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In Sickness and in Health: Politics of Presidential Illness and Intraparty Factions in Africa

Victor Agboga

PhD Student, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick, UK

Abstract

To prevent a retrogression into conflict, African states have orchestrated power-sharing agreements among ethnoreligious groups. However, the incapacitation of a president which leads to a premature power-shift complicates this ethnic arithmetic, and threatens the existing redistributive mechanism. While the sickness (and death) of an incumbent is considered dire in new and old democracies, the event takes a dramatic turn in the former with recent episodes of intergroup animosities. This paper examines how the sickness and death of a president in Africa could expose the fragility of interethnic agreements. Using Nigeria as a case study, and by examining the events surrounding the sickness and death of President Yar'Adua, and the near reoccurrence in President Buhari's tenure, this paper argues that power-rotation agreements which are not institutionalised and which do not make provisions for the possibility of premature power-shifts are susceptible to aberrations with serious consequences for political stability.

Introduction

The fever of an ailing president sends glitters down the spine of the entire country. The illness of a president who is often a symbol of national strength, wholeness and unity, becomes a matter of national emergency even as his¹ handlers try to dedramatize the episode (Augé 1977; Ngokwey 1994). Fearing the outbreak of public panic, the nature of the president's sickness is often kept hidden from the prying eyes of the press and public, and as opposition parties could also seize the opportunity to condemn the government and call for the president's resignation. This could also be a matter of political stability and national security, as enemies of the state could take advantage of the dire situation to launch their attack. Military coups, foreign invasion and civil unrest are a few examples of the possible aftermaths of a severely weakened

¹ Presidents in Africa are often men

presidency, especially in developing democracies (Ighobor 2011; Bruce and Alastair 18 September, 2012). Even though the constitution of most countries spells out what should be done when the president can no longer carry out his duties whether temporarily or permanently, it is not always as easy as it sounds.

Some major questions that complicate the episode are who stands in for the president while the latter is on treatment and how long can he be out of office. While the first question may be easy to answer, the second is not, since many constitutions are silent about how long a president can stay out of office. The vice-president in most cases will stand in for his boss and keep things running while the president receives treatment, but may start thinking of full succession when the president's condition fails to improve. When and how is a president declared no longer capable of governing because of his failing health? This is often a complex issue that requires the intervention of medical professionals, the president's cabinet, congress (the national legislature), and the judiciary (Riccards 1977). It is also doubtful whether the acting-president has the same powers as the substantive president, whether he can make major decisions while his boss is away. Most constitutions are equally silent about this, leaving the acting president to discern the extent of his power when confronted with a major incident. Fortunately, other members of the president's cabinet as well as congress are often there to give guidance when the need arises, a luxury not often found in most nondemocracies. At least, it is also expected that he consults (if possible) with the sick out-of-office president before making big decisions about the nation.

But the relationship between the president and his vice is not always a cordial one. As a matter of fact, they may be from different factions of the same party since it is not unusual for a president to pick his running-mate from a region of the country where he is not popular with the aim of attracting voters who otherwise would not have voted for him. In other words, a president may get into a marriage of convenience with his vice in order to widen his support base. And when this president becomes incapacitated either temporarily or permanently by an illness, his vice-president from another faction becomes his replacement, often to the horror of the president's faction.

At this juncture, it is important to point out that political parties are not necessarily composed of agreeing members, as intraparty politicking and infighting are common both in developed and developing democracies. After all, parties are composed of individual politicians who seek to advance their own political career and agenda (Boucek 2009; Bob-Milliar 2011; Elisher

2013), so one should not expect total cooperation from the different factions within the party when the president is incapacitated by a severe illness. The vice president, who is most likely nursing a presidential ambition, could utilise this as his opportunity to leave the shadows and gain national prominence. In fact, Hayes (2007) argues that often times than not, the vice president is as qualified to be the president, and his capacity to succeed the president is considered before his nomination as vice president. As an acting-president, the vice president could use the position to reward members of his own faction and rollback policies or even fire appointees of the substantive president.

This takes a dramatic turn in Africa which is often characterised by political parties that garner support through instrumentalising identity cleavages. Parties in Africa often have strong ties to ethnic and religious groups and actively utilise these to their advantage (Elisher 2013; van de Walle 2003; Ololajulo 2016). Nonetheless, the past decade has witnessed inter-ethnic coalition, as political parties move from their limited base to a national outlook. As a result, different identity groups are incentivised to cooperate in order to attain nationwide electoral victory (Elisher 2008; Adekanye 1998). This does not come easy by any means, as several African countries have not so distant history of interethnic/interreligious squabbles. A delicate interethnic and interreligious agreement is broker to give the different groups a sense of belonging, but with each faction keeping their cards close to their chest in suspicion of the other group(s). It is therefore not surprising to find a party where the major candidate and the running mate are from two different ethno-religious groups, a running mate who would likely run as the main candidate in the next electoral cycle while perpetuating a gentleman agreement of choosing his own running mate from another faction. In fact, this has become the modus operandi of several political parties in Africa in the national level (Cheeseman 2010; Ololajulo 2016). But the incapacitation of a president and the ascension of the vice president which often upsets this fragile coalition suddenly attempts to give the recessive faction the upper hand, and raises tension among the different factions in the party.

