

‘Eat and Give to Your Brother’:

The Politics of Office Distribution in Nigeria

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This article analyses the politics of office distribution in Nigeria, focusing on how elite struggles for power shape the conception, implementation, and continuity of office distribution arrangements. The article adopts a methodology involving a re-description of history based on a review of published literature, government documents, and media reports. It contends that the politics of office distribution in Nigeria is conditioned by two main factors: fears in Northern Nigeria that the more educated South would dominate state institutions and concerns in Southern Nigeria that the more populous North would have upper hand in majoritarian electoral contest. The search for regional equilibrium in government by the elite has transformed office distribution arrangements in Nigeria into modalities for ethnic diversity management.

Introduction

Intense elite struggles for power are a striking feature of Nigerian politics. The key element of the struggle has been the tension between elites from the largely Moslem North and the Christian South. The underlying issues behind the political tension are the fears in Northern Nigeria that the more educated Southern elite would dominate state institutions as well as concerns in Southern Nigeria that the more populous North would have upper hand in majoritarian electoral contest¹. The zero-sum political competition among the elites precipitated a bloody civil war between 1967 and 1970. The soul-searching that followed the civil war reflected in the quest for elite consensus on how Nigeria should be governed to ensure political stability and equity in distribution of resources. Two office distribution arrangements – the principles of federal character and zoning emerged as modalities for resolving elite conflicts over distribution of offices. These office sharing arrangements express the tendency of the Nigerian elite since the 1970s to manage ethnic diversity and promote a Nigerian state project by avoiding divisive politics and emphasising ‘unity in diversity’. This position shows the basis, contradictions and ambivalence that underlie the principles of federal character and zoning as modalities for sharing power, positions and resources between the Nigerian elite, and on the other hand, as frameworks and processes through which the elite seek to realise their interests within non-violent distributive politics.

¹ Northern Nigeria refers to areas inhabited by predominantly Islamic communities like Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri and Nupe as well as the Christian groups like Tiv, Idoma and Igala in the Middle Belt; while Southern Nigeria is the area occupied by the Yoruba, Igbo, and other communities in the Niger Delta. Nigeria was divided into Northern and Southern Protectorates and administered as separate colonies by the colonial administration. The two protectorates were amalgamated in 1914, but it was in the 1940s that Nigerians from both regions began to have close political and administrative contact.

This article analyses the politics of office distribution in Nigeria, focusing on the interests, logic, and circumstances underpinning the conception, implementation, and continuity of office distribution arrangements in the country. It argues that mutual fear of domination by elites from Northern and Southern Nigeria as well as the relatively balanced power relations between the two groups explain the adoption and continued practice of federal character and zoning in Nigeria.

Methods of office distribution in Nigeria

There are two main principles that guide the selection of political and bureaucratic officials in Nigeria – federal character and zoning. These two modalities of office distribution work in concert, although three fundamental features differentiate them. Firstly, the principle of federal character is enshrined in the Constitution while the principle of zoning is an informal arrangement devised by Nigerian elites in the course of their informal political exchanges. This means that unlike the principle of federal character that legally mandates public officials to ensure equal representation of states in federal institutions, there are no legal provisions compelling politicians to abide by the zoning arrangement. Secondly, the principle of federal character applies mainly to appointive positions while zoning applies mostly to elective positions. Thirdly, the focal point of the principle of federal character is the equitable distribution of positions among states while the principle of zoning focuses on allocation of offices to geo-political zones.

The principle of federal character

The principle of federal character highlights the need to consider ethno-regional diversity in the composition of public offices. The principle is one of the by-products of the 1979 Constitution with its origin linked to an address by the former Head of State, General Murtala Mohammed to the Constitution Drafting Committee in October 1975. In the address, Gen. Mohammed charged the Committee to consider the adoption of an executive presidential system of government in which the election of the president and the vice president and the selection of members of the cabinet would be done in “such a manner so as to reflect the federal character of the country” (Ekeh, 1989: 29-30). In line with the suggestion of Gen. Mohammed, the Constitution Drafting Committee resolved that fear of domination was an important feature of Nigerian politics and that the fear could be allayed by instituting measures that would prevent the predominance of persons from a few states, ethnic or sectional groups in government or its agencies. Consequently, the Committee adopted the principle of federal character as the framework for promoting equitable ethno-regional representation in government.

