Act must be made more enforceable so as to forestall politics of impositions by the political elites on the electorates.

Keywords: *Incumbency, incumbency factor, democracy, succession, politics, political succession.*

1. Introduction

One of the essential features of democracy that makes it the preferred system of government in contemporary times is that it guarantees citizens the freedom to choose or replace their political leaders or representatives through elections that ought to be organized in a free and fair manner. Hence, democracy is often defined as government by the majority and this implies that while the wishes of the majority do prevail, the minority are also allowed to express their will without fear of intimidation or reprisals.

The people elect their leaders through a democratic means and thus relinquish to them the management of the resources collectively owned while believing that in the hands of such elected few men and women, they can be guaranteed a better bargain. These elected individuals therefore hold their respective positions in trust for the society. So, they are expected to serve the people within the statutory frame of their tenure with sincerity and dedication.

Democracy therefore operates on the principle that the leaders and the led are in a contract with the condition that the people who are the governed reserves the right to choose and replace their leaders in a periodic election. It is therefore the people that should determine who their leaders should be and not the leaders overtly or covertly imposing themselves on the people or even their surrogates in defiance of the wishes and aspirations of the citizens.

By the foregoing, it implies that periodic election is one of the main features of democratic system of government. Election periods here becomes the time for the people to exercise their franchise through the ballot boxes as a means to decide who actually partakes in the decision making process as stipulated by the constitution.

In developed countries of Europe and America, these democratic processes have grown over time to become part of the people's culture. On the contrary however, when we look at the democratic experiments of most developing countries of the world, Nigeria inclusive, what we see leaves much to be desired. Given the nascent nature of their democracies and as emerging states, Political leaders in most African countries use their various political positions as necessary means to manipulate electoral outcomes to their advantage even to the detriment of their citizens. This is what is referred to in this study as the *incumbency factor*.

Basically, incumbency is not a negative term on its own. It is simply defined as the state of being the current office holder. That means that an incumbent in political parlance is the person who is currently occupying a political office. So, it is a common phenomenon in every organized society because at any given time, the various political offices are mostly occupied by one person or the other. However, the specter at which such coveted political offices are subjected to moments of abuses owing to pecuniary instincts have become antithetical to the growth of the democratic enterprise in most emerging states of Africa, Nigeria inclusive. It is against the background of such abuses that one can locate the impact of the incumbency factor.

During the time of elections, these incumbents may either wish to re-contest or where the tenure is up, usually prop an anointed political godson as possible successor to contest the election with other contenders. In such contests, the outcome is often influenced by what is referred to as “the incumbent factor, incumbent advantage” or even “the incumbency effect”. This is simply the advantages that elected and serving officers or representatives have over new comers in getting re-elected. The advantages stem from certain factors like; prior experience, familiarity with voters, access to funding, ample time for campaign tours and wider media coverage as well as viable security all at the expense of the state.

For instance, in democratically advanced societies such as in Europe and America, elections, more often, are smoothly conducted and owing to their level of democratic advancement, incumbents hardly cash in on the afore-mentioned advantages as obvious edge over their challengers in any political race. Despite their portfolio as sitting incumbents, both campaigns and elections are issue based. However, scholarly evidences demonstrate that the factor of incumbency cannot just be wished away even in the advanced democracies of the west but the point of difference lies on moderation. In fact, it was recorded that in 2004, 401 of the 435 sitting members of the US House of Representatives sought re-elections and out of these 401, all but five were re-elected. In other words, incumbents seeking re-election to America’s House of Representatives had more than 99% success rate, (www.thisnation.com). This is also referred to as the power of incumbency.

However, this power of incumbency is usually misunderstood by politicians in a developing state like Nigeria, leading to its abuse by political office holders during election periods (Nwanegbo & Alumona, 2011). It is obvious to every observer of political events in Nigeria that the process of transiting from one administration to another has been a herculean task for the citizens owing to the precarious Politics of succession prevalent in the country.

