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ROTATIONAL PRESIDENCY AS PANACEA OF ENHANCING DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The clamour and agitation for the rotational presidency have been on the front burner in Nigerian politics for a long time, and the debate has brought a sharp divide between those supporting the policy and those against it. Nigeria, with over 374 ethnic groups with three major ethnic groups – Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba constituting more than half of the country's population have always contended that for the sake of equity, fair play and justice, the office of the president should be rotated among these three major ethnic groups or the sub-ethnic groups under them. This study will adopt the elite theory of democracy as it concerns the rotational presidency as the nexus for enhancing democracy in Nigeria. The cardinal belief of this theory is that society is divided into two – those who govern the state and those who govern the state. The study adopted a secondary method of data collection to gather vital information. The study concluded that rotational presidency or power sharing in Nigeria is an arrangement of the elite class in the country aimed at promoting informal political exchanges. Moreover, this notion is premised on the undue power rivalry and the struggle between the elite class in the country, who are much more interested in promoting their personal and collective political interests, and recommended, among others, that rotational presidency is an ideal principle that will assuage the fear against political domination of a particular region or section of the country against others if properly and systematically implemented.

Keywords: Rotational Presidency, Panacea, Democracy, Nigeria.

Introduction

The matter of rotational presidency has emerged as one of the most extensively discussed subjects in the evolution of Nigeria's political landscape. The matter has become increasingly significant since the establishment of the fourth republic, as various regions have, at different times, either contended that a gentleman's agreement exists for power to alternate between the north and south, or conversely, that no such agreement was ever established, thereby rendering that stance untenable. Nonetheless, an alternative perspective posits that while the necessity of power rotation between the North and the South is acknowledged, particularly given the diverse ethnic composition of the nation, it is imperative to prioritise competence in any agreements regarding such power rotation (Danjibo, 2019).

In his 2018 work, 'Power Sharing: The Element of Continuity in Nigeria Politics', Orji offers a comprehensive historical analysis of the subject matter. He observes that the push for

presidential rotation is profoundly embedded in the nation's historical context and stems from the stark divisions among its various ethnic groups. Nigeria, comprising more than 374 ethnic groups, has consistently argued that for the sake of equity, fairness, and justice, the presidency should be rotated among the three principal ethnic groups or their respective sub-ethnic groups.

Oladesu (2020) posits that a more equitable power-sharing framework is essential. Although the rotation of the presidency between the northern and southern regions represents a progressive advancement, it is imperative to contemplate a more holistic strategy. He proposes that the presidential position ought to be alternated among the six geopolitical zones within the nation. He posits that this will rectify the perceived marginalisation of certain regions and facilitate the desired resolution to the agitation being advocated by various areas within the country.

Haruna (2019) underscores the significance of unity and peace within the nation. He posits that the rotation of the presidency among the various regions constitutes the most effective strategy to guarantee this outcome. He emphasises that the significance of having a military head of state alongside a vice from distinct regions was recognised even in the era of military regimes. This facilitated the inclusion of every region, thereby preventing any notion of one region exerting dominance over the others.

Ojo (2019) highlighted the concerns of certain northern factions within the nation who oppose the equitable distribution of the presidential position between the North and South. He argued that these northern factions believe that the South has come to dominate the nation's economic power and the federal civil service. Therefore, the North surrendering political authority to the South would constitute a profound injustice. He arrived at the conclusion that, given democracy operates on numerical strength, and other regions recognise that the North will consistently prevail in any democratic election due to their demographic advantage, the demand for power rotation between the two regions lacks justification.

Consequently, this study seeks to conduct a thorough examination of the rotational presidency issue in Nigeria with the objective of advancing democratic principles. The analysis will encompass a thorough examination of significant literature and academic perspectives on the topic, while also enhancing understanding of this widely discussed issue through pertinent recommendations and insights for policymakers in the nation.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's democratic framework grapples with profound challenges arising from ethnic mistrust, regional disparities, and a sense of political marginalisation. The disparate allocation of political authority—most notably the presidency—has traditionally benefitted specific regions and ethnic demographics, resulting in the marginalisation of others and engendering feelings of resentment, unrest, and demands for secession or reorganisation.

The concept of rotational presidency—where the authority of the presidency shifts among various regions or geopolitical zones—has surfaced as a plausible approach to foster inclusivity and mitigate the hegemony of any singular group. Although certain political parties have adopted the practice of zoning presidential tickets, this concept remains largely

informal and devoid of constitutional basis, resulting in uneven application and heightened political discord.