The legal foundation of the principle of federal character was set forth in Section 14(3) of the 1979 Constitution:

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 manner as 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.

Several other sections of the 1979 Constitution laid down the *modus operandi* of the principle of federal character. The following are some of the highlights:

- The president of the Federal Republic shall appoint at least one minister from among the indigenes of each state of the federation (section 135(3)).
- The president shall reflect the federal character of Nigeria in the appointment of persons to such offices as those of the secretary of the federal government, head of civil service of the federation, ambassadors, high commissioners, permanent secretaries or other chief executives of federal ministries or departments, and any office on the personal staff of the president (section 157).
- The members of the executive committee or other governing body of the political party shall be deemed to reflect the federal character of Nigeria only if the members belong to different States not being less than two-thirds of all the States of the Federation (section 203(b)).

The incorporation of the principle of federal character in the 1979 Constitution was reflected in the composition of the federal cabinet and the civil service after 1979. The application of the principle has led to a more proportional allocation of offices. For instance, in 1960 the North produced 60% of the members of the cabinet while the Yoruba, Igbo, Niger Delta and Middle Belt² had 20%, 13%, 6.7%, and 0%, respectively. This situation has changed considerably in 2004 with the following office allocation pattern: North 30%, Yoruba 18%, Igbo 15%, Niger Delta 18%, and Middle Belt 18% (see Table 1 below). The adoption of the principle of federal character has also opened the way for the North elites to push through a number of measures to improve the representation of Northerners in the Federal Civil Service. Among the measures are the *ad hoc* transfer of senior Northern civil servants from the state civil services to the Federal Civil Service as well as the policy requiring that junior civil servants working in any federal agency outside the Federal Capital be recruited from the locality served by the agency (Adamolekun, Erero and Oshionebo, 1991: 44).

Table 1
Ethno-regional Composition of Nigerian cabinets,
1960-2004 (in percentages)

Regime	North	Yoruba	Igbo	Niger Delta	Middle Belt
Balewa 1960	60	20	13	6.7	0
Gowon 1967	21	36	0	21	21
Murtala 1975	25	35	0	5	35
Shagari 1983	38	14.7	8.8	17.6	20.5
Buhari 1984	35	20	10	10	25
Obasanjo 2004	30	18	15	18	18

Source: Adapted from Mustapha (2004: 26).

² The Middle Belt consists of a number of predominantly Christian communities that have historically resisted the political and religious domination of the core Islamic groups in the Northern Region such as Fulani, Hausa, and Kanuri. Although the communities in the Middle Belt sometimes make political alliances with the Muslim North, both are usually separated by religious differences.

The federal character arrangement was extended in 1989 with the addition of new bodies in the range of agencies required to implement the principle. The bodies affected by this review include the National Revenue Mobilisation, Allocation and Fiscal Commission, the Public Complaints Commission, the boards and governing councils of universities, colleges, and other institutions of higher learning as well as government-owned companies (See Section 150, The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1989). In addition, the National Constitutional Conference convened in June 1994 further extended the federal character arrangement by recommending the establishment of the Federal Character Commission to monitor and enforce the principles.

The Federal Character Commission is empowered by Decree No. 34 of 1996 to take legal action against heads of ministries and parastatals that failed to implement its recommendations. The Commission is also given powers to: (a) work out a formula for the redistribution of jobs; and (b) to establish, by administrative fiat, the principle of proportionality within the Federal Civil Service (Mustapha, 2007). As part of its mandate to establish the proportionality principles in the federal public service, the Federal Character Commission proposed that the indigenes of any State shall not constitute less than 2.5% or more than 3% of the total positions available including junior staff at Head office. The Commission also proposed that where there are only two posts, one must go to the north and the second to the south; where there are six posts, one must go to each of the six geo-political zones of the country (Federal Character Commission, 1996: 33).

