The Nigerian General Elections of 2015

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JOHN ARCHERS
(Publishers) Limited
Ibadan
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Chapter Eleven

The Igbo Dilemma in the 2015 General Elections and Beyond

Emmanuel I. Onah

Introduction

To say that the Igbo ethnic group lost the 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria may not be exactly correct. To start with President Goodluck Jonathan who lost at that election was neither Igbo by ethnic origin, nor was he from the South-East geo-political zone by region. Indeed, President Jonathan is an Ijaw from the South-South geo-political zone. However, it would be inappropriate to present a picture of the Igbo as not being concerned about the outcome of the 2015 Presidential Election. The Igbo had come out almost en masse at the elections in support of President Jonathan. They had adopted him as their son and even reinvented the Igbo name (Azikiwe) supposedly given to him (President Jonathan) at birth (but which obviously had been forgotten), to create the impression that President Jonathan was a member of the ethnic group. In fact, as the elections drew nearer, the Jonathan campaign increasingly assumed the toga of an ‘Igbo Project,’ with virtually every Igbo elite as well as the people lining up to work for his victory at the polls.

This massive support was destined to bring the Igbo into conflict with some other ethnic groups in the country. In Lagos State, the Igbo in their numbers came out in support of Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) candidates in all the elections as a mark of solidarity with President Jonathan. Lagos State however is largely Yoruba and is under the control and influence of the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC). Relations quickly degenerated between the Igbo and the Yoruba in the State, who felt betrayed that the non-indigenous Igbo were trying to impose a political leadership on the indigenes. The Igbo remained undaunted and even became more resolved when the Oba of Lagos threatened to push them out of the city if the APC
lost in the State. In the North, the Igbo were equally vociferous in their support for President Jonathan and the PDP. This was even as President Jonathan’s main rival, Major-General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd), who hails from the region, had a groundswell of support in the area.

In fact, the Igbo support for President Jonathan throughout the Northern States was so strong that fears grew of possible backlash/violence against them in their states of residence in the North were Major-General Buhari to lose the elections. Yet, the Igbo remained undaunted, and instead preferred to move out of the Northern States in large numbers back to their home States for the period of the elections. Back in Igboland, President Jonathan was elevated to the level of a hero, and even promises that he never made to the people were attributed to him and projects he never executed credited to him. The opposition APC was roundly vilified. As the elections approached, everybody was upbeat, and the popular expectation was that the President Jonathan could not possibly lose the election. On the day of the polls, virtually everybody at the polling booths across Igboland voted for President Jonathan. As observed by an eyewitness at one of these booths: “everybody agreed, including the opposition parties here, that everything possible at the polling booths must be done to ensure that the president won this election.” Virtually all the booths in the Igbo States thus returned almost 100 percent votes for the president, and the total votes for the opposition in all the Igbo States was negligible. It is in this light that it is being said and wrongly too that the Igbo lost the 2015 elections. Perhaps, it is more appropriate to say that the Igbo lost out in the elections. When the results of the election, as released by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), showed that President Jonathan had lost, the atmosphere throughout Igboland became gloomy and despondent. Even the people felt as those who had been visited with calamity. Other Nigerians seemed to also think in this direction. More so as the attitude of the Igbo at that election seemed to portray them as standing against almost all other major groups in the country. As the days went by, it started becoming clear that the Igbo political behaviour at the 2015 General Elections might have far-reaching political implications for the Igbo in the politics of Nigeria beyond 2015. It is the political behaviour of the Igbo at the 2015 General Elections and the implications for the ethnic group beyond 2015 that this paper seeks to study.
The Ethnic Nature of Politics in Nigeria

The political behaviour of the Igbo at the 2015 General Elections can only be properly understood if we look at it from the perspective of the ethnic nature of Nigerian politics. A defining feature of Nigerian politics is that it is ethnic in nature. The history of Nigeria shows that ethnicity has played a major role in virtually every aspect of the country’s politics, particularly at elections. In fact, ethnicity and ethnic considerations have pervaded virtually every aspect of Nigerian politics, from the support base of political parties, to the emergence of party candidates, to actual voting, and even post-election reactions. The foundation of this ethnic-based politics was laid way back in the country’s history. First, was the very manner in which the various parts of what eventually became Nigeria were acquired by British colonial entrepreneurs. Different areas, conforming roughly to today’s geopolitical regions in Nigeria, were acquired by different colonial agents acting differently, and these areas were eventually brought together as one entity. Even after being brought together in one territory, these areas continued to be administered separately, and largely on different terms. In the same vein, many policies were implemented in the different areas in different ways by the colonial authorities.

