

Links of the Sleeping Giant to the World¹

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There are many similarities between the administrations (and the political histories) of Olusegun Obasanjo and Umaru Yar'Adua, the current president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Obasanjo was snatched from the jaws of death after he had been imprisoned by the most brutal dictator in Nigeria's history, the late General Sani Abacha. Obasanjo was freed by a cabal of retired army generals led by the ubiquitous Ibrahim Babangida, a former dictator himself. Olusegun Obasanjo became president of the country in 1999 and was in power until 2007 when he handed over to Umaru Yar'Adua. Both Obasanjo and Yar'Adua suffered dearly from atrocities of the Sani Abacha regime. Obasanjo had been imprisoned by the regime under dubious circumstances concerning a coup plot. During his incarceration, he was humiliated in every way even though he had first presided over the country as a military general between 1976 and 1979. Umaru Yar'Adua's elder brother, Musa had been Obasanjo's second-in-command during the period. After leaving office in 1979, Musa Yar'Adua went into business and did very well. Soon after, he ventured into politics until he met his untimely demise in one of the dungeons of Sani Abacha. And so Obasanjo and Umaru Yar'Adua have a great deal to agree about. However, there are also profound dissimilarities between them. Obasanjo is a Yoruba southerner of Christian faith while Yar'Adua hails from the north and is a Muslim. Within the context of the Nigerian political configuration, these differences have far-reaching consequences. Nigeria's multi-ethnic nature has often been a source of extremely divisive politics and machinations. In 1967, it led to a thirty month long civil war.

However, at the levels on which real political power operates, the assumed inflexible tribal and regional politics does not completely hold sway. During Obasanjo's first experience with political power (1976-1979), he did not relinquish the reins of government to candidate of

Yoruba ethnic affiliation (in this case, the irrepressible Obafemi Awolowo) as many had imagined he would. Instead, he handed over power to Shehu Shagari, a northerner from Sokoto, homeland of the Sultan who is arguably the most powerful traditional ruler in Nigeria. So the interests of the ruling classes often subvert the commonly held logic of ethnic-based politics. Obasanjo could not win his home state during his first tenure as a civilian president. He was clearly not a popular political figure and it took the financial and organisational might of Ibrahim Babangida and a cohort of retired military generals to install him in the state house at Abuja. Again the choice of Obasanjo by the generals was a well-thought out one. Babangida had angered the Nigerian nation by annulling the June 12 presidential election, which was presumed by most to have been won by the late Moshood Abiola. As a result, Babangida became a pariah both locally and internationally. Through his mistake, Babangida had almost plunged the country into another civil war. In the eyes of most non-northerners, it appeared that the northern political elite was incapable of ceding political power to another region. Babangida had other reasons to be apprehensive. During his period in power as a dictator, he had committed several human rights abuses. Also, billions of dollars had gone missing in the national treasury that required much explanation. And of course, the fall-out from the June 12 fiasco loomed like an albatross. Babangida was desperate to return to political reckoning and he could only do so by appeasing the aggrieved western region from where Abiola came. But he also needed a western candidate that was not only acceptable to the powerful Nigerian military establishment but also one who would protect his personal interests. Obasanjo fitted the bill perfectly.

Prior to 1999, Obasanjo had presented himself as a staunch advocate of democracy. His incarceration by the nefarious Abacha regime had had a useful effect on his perceived democratic credentials. However, once he assumed power, those very credentials quickly became tarnished. In 1999, federal troops stormed Odi, a community in the embattled Niger Delta and razed it to the ground. Odi, located in the oil rich region had been protesting governmental neglect and abuse. The destruction of the community supported the common view that even military generals would always act like soldiers. Obasanjo had demonstrated that just like the Babangida and Abacha regimes before him, he would continue to ride roughshod over the exploited communities of the Niger Delta. Once again, he had demonstrated the greed and insensitivity of federal political actors in dealing with the time-bomb that is the Niger Delta. Towards the

end of his tenure in 2007, Obasanjo attempted to secure a third term in office. Fortunately, this undemocratic plan was truncated. However, just as many dubious African political leaders, he needed an ally to look after his business once outside the actual corridors of power. In this instance, Umaru Yar'Adua possessed all the necessary credentials. Yar'Adua was a brother of his former second-in-command and also, a seemingly modest and unassuming man. Furthermore, being a northerner, the traditionally politically ambitious North would be pacified when a son of the region assumed power. Again, Yar'Adua met this condition. Let us restate all those conditions very quickly. Obasanjo needed a candidate that hailed from the politically volatile North who was acceptable to the military establishment; preferably a Muslim; and finally, Obasanjo needed a president who would not prosecute him or re-open old political wounds.