The principle of zoning

The second method of office distribution in Nigeria is based on the principle of zoning. Zoning, in the Nigerian context, is the aggregation of states and ethnic groups into a number of smaller regional blocs on the basis of which positions are allocated (Suberu, 1988: 433). There are two important features of zoning - rotation of offices and 'power-shift'³. The goal of zoning is to validate a pattern whereby the ethno-regional origin of top political officeholders including the president, alternates from one election or set of elections to another (Akinola, 1996: 1).

The practice of zoning in Nigeria has a deep-seated cultural basis. Several scholars have reported the evolution of the idea of representativeness in political governance in various parts Nigeria before the advent of Islam and colonialism⁴ (Dent, 1966: 465; Akinola, 1988: 445, fn. 19). The quest for inclusive political systems is fuelled by the autonomist tendencies and demands for a voice in the conduct of their own affairs by the local communities (Isichei, 1983: 178-201). As Uwazurike (1997: 335) noted:

Historically, no monarch or body of elders made decisions except through procedural consensus building. And among the autonomous communities, notions of numerical supremacy had no bearing: each group, no matter how small, possessed an embedded

³ The concept of 'power-shift' emerged in the late 1990s as an expression of the South's opposition to Northern domination of executive power.

⁴ In Tivland, recurrent tension among various subunits led to the evolution of a system in which chieftainship rotates among the subunits based on the principle of 'eat and give to your brother' – this way, a balance is kept among the subunits of the Tiv society and agreement is easily reached on how to govern the society. Zoning was also popular in traditional Yoruba society. It was applied in the selection of the traditional rulers.

sovereignty that did not acknowledge the sort of marginalization that might imperil its corporate existence.

In these traditional societies, the 'ruling families' or 'dynasties', were the platforms for zoning arrangements (Akinola, 1996: 18; Abatan, 1994). In contemporary Nigeria, the elites have reinvented the cultural practice of zoning in the context of the ethno-regional struggle for power. They also strive to constitutionalise the practice.

There have been four attempts to incorporate the principle of zoning in Nigerian Constitution, but all of these have failed. In 1979 when a sub-committee of the Constitution Drafting Committee proposed the constitutionalisation of zoning, some intellectuals within the CDC opposed the proposal, arguing that Nigeria's Constitution should emphasise "only those ideas and values which render the area or ethnic origin of a person irrelevant in determining his quality as an individual" (Panter-Brick, 1978: 314). In 1986, some individuals⁵ advocated the constitutionalisation of zoning in the debates coordinated by the Political Bureau⁶, but the Political Bureau rejected the arguments for zoning claiming that "a constitutional provision for rotation...amounts to an acceptance of our inability to grow beyond ethnic or state loyalty" (See Government's Views and Comments on the Findings and Recommendations of the Political Bureau, 1987: 23). Attempts at constitutionalising the zoning failed again in 1999⁷ and 2005⁸ (see Report of the Constitutional Conference Containing the Resolutions and Recommendations, vol. II., 1995; *The Guardian*, 23 May 2005: 1-2).

Although efforts to constitutionalise the principle of zoning have not been successful, the political elites have implemented the principle informally. Since independence, the search for cordial inter-group relations has forced elites from the Northern and Southern regions to share the most important political positions in Nigeria⁹. However, the principle of zoning received the greatest attention and action during the Second Republic (1979-1983) following its relatively rigorous implementation by the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN) (Akinola, 1988; Suberu and Diamond, 2002). The NPN opted for zoning, first as a strategy of building a national party - allocating top government and party offices to its members from various ethno-regional groups. The adoption of zoning by the NPN also reflects the increasing efforts by the elite to overcome ethno-regional chauvinism in politics. The overthrow of the civilian government in 1983, deflated hopes that the party's 1987 presidential nomination would rotate to the South, giving way for a consequential adjustment in the zonal allocation of other key offices.¹⁰

⁵ Including ex-Head of State, Olusegun Obasanjo, former Chief of Army Staff, Theophilus Y. Danjuma; ex-Governors, Bisi Onabanjo and Abubakar Umar; and politician K. O. Mbadiwe.