The implication of all these was that for long after colonisation and pacification Nigerians continued to develop as people of separate entities. The corollary of this was that ethnicity developed almost immediately that the Nigerian entity came into being. As politics became institutionalised in Nigeria following a number of colonial policies, ethnicity also became entrenched. This was evident as early as 1936 when the Nigerian Youth Movement (NYM) emerged as a pan-Nigerian political party. Following the struggle between a coalition of Igbo/Ijebu-Yoruba and the coalition of other Yoruba/Ijaw elements in the party, that party soon declined. The next party to be formed after this, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), later renamed the National Convention of Nigerian Citizens, was equally touted as a national party, but in reality, it always had an Igbo base in its membership throughout its existence. From this time onwards, almost every other party formed in the colonial period leading up to independence, was ethnic-based, including the (Yoruba-based) Action Group (AG) and the (Hausa-Fulani based) Northern Peoples Congress (NPC).
In the run-up to flag independence, politics in the country coalesced largely around the contest of the various ethnic groups for positions in the coming post-colonial dispensation. The political parties became virtually tools in the hands of the dominant ethnic groups in their membership for the struggle for power. The campaigns by these parties, and the alliances that they entered into with other parties at this time, were aimed at attaining a balance among the various ethnic groups in the country, particularly the major ones. In the end, this was exactly what was achieved – the three major ethnic groups and their parties divided the regions among themselves, and at the federal level, these three groups again shared power – the Hausa-Fulani (NPC), and the Igbo (NCNC), shared the government, while the Yoruba (AG), became the Opposition. In subsequent Republics, the situation was not as barefaced, and efforts were made to ensure that the membership of the parties cut across ethnic divides. The laws required that the parties must show presence and have members in a majority of the States of the Federation before they could be registered.

Even with all this, what obtained in the end was not so different from what had always existed. For instance, five parties were registered for the 1979 General Elections. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN) had Alhaj Aliyu Shehu Shagari as its Presidential candidate, and the party was always associated with the Hausa-Fulani; the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) had Chief Obafemi Awolowo as its Presidential candidate, and immediately became a Yoruba party; just as the Nigerian Peoples Party which, with Nnamdi Azikiwe as its Presidential candidate immediately became the Igbo party. Even the power arrangement within the parties was also calculated to achieve ethnic balancing – the NPN gave the party chairmanship position to the Yoruba and wooed the Igbo with the Vice-Presidential slot, just as the NPP wooed the Yoruba with the chairmanship position and gave the Vice-Presidential slot to the North. The UPN tried to achieve a historical alliance of the Yoruba with the Igbo by giving out its Vice-Presidential position to the latter.

This politics of ethnic balancing or ‘ethnic politics in Nigeria,’7 has continued in subsequent Republics, despite several efforts at exorcising the phenomenon from the country’s body politic. In fact, many of these efforts have only ultimately reinforced ethnicity in the politics of the country, even if it has also mystified the tendency. This mystification was evident in 1983 when the NPN claimed to have built a pan-Nigerian platform, with prominent
members drawn from across the ethnic divides and a promise to ultimately shift power to other areas of the country. This however, did not detract from its Hausa-Fulani core, and the party’s pan-Nigerian pretensions only ultimately fostered a resistance from the ordinary peoples of most of the non-Hausa-Fulani ethnic groups in the country. The subsequent attempt to rig the 1983 election (so as to be able to portray a pan-Nigerian mandate) eventually led to the collapse of the Second Republic following the December 30, 1983 coup d’etat.