It is this tension of succession that this paper seeks to analyse, how intraparty factions and politicking affect the relation between the vice president, the ailing president and their supporters, using Nigeria as case study by particularly examining the events surrounding the sickness and death of President Yar'Adua, and the near reoccurrence in President Buhari's tenure. It argues that in states where the members ruling party have deep regional cleavages like in Nigeria, the replacement of the ailing president becomes a tug of war in spite of the clear dictates of the nation's constitution. Even if the president eventually dies and the vice is sworn

in as president, he leads a severely divided country where certain factions feel short-changed. Conversely, in countries with lesser ethnic tensions and where there is no significant infighting, the president's illness is dedramatised and his vice holds the fort without any major incident until the boss returns, that is, if he ever does.

President as symbol of national strength and Unity

The president is considered a symbol of strength, unity and wholeness, an embodiment of the qualities that a nation wishes to showcase not only to the rest of the world but to itself. The power that the office of the president yields also gives its occupant a grandiose larger-than-life aura, commanding respect and honour. But this image comes tumbling down when the president is stricken with a severe illness, humanising the office and reminding us of our common frailty (Ngokwey 1994). Augé (1977) observes that the failing health of a president, who hitherto had embodied the stability of the state, could raise questions about the perenniability of the latter. Augé (1977) further states that during this period, the individual and political dimension of the office meets without merging.

Riccards (1977) reveals that most US presidents who served after 1861 died earlier than their contemporaries, and highlights the increased curiosity about the health of presidential aspirants. While he attributes these premature deaths to mounting “executive stress”, he conversely observes that the same cannot be said of governors, judges, senators and even vice presidents “— who all enjoy superior longevity” (Riccards 1977, p. 215). Gerontocracy may be another factor that explains the frail health of many presidents since most of them take up the demanding job when their contemporaries in other fields are leaving theirs. Some of them take up the position after several arduous years in the military with both physical and psychological war scars and injuries, a phenomenon not peculiar to developing democracies like in Africa but also countries like the United States.

For the sake of dousing the fear of the populace, the president's handlers try frantically to dedramatise the situation, strategizing with medical doctors and communication experts on ways to deescalate the severity of the situation for the public. As the president's sickness turns into a national sickness, it becomes imperative to project stability for domestic and international ends. Competing world powers such as the US, China and Russia who are often concerned about their international image would hide any sign of weakness, a fear also harboured by their citizens who wonder how their frail leader would stand up against foreign

adversaries: “How will he stand up to Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping?” Americans would ask about a sick president (Khullar 20 March, 2020).

Comparing Sick presidents in democracies and autocracies

Nondemocracies often fare worse when the president is stricken, as the lack of clear rules of succession could spark violent clashes amongst political elites. Also, autocrats project themselves as the “strong father” of their country to inspire confidence in their people, with images like that of a bare-chested Vladimir Putin riding a horse and Kim Jong-un grinning heartily in front of his nation’s warheads. News of a severely sick autocrat would no doubt distort these powerful images and wane the confidence of the people. A gravely ill autocrat is equally unable to maintain his backers and loyalists, often forcing the latter to realign their loyalties behind the next strongman. This provokes the need to keep the president’s sickness a top secret both for national stability, and from enemies within and without; “after all, “loyal” backers — even family members — remain loyal only as long as their leader can be expected to continue to deliver power and money to them” (Bruce and Alastair 18 September, 2012). However, there are some interesting situations where political elites perpetuate a stricken president by making him a puppet for their own agenda. This was likely the case of President Boutefika of Algeria, who in spite of suffering from a severe stroke, opted to contest for a fifth term, a president who could neither speak nor walk, used “as a puppet figure fronting a corrupt and autocratic elite, widely known as ‘pouvoir’ (the power)”, and eventually withdrew his candidacy after massive nationwide protests (Socialist World 2019).

Apart from the political discontentment that engendered the Arab Spring, most of the leaders in the affected countries had severe health issues. There were several stories in the public about the failing health of Honi Mubarak of Egypt, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen, during the time of their political downfall (Socialist World 2019). The combination of a suffering economy, growing political dissatisfaction and the failing health of the head of state were the combustible mix that precipitated the downfall of the regimes. In Sub-Saharan Africa, Kabila’s forces invaded Zaire in 1997 when it became obvious that Mobutu was seriously sick. Robert Mugabe’s age and ill health weakened his grasp on power and led to his eventual removal from office in 2017, as a younger and healthier Mugabe would have probably held on for longer in Zimbabwe. It is doubtful how long the visibly ill president of Cameroon, Paul Biya and his equally stricken counterpart in Gabon, Ali Bongo

Ondimba, would remain in power. They could as well be serving as puppets at the pleasure of powerful military and political elites.