Such a candidate is bound to maintain the old political order with all its excesses, absurdities and obvious limitations. We should not expect this order to be radically transformed during the tenure of Yar'Adua. Perhaps we should even expect a little more conservatism. Indeed one of the first crucial appointments Yar'Adua made once in power was to choose Babagana Kingibe as secretary to the federal government. Kingibe encapsulates the chameleonic character of contemporary Nigerian politics. He is a man of all seasons in the most negative connotations of the term. Kingibe was a former diplomat who managed to win the approval of Nigeria's influential military establishment. During the regime of Babangida, he became a prominent political figure and contested for the position of president of the nation. Through the chicanery of Babangida he lost out and eventually became the presidential running mate of Moshood Abiola. When the June 12 elections were annulled by the military after a fiercely contested race, Kingibe gradually began to retrace his democratic steps. General Sani Abacha quickly rose to power after deposing an ineffectual transitional government led by Ernest Shonekan. Babagana Kingibe went on to hold a series of high profile ministerial portfolios including the post of minister for foreign affairs. Here, the stark contrasts in his political and ideological make-up becomes apparent. Here was a political figure who had won arguably the fairest elections in Nigeria's history as vice-president who then abandons that hard-won electoral victory and elects to serve the worst dictator the nation had ever seen in a number of ministerial positions. It is perhaps the most cynical act undertaken by a major political figure. Kingibe's cynicism has come to define the general nature of contemporary Nigerian politics. Babagana Kingibe in failing to heed the crucial democratic imperatives of June 12, that is, in

neglecting to see its importance as an opportunity for much-needed sociopolitical reconstruction after decades of corrosive militarism postponed indefinitely a genuine ethos of democracy. This kind of political opportunism also undermines efforts geared towards projects of national reconciliation after incidents of collective moral trauma. Kingibe's over-ambition and opportunism eventually got him booted out of Yar'Adua's administration.

It is clear Umaru Yar'Adua, the current Nigerian president does not intend to do away with this pervasive political cynicism. Yar'Adua in not seeing Kingibe's consistent treachery as a symptom of a broader national malaise not only compounds the problem but also demonstrates an inability to undertake the project of national reconstruction. We should not expect much change in this regard. The various military regimes that held Nigeria in thrall for several decades have brought the nation to its knees. Social services- health, education, public works, security etc.- have been severely impaired when not destroyed. A massive haemorrhage of various kinds of skills and intellectual capital has occurred which would take several generations to remedy. Also in political terms, there has been a rapid erosion of the foundations of public ethics. Hence a pervasive sense of cynicism prevails within the general populace.

Nonetheless, a number of factors would continue to extract the attention of all Nigerians: oil, the ongoing democratic quest and finally the post-9/11 global political configuration. It can be argued that the politics of oil indeed link all the variables mentioned above. The dynamics of the politics of oil can be viewed from basically two angles: the international dimension and the local angle. In exploring the international angle, the activities of the United States are particularly crucial. The international dimensions of petroleum politics not only involve the United States but also other major international players such as China and India have become enmeshed in the machinations concerning global access to oil. Previously, it had been noted by African analysts that the United States maintained a cavalier attitude towards Africa's needs and problems. The United States, it was believed, responded to the African continent on the basis of demands relating to states of emergency and humanitarian aid. This approach prevented the development of a comprehensive strategic policy towards Africa. However, after the 9/11 event, some analysts are saying this approach has started to change. For one, America urgently needs Africa's oil following the uncertainties in the Middle East. Also, the global fight against terrorism led by the United States means that Africa can no longer be treated as a marginal site. Finally, the involvement of

players such as China in the global quest for oil is fast changing the international ideological architecture in ways that demand a transformation of US attitudes towards Africa. In the same vein, the politics of international humanitarianism is certain to undergo a similar transformation.