Hence, many researchers have made several efforts to point out different aspects of this problem plaguing the country’s nascent democracy with some modicum of suggestions as solutions. For example, while Ugwuanyi (2015), ex-rayed the role of the security agencies in the conduct of elections in Nigeria and suggested the strengthening of the Nigerian police and the armed forces so as to curb the incessant cases of electoral violence (www.clean.org), Nwanegbo & Alumona (2011) looked at the problem of the abuse of incumbency factor with regard to alternation of power between the ruling party and the opposition. They viewed the manifestations of the problem from three levels in line with Mozaffer & Schedler (2002), which includes: - the level of rule-making, rule application, and rule adjudication and concluded that genuine electoral reform and a national orientation programme holds the key to solving the problem.

Going down memory lane, Omotayo (2002) traced the history of Nigeria’s political succession problem right back to 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates to form one single entity called Nigeria. He therefore canvassed for the entrenchment of the idea of **rotation** of principal political positions among the contending ethnic configurations as a panacea. Moveh (2010) while exploring the roles of the state and the youths in exacerbating electoral violence in Nigeria’s fourth republic believes that with a nationally coordinated empowerment programmes for the youths, much significant reprieve could come the way of the country. Despite the immense contributions of scholars in the efforts towards finding lasting solutions to the problems of Nigeria’s political development, there is still the need to highlight on the direct adverse consequences of the abuses of the power of incumbency in the processes of democratic experimentations in Nigeria.

In this direction therefore, this work is set out to point out the various manifestations of the incumbency factor and the politics of succession in Nigeria and at best, prove that it is central to the travails of the country’s emerging democracy and essentially instrumental to the numerous post-election violence, political instability, and the hydra headed problem of corruption and mismanagement of scare resources that have come to grapple the Nigerian state today.

2. Theoretical Perspective

This research work is anchored on the Marxian class theory of the state as its tool of analysis. There is no doubt that the theory of the state in the radical Marxian tradition has become a very important tool within the Marxian paradigm for the analysis of the interplay of relations in capital reproduction in the bourgeoisie capitalist and neo capitalist states of which Nigeria cannot be isolated from (Ezeh, 2010). Notwithstanding the fact that there has been a general lack of consensus on the notion of the state as captured by Lenin (1975), its major role in capital reproduction has continued to spark scholarly attention especially following from the works of Engels (1978), Marx and Engels (1977), Lenin (1974, 1975) and Marx and Engels (1969). From the background of the Marxian Persuasion, the state is nothing but a representation of the interest of the ruling class which on the contrary repudiates the pretences on the part of the state as an unbiased umpire in the distribution of the social resources on grounds of justice and equity. As a matter of fact, the origin of the state has been tied to the emergence of classes in the society and the consequent struggle among the classes to suppress and appropriate the labor of one or more class by another (Ezeh, 2010). Against this background, the state is not only an agent in the hands of the ruling class but also an organ for the oppression of one class by another and a serving instrument for the maintenance of pecuniary socio-economic and political order. The incumbency factor is therefore a power game dangling around the neck of the state which is an invention of the ruling class to foster a programmed pattern of succession. The essence of such perpetuation is to guarantee uninterrupted access to state scarce resource at the expense of the citizenry. Due to the fact that the state in Africa has been

dislocated and over ran, the peripheral bourgeoisie have continued to enjoy an un-assailed programme of self-perpetuation and recycling that makes it possible to employ state apparatus such as the army and police as instruments of intimidations in order to amass fictitious votes to its advantage and guarantee itself a place in governance or even its surrogate (godson) as the case may be. The main contention of the Martian thesis here is that at the root of the struggle for political power is the economic interlay and reward which invariably the political class in Nigeria has continued to see as a matter of **do or die** thereby inventing all proven strategies and mechanisms to control at all times. The inordinacy behind the application of the power of incumbency is to ensure that political power does not escape from the serving political class not for the reason of continued service to the society but rather for increased self-aggrandizement.