While a stricken president appears to be more cataclysmic for nondemocracies, democracies both new and longstanding also battle to stabilise the polity when the president is severely sick. It actually begins from electoral campaigns where candidates are often compelled to release some details about their health status to voters. A candidate with a major ailment is unlikely to win, as voters would question his or her capacity to preside over the nation, leading many presidential aspirants to hide severe illness from the public. Political opponents and the press are also likely to exaggerate the severity of the illness, casting doubt on the candidate's electability and ability to lead the country. Both the late President John Atta Mills of Ghana and late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua of Nigeria who died while in office, strongly refuted media speculations about their health during their campaign since admitting their frail state of health would have been a major stumbling block for their campaign judging from the highly competitive races they were involved in. In addition, the excessive foreign medical trips of African presidents have not gone unnoticed. Firstly, it is indicative of the epileptic health sector in most countries in the continent, and secondly, a perfect cover to keep the nature of the president's sickness secret, "usually in a country with strict respect for patient-client privilege" (Bruce and Alastair 18 September, 2012).

Even in older democracies, there is an increasing curiosity about the physical and mental health of the president, especially how the health of the president could affect his performance in office. For instance, the annual medical check-up of US presidents has become a spectacular event, filled with lots of public speculations. While there is no absolute requirement to undertake an annual medical examination, President Richard Nixon began the tradition that has "become more customary for U.S. presidents" (Seitz 2019).

In new and fragile democracies such as in Sub-Saharan Africa, a gravely ill president fuels tension of imminent political instability even where there are clear processes of succession in their constitution. Since many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have histories of draconian military regimes and with the latter still influential in their present democratic states, the fear of the likelihood of a coup and other forms of social upheaval is not uncommon. Ethno-religious politicking which often characterises new democracies in Africa equally contributes to this tension, especially when the incapacitation or death of a president leads to a significant power shift. Few months after the death of President Malam Bacai Sanhá of Guinea-Bissau,

and at the middle of a presidential election, the military took over the government in April 2012 and arrested the leading candidates (The New York Times 13 April, 2012). In Malawi, after the death of 78-year-old President Mutharika through a heart attack, there were hesitations in swearing in the vice president Ms Joyce Banda as the constitution prescribed because the late president had chosen his son, Foreign Minister Peter Mutharika, to be his successor (Ighobor 2011). It could be said that Burundi had a lucky escape after President Nkurunziza died allegedly from cardiac arrest few weeks after a presidential election which he did not contest. Fortunately, a winner had emerged before the death of Nkurunziza and president-elect Evariste Ndayishimiye was sworn in two months earlier than the supposed inauguration date to hastily fill the power vacuum.

Political Parties, Internal Factions and Multiethnic Alliances in Africa

While political parties are meant to be composed of members with similar ideology on how the nation should be governed, they are equally composed of individuals, factions and cliques of politicians with personal goals, ambitions and agenda. As Zariski (1960, p. 33) aptly comments, factions are “any intra-party combination, clique, or grouping whose members share a sense of common identity and common purpose and are organized to act collectively – as a distinct bloc within the party – to achieve their goals”. Zariski goes on to explain that these goals may be based on patronage, fulfilment of regional interests, policy interests or clandestine objectives within the party.

Still on factions within political parties, Boucek (2009) identifies three major kinds: cooperative, competitive and degenerative. Boucek reveals that while cooperative factions entail the coming together of distinct groups for the sake of party/state building, competitive factions create shadow oppositions within the party, which could be beneficial for intraparty debates but delay decision-making. Conversely, degenerative factions are excessively rent seeking, devoid of substantial ideological or policy goals, and detrimental to party development. All these imply that factions are not inherently bad, but that their goals and objectives are what matter most. Also, it is important to note that certain factions may not fall neatly into these categories but exhibit complex combinations of characteristics from two or more categories.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, political parties in years before and after independence had strong ethnic ties which could be traced to colonial balkanisation of the continent, where many

kingdoms were split and fragments of dissimilar empires cramped together under one colonial administrative rule, sowing the seed of identity politics in the continent. While other empires learnt to live together through generations of wars, alliances and intermarriages, the integration of African empires was cut short by the artificial construct of colonialism. According to Aka (1995, p. 65), these arbitrary boundaries of colonies set the foundation “for diverse rates of socioeconomic development, and, ultimately, regional inequalities”, hence regional politicking. Carey (2001, p. 19) equally observes that by initially allowing only district/regional political parties, colonialism set the foundation for ethnic politics in Africa by hindering “the formation of national parties that could have brought together different groups in society”.