Proponents contend that a rotational presidency promotes cohesion and ensures that every region of the nation feels represented, thus enhancing the democratic framework. Nevertheless, detractors perceive it as a misrepresentation of democratic ideals that emphasise meritocracy and the will of the populace. This tension prompts profound enquiries regarding the compromises between national unity and the principles of democracy.

The lack of a definitive and broadly recognised framework for the rotation of power perpetuates distrust among Nigeria's varied factions, undermines democratic institutions, and jeopardises political stability. This study aims to explore the potential of rotational presidency to genuinely improve democratic governance in Nigeria, while also considering the possibility that it may jeopardise merit-based leadership and the integrity of democracy.

Research Questions

1. What historical and political factors led to the emergence of rotational presidency in Nigeria?
2. To what extent has rotational presidency contributed to national unity and political inclusiveness in Nigeria?
3. How do Nigerians perceive the impact of rotational presidency on democratic principles such as meritocracy and electoral competition?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of rotational presidency as a mechanism for enhancing democracy and political inclusivity in Nigeria. Other objectives are to:

1. Assess the historical and political context that gave rise to the demand for rotational presidency in Nigeria.
2. Evaluate the impact of rotational presidency on national unity, political stability, and democratic participation.
3. Analyze public and elite perceptions of rotational presidency in relation to meritocracy and democratic ideals.

Literature Review

Akintola (2019) posits that the zoning of the president's office is a concept aimed at establishing a systematic approach in which the presidential position is alternately held by representatives from various geopolitical zones within the nation. He further articulated that the concept emerged as a means to tackle the challenges of national unity and stability, ensuring that each region of the country has the opportunity to occupy the presidential seat, thereby alleviating concerns regarding the potential for domination and marginalisation of one region over others.

In referencing a statement attributed to Alhaji Maitama Sule, Ojo (2019) observed that the typical northern politician holds the belief that divine providence bestows upon the north certain leadership attributes, which accounts for their predominance in the presidential office of Nigeria compared to other regions in the nation. He further articulated that the northern

region perceives the western region (Yorubas) as endowed with diplomatic acumen, while the southern region (Igbos) is recognised for its remarkable prowess in commerce, trade, and innovation. He asserted that divine providence has bestowed unique attributes upon each of the major regions, contributing to the nation's unity and advancement. Consequently, he contended that it would be inappropriate to compel the north to acquiesce to any rotation policy regarding the presidential office, as it is perceived as a divine inheritance for the region. Alonge (2019) asserts that rotational power sharing in Nigeria seeks to guarantee that each region within the nation has the chance to attain the highest political office. This will guarantee that no region perceives itself as being diminished in the nation's political landscape, alleviating concerns regarding potential political hegemony and marginalisation.

Osuntokun, as referenced in Ojo (2019), contends that the concept of rotational presidency, advocated by certain political figures within the nation, undermines the essence of democracy and its long-term viability. He contended that the advancement of democracy in Nigeria is most effectively realised when political actors focus their efforts on advocating for capable leadership, which can be selected from any region of the nation, rather than conforming to a zonal policy regarding the presidency that could lead to the election of unqualified leaders.

Theoretical Framework

Elite Theory of Democracy

This research will embrace the elite theory of democracy in relation to the rotational presidency, viewing it as a pivotal element for the advancement of democratic principles in Nigeria. The fundamental premise of this theory posits a bifurcation within society – one segment comprises those who wield authority over the state, while the other consists of those who similarly exert control over the state. The theory suggests that those in elite positions are strategically situated to wield the political power of the state, a privilege that remains largely out of reach for the impoverished majority. The structure of society is such that the educated elite possess a greater level of knowledge compared to their counterparts, thereby positioning themselves favourably to influence governmental policies and the socio-economic and political dynamics of the state (Yahaya, 2018).

The individuals who have achieved success across various domains and social strata form the distinguished class. They excel in the art of manipulating the complacent, lethargic, and submissive populace of the nation, who are easily swayed by flattery and sycophancy in the company of those wielding strength and influence within the political sphere (Agarwal, 2019). Heywood (2020) asserts that the elite class within democratic societies is bifurcated into two distinct groups: those who actively govern as political office holders and those who operate in the background, exerting influence over state affairs via proxies, surrogates, and associates positioned in various political roles. He arrived at the conclusion that, in essence, democracy cannot truly be characterised as a governance by the populace when a select few elite classes maintain a steadfast control over political power, dictating who occupies various political offices at any given moment.