⁶ A body set up by the Government to collate the views of Nigerians on the political future of the country.

⁷ Although the zoning was included the aborted 1995 Constitution prepared by late Head of State Sani Abacha, the principle was removed when its successor, the 1999 Constitution, was eventually enacted; no reason was given for this.

⁸ The principle of zoning came close to being constitutionalised in 2005, but the National Assembly discarded the constitutional review exercise when it became apparent that President Obasanjo wanted to use it as a pretext to elongate his tenure.

⁹ The independence government was led by Nnamdi Azikiwe (South) as the Head of State and Tafawa Balewa (North) as the Prime Minister. There were also the governments of Gen Murtala Mohammed (North) and Gen Olusegun Obasanjo (South) 1975-1976; Gen Olusegun Obasanjo (South) and Gen Shehu Musa Yar'Adua (North) 1976-1979; Shehu Shagari (North) and Alex Ekwueme (South) 1979-1983. This pattern has continued until the present era, with the election of Umaru Yar'Adua (North) as President and Goodluck Jonathan (South) as Vice President in May 2007.

¹⁰ The implementation of zoning by the NPN generated a serious controversy during the 1983 elections when Moshood Abiola (South) tried to compete for the party's presidential nomination against the incumbent Shehu

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The question of zoning re-emerged after party politics resumed during the Third Republic (1989-1993). The issue of whether a Southerner or Northerner would be the president was keenly contested within the two registered political parties – the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC). At the initial period of the Third Republic, there seemed to be an emerging consensus that it was time to elect a president from the South. In the NRC, for instance, key personalities in the party argued that the North had produced a sufficient number of presidents; they therefore canvassed for the zoning of the party's presidential ticket to the South (Badejo, 1997: 185). However, the election of Tom Ikimi (South)¹¹ as the NRC Chairman dashed the hopes of many Southern politicians¹². Consequently, the NRC zoned its presidential ticket to the North, with the South getting the vice presidential ticket.

Zoning in the SDP was not as fiercely contested as it was in the NRC, since the party allocated its presidential ticket to the South from the outset. Consequently, Moshood Abiola (South) was nominated as the SDP presidential flag bearer while Baba Gana Kingibe, administrator and diplomat from Borno State, left the post of party chairman to become the vice presidential candidate. The hope of subsequent rotation of the zoning arrangement was again truncated following the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election and the return of military rule in November 1993.

The issue of zoning was re-opened during the transition to civil rule program of 1998-1999. This time, in response to the increasing calls for a power-shift from the North to the South, all the three registered political parties – Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), the All Peoples Party (APP), and the Alliance for Democracy (AD), zoned their presidential tickets to the South (Newswatch, 26 April 1999: 8-15, Ibrahim 1999). Zoning was also applied in the electoral process that produced Umaru Yar'Adua as president in May 2007, with the allocation of its presidential ticket to the North by the ruling PDP.

Office distribution as a balancing act

The conception, implementation, and continuity of the principles of federal character and zoning reflect elite power relations in Nigeria. Although the Northern elite are undoubtedly the leading group in Nigeria, they have been unable to dominate the entire polity. The Northern control of political power began after Nigeria's independence in 1960 when the Northern People's Congress won both Federal and Northern Regional elections; it has extended since then to most regimes, both military and civilian. The political fortune of the Northern elite is enhanced by the North's large population, a common religion – Islam and a *lingua franca* – the Hausa language that facilitate regional mobilisation. However, the South's head-start in western education enabled the Southern elite to control the bureaucracy, a situation which counteracts Northern political primacy and raises anxieties among the Northern elite that the more advanced South would dominate federal institutions and agencies. The

Shagari (North) evoking the zoning logic. The party's hierarchy chided Abiola and asked him to allow Shagari complete his maximum term. Abiola was outraged – he later resigned from the party.