Then, in the still-born Third Republic, Chief M. K. O. Abiola was able to build a party (Social Democratic Party) ticket that swept the 1993 polls across the country, but notwithstanding the shenanigans of the military in scuttling that mandate, analysts have also pointed out that the Abiola campaign continued to retain a Yoruba base throughout the period. In addition, the exclusion of the Hausa-Fulani from the Presidential ticket (Abiola’s running mate, Babagana Kingibe, was actually a Kanuri), as well as the exclusion of the Igbo from the hierarchy of the winning party, were sore points in the campaign, and which the military and the power cabals in the country at the time eventually manipulated to ultimately sustain the annulment of that free and fair election. It is a pointer to the ethnic nature of politics in Nigeria that after the annulment, most of the efforts at reclaiming the mandate and dislodging the military from power was from the South-West or made by elements of the South-West.

The Igbo in Nigerian Politics

Like any other ethnic group in Nigeria, the manner of participation of the Igbo in the politics of the country was defined at first by the realities of the colonial situation. It was colonialism that brought the Igbo and other contiguous groups into the territory that became Nigeria. Consequent upon this colonial contact and aided by several colonial policies, ethnicity subsequently developed in the country. Once this happened, even the Igbo became involved in the ethnic politics of the country. The rules of the new game of politics dictated that the Igbo ethnic group became dominant in the Eastern Region, as well as became one of the ‘majority’ ethnic groups at the national level. Throughout the colonial period, the Igbo dominated the politics of the Eastern Region, while at the Centre, the Igbo was part of a ‘tripod’ – alongside the Hausa-Fulani and the Yoruba – that determined the politics of the country.
This was carried on to independence, when the Igbo-dominated party, the NCNC, formed the government in the East, and was part of the (Hausa-Fulani dominated) NPC coalition with the NCNC, which formed the Federal Government. The Yoruba-dominated AG became the opposition at the Federal level. With the situation as such, the Igbo were reckoned with at the time. In fact, the First Republic could be likened to the glorious days of Igbo politics in Nigeria, and prominent Igbo politicians held important positions and played important roles in Nigerian politics. Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the most prominent Igbo politician of all time, even earned the sobriquet of ‘father of Nigerian nationalism’ as a mark of his towering political stature in the country.

All these were to change at the end of the First Republic, following the series of events that ultimately culminated in the Nigerian civil war. The First Republic was brought to a close by a military coup on January 15, 1966 in which Igbo elements played a prominent role and in which prominent politicians and military personnel from the West and the North were killed. The coup eventually failed, but the military nevertheless came to power and General John T. U. Aguiyi-Irons became Head of State. Although the coup was popular all over the country at first, including in the North, later, the fact of the Igbo leading the coup, coupled with the fact that no prominent Igbo leader lost his life, Igbo arrogance and behaviour in the North as well as an Igbo taking over power and surrounding himself with Igbo technocrats was interpreted as an Igbo plot for power in Nigeria. The mood then changed, especially in the North, where anti-Igbo sentiment rapidly took hold.

In late May 1966, following the promulgation of Decree No. 34 of 1966 which was unnecessary the North retaliated the January 1966 coup with a large-scale massacre of the Igbo living in Northern Nigeria by mobs that lasted for three days and continued intermittently for the next four months. Then on July 26, 1966 military elements of Northern Nigeria origin staged a counter-coup in which almost every senior military officer of Igbo origin, including the Head of State, were killed. The Igbo-led Eastern Nigeria Government first demanded that the killings be stopped, but when this was not forthcoming, it ordered all Easterners living in the North to come back to the East, creating a siege mentality. Events then degenerated quickly and although several efforts were made both at national and international levels to resolve matters, the situation remained such that by May 30, 1967, the
Eastern Nigeria Government felt it necessary though unwisely to declare the secession of the region from Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra. The Federal Military Government on May 27, 1967 had created a twelve-State structure with three States created in Eastern Nigeria thus effectively liberating the non-Igboos from Igbo domination and enlisting their support for Nigeria and against Biafra civil war followed, and which lasted till January 1970, when General Phillip Effiong signed in Lagos the instrument of surrender by Biafra which was subsequently reabsorbed into Nigeria.