Nonetheless, the third wave of democratisation witnessed some movements within and among political parties in Africa. After recognising that pandering to their limited ethno-religious base was not helping them expand their national outreach, parties began to broker alliances and merge with hitherto hostile competitors. These alliances were also necessary to prevent them from regressing into the social unrests and civil wars fuelled by ethnic clashes that were experienced in several African countries after independence (Adekanye 1998). It is nonetheless important to acknowledge that there were attempts in Africa, albeit unsuccessful, to build interethnic alliances among political parties before the so called third wave. In Nigeria, inability to manage alliances brokered among different monoethnic parties in the first republic contributed to the devastating military coup in 1966 which eventually led to the 1967 civil war (Abegunrin 2009). The infighting in Action Group (AG), the dominant party in Western Nigeria, over whether or not to broker a deal with the eponymous Northern People’s Congress (NPC) which controlled the federal government, let lose pandemonium in the western region and set the stage of the military coup. This necessitated the establishment of not monoethnic but multiethnic and multireligious political parties in the third wave; parties that would embrace the diversity of the nation. In Nigeria, it became compulsory in the 1999 constitution that political parties must “not contain any ethnic or religious connotation or give the appearance that the activities of the association are confined to a part only of the geographical area of Nigeria” (Nigerian Constitution 1999, 222e). Section 55 (4) of the Ghanaian Constitution likewise dictates that "Every political party shall have a national character, and membership shall not be based on ethnic, religious, regional or other sectional divisions" (Ghanaian Constitution 1992).

But while these constitutions encourage or even mandate multiethnic parties, they do not automatically evaporate the tension and suspicions that exist among these groups. As Elisher (2008, ii) rightly observes, "parties have increasingly incorporated diverse communities, [but] they have consistently failed to bridge the country's dominant ethnic cleavages". As a result, most parties in Africa have invented power-sharing mechanisms to give all factions a sense of belonging, with rotational presidency and "zoning" aimed at redistributive politics. This entails the choosing of candidates from different ethnoreligious groups, splitting party tickets between members from different factions and the rotation of candidacy ethnoreligious cliques. Cheeseman (2010, p. 146) observes that "in highly diverse countries such as Kenya and Mali, successful parties must be multiethnic coalitions in which the presidential candidacy rotates among the different groups". This has become the order of the day also in Nigeria and Ghana where presidential candidates usually pick running mates from a different ethnoreligious group, and likely from a different intraparty faction. And the running mate or later vice president, often times than not, vies for the presidency after his boss's tenure is over.

Even with these alliances, regional factions have continued to exploit opportunities that would give themselves the upper hand within the party. At this juncture, it is important to cite the distinction Horowitz (2000) makes between what he calls "coalitions of convenience" and "coalitions of commitment". While coalitions of convenience are solely interested in parliamentary majority and electoral victories without addressing underlying divisive issues, coalitions of commitment are longer lasting pacts, survive electoral defeats and seek to build bridges of cooperation among several ethnic groups. Nations with deep ethnic factions which seek to promote and protect their group interests at all cost, are likely to fall into coalitions of convenience. This could also be as a result of the "two publics" that Ekeh (1975) discusses in his seminal work on African politics. Eke argues that modern African politicians in spite of their education and exposure are still burden by the demands of their "primordial public", which entails their ethnic and kinship ties. National leaders are expected to exploit their access to the "civic public" to support and maintain their "primordial public" from which they derive their support. Another way to present this is to utilise van de Walle's description of clientelism to explain this ethnic allegiance, where access to power would enable politicians support and maintain their base, with regional factions tenaciously pursuing opportunities and loopholes within this multiethnic alliance that would give them the advantage (van de Walle 2007).

With all these, the sickness and incapacitation or eventual death of an African president, who is usually the chief patron, evokes tension and panic both in his regional faction and the entire

nation. "Even in democracies, with constitutionally mediated and moderated political tenure-ship arrangements", Chukwuma and Atelhe (2015, p. 45) aptly observe, "the demise of political incumbent have often engendered fundamental outcomes that defy conventional permutations of political succession". The incapacitation of the president which is common due to the prevalence of gerontocracy in the continent would likely lead to a premature power-shift, and would upset the political equation, complicate the ethnic arithmetic and threaten the existing redistributive mechanism, to the horror of one group and the sordid delight of the other faction(s). This paper proceeds to examine how the depth of regional cleavages within parties in Nigeria interacted with episodes of presidential sickness, incapacitation and death.

Nigeria: Political Factions, Power Shift and Death of President Yar'Adua

With the return of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999 after about three decades of military dictatorship interspersed with brief civilian governments, Olusegun Obasanjo (from Southwestern Nigeria) of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) was sworn in as president after winning that year's election. But after serving his two constitutionally recognised tenures, Obasanjo moved to secure a third term; an attempt that could disrupt the "gentleman agreement" of power rotation among different ethnic factions. This gentleman agreement refers to the "unwritten power-sharing agreement [which] obliges the country's major parties to alternate the presidency between northern and southern officeholders every eight years" (Siollum 1 June, 2017). This agreement was necessary to prevent a repeat to the bloody political clashes between the north and the south, which snowballed into the 1967 to 1970 Nigerian civil war.