3. The Incumbency Factor in Nigeria's Democratic Politics

There is no doubt that the dosage of incumbency factor showcased in the process of transiting from one administration to another in Nigeria has created untold problematic situations for the country's political development. This factor is seen in all levels of government in Nigeria and it cuts across all states of the Federation and the registered political parties. Its repeated interplay has continued to deny the electorates the rights of choosing their leaders through the instrumentality of the power of the ballot box.

From the inception of the present fourth republic in 1999, the citizens have witnessed the spirited activities of the political class in the game of who gets what, when and how. At present, over 20 political parties are dully registered by Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This is in complete realization of the fact that Political parties provide a vital channel by which citizens can aggregate their interests, make polices and hold government accountable (Liebowitz & Ibrahim, 2013) and of course too, the existence of vibrant political parties is believed to be a sine qua non for democratic consolidation in any polity (Dode, 2010).

However, a closer look at the Nigerian political parties would reveal a remarkable factor that has to do with the uncoordinated movement of politicians from one political party to another before, during and after each transition period. Political parties are supposed to be built on ideological convictions and so, only those who share the same political ideology are to be found in one party (Nnoli, 2003). On the Contrary, Nigerian political parties do not seem to be built on any clear cut ideology, considering the spate of cross – carpeting from one party to another by politicians.

The problem as presented above derives ostensibly from the lack of internal democracy in virtually all the political parties in Nigeria. With the approach of each general election, political parties are expected to conduct their primary elections to choose those that will emerge as flag bearers for various political offices in the country and this is usually the time that the incumbency factor begins to manifest itself.

The president, the governors and of course, their party chairmen both at the national and state levels, all struggle to impose one candidate or the other on their various political parties on one hand and the electorates on the other. This imposition of candidates does not give party members the opportunity of choosing who their flag bearer should be. It often stirs ripples within the various political parties leading to the exodus of some disenchanted members after each exercise.

This interplay as painted above was massively witnessed during the administration of former president Olusegun Obasanjo between 1999 and 2007 in Nigeria. That was the time that the president used his powers of incumbency to re-draft the constitution of his party, the People's Democratic Party(PDP), an intention aimed at probably enabling him to emerge as the party's sole presidential candidate for the 2003 general elections in Nigeria (Nwanegbo & Alumona, 2011).

With the crash of his 2003 ambition at redesigning his party for obvious self-centered reasons under the propelling force of the incumbency factor, the same former president Obasanjo went ahead to dare to amend the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in a bid to allow him run for the third term in office in 2007 but for the stiff resistance of the country's National Assembly. But relentless as he seemed, at last, he singles – handedly nominated the late President Umaru Musa Yar'adua who eventually became the president of the country as his party's sole Presidential candidate in the 2007 general elections on the grounds that all other contestants in the party were corrupt (Oladimeji, 2015).

President Obasanjo not only hand – picked his party's candidates but also made it clear to the electorates that winning the 2007 elections was a do ordie affair for the PDP as if to say that electoral victory was no longer a matter of the ballot box (Larewaju, 2007). He went ahead using his power of incumbency to manipulate the election in favor of Yar'adua. Little wonder then why the Late Yar'adua when he assumed office as the President acknowledged before the United Nations Secretary General, Mr. Ban-ki Moon, on 4th June 2007, that the election which brought him into office was rigged (Bankole, 2007). The rest of what happened as a result of the 2007 elections is now history but suffice it to say that the incumbency factor over played itself out in the Nigerian politics during the Obasanjo's Administration.

According to Odeh (2003), the ruling party (PDP) gave all the incumbent governors automatic tickets to contest the 2003 elections except in Anambra State. And in the South West where Alliance for Democracy (AD) dominated, no other aspirant for the gubernatorial position was allowed to contest.