The defeat of Biafra and the reabsorption of the Igbo into Nigeria was the turning point for the ethnic group in Nigerian politics. The Civil War had completely changed the realities under which the Igbo were now to operate in Nigeria. To start with, the Igbo were consigned into one State out of the twelve states that were created at the start of the Civil War, and this was from the former position in which they were the majority in one of the three/four regions in the country. Then, a number of war-time and post-war policies were also enforced to despoil the Igbo in the economic and social spheres of the country. In the many years of military rule after the civil war, the Igbo were removed from the commanding heights of Nigerian politics and economy, and their participation in the Nigerian society was generally marked by a struggle for survival. As the nation prepared for a hand over of power to civilians in October 1979, the marginalisation of the Igbo by the military government was virtually complete.

In fairness to politicians, they were prepared to rectify the situation in the run-up to the 1979 General Elections. Every other party that contested that election offered the Vice-Presidential slot to the Igbo, in addition to the NPP which had Nnamdi Azikiwe as its Presidential candidate. When that election was finally won by the NPN, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, an Igbo, became the country’s Vice President, and there were speculations that the party was even ready to hand over to Dr. Ekwueme at the end of the eight year tenure of President Shehu Shagari, had the December 1983 military coup not intervened to scuttle the plans of members of the political class. When the military again came back to power on December 30, 1983, the marginalisation of the Igbo in the governance of the country resumed in earnest. Except for a brief period during the Babangida regime when an Igbo officer, Commodore Ebitu Ukiwe, was the Chief of General Staff and No. 2 man in government, virtually all post-2nd Republic military regimes did not feature the Igbo in the top-most hierarchies of their administrations.
Although the argument was maintained that the situation could not have been otherwise because there was virtually no Igbo of commensurate ranks to hold such high positions in a military regime as almost all Igbo in the military deserted to join the Biafran army, and those who joined at the end of the war had not yet reached the senior ranks, the more plausible reality was that the military elements that continued in power were actually those that led the civil war against Biafra and whose continued suspicion of the Igbo made them to continue to work against Igbo resurgence in Nigerian politics. A typical example was when the Babangida regime decreed two parties into existence. Majority of the Igbo had joined the National Republican Convention (NRC), and Igbo leaders who were eying the position of the presidency of the country at the time worked towards putting in place a national executive for the party that will have a National Chairman from the North so that the Presidential slot could then come to the South. At the national convention of the NRC to pick the officers, however, the hand of the military government was visible in the counter-plot that eventually saw the triumph of a National Chairman from the South-West in person of Dr. Kusamotu, thereby, rendering the Igbo ambition in NRC anomalous. Another example of the military actively working against Igbo resurgence in Nigerian politics could be seen in the events leading up to the handover of power by the military to civilians in May 1999. The death of General Abacha in June 1998, saw the emergence of General Abdulsalami Abubakar who immediately decided on a hand over of power. The transition arrangement required the formation of political parties, and a prominent pro-democracy group in the Abacha days, the G-34, was one of the associations that eventually coalesced into the PDP. The G-34 was led by Vice-President Alex Ekweume, one of the few Igbo elite that refused to work with General Abacha and instead remained with the pro-democracy movement.

It was widely expected that Dr. Ekweume will be the Presidential candidate of the new party. But this was not to be, as shortly before the party picked its candidate, some military elements decided to use the opportunity of the transition to compensate the Yoruba over the criminal annulment of June 12, 1993 election setting aside the mandate of MKO Abiola. General Olusegun Obasanjo (Rtd), who was then serving a life sentence in jail on charges of involvement in the 1995 coup plot, was quickly released from prison and then given official pardon. Almost immediately, he joined the PDP and declared for the presidency. From this time onwards,
the hand of the military government was prominent in the subsequent events that first saw prominent politicians, including erstwhile members of the G-34, moving over to the Obasanjo campaign. While Dr. Ekwueme continued to run, but his campaign never again gathered momentum, and largely remained an Igbo affair. General Obasanjo eventually cruised to an easy victory at the primaries and went on to win the general elections. The accession of General Obasanjo to the Presidency in May 1999 was thus the culmination of the military agenda against the Igbo in Nigerian politics, and a demonstration of the contention that ethnic considerations and manipulation are at the nerve centre of politics in Nigeria.