This ambition also pitted Obasanjo against his vice president, Atiku Abubakar (from Northern Nigeria), who was nursing a presidential ambition and predictably refused to support Obasanjo's third term agenda. In what was becoming a heated ethnic and intraparty squabble, Obasanjo's camp allegedly doled out £200,000 as bribes to legislators to vote in favour of his third term bid (Soares 22 October, 2011). But in spite of his vigorous lobbying and his cash enticements to legislators, the Nigerian Senate tossed out the third term bill and barred Obasanjo from contesting in another presidential election. Following his defeat, Obasanjo threw his weight behind 58-year-old northerner Umaru Musa Yar'Adua – governor of Katsina State, for the PDP presidential candidate, whose elder brother had served as Obasanjo's deputy when the latter was a military head of state from 1976 to 1979, instead of Atiku in retaliation for his political betrayal. During the campaigns for the 2007 presidential elections, Yar'Adua

was visibly absent in most of the party rallies with news of his ill health circulating around the country. To allay the fears of Nigerians, Obasanjo, the outgoing president who had taken it upon himself to act as Yar'Adua's spokesman, dismissed the news as mere rumours. "Obasanjo claimed to have obtained in 2007", according to Omotola (2011, p. 230), "a medical report certifying Yar'Adua medically fit to be Nigeria's president, before the announcement of his candidacy". In the fiercely contested 2007 presidential election, Yar'Adua who emerged victorious conceded that the election was not free and fair and promised to revamp the country's electoral commission. He orchestrated a number of reforms not only in the electoral commission, mended the frosty legislative-executive relations, and approved the Niger Delta amnesty programme (Omotola 2011). He won the heart of several Nigerians after he called himself a "servant leader", declared his assets and invited the opposition to form a government of national unity.

However, things came tumbling down on November 23rd 2009 when Yar'Adua was rushed to the King Faisal Specialist Hospital in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for his acute pericarditis. Before then, as Governor of Katsina state between 1999 - 2007, Yar'Adua had had several medical emergencies including kidney problems which took him out of office for weeks (Omotola 2011; Joseph and Gillies 2010). In other words, the president's ill-health was well known by those close to him but kept hidden from public eyes. Yar'Adua's 2009 medical trip to Saudi Arabia would not have been problematic if he had transferred power to his vice, Goodluck Jonathan (from Southern Nigeria), as the constitution dictates. Section 145 of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution requires the president to make a written declaration to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, before proceeding on vacation or any activity that inhibits him from performing his duties. Upon the reception of this letter, the vice-president is raised to acting-president until the substantive president returns. Yar'Adua made no such contact with the national legislature before his medical trip, leaving a gaping power vacuum for three months.

The second alternative dictated by the constitution which requires the president's cabinet and the senate to convene a medical panel to assess the president's health, determine whether he is fit to carry out his duties and the need to transfer power to the vice president, was also not complied with. The then Minister of Information, Dora Akunyili attempted to bring up the issue at the federal executive meeting presided over by Goodluck Jonathan (with questionable legitimacy) but was accused by the Attorney General Michael Aondoakaa of seeking cheap publicity (Joseph and Gillies 2010; Omotola 2011). "Bullying the cabinet and the nation during

this political parenthesis was the attorney general and minister of justice, Michael Aondoakaa, who defended Yar'Adua's authority", Joseph and Gillies (2010) reveal, "and justified not making Jonathan the officially acting president". This sidelining of the vice president by Yar'Adua's handlers provoked suspicions that the latter were not comfortable with transferring power to a southerner and Christian when the north (predominantly Muslim) had barely started its eight-year run.

After weeks of not hearing from the president, several prominent individuals and civil society groups such as Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, Save Nigeria Group (SNG) and the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA) called for Yar'Adua's resignation if he was unable to show medical proof that he was fit for office, and the transfer of power to Goodluck Jonathan. While the Attorney General and other supporters of the sick president notoriously known as "the cabal" (who were mostly extracts from Northern Nigeria), were able to weather the storm of court cases filed by both the NBA and other concerned individuals seeking to compel the transfer of power, the cabal knew that time was running out, and the patience of Nigerians was running thin. The sick president was convinced to undertake a phone interview with BBC where he told the nation of his improving health and imminent return. "At the moment I am undergoing treatment, and I'm getting better from the treatment. I hope that very soon there will be tremendous progress, which will allow me to get back home," he said while speaking both in English and Hausa to BBC Hausa service reporter, Mansur Liman (BBC 12 January, 2010). But Yar'Adua's frail voice was far from reassuring and he controversially made no mention of transferring power to his vice. The Nigerian Senate swung into action on 9 February 2010, and invoked the so called "Doctrine of Necessity" which finally made Goodluck Jonathan the acting president without addressing Yar'Adua's failure to submit a notification to the national legislature (Kagbala 2018). The senators circumvented this by claiming that Yar'Adua's interview granted to the BBC was admitted in lieu for a letter of notification of absence. The executives on their part sent delegates to Saudi Arabia to ascertain the health status of Yar'Adua, delegates which Omotola (2011) claims as mostly composed of backers of the ailing president.