The concept of rotational presidency, according to advocates of the elite theory of democracy, suggests that the determination of power-sharing is most effectively managed by the educated and knowledgeable elites within society. These individuals act as the moral compass of the community, possessing a comprehensive understanding of what is most beneficial for the

populace at any given moment. Consequently, these influential individuals are optimally situated to determine the most effective power-sharing arrangement for the presidential office, identify which region ought to be favoured in producing the nation's president, and potentially endorse candidates in forthcoming elections for the presidency, as demonstrated by the consensus that facilitated Olusegun Obasanjo's ascension to the presidency of Nigeria in 1999, achieved through the collective agreement of the Nigerian elite class.

Garba (2020) posits that the elite factor was utilised to present the concept of a rotational presidency in Nigeria. The ruling class has conceived this notion as a means of influencing the populace; they are led to believe that a rotational presidency will serve their interests. The primary objective is to regulate the behaviours of the populace without their awareness of the underlying intentions and aims associated with advocating for a rotational presidency within the nation.

Reasons for Rotational Presidency

Several of scholars, commentators, and opinion leaders in Nigeria have expressed differing perspectives on the matter of rotational presidency in the nation, articulating reasons for both its endorsement and opposition. Akinola (2019) argues for the inclusion of a rotational presidency in the Nigerian constitution, citing the nation's ethnic diversity, multi-religious composition, and extensive territorial expanse. He further observed that a rotational presidency would alleviate concerns regarding political hegemony by any specific region within the nation, asserting that the emergence of separatist movements and the Nigerian civil war were consequences of a particular region's apprehension about political subjugation. He determined that the faithful execution of the rotational presidency in Nigeria would alleviate concerns regarding political domination and marginalisation of any particular region.

Okwenna (2019) posits that a systematic implementation of the rotation of the presidential office in Nigeria would serve to broaden the political landscape of the nation. The process will facilitate the emergence of credible and capable leaders who will enhance the nation's unity and peace, ensuring that every segment of the country has unobstructed access to the presidential office. He deduced that a rotational presidency would alleviate the current tensions arising from the power struggles observed among various regions in the country, as authority would circulate among the six geopolitical zones, thereby fostering harmonious coexistence among the diverse regions.

Odunze (2019) argues against the notion that a rotational presidency will improve democracy in Nigeria. He contends that the distasteful and detrimental competition for power in the nation is rooted in the misguided assumption that the presidential position bestows excessive advantages and privileges to any region or zone that holds it at any moment. He further contended that the majority of Nigerian politicians view government as a means to amass wealth; consequently, the advocacy for a rotational presidency will not address the nation's political challenges and issues. He arrived at the conclusion that in advanced nations, individuals engage in political decision-making based on core principles and ideologies, rather than basing their actions on the potential political benefits or gains for themselves or their locality.

Ramalan (2019) posits that the rotational presidency in Nigeria is likely to result in the emergence of ethnic and regional champions, who may subsequently appropriate a significant portion of the nation's resources for their respective regions. He contended that the principle of rotational presidency is unlikely to yield positive outcomes, as it may foster the advancement of mediocrity and prioritise regional agendas over national policy. He referenced instances from the Buhari administration in Nigeria, which has persistently designated significant political positions to individuals from the northern region and initiated numerous federal government development projects in the North, contrasting this with the situation in the South.

In a different context, Odunze (2019) argues that it is misguided to draw parallels between the political dynamics of Switzerland, where the rotational presidency has flourished for an extended period, and the political landscape of Nigeria. His argument is founded on the notion that the rotational presidency has proven effective in Switzerland due to the country's frameworks that have facilitated the system's functionality and success. He asserted that Switzerland rigorously upholds the principles of checks and balances as well as the rule of law, a stark contrast to the situation in Nigeria. Furthermore, until these principles are established in Nigeria, the concept of a rotational presidency will persist as a mere mirage, an illusory notion that is likely to exacerbate the nation's political challenges rather than provide solutions.

Amuwo and Herault (2019) contend that the matter of rotational presidency, particularly within the context of Nigeria's fourth republic, constitutes an internal concern of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). It is suggested that the influential figures within the party established an informal understanding to alternate the presidency between the North and South, thereby facilitating Olusegun Obasanjo's ability to complete two consecutive eight-year terms before transferring power to his successor, Umaru Musa Yar'Adua from the North.