¹¹ Ikimi defeated Ibrahim Mantu, from Plateau State (North) in the Chairmanship election.

¹² Based on the zoning arrangement, if the South produces the party Chairman, the presidential ticket would go to the North.

Northern elite have tried to avert Southern domination by advocating the implementation of the federal character principle. Conversely, the Southern elite have tried to address their concerns about the North's political primacy by championing the issue of zoning. Thus, office distribution in Nigeria serves essentially as a vehicle for an ethno-regional balance of power.

Preventing 'Southern domination': the North and the principle of federal character

The fear of Southern domination by the Northern elite originates from educational disparities between the two areas. Beginning from the colonial era, the North lagged behind the South in the establishment and enrolment into schools. In 1947, for example, only 251 Northerners were in secondary schools; this figure represents just 2% of the total secondary school enrolment in Nigeria. In 1965, secondary school enrolment in the North increased to 15,276; this is a marginal increase compared to 180,907 pupils enrolled in secondary schools in the South (Coleman, 1958: 134; Mustapha, 2004: 12). The educational imbalance between the North and the South continued after independence. For instance, in the 1969/70 academic session, only 19% of the students in Nigerian universities were from the Northern states; the Western State alone had 48% of the students (New Nigeria, 2 February 1974). In the 1974/75 academic session, the Northern states had 24% enrolments in Nigerian universities while the Southern states had 74% (National Universities Commission 1978: 14). In the 2000/2001 session, the North accounted for only 20% of the candidates admitted into Nigerian universities (Mustapha, 2004: 12).

The uneven educational development in Nigeria is largely a result of colonial educational policy. While the Christian missions - the major agency for the advancement of western education in Nigeria - were allowed to establish schools in the South, the colonial government restrained them from penetrating much of the North under the pretext of preserving the Islamic emirates in the North (Kastfelt, 1994; Abubakar, 1998; Mustapha 2004). Instead, considerable effort was channelled at a cultural engineering project that sought to inculcate the aristocratic values of the British Public School system on the Northerners, with the hope of creating "a modern and aristocratic Anglo-Muslim civilization" (Barnes 1997: 198). The colonial government made no efforts to modernise the Koranic schools that formed the basis of the pre-colonial educational system in the North. To worsen matters, the education system in North was very expensive and inefficient (Mustapha 2004: 11).

The Southern head start in education had a subsidiary effect on ethno-regional formation of human capital. The North lagged behind the South in the production of skilled manpower that took over the public service after independence. For instance, in the mid-1960s, the North had only 7%, 4%, and 3% of the engineers, doctors, and accountants in Nigeria, respectively (Osemwota, 1994: 86). This translated to Southern predominance in the public service. The data in Table 2 below show that the Southern states have more than two-thirds - 62.2% of the officials in the federal civil service while 37.7% are from the North. The figure for the core Islamic areas is even smaller - only 19.1% of the federal civil service. The two dominant ethnic groups in the South - the Yoruba and Igbo have 25.2% and 16.2%, respectively. This analysis shows the link between the South's advantage in education, human capital formation, and staffing of federal institutions.

Table 2
Composition of Federal Civil Service by Zones and Regions as of 2000
(Consolidated Statistics)

Region	No. of Staff	% of Total Staff
North	35,977	19.1
Middle Belt	34,989	18.6
Northern Region	70,966	37.7
Yoruba	47,349	25.2
Igbo	30,490	16.2
Niger Delta	39,153	20.8
Southern Region	116,992	62.2
Total	187,958	99.9

Source: adapted from Federal Character Commission 2000: 2.