Ethnic Politics in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic

Ethnic calculations and manipulation have remained at the heart of politics in Nigeria in the Fourth Republic. The Fourth Republic itself was founded on the shadows of the events of the Third Republic which was not the same after the military annulled the June 12, 1993 presidential election, and the disquiet continued to be felt, especially in the South-West, the home region of the presumed winner. When therefore, the military decided to hand over power to politicians in May 1999, it was imperative that issues regarding political disillusionment and disenchantment in the South-West will be prominent in the transition arrangements. The military saw the transition of power as the opportunity to correct the injustice of June 12, 1993 which was meted to the Yoruba, and ultimately ensured that a Yoruba was elected as the first President of the Fourth Republic. General Obasanjo’s victory in the 1999 Presidential Election was thus, partly calculated to compensate the Yoruba for the fate that befell Chief M. K. O. Abiola.

The victory also satisfied the vocal demand at the time for ‘powershift’ to the South of the country, in view of the North holding power for most of the years that the country was under military rule. President Obasanjo ruled the country for two terms of eight years, and the arrangement was that after his tenure, power will go back to the North for another eight years. It was on the basis of this agreement that General Obasanjo handed over power in 2007 to President Umaru Yar’Adua. Unfortunately, he had a terminal ailment and just less than three years into his tenure, President Yar’Adua died. Going by the arrangement in the ruling PDP at the time, another element from the North was supposed to be the chosen in replacement of President Yar’Adua. At the time of President Yar’Adua’s death
however, certain elements who were close to power at the time, and who sensed that ditching the zoning arrangement would be more beneficial to their interests immediately plotted to subvert it. Fortunately for them, the zoning arrangement to rotate the presidency between the North and the South was made only at the party-level. Although it was widely accepted by the populace and almost all the parties adopted the arrangement, it was never incorporated in the Nigerian Constitution. Instead, the Nigerian Constitution clearly provided that the Vice-President will take over in the event of the President dying in office. This constitutional provision came in handy for the plotters of the post-Yar’Adua succession, who immediately argued that the country could ill-afford the power vacuum that would exist if the party’s zoning arrangement was to be honoured. They then devised a ‘doctrine of necessity’ by which Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan was first made Acting President and eventually sworn in as President of Nigeria on the demise of President Umaru Yar’Adua.¹⁹

President Jonathan hailed from the South-South geo-political region of the country. His accession to power was also aided by the long-standing argument that his region, despite being the ‘bread basket’ of the country, had never tasted power at the national level. There was, therefore, a sigh of relief across that section of the country that his accession had helped to correct that injustice.²⁰ The situation, however, created its own sense of injustice among Northerners, who now felt that they had been denied the right to stay-out their time in power. This impression remained among Northerners for as long as President Jonathan remained in power. The situation was not helped when after serving out the remainder of President Yar’Adua’s first tenure in office, President Jonathan announced that he would vie for another term in 2011. The North did not take kindly to this, and a number of prominent Northerners immediately lined up to contest against the President at the party nominations.

When President Jonathan won the primaries, other prominent northerners picked the tickets of the other parties to confront him. One such candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd) of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), eventually came to approximate the sentiments of the North. Huge crowds followed him everywhere he went to campaign in the Northern States. General Buhari was, however, hampered by paucity of funds as well as lack of support in the South. President Jonathan on the other hand had massive support in the South and was aided by the incumbency
factor and robust funding, and was generally expected to win. Nevertheless, the masses of the North still expected that General Buhari will win at the general elections. When therefore, the results were announced, showing that General Buhari had lost, all hell was literally let loose in many parts of the Northern States for days, in the post-election violence of April 2011 which has been described as the worst in the country’s history. The situation was eventually brought under control, but the political atmosphere in the country was never the same afterwards.

From this time onwards, the relationship between the Jonathan Administration and the North was uneasy, despite the presence of prominent Northerners in the Jonathan Administration. The relationship was marked by mutual distrust and suspicion. Thus, when events led to the escalation of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North during the Jonathan presidency, agents and sympathisers of the Administration were quick to attribute the insurgency to the hand work of the Northern elite, whom they accused of ‘inventing’ Boko Haram so as to make the country ‘ungovernable’ for the President. Additionally, when the Administration proved incapable in containing the activities of the Boko Haram during his tenure prominent Northerners continued to argue that the Jonathan Administration deliberately chose not to tackle the Boko Haram insurgency as a way to punish the region for its opposition to the Administration.