It was observed that unrest ensued following the death of Yar'Adua, who had served for two years, thereby facilitating the ascension of his Vice, Goodluck Jonathan, to the presidency. Furthermore, the Northern region experienced a sense of betrayal when Jonathan pursued the presidency in 2011. Nevertheless, in the face of intrigues and resistance from certain northern factions, he triumphed at the polls. Nonetheless, his second endeavour to secure re-election in 2015 encountered significant obstacles, as influential figures from the northern region, transcending party affiliations, conspired against him. This confluence of opposition facilitated the rise of Muhammadu Buhari from the All Progressive Congress (APC) to the presidency of Nigeria.

The consensus reached was that the concept of a rotational presidency effectively ceased to exist within the PDP following Jonathan's defeat in the 2015 presidential election. Furthermore, certain factions in the northern region maintain that Jonathan ought to have relinquished his position following the completion of his predecessor Yar'Adua's term. Consequently, there has been a dismissal of the concept of rotational presidency, as they perceive it to have lost its relevance. With the conviction that they can secure the presidency independently of the southern regions, the notion of rotational leadership has diminished in its allure for them.

Assessment of Rotational Presidency in Nigeria

In evaluating the endorsement and opposition to the implementation of a rotational presidency in Nigeria, it becomes evident that a limited number of scholars align with this perspective. Conversely, certain academics contest the notion from an ideological standpoint, whereas others embrace it for differing reasons. Danjibo (2019) posits that a rotational presidency will exacerbate Nigeria's already intricate political landscape, thereby hindering the pursuit of effective governance, national cohesion, and the advancement of democracy. Danjibo posits that the nature of the Nigerian political class, which has played a significant role in both the governance and deterioration of the nation, renders it unfavourable for power to be distributed among the same individuals.

Danjibo (2019) posited that irrespective of the systems established or adjusted to enhance the welfare of the populace, the persistent dominance of the elite class in governmental affairs undermines any potential for meaningful change. Their apparent indifference to the majority's interests suggests that a mere geographical shift of power, from north to south, will ultimately continue to cater to their private agendas. Furthermore, in light of the pervasive threat posed by primitive accumulation, which has become standard among the political elite adept at exploiting poverty to the detriment of the impoverished populace while entrenching corruption, a rotational presidency cannot foster democratic principles within such a framework.

Human and Zaimen (2019) contend that the concept of a rotational presidency in Nigeria serves to foster a misleading perception, suggesting that this arrangement will be advantageous for all regions of the country, while in truth, power remains firmly entrenched within a select few and their stronghold. They argued that the current segmentation of the nation based on ethnic, regional, and religious distinctions will render a rotational presidency a contentious framework for the country.

According to Agbaje (2018), the concept of a rotational presidency is likely to undermine the pursuit of genuine federalism, foster the centralisation of authority, and intensify the competition for power at the national level, all of which have emerged as significant obstacles to the political advancement of the country. Consequently, the implementation of a rotational presidency would be detrimental to the nation beyond what is justifiable and ought to be discouraged.

Oladesu (2020), in advocating for a rotational presidency in Nigeria, contends that the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognises the necessity of power distribution; thus, the Federal Character Principle embedded within it seeks to allocate power among the various regions of the nation. He deduced that with proper management and implementation of the principle of rotational presidency, the increasing emergence of separatist factions and the apprehension of dominance by any single region or ethnic group would be alleviated.

Rotational Presidency as Nexus for Enhancing Democracy in Nigeria

In the academic study by Dumoye (2018) entitled "Nexus of Democratic Consolidation and Development Imperative in Africa," it is argued that the concept of maintaining and improving democracy within any society necessitates the widespread acceptance of regulations to guarantee extensive political engagement and altruistic political representation.

He asserted that in a truly democratic society, citizens possess the autonomy to select a government that is effective, honest, transparent, and accountable in its governance.

Dumoye (2018) further contended that it has been convincingly shown that the rotational presidency in Nigeria will ultimately cater to the interests of the nation's elites, potentially undermining the country's democratic progress if implemented as a foundational principle for determining the presidency at any point in time. In his own articulation: "Sustaining democracy necessitates the cultivation of a democratic ethos via active engagement and adherence to the rule of law…"

From an analytical perspective on the matter of rotational presidency in Nigeria, it can be asserted that this system is fundamentally undemocratic, as it deprives the populace of equitable opportunities and chances during each electoral cycle. This process ultimately undermines the electorate's constitutional right to free choice, as it confines the presidential selection to a specific segment of the nation, thereby marginalising other candidates who may be more suitably qualified for the role at that particular moment.