There has been a long-standing effort by the Northern elite to under-cut possibilities of Southern domination of federal institutions. For instance, at the 1950 Ibadan Constitutional Conference, the Northern elite demanded the application of a quota system in military recruitment. Thus, in 1958, the principle of quota was implemented in the recruitment of other ranks in the Nigerian army and extended to the officer corps in 1961¹³ (Adekanye, 1989: 232). The quota system was also applied in areas like the federal cabinet¹⁴, the parliament, police, civil service, and higher educational institutions (Mustapha, 2004: 37; Gboyega, 1979: 173; and Osaghae, 1989: 138). The Northern Regional government further adopted the 'Northernisation' policy to deliberately keep out or displace Southerners in the Region's civil service (Albert, 1998: 59-60).

The Northern elite used establishments such as the media to mobilise support for the principle of federal character. Agbaje (1989) showed the involvement of Northern media organisations such as the New Nigerian Newspapers in the struggle for the codification and implementation of the principle of federal character. In 1985, for instance, the then Managing Director of the New Nigerian Newspapers, Mohammed Haruna, vowed that the newspaper "would continue to fight for the introduction of Sharia, the application of quota system or federal character in all spheres of national life" (Kukah, 1993: 78). The New Nigerian promoted the principle of federal character principle in its editorials and comments.

The Northern elite anchor their support for the implementation and continuity of the principle of federal character on three major assumptions. First, they claim that no lasting unity can be expected from a situation where the South has a large, disproportionate representation in the federal bureaucracy. Secondly, they argued that recruitment into the federal public service in a diverse country like Nigeria cannot be left to the spontaneity of merit and expertise. Finally, they maintain that the Southern elite that dominate the federal institutions should make personal and collective sacrifices by way of foregone opportunities in the interest national development (Mustapha, 1986: 89). The Northern elite believe that the main way the low representation of the North in the state institutions can be addressed is by positive discrimination in employment and promotion in favour of the North. This

¹³ The quota arrangement gave the Northern Region 50% of new intakes into the Nigerian army while the Eastern and Western Regions got 25% each.

¹⁴ With each region contributing at least three ministers to the cabinet.

would entail loss of opportunities to the South, but the Northern elites expect their Southern counterparts to show understanding in the interest of the overall development of Nigeria. The above arguments are unacceptable to many in Southern Nigeria; as a result, there have been persistent calls for a review of the principle of federal character.

Counteracting 'Northern political primacy': the South and zoning

The Northern elites' support for the principle of federal character has been paralleled by a struggle in the South to counteract Northern control of executive power through zoning. Much of the dynamics of Nigerian politics in the first three decades after independence is informed by the unwillingness of the Southern elite to accept Northern political primacy. The Southern opposition to Northern rule is linked to the early 19th Century Islamic revolution and the establishment of Fulani hegemony over a vast area under the Sokoto Caliphate. The close collaboration that developed between the British colonial administration and the ruling Hausa-Fulani aristocracies engendered a fear in the South that the Sokoto Caliphate would extend its hegemony to the whole federation. This fear was fuelled by tensions between the Southern elite and the colonial administration, which contrasted with the more cordial relations between the Northern elite and the colonial government.

Anti-Northern sentiments date back to the period before the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates into Nigeria. Nwabughuogu (1996: 42) reported that between March and April 1914, Lagos newspapers were filled with anti-Northern articles, letters, editorials and reports, highlighting the differences between the North and the South, reasons why the two areas should not be merged, and even allegations of foul-play on the side of the colonial administration. For instance, the *Nigerian Times* of 4 May 1914 alleged that the "hidden meaning of the 1914 amalgamation" was "broadly speaking the conquest and subjugation of Southern Nigeria by Northern Nigeria; Northern Nigeria administration must be made to supersede every system of Southern Nigeria". Such anti-Northern sentiments also aroused strong ill-feelings against the South in the North.