Ultimately, the antagonism was to crystallise at the 2015 General Elections when the Northern voting behaviour became decidedly and decisively anti-Jonathan and anti-PDP. Pitted against the North, and being from the minority area, President Jonathan knew that he needed guaranteed support from a majority ethnic group in the country. This was happening at a time when many Igbo elite had become involved with the presidency and apparently needed that presidential connection to remain politically relevant. It was this mutual need that ultimately created the circumstances that eventually led to the adoption of President Jonathan by the Igbo as their candidate for the 2015 General Elections.

The Igbo, President Jonathan and the 2015 General Election

The background to the circumstances that culminated in the wholesale adoption of President Jonathan by the Igbo in the 2015 General Elections can be traced to the Obasanjo’s tenure as Nigeria’s President. It was as if the military knew that General Obasanjo was the best they could ever get to
continue their anti-Igbo agenda. In any case, his disdain for the Igbo was already legendary, and on assumption of office, President Obasanjo seemed clear on what he wanted to do the Igbo. His strategy from the start was to foist confusion among the Igbo and not allow them ever organise into a formidable political front. Part of his strategy was to empower charlatans and school dropouts in the various Igbo States, some of whom he then imposed as leaders on the States, and became ‘political godfathers,’ and were then given official cover and set against the genuine leaders of the people.  

Those who knew President Obasanjo were literally above the law in Igboland, and they routinely flouted the laws of the land as well as disregarded rules and official decisions without repercussion. Meanwhile, those Igbo politicians who did not know President Obasanjo including State Governors, were regularly hounded, and removed from relevant party and government positions at different levels and replaced by the president’s associates. Many, who won party primaries for the various political positions were often dropped and others became party candidates simply because the president anointed them. Before long, genuine Igbo leaders were frustrated out of politics, or if they remained, were humiliated at every turn of the political cycle in the country.

The coast of Igbo politics was now almost clear for the President’s men. It started making sense that the Igbo who wanted to succeed in politics must first try to be admitted as the president’s men. In fact, President Obasanjo became the highest political godfather in Igboland, and only those who ‘knew’ him ultimately succeeded in politics in the area. Those who knew the president, or knew the president more than the others, almost always, were sure to win in any political encounter. With President Obasanjo looming so large in Igbo politics, politics in Igboland eventually transformed into a game of “who knows the President.” Ultimately, it was this “politics of who knows the president” that created the conditions that led to the wholesale adoption of President Jonathan in the 2015 presidential elections. The politics of who knows the president was rife in Igboland throughout the tenure of President Obasanjo, and he routinely intervened in Igbo politics to ensure that his will was always done. When President Yar’Adua took over from President Obasanjo, his aloofness was bound to discourage ‘the politics of who knows the President’ in Igboland. While President Yar’Adua made some concrete moves towards resuscitating and rehabilitating a number of genuine Igbo leaders, his death did not allow this to crystallise.
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When President Jonathan assumed the mantle of leadership however, the politics of “who knows the president” came back in full force. The circumstances in which he assumed office helped the situation, as he relied on a core of highly placed officials of the Federal Government to scuttle the zoning arrangement of the ruling party that would have ordinarily prevented him from taking office. These people subsequently became members of the President’s inner caucus. Those of them from the South-East, including the then Deputy Senate President, immediately took advantage of the situation to project themselves as the president’s right-hand men and thus, became power brokers in the South-East. The South-East Governors at this time also played prominent roles in helping President Jonathan to consolidate his power, and these equally joined the list of the president’s men.