Indeed the politics of oil has become quite intricate. The United States needs a considerable amount of the commodity to keep its economy running. And so do nations such as China, India and Japan. This global quest for oil is a very important determinant for global peace and security. In many oil-producing nation-states of Africa, we are witnessing a growing incidence of separatist agitations in oil-producing communities. In addition, oil-producing nations are becoming even more corrupt through the combined activities of multinational oil concerns, failing (and failed) nation-state machinery, and an agglomeration of dubious international interests and actors. This scenario makes the global quest to establish credible democratic processes in the third world particularly difficult.

In a paradoxical twist, the United States leads the quest to secure adequate oil supplies for its economy nonetheless, it pursues this objective in unabashedly undemocratic regions thereby subverting its accompanying drive to improve democratic and human rights practices in politically beleaguered zones. Also, the United States has demonstrated a readiness to implement the Roosevelt and Carter Doctrines in securing its oil requirements. These doctrines support the employment of military force in protecting the interests of the United States. The Bush administration tried desperately to launch the US African Command as a strategy for securing its oil interests within the African continent and also for promoting other strategic business and security goals in the continent.

In line with these broad objectives, the United States has supported the establishment of the Gulf of Guinea Commission (GoGC). Some analysts argue that this initiative is meant to undermine the activities of OPEC. One of the primary aims of the GoGC is to ensure unhindered supply of oil from Africa to the west at low cost. Due to the perennial crises in the Middle East, the United States and Israel began to explore other possibilities of acquiring oil supplies without an over-dependence on Saudi Arabia. The necessity to acquire oil from regions other than the Middle East became even more apparent after the 9/11 incident. American multinational oil concerns such as ExxonMobil and ChevronTexaco met to find other viable alternatives to Middle East oil. Donald R. Norland, a former US ambassador to Chad, Michael A. Westphal, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for African Affairs and Walter Kansteiner, the US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa all came to the conclusion

that Africa's petroleum is of vital importance to the strategic interests of the United States.

To sell the idea of the GoGC to Nigeria, the US proposed the cancellation of Nigeria's debts. An NGO, African Oil Policy Initiative group (AOPIG) headed by Dr. Paul Michael Wihbey was actually founded before the GoGC with more or less the same objectives in mind. The Obasanjo administration agreed with these American-led initiatives since it entailed the cancellation of Nigeria's national debts. On the other hand, the United States approached Nigeria with these initiatives because of the influence it wielded in the sub-region. The United States really went to work on the Nigerian political elite. For instance, the Nigerian Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan attended the prestigious Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, sponsored by Ford Foundation.

The GoG states are made up of Angola, Chad, Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Congo Brazzaville and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). However, the formation of the GoGC has far-reaching sub-regional implications. In direct political terms, it could be seen as oppositional to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) of which Nigeria is a staunch supporter. Eventually the inaugural meeting of the Commission was convened by Nigeria and hosted by the Gabonese government. The final treaty of the Commission was signed by the following states; Nigeria, Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo and Cameroon. The aims of the Commission include deepening cooperation and preventing conflicts among the member states. It also advocates the employment of dialogue and consultation in the resolution of conflicts on matters of commerce and also in relation to the exploitation of oil among the members' states. In addition, a strategy is to be put in place to resolve boundary problems, which might hinder the production of fossil fuels among member states.

Thus the establishment of the GoGC has immense implications for Nigeria's foreign relations. First of all, the Commission differs and departs from the objectives of ECOWAS, which Nigeria has actively supported for many years. Whereas ECOWAS has a basically sub-regional agenda and focus the new American-inspired Commission is motivated by broader global pressures. As mentioned earlier, the Commission was launched based on US apprehensions in relation to the volatility of Middle East oil supplies and the actions of the US in combating these fears are bound to have far-reaching consequences on the traditional features of African sub-regional and continental politics. However, it is somewhat uncertain how far the current Nigerian president, Umaru Yar'Adua is

willing to venture in pleasing the US. An important fact to be noted is that Yar'Adua is a Muslim and global Islamic agendas are usually oppositional to US interests. This is coupled with the fact that since 9/11, there has been a heightened politicisation of culture in a way that threatens global security.