Threats of Northern domination manifested most visibly during the late colonial and early independence periods. For instance, during the 1950 Ibadan Constitutional Conference, Northern delegates proposed that the North would hold 50% of the seats in the federal legislature based on regional per capita representation. After a protracted debate, the North refused to compromise and forced the Southern elite to capitulate. The principle of regional per capita representation in parliament meant that seats were decided not necessarily by the total number of actual votes cast, but by an initial allocation of seats on regional basis. This gave the North an in-built advantage in the federal legislature. In 1959, the Northern elite used this representational advantage to secure the position of Prime Minister. As Table 3 below shows, though the Northern party - the NPC, got less votes than the Southern parties - NCNC and AG, the NPC still went ahead to form the government.

Table 3

Results of the 1959 General Elections

Parties	North	West	East	Nigeria
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	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%	Votes	Seats	%
NPC	134	77	-	-	-	-	1,922,179	134	42.9
NCNC	-	-	23	35	58	80	2,594,577	89	28.9
AG	25	14	34	52	14	19	1,992,364	73	23.4
NEPU	8	5	-	-	-	-	509,050	8	2.5
Others	7	4	8	12	1	1	610,677	16	5.1
Total	174	100	65	100	73	100	7,189,797	312	100

Source: Kurfi, 1983: 173.

Since 1959, a broad pattern of government composition has emerged in which the Northern elite dominated most civilian and military regimes. The Buhari regime (1983-1985) is regarded as the most narrowly-based Northern leadership. According to Ibrahim (1999: 13) "many within the Southern political elite read the Buhari coup as a further narrowing of the base of political power to a core Hausa-Fulani oligarchy". Ekwe-Ekwe (1985: 621) alleged that under Buhari:

Thirteen of the nineteen members of the ruling Supreme Military Council (SMC) [were] northern Muslims, most of whose families are closely related to powerful local emirs. Apart from the head of navy, all service chiefs and commanders of the principal military divisions come from the north. Recent appointments and promotions in the armed forces, parastatals, the Central Bank and diplomatic services also reinforce this pro-northern trend. Buhari's principal adviser, Mamman Daura, is not just the head of state's uncle, but also the brother of the powerful Emir of Daura in northern Nigeria.

The successive regimes of Generals Babangida and Abacha were also labelled as 'Northern governments', even though the regimes tried hard to portray themselves as having national outlook (The News, 8 April 1996: 17).

Complaints of Northern primacy seem loudest among the Igbo. The Igbo factor in Nigerian politics can be summarised as one of 'lost privileges' (Ibelema 2000: 213). The Igbo elites were probably the most privileged group in Nigeria before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war. However, the Igbo defeat in the civil war by the 'North led national forces' changed everything. The loss of former privileges has precipitated a strong sense of failure and frustration among the Igbo. The Igbo elites see the refusal to reabsorb most Igbo who held high positions in the armed forces and civil service after the end of the civil war as an example of the acts of marginalisation of the Igbo (Harneit-Sievers 2006).

Like the Igbo, the Yoruba elites also feel marginalised by the North. The failure of the Yoruba elites, especially Obafemi Awolowo and Moshood Abiola, to win Nigeria's presidency has generated resentment against the Northern elite. The Yoruba elites hold several grievances against their Northern counterparts, including allegations of vote-rigging in all of the elections that Awolowo lost; the NPC meddling in the AG crises that led to the imposition of a state of emergency in the Western Region in 1962; the carving out of the Mid-West from the Western Region - reducing the domain of the Yoruba elites; and the annulment of the June 12 presidential election, presumably won by Moshood Abiola (Ibrahim 1999: 14). The annulment of the June 12 election created strong fears that the North was not ready to allow a Southerner to rule, even if he wins a democratic election.

During the 1990s, the Southern elites intensified demands for the application of zoning in office distribution¹⁵ (Newswatch, 10 August 1998: 8). The main thrust of the demand is that since the Northern elite have ruled Nigeria for most parts of the post-colonial era, only a power-shift from North to South can assuage the agitations of Southern elites. Figures such as those in Table 4 (below) were presented to justify the demands for power-shift. Notice in the table that the North had dominated executive power since independence, having 66.6% of Nigerian heads of state between 1960 and 2007, while the South has 33.3%. The gap is even wider when one considers the number of months the heads of state spent in office. The heads of state from the North have spent 412 months in office, representing 73.4% of the period 1960-2007 while the heads of state from the South have spent 148 months in office or 26.1% of the duration.