When Northern opposition to his decision to contest the 2011 Presidential Election mounted, the South-East PDP came in handy and gave the president almost 100 percent votes at the primaries. Some of their leaders as a result earned the right to be called the “President’s Men.” Then, the fear that other political parties might gang up with the North to defeat President Jonathan at the general elections was exploited by a few other Igbo leaders outside the PDP, especially leaders of the Igbo-based All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), to gain entry into the list of the president’s men – the party adopted the President as its presidential candidate, and literally collapsed into the structures of the ruling PDP. As the campaigns for the 2011 elections took off, it was easy to see that many Igbo elites had actually secured prominent positions around the president.

The importance of the president’s men lay almost exclusively in the fact of their closeness to the president. Their political relevance was directly tied to the fate of the president, and it was therefore imperative that they worked to ensure the president’s victory at the 2011 President Election. The Igbo elite hoped to get the rewards of this support in appointments after the election. It was small wonder that the Jonathan Administration gave the Igbo such a position as the Secretary to the Government of the Federation and other positions including ministerial appointments into the government. With so many Igbo associated with the Jonathan Administration, the Igbo started seeing their fate in Nigerian politics as being tied with the Jonathan Administration.

Much later, support for the Jonathan Administration even acquired the status of inspired wisdom, and groups that were fighting each other even
started making sure that they carried on their struggles only on the platform of the PDP so as not to be construed as being against President Jonathan. Even members of the opposition parties among the Igbo had expressed the view that they were not anti-Jonathan, adding that their support for the re-election of President Jonathan not ran against logic, but also against ‘the wisdom of Zik and Ojukwu’, the two most prominent leaders of the Igbo in Nigerian politics, who had always preferred adherence with the North in the interest of the Igbo. To be sure, the relations between the Igbo and the Ijaw have hardly ever been cordial. At the socio-economic level, it is well-known among the Igbo that Ijawland is not a friendly business environment. Ijaw youths and people are known to be prone to violence against Igbo strangers in their midst at the least provocation, during which the looting of Igbo shops and businesses is commonplace. When the two ethnic groups were in the then Eastern Nigeria, conflict was the norm. In fact, the Isaac Adaka Boro rebellion in the First Republic was, more appropriately, against the Igbo-dominated Eastern Nigeria Government. That rebellion was eventually put down by the Federal Military Government. Paradoxically, when the Igbo embarked on secession against Nigeria, the Ijaw promptly disowned Biafra and joined the Nigerian side. The opening of the creeks by the Ijaws to the Nigerian troops ultimately led to the early defeat of the Igbo in the Nigerian-Biafran “Civil War.” At the political level, there is also no record of cooperation between the Ijaw and the Igbo in Nigerian politics, as the Ijaw had consistently voted against Igbo parties and candidates in national elections prior to the 2011 General Elections. In April 2011, however, the Igbo massively voted for Dr. Goodluck Jonathan in the 2011 Presidential Elections. This marked the beginning of a new relationship in which the Igbo supported Dr. Goodluck Jonathan throughout his presidency. Between 2011 and 2015, the Igbo somewhat served as Guarantors of the Jonathan Presidency, and in the 2015 Presidential Election, the Igbo support for Dr. Jonathan was almost total.

The massive Igbo support for President Jonathan did not even shake when indications appeared that the president’s campaign was not doing so well. Instead, the Igbo became more emboldened and such groups as the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which had earlier declared Igboland “a no go area for the All Progressives Congress (APC),” and which ordinarily would not even have anything to do with elections in Nigeria, joined the PDP in mounting campaigns to scuttle
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The 2015 General Elections! Eventually, elections were held with massive support for Dr. Jonathan who lost to the APC candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd). The results showed that the winning coalition featured almost every other ethnic group in Nigeria except the Igbo and the minorities of the South-South.

The Dilemma of the Igbos in Nigerian Politics Beyond 2015

The defeat of President Jonathan in the 2015 General Elections was felt throughout Igboland. In the days since that election, the mood of the Igbo mainstream in Nigeria has had to change from gloom and despondency to anger and frustration, then to defiance and an attitude of “we can survive even without the presidency.” It is this last tendency that has enabled the Igbo in recent times to maintain a straight face and insist that they did not regret their support for President Jonathan at the elections. True, it is that the Igbo may not have done anything wrong in voting for President Jonathan in 2015. There are many who feel that the Igbo attitude in those elections was awful. Analysts have actually argued that the Igbo attitude in the elections has put the ethnic group in a dilemma in Nigerian politics in the years beyond 2015.