At the local (national in Nigerian terms) level, the politics of oil has always been volatile. There has been a continuing spate of agitations in the Niger Delta region and many potentially dangerous groups have been formed that not only threaten the national security of Nigeria but also the peace of the entire West African region. For instance, there are various groups of all kinds within the Niger Delta region agitating for resource control, environmental sanity, and economic justice have taken to arms. These pressures have placed considerable stress on the cohesion of the Nigerian federation. Also, under the guise of agitating for an equitable distribution of federal resources and also environmental sanity many criminal elements have emerged causing mayhem in the region. One of the most active of such groups, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) has not only been particularly violent but has also been keen to avoid visibility. When a CNN news crew visited members of the movement in the creeks of the Niger Delta a couple of years ago, they had their faces covered with masks and refused to disclose their identities. Indeed, some of the objectives they appear to be pursuing seem legitimate but because of the use of violence, including kidnapping the foreign workers of oil companies, their activities become illegal. They also become global because of the fact the people they kidnap work for multinational corporations and they are usually not Nigerians. Groups such as MEND do not only perpetrate violence, they also do not uphold the aspects of democracy that entail and demand public accountability. These kinds of groups are creating a syndrome of criminalisation as well a culture of impunity in the Niger Delta. Also, we must not neglect the fact that the traditional inhabitants of the Niger Delta are predominantly Christians and so a politicisation of religion is likely on account of Yar'Adua being a Muslim. Yar'Adua has to find a peaceful way of dealing with the brutalised communities of the Niger Delta since this has not only local implications but also international consequences. In addition, a peaceful resolution of the spreading crises in the region has a direct bearing on the democratic future of the Nigerian nation. If dealt with appropriately, it means the issues pertaining to minority rights; environmental health and general social well-being would have been settled or least addressed in democratic manner. Yar'Adua has to present himself as a

credible mediator in the multifarious crises in the Niger Delta and being a Muslim in a Christian zone, this cannot be easy. On the question of the politicisation of religion he has to contend with the pressures of Islamisation in northern Nigeria just as he must strive to uphold the secularism of the national constitution. Furthermore, Umaru Yar'Adua emerged from the ashes of a botched election. In other words, he was appointed under suspect circumstances. A great deal of energy needs to be expended in creating confidence within the populace. It should also be noted that just as the United States exerts pressure on Nigeria through initiatives such as the GoGC, opposing global Islamic initiatives within the Nigerian context would also come into play. In fact, traditionally, Nigerian rulers who were Muslims –such as Babangida - oftentimes actively pursued broad Islamic agendas on an international level.

A line of argument pursued so far is that the politics of oil and the various pressures left in its wake would determine the nature of Yar'Adua's activities as president. The politics of oil, as we have seen, has both local and international dimensions. The United States of America is a very important factor in this equation as its direct activities in the region is radically transforming the shape of its politics. Events in the Niger Delta are directly related to democratic processes in Nigeria as well as the contours of global oil politics. Finally, the dynamics contained in the politicisation of culture as well as religion are likely to resonate not only at the broader global level but also at the most micro of levels.

At this juncture, it is necessary to explore at greater length the theme of moral ambivalence in Nigerian politics. How does the Yar'Adua dispensation differ from the Obasanjo administration? Obviously, Obasanjo felt comfortable with Yar'Adua's candidacy and that was why he promoted it. On the current showing, Yar'Adua does intend to depart from the ideological conservatism- and oftentimes reactionary proclivity- of the Nigerian ruling elite. His appointment of Babagana Kingibe into a key government post is reflective of his political conservatism. Also, he emerged as president from a deeply flawed election and this greatly undermines his democratic credentials and credibility. In this way, it also demonstrates that he is not willing to dissociate himself from the glaring failures of the Nigerian ruling elite and he is in fact ready to protect the interests of that heavily compromised class. These realities create a strong sense of moral ambivalence, which may also be extended to a universalised notion of modernity in the Habermasian sense. How would Yar'Adua resolve the tensions between Islamisation and secularism within an increasingly complex context of postmodernity? This particular

conjuncture is bound to lead to a scenario of problematic conceptual dualisms. As pointed out earlier, he differs from Obasanjo only in terms of religion and ethnicity. However, their political interests have more similarities than differences.

Nonetheless, Nigeria's regional relations in the post-Obasanjo era are increasingly being shaped by the local and global dynamics of petrolic politics and capitalism; the conditions in the Niger Delta; the activities of, and pressures mounted by the American-inspired GoGC; the growing influence of China in Nigeria and the West African sub-region as a whole; and finally, the readiness (or otherwise) of the Umaru Yar'Adua administration to bow to global and local Islamic agendas, in other words, the various imperatives of political Islam.

Notes

- ¹ Sleeping giant is a nickname for Nigeria concerning its unrealised potential.

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