Ramalan (2019) posited that a rotational presidency could potentially undermine the advancement of democracy in Nigeria. He asserted that the principle will foster ineptitude and mediocrity, which undermines the pursuit of competence and accountability in governance, essential tenets of democracy. He referenced the instance of Goodluck Jonathan's ascension to the presidency of Nigeria, noting that it was largely a result of the advocacy from the south-south region, which contended that they had not produced a president since the nation's independence, often with insufficient regard for meritocracy.

Olaitan (2021) observed that Goodluck Jonathan ascended to the presidency of Nigeria following the premature demise of his predecessor, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua. Jonathan faced allegations of significant inadequacy in fulfilling his constitutional obligations and responsibilities during his administration, as well as a failure to provide the promised benefits of democracy both domestically and nationally. Therefore, his rise based on the concept of a rotational presidency lacked justification.

In contrast, Odunze (2019) contended that the Northern region, which collaborated to oppose Jonathan's re-election in favour of Muhammadu Buhari's presidency in Nigeria, has since recognised that this principle has not yielded favourable outcomes for the nation or for their region specifically. This realisation is underscored by a notable increase in insecurity, economic stagnation, and administrative inefficacy. Consequently, the concept of a rotational presidency appears favourable at first glance. Nevertheless, in reality, it has consistently failed to serve as an effective mechanism for bolstering democracy within the nation, instead fostering ineptitude, poor leadership, mediocrity, and a deficiency in the actual realisation of democratic benefits for the populace.

Egwemi (2018), in his analysis of the rotational presidency as a means to bolster democracy in Nigeria, asserts that; "…until Nigerians can transcend or at least temper the notion of a north-south divide, efforts towards national integration will remain ineffective."

Methodology

This study employed qualitative research framework, predominantly utilising secondary data to explore the notion of rotational presidency and its significance in bolstering democracy in Nigeria. The secondary method is well-suited for this research as it facilitates a thorough examination of existing literature, historical records, policy documents, and media reports pertinent to political power-sharing and democratic governance in Nigeria. The gathered data will undergo thematic analysis to discern patterns, trends, and contradictions within the discourse regarding rotational presidency. Special consideration will be given to the application of this system in historical political transitions and its perceived impact on democracy, national unity, and civic engagement. This approach allows the researcher to rigorously evaluate the advantages and constraints of rotational presidency as a mechanism for fostering democracy, all without the necessity of primary fieldwork.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The concept of rotational presidency or power sharing in Nigeria represents a strategic arrangement among the elite class, designed to facilitate informal political interactions within the nation. This concept is founded on the excessive power competition and conflict among the elite class within the nation, who are primarily focused on advancing their individual and collective political agendas. The elites exhibit a preoccupation with advancing their interests in primitive accumulation and the dominion over the nation's resources for personal benefit, which stands in stark opposition to the welfare of the populace.

Jega (2022) posited that a rotational presidency does not inherently promise a resolution to the myriad issues plaguing the populace, including pervasive poverty, technological stagnation, overwhelming debt, widespread illiteracy, health crises, and systemic injustice, among other societal challenges faced by the nation. He reached the conclusion that the rotational presidency implemented by the PDP in 1999 seems to have been abandoned in 2022 with the selection of a Northerner as its presidential candidate, considering that President Buhari is also from the North, and a Southerner would have been more suitably positioned for the party's presidential ticket in alignment with the principles of an ideal rotational presidency.

To this end, the study recommended that;

1. Rotational presidency is an ideal principle that will assuage the fear against political domination of a particular region or section of the country against others if properly and systematically implemented.
2. The pluralistic and multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria should have ordinarily made rotational presidency the best formula to be adopted in Nigeria political space, but because of selfishness of the elite class, this system has been badly managed.
3. While rotational presidency appears to be the best approach to solve the problem of ethnic agitation, the political class in the country has failed to properly manage this principle, thereby undermining the benefits of this wonderful principle as is obtained in Switzerland, therefore, the idea should be jettisoned until a proper arrangement is made to accommodate some of the basic ideal approaches adopted in Switzerland where the policy have been in practice and beneficial to the citizens

4. Rotational presidency should be enshrined in the Nigerian constitution with emphasis laid on the proper and diligent implementation of the principle of separation of power and the rule of law.
5. A complete relegation of the principle of rotational presidency in Nigeria will create more room for the emergence of separatist groups and the allegation of marginalization by any section or region of the country that is yet to produce the president, hence the principle should be promoted, but must be observed diligently with the interest of the citizens being actively promoted.

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