Table 4

Number of Heads of State/Government by

Region and Length of Time in Office (Oct. 1960-May 2007)

Region/ Ethnic Group	No. of Heads of State/ Govt.	%	No. of Months in Office	%
North	5	41.6	197	35.1
Middle Belt	3	25	215	38.3
Igbo	1	8.3	6	0.8
Yoruba	3	25	142	25.3
Niger Delta	-	-	-	-
North	8	66.6	412	73.4
South	4	33.3	148	26.1
Total	12	100	560	100

Source: Adapted from Nwala, 1997: 153.

Just before Nigeria's transition to civil rule in 1999, the Southern elite became more dogged in their demand for power-shift, threatening that "unless the South produces the next president, it is not likely that this country will continue to be one" (Newswatch, 10 August 1998: 7-8). The tone of the agitation for power-shift forced the Northern elite to concede. Northern politicians like the former petroleum resources minister, Jubril Aminu, supported the idea of power-shift on the grounds that "a shift in power from the North to the South is compulsory" in order to bring about a lasting peace in Nigeria (Newswatch, 10 August 1998: 11). In 1999, there was a significant decision by the Northern elite not to contest the presidency so that it can be rotated to the South. Consequently, the three registered political parties nominated two Yoruba candidates to run for the presidency¹⁶. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) chose Olusegun Obasanjo while the coalition of Alliance for Democracy (AD)

¹⁵ For instance, a meeting of Igbo Elders at Enugu on July 24, 1998, resolved that "the basis on which the Igbo shall partake meaningfully in the present political transition would be the promotion of a true federation with six regions based on the current six geo-political zones in the country".

¹⁶ This was to pacify the Yoruba elite after the annulment of the June 12 election won by Moshood Abiola (a Yoruba).

and the All People's Party (APP) nominated Olu Falae. The power-shift to the South was reciprocated in 2007, when the three major parties, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), the All Nigerian People's Party (ANPP), and the Action Congress (AC), selected their candidates from the North¹⁷

Conclusion

Office distribution is a hotly contested issue in ethnically divided societies. The conflicts arising from the struggle for offices has prompted some scholars to talk about the impracticability of democracy in divided societies (see Lijphart 1977: 144-146). However, as scholars like Arend Lijphart (1977) and Donald Horowitz (1985) have noted, democracy is practicable in ethnically divided societies as far as those societies are ready to accept consociational democracy *in lieu* of majoritarian (winner-takes-all) democracy. Since the 1970s, Nigeria has been struggling with the application of consociationalism in office distribution. The efforts to develop a consociational office distribution arrangement reveal the contradictions of the Nigerian political system and ambivalence of the political actors in the country.

This article analyses the politics of office distribution in Nigeria, examining the interests, logic and circumstances that informed the conception, implementation, and continuity of the principles of federal character and zoning. It identifies the mutual fear of domination by the Northern and Southern elite and the relatively balanced power relations between the two arms of the Nigerian elite as the main reasons for the operation of parallel methods of office distribution in the country. This article discusses the relationship between the Northern and Southern elite and argues that the equilibrium of power between the two regional elite groups is based on the inability of any of the groups to dominate the entire political system – the North having supremacy over executive power while the South dominates the public service. The adoption and implementation of the principles of federal character and zoning reflect attempts by the elites to avoid ethno-regional domination and ensure stable and equitable allocation of power and offices. As this article shows, the Nigerian elite have managed to hold together the diverse groups in the country through the conscious application consociational office distribution arrangements. However, the continuity of these arrangements depends on the preservation of the existing balance of power between ethno-regional elite groups in Nigeria. A shift in the ethno-regional balance of power would lead to changes in the country's office distribution arrangement.

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