The governor of Ekiti State, Chief Ayo Fayose, once described his party, the PDP, as an anti-public and anti-party party where imposition of leaders, oppressions, suppression and lack of internal democracy reign supreme (Oditta, 2010). That Statement was made during his first term in office when he decamped to the labour party (LP). The story from other parties is not in any way different.

The incumbency factor also manifests in form of control and manipulation of the mass media. Most of the state-owned media outfits in the country are fully controlled and manipulated by agents of the Chief executive of the state where they are located. This makes it near impossible for opposition candidates and their parties to have access to such media houses. In such situation, the masses are not provided with enough options to choose from during elections. The Common Wealth Observer Group said in its report on 2007

elections that significant state ownership of media negatively impacted on and influenced the coverage in favor of the incumbent's parties (www.nigeriaelectionreport.com)

The security agencies on their own tend to be working for the incumbents during elections. There are cases where opposition politicians are rough-handled and maltreated by security officers whenever there is a disagreement between them and the incumbents. The answer to such cases is usually buried in the claim that the order is from the above. The case of Rotimi Amechi and the former Rivers State Police Commissioner, Mr Mbu, is a good example (Ibeh, 2014).

When Dr Chris Ngige was serving as the Governor of Anambra State, all the security men that were attached to his office were removed because of the disagreement between him and his former political godfather who apparently was an agent of the incumbent president at that time (Browne, 2013).

In a related manner, the Judiciary was also compromised as some judges were known to have miscarried justice in some cases where an incumbent had interest. Example of such judgments and Judges were linked to those of Justice Wilson Egbo and Justice Stanley Nnaji who all delivered what was referred to as black market Judgment particularly on Ngige's case. They were later sacked from the Judiciary for lack of competence (David, 2013). Furthermore, in the case of the former president, late Umaru Musa Yar'adua that was earlier highlighted and, who, in spite of the fact that his election was obviously rigged as confessed by him, the judiciary still went ahead to declare him the duly elected president of the federal republic of Nigeria.

The Nigeria's 7th National Assembly intermittently witnessed some rowdy sessions and disruptions of activities when at some time; the entrance gate was locked up by some police officers on grounds that they are acting on the orders from above which was an obvious manifestation of the brazen powers of incumbency (Makinwa, 2014).

4. The Incumbency Factor and the Democratic Enterprise in Nigeria: The Consequencies

The nature and manifestations of the incumbency factor in Nigeria's democratic experiments have already preoccupied our scholarly attention and that being the case, it is necessary that this work turns the searchlight on the consequences of the interplay on the country's political development.

There is no gain saying the fact that the various manifestations are the causes of political instability being experienced in this country. First and foremost, the incumbency factor within the country's political corridor has led her to series of post – election violence. Using the 2011 general elections as an instance, it is a known fact that going by the People's Democratic Party (PDP's) zoning formula, it was still the turn of the North to produce the president of Nigeria. In the words of Gwegwe (2010);

- the northern belt of the country believes that based on the power sharing principle as adopted by the ruling PDP, the period spanning between 2007 and 2015 was their turn to occupy the Nigerian presidency.

Contrary to that, the hospitalization and eventual death of the former President Musa Yar'adua turned everything the other way round. The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria states that should the President vacate his office prematurely either by death, impeachment or resignation, the vice president should take over as president and complete the remaining years of that tenure. That was exactly what led to Dr Good luck Ebele Jonathan becoming the president of Nigeria in 2010, prior to the 2011 general elections.

Again, the incumbency factor played its self out during the PDP's primary election before the general elections when President Jonathan presented himself as a candidate to run for the office of the president on the platform of the People's Democratic Party. There were stiff oppositions from many powerful Northern Politicians within and outside the PDP family, some of who threatened openly that should any one deny the North the opportunity to produce the president in 2011, such would be an invitation to confrontation and violence. That notwithstanding, Good luck Jonathan actually won the PDP's primary election and went ahead to win the general election to become the Nigerian president. But immediately after the 2011 elections, there were violent protests in about 12 northern states. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that more than 800 people were killed and more than 65,000 people were displaced, 350 churches were burned down or destroyed by rioters across 10 northern states (www.hrw.org). This situation could have been avoided if not for the incumbency factor.