Few days after been recognised as acting president, to the horror of the cabal and seemingly confirming their fears, Goodluck Jonathan demoted Attorney General Michael Aondoakaa (Ige 13 February, 2010). This might have influenced the speedy return of the stricken president who was smuggled into the country on the 23rd of February under the cover of darkness and with heavy military presence, but without the knowledge of Jonathan, the acting president. Yar'Adua upon his return made no public appearance, not even Jonathan was able to see him,

communicating to the nation only through his aides. And in March, Jonathan took the assertive step of dissolving the cabinet without warning in what could be described as “a bid to consolidate his authority at the helm of Africa’s most populous nation a month after he assumed executive powers” (Onuah 17 March, 2010).

As the opposition and civil society groups continued their demand for transparency about the president's health, the confidence of some of Yar'Adua's backers began to wane. They knew that they could not perpetuate an absentee president for long amid rising tension in the country. Most of the president's handlers were cut off guard when former president Obasanjo who was instrumental to Yar'Adua's ascent to the presidency, joined the chorus of calling for the latter's resignation because of his failing health. At a public lecture, Obasanjo made this statement to his anointed candidate:

“If you take up an assignment, a job-elected, appointed whatever it is, and then your health starts to fail and you will not be able to deliver to satisfy yourself and to satisfy the people you are supposed to serve, then there is a path of honour and the path of morality. There is path of honour and the path of morality and if you don't do that, then you don't know anything.” (Sahara Reporters 20 January, 2010)

In the above comment, Obasanjo did two things: firstly, he subtly denied his awareness of Yar'Adua's pre-existing health condition before supporting his candidacy; and secondly, implored the gravely ill president to resign honourably. The Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), a major pressure group in Northern Nigeria composed of several elites, dealt another major blow to Yar'Adua's backers when it withdrew its support for the president (Ibrahim et al. 13 April, 2010). And few weeks after ACF withdrew its support, the death of Yar'Adua was announced on the 5th of May, 2010 to a dazed nation. Goodluck Jonathan who was sworn in as president the next day, promised to continue the policies of his late boss, invited all Nigerians (especially Yar'Adua's backers) to support his government, and he subsequently selected a northerner, Namadi Sambo, as his vice.

But Yar'Adua's death was by no means the end of the power struggle among the ethnopolitical factions in Nigeria. Yar'Adua had died just one year before the next presidential election and Jonathan had registered his interest in contesting in the election, setting the stage for another political drama. This once again threatened the power rotation formula agreed by the party complicated by Yar'Adua death before completing his tenure, with Jonathan's camp arguing that he was simply continuing the policies of his late boss amid strong opposition from the

north. Jonathan's eventual victory at the 2011 polls provoked widespread post-election violence in Northern Nigeria between Christians and Muslims which led to the death of at least 800 people (Human Rights Watch 2011). According to Tayo and Amusan (2012, p. 322), Jonathan won "in nearly all southern states, which are predominantly Christian except for one, while his main challenger Muhammadu Buhari won in the Muslim north-east and north-west; both candidates shared votes in the north central area which has a substantial Muslim and Christian population," highlighting the ethnoreligious dimension of the fierce contest. This period after the 2011 elections also witnessed the rise of the Boko Haram insurgent group and multiple bombings around the country, with several people drawing connection between anger against Jonathan's presidency and the rise of Boko Haram insurgency in the north (Ololajulo 2016).

Jonathan's ambition to run yet again in the 2015 presidential election was the last straw that broke the back of the interethnic alliance of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). At this point, the northern political elites had had enough and accused Jonathan of attempting to perpetuate himself in power. Jonathan was however successful in getting majority of the party leadership to his side, and was announced the unopposed candidate of the PDP to the disapproval of several northern politicians (Owen and Usman 2015). The fallout led to the defection of at least 11 senators and 37 members of the House of Representatives, mostly of northern extraction, from the PDP to the major opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC). The APC on its part presented a northerner and a former military head of state, Muhammadu Buhari, as its presidential candidate; the same man who lost to Jonathan in the 2011 election. Eventually, Goodluck Jonathan who went into the 2015 election with a fragmented party, massive national security challenges, and a waning economy, was defeated by Buhari of the APC with over two million votes, and power returned to the north.