The immediate dilemma which the Igbo voting pattern in the 2015 elections has created for the group lies in its implications for the sharing of offices in the Buhari Administration. The Igbo did not only vote for President Jonathan, they extended the support to all PDP candidates such that on the first day of voting, the PDP won every Senatorial and House of Representatives seat except two in the entire South-East geo-political zone. Since the APC eventually secured an overall majority in both Houses of the National Assembly, the implication is that the ethnic group has shut itself from the Senate President and House of Representatives Speaker positions in the 8th National Assembly. This situation is even made worse as indications were that the victorious APC had before the elections had actually slated the zone for the senate presidency. What this means is that the zone will not occupy any of the first five offices in the country’s Protocol List during the APC Administration. Not even the crass opportunism of an Igbo PDP Senator in securing the Deputy Senate President position at the inauguration of the Senate in June 2015 had changed the situation in any real term. The office of the Deputy Senate President is much farther in the Protocol List, and in any case, not being from the ruling party means that he may be “in office but without the power.”
This whole situation where the Igbo are not represented in the commanding heights of the nation’s politics is capable of reducing the Igbo to a negligible minority ethnic group in the country despite their majority-population status.

The Igbo voting pattern in the 2015 elections also exposed the group as being without leadership and direction in Nigerian politics. Throughout the election, no leader or group of leaders stood out among the Igbo. Instead, what obtained was elite consensus, based largely on pecuniary considerations, and driven by popular sentiments rather than strategic thinking and long-term planning. It was the lack of leadership that actually allowed these base sentiments of North-South and Muslim-Christian dichotomies to take root among the Igbo electorate despite the fact that all along, the Jonathan ‘Project’ actually came against the Igbo interest. The dilemma here is that by voting for President Jonathan, the Igbo were unwittingly saying that they did not mind if the time frame within which an Igbo person could occupy the Nigerian presidency was extended, were the original zoning formula for the office to be followed. If President Jonathan had won his re-election, for instance, it would have delayed the Igbo chance by eight years. As it eventually happened, the Igbo by supporting President Jonathan instead of a Northern candidate even in 2011, still postponed their own chance by a whole four years.  

The Igbo political behavior throughout the period of the 2015 elections also gave out the ethnic group as having a penchant for boastfulness and noise making in the public space. Unlike other comparable groups in the country whose voting game plan remained close to their hearts all through the period of the elections, the Igbo did not leave anybody in doubt as to where their votes will go. This support, especially among the Igbo living outside Igboland, was particularly offensive to their major hosts – the Hausa-Fulani in the North and the Yoruba, especially in Lagos State. This open and noisy support created much tension between the Igbo and their hosts that, particularly in the North, numerous Igbo people had to evacuate to their home states in the days shortly before the election. Ironically, this denied President Jonathan of large numbers of votes as most of these evacuees were only registered for the vote in the States of their residence. But more than this, the political behaviour of the Igbo has tended to portray them out as an ungrateful people incapable of being good strangers in other peoples’ lands. The dilemma here is that this Igbo attitude in 2015, which has incurred antagonism towards the group from most other Nigerians
actually reduced the political prospects of the Igbo in the country. Other ethnic groups might now find it difficult to enter into political alliances with the Igbo and may be unwilling to support the ambition of the Igbo to rule Nigeria anytime in the near future.

Conclusion

The 2015 General Elections is by all measures, the worst outing for the Igbo in Nigerian politics. By aligning their fate with the Jonathan campaign, the Igbo not only lost out in the 2015 elections, but also jeopardised its prospects in Nigerian politics in the future. In the years after this debacle, what the Igbo people need therefore is not defiance that presently subsists among the group, but rather a deep reflection and a resolve to project a new leadership as well as the attitude that will enable them reach out to other groups and work out all arrangements that will help them achieve their political ambitions in Nigeria.

Notes

12. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. O. Adeniyi, Power, Politics and Death: A Frontrow Account of Nigeria under the Late President Yar’Adua (Lagos: Kachifo Ltd, 2011).
20. Ibid.