Similarly, the current Boko Haram Islamic fundamentalism that is mesmerizing the country today started with the protest against the denial of the North's perceived right to produce the president of the country in 2011. As at August 2014, the Guardian Newspaper reported that an estimated number of **650,000** are internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a result of the Boko Haram attack. In the same token, more than 100,000 Nigerians were said to be seeking refuge in Niger's Diffa region, about 44,000 in Cameroon and 2,700 in Chad (Baiyewu, 2014).

One could see from the foregoing that what happened before and during the 2011 general elections did not repeat itself in the 2015 general elections in terms of Post – election violence due to the proactive tactic deployed to manage the incumbency factor.

Furthermore, the incumbency factor is a conspiracy against the institutionalization of viable internal democracy among political parties in Nigeria. In a multi-party state like Nigeria, political parties provide the citizens with alternative sets of programmes for governing the society. This offer of choice enables the people to decide what kind of government is in their best interest and to choose accordingly during an election. For the development of strong, coherent and ideologically well-focused political parties, the basic principle of democracy which is the general will must be maintained within the parties. Ironically, in Nigeria today, except for their names, we can hardly differentiate between one political party and the other on the basis of policies and programmes they have for the country. This situation makes it easy for self-seeking politicians to cross-carpet from one party to another whenever they feel that their leaders are showing high-handedness in handling the affairs of their party or even when their chances of securing a ticket to run for their intended political offices is becoming slimmer. For instance, the present Nigeria's ruling party, the All Progressive Congress (APC) is currently having in its membership at least two former National chairmen of the ousted People's Democratic Party (PDP) now the opposition party.

In the same Vein, many former governors who served on the platform of the PDP are now leading members of the APC including but not limited to; Rotimi Amechi, Musa Knankwaso, George Akume etc. Likewise, former speakers of the Federal House of Representative from PDP like Aminu Bello Masari, Aminu Tambuwal and other prominent members of the PDP are now all in APC. They all left the PDP because of disagreements with the former president and leaders of their former party, PDP, all bothering on the use of the power of incumbency.

The incumbency factor also re-enforces the problem of parasitic god-fatherism and corruption in Nigerian Politics. When a president or a governor is completing his tenure in office and instead of allowing for a free and fair elections uses his power of incumbency to manipulate elections and enthrone an incompetent successor as opposed to the choice of the people, it promotes corruption and mismanagement of the scarce resources of the society.

Finally, it also leads to unending legal battles after elections which invariably distract the government's attention from discharging its functions very well to the people. Regrettably too, the commonwealth is often plundered by the sitting incumbents who deploy such in fighting to sustain themselves in such exulted positions as long as such legal battle lasts.

5. Conclusion

All over the world today, Democracy remains the best form of government in the sense that it provides the people the platform to express their general will. Therefore, the political class should understand that democracy can only be sustained if they give the people the chance to decide who their leaders should be in a free and fair manner, rather than using their power of incumbency to over – rule the choice of the people.

It has been observed that the blatant application of the power of incumbency within the Nigerian successive democratic experiments had denied the country the much-needed peace in many parts. Since it amounts to stating the obvious that no meaningful development can take place in an atmosphere of rancor and acrimony, the Nigerian state is just being plundered into an avoidable state of stagnation, complacency and inertia at the instance of incumbency ordeal perpetrated by her inordinate political class for pecuniary ends. So in order to avert further violent protests, and to ensure the development of strong, coherent and well-focused political parties in the country, the political leaders at all levels should imbibe some modicum of democratic principles in their leadership style ostensibly by extinguishing every appetite derivable from the wrongful application of the power of incumbency. It is only by so doing that the issue of corruption and mismanagement of scarce resources can easily be resolved because the people are always ready to vote out any non-performing political office holder out of power.

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