Thunder Striking Twice? President Buhari's Sickness and Osinbajo's Ambition

Months after winning the 2015 election, Nigerians began to realise that President Buhari was not as agile as his earlier days when he was the military head of state in the 1980s. He ran an aggressive anticorruption and anti-terrorism electoral campaign, and Nigerians had considered his past military "no nonsense attitude" as the vital qualities needed to stir the affairs of the troubled nation. But the septuagenarian president soon earned the name "Baba Go Slow" as Nigerians began to notice that he had lost the vigour of his younger days (The Economist 10 October, 2015). President Buhari's prolonged medical trip in the UK in January 2017 provoked speculations about the president's health while his handlers kept sealed lips about the nature of

his illness. But unlike Yar’Adua, Buhari sent a letter to the National Assembly notifying them of his medical trip and thereby transferred power to his vice, Yemi Osinbajo (from South West). However, this did little to douse tensions about the true nature of Buhari’s sickness, with rumours of his demise flooding social media. Just like in the Yar’Adua episode, certain quarters accused the president’s handlers of lying to the public about the severity of Buhari’s illness. Nigerians started getting a whiff of the severity of Buhari’s illness after a second letter was written in February to the National Assembly to extend the president’s medical trip. The visibly emaciated president returned to the country in March and remained indoors for weeks, only to be flown back to the UK in May for further treatment.

Meanwhile, Osinbajo stepped out of the shadows to showcase his leadership skills in what could be interpreted as a foreshadow of his own presidential ambition. He went about commissioning projects, visiting regions of the country Buhari had snubbed, meeting with protesters, and sacked the Director-General of the Department of State Services (Financial Times 2017). Osinbajo’s performance impressed even the main opposition party as the chairman of the PDP called for Buhari’s resignation and the elevation of Osinbajo as the substantive president (Yakubu 18 August, 2018). As Nigerians began to draw comparison between Osinbajo and Buhari, the president’s handlers were forced to issue a public statement, claiming there was no competition between the president and his vice, and that the latter was only continuing the work of the former. “There is no tussle for power, there is no tough battle between him and the president,” a presidential spokesman said, “What we will like to say for the umpteenth time is that the Presidency is one” (Opejobi 8 August, 2018). Even when Buhari finally returned in August, there were rumours spreading widely on social media that he had succumbed to his illness and was replaced by a body-double, by a “Jubril” from Sudan; an alleged ploy by the cabal to perpetuate a northern presidency by all means (Hitchen et al. 2019). The president recovered enough to address the matter himself at a news conference months later.

“A lot of people hoped that I died during my ill health. Some even reached out to the Vice President to consider them to be his deputy because they assumed I was dead. That embarrassed him a lot and of course, he visited me when I was in London convalescing... It’s [the] real me; I assure you,” he declared. (Premium Times 2018)

While the semblance of normalcy returned as Buhari fully recovered, certain Nigerians were quick to point out the sidelining of the vice president and the shrinking his public roles. First, the president unceremoniously dismantled Osinbajo's economic management team, and months later, fired at least thirty-five aides of the vice president without consulting him, "following an alleged plan by the President to reduce the influence of the vice president" (Ailemen 6 November, 2019). According to Punch Newspaper, a source in the presidential villa disclosed that "members of the cabal in the Presidency were bitter about the roles played by the vice-president, when he stood in for Buhari, when the latter went on medical leave" (Ameh et al. 2019). Top among the issues that allegedly enraged the cabal were the sack of the Director-General of the Department of State Services, a strong ally of the president, and the emergence of a new chief justice who had ruled against the president in the past, all under the auspices of Osinbajo. And in a subsequent medical leave in 2019, Buhari failed to transfer power to Osinbajo, signing bills and performing other government matters from the UK. "The action doesn't give a picture of good working relationship between the president and the vice president," observes the Executive Director of Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre (CISLAC), "because the president is supposed to be on leave" (Daily Trust 5 November, 2019). Weighing in on the rift between Buhari and Osinbajo, an associate fellow at Chatham House Matthew Page observed that the treatment of Osinbajo "has sent a strong signal to the ruling party and national power brokers that Buhari has no plans to anoint, or go out of his way to position, his VP as his preferred successor" (Clowes 2019).

The Precariousness of a Gentleman's Agreement

Several Nigerian presidents since 1999 have attempted to poke holes into this gentleman agreement brokered by political parties to distribute public positions between the north and south, and rotate public offices especially the presidency between them. In 2006, Obasanjo tried his luck by aggressively lobbying for a third term, a ploy that would have delayed the transfer of power if he had succeeded. Yar'Adua's sickness and death complicated the matter and led to a premature power-shift to Jonathan, who probably pushed his luck a little too far until he was voted out in 2015. President Buhari's frequent medical trips have raised tension about the prospects of another untimely power-shift, with his vice Osinbajo feeling the brunt of northern suspicion. Of the two largest political parties that have dominated politics in Nigeria since 1999, only the PDP actually has a clause in its constitution that recognises "the rotation

and zoning of party and public elective offices in pursuance of the principle of equity, justice and fairness" (PDP Constitution 1998). However, it is believed that "other political parties have come to appreciate its expedience in the management of the North/South dichotomy in Nigerian politics" (Ndubueze 2014), even though the legality and constitutionality of this agreement has also been questioned by several individuals and groups. In view of the 2023 elections, Secretary of the Arewa Consultative Forum argued that parties are not obliged to respect the agreement because of its absence in the national constitution, an argument that angered certain groups in the country but was supported by President Buhari's nephew and adviser Mamman Daura, contending that the nation should embrace competence instead of zoning (Olaniyan 7 August, 2020). These comments have raised suspicions that some northern politicians are prepping to replace Buhari in 2023 with flagrant disregard for the rotational presidency agreement.

While the legality and competency arguments raise important points, they belittle the need for a retributive mechanism of power in a divided nation and forget that horizontal inequality of political power has engendered several violent conflicts not only in Nigeria and Africa, but in the world at large. Akinola (1996, p. 22) points out the prospects of a democratic rotational presidency when Nigeria was still under military dictatorship, claiming that "it is considered by many as 'the only thing which can keep Nigeria together', by creating a sense of belonging among the various segments of society". While Ololajulo (2016, p. 157) denounces this turn-taking as "a paradoxical pursuit of unity by the process of division" and other critics before him claiming that it "amounts to an acceptance of our inability to grow beyond ethnic or state loyalty" (Cookey 1987), it is also important to note that they are yet to offer a practicable and timely alternative that would give the factions this sense of belonging. While Ololajulo (2016, p. 167) calls for "de-emphasising it [ethno-religious cleavage] through a national political re-orientation campaign and by embarking on good governance", he gave no explanation of what this campaign should look like nor what accounts for the failure of current and previous efforts such as the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) programme and the compulsory teaching of civics in schools. These critics also forget that the Nigerian constitution already contains elements of zoning as ministerial and federal parastatal offices are allotted through redistributive mechanisms. The 'Federal Character' clause which is stated in several parts of the constitution mandates a distribution of public offices among the different states in the country. Section 14, subsection 3 of the 1999 Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria mandates that:

The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that government or in any of its agencies.

An extension of the Federal Character to electoral contests would codify redistributive politics in a precarious arena, a form of redistribution which the constitution already recognises and supports. It would surmise to say that as long as the agreement is not enshrined in the national constitution, this form of redistributive politics which seems to be the only pragmatic option remains vulnerable to both human and nonhuman aberrations. The agreement's narrow scope has also failed to cater for (un)foreseen circumstances such as sickness, incapacitation and death; so only its institutionalisation and provisions for these circumstances can moderate aberrations. While the Nigerian constitution recognises the possibility of presidential incapacitation and makes provisions for it, this gentleman agreement of power rotation lacks such provisions. An extended agreement to renegotiate the terms of turn-taking when these circumstances occur or rotate power "naturally" to another group in the next election may be useful. It is likewise important to note that all parties do not run on the same rotational schedule. While both the APC and PDP presented northern presidential candidates for the 2019 election, there is no assurance that this synchronization would occur in the next election. Therefore, intraparty agreements alone are not adequate in guaranteeing rotational politics. Rather, a national schedule which is mandated by law could compel parties into compliance.

Similarly, the existing agreement homogenises the south which is composed of at least three powerful blocs: the Ibos in the southeast, the Niger Delta south-south, and the Yorubas in the southwest. The north on the contrary and arguably has a more homogenous ethnolinguistic bloc, the Hausa/Fulani bloc, apart from the North Central with more diverse ethnic groups. And that is why in spite of Jonathan's south-south presidency from 2010 - 2015, Ibos in the South East argue that they have been sidelined since 1999. So, a formal rotation has to cater for the ethnic diversity in the south as compared to the north. And while the legalisation of this seems a herculean task to achieve, it presents the only way to manage the combative ethnoreligious politics in

Nigeria. Indeed, it will be unpracticable to rotate among the over 300 ethnic groups in the country, however, Nwozor (2014) suggests turn-taking among the six geopolitical zones in which similar ethnic groups are placed together and which both the APC and PDP have utilised in allocating their party leadership positions. These geopolitical zones which were introduced in the last military regime before the return to democracy in 1999, have also formed basis of intergroup coalitions even after the end of military rule, and are more realistic than rotating the presidency over 300 ethnic groups or the 36 states in the country.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that while the sickness, incapacitation or death of an incumbent president is considered serious both in old and new democracies, it takes an intriguing turn in Sub-Saharan African where the president and vice president serve as bonds between competing ethnoreligious factions within the ruling political party. The incapacitation or death of the president leads to a premature power-shift that upsets the fragile power rotation agreement brokered among different factions in many African states. Having demonstrated how this played out in the Nigerian case study with the death of President Yar'Adua and the near reoccurrence in President Buhari's tenure as well as the turbulent situation faced by their vice presidents while leading a country where certain factions felt short-changed, the paper argues that power-sharing and power rotation agreements which are not institutionalised are suspectable to aberrations, a toothless bulldog that often fails to compel compliance, thereby raising the political temperature of the state when the president falls sick. The paper also argues for an agreement that makes provisions for (un)foreseen circumstances such sickness, incapacitation and death which would intervene in preventing one man's sickness from becoming a national malady.

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