



Ethnic Elite Organisation and Political Transitions in Nigeria: Ohanaeze Ndigbo in Perspective

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Abstract

Nigeria has experienced various phases of political regime transitions. Though a lot of studies have been done on these transitions, there has been no systematic study of the roles of ethnic elite socio-political organizations in the transition processes. Where they were studied, organizations were subsumed into civil society and portrayed either as constituting an opposition to political repression or as agents of public accountability. Yet, such organizations are usually composed of ruling and opposition figures. It is against this backdrop the paper attempts to examine the role of Ohanaeze Ndigbo in the Nigeria's political transitions from 1985 to 2003.

Key words: Ethnicity; Ethnic organization; Elitism; Political transitions

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, power relations, political structures, culture and indeed social processes and norms have had cause(s) to change either in response to internal dynamics or external ones, or a combination of both. The historical conditions that gave rise to these changes, the social (centrifugal and centripetal) forces in contention and

the factors that propelled and shaped their development and objectives differ from one country to the other.

In his books, *The Third Wave*, Samuel Huntington (1991, pp. 124-130) argues that the world is now in the midst of a "Third wave" of democratic expansion. A wave of democratization is a group of transitions that tilts from non-democratic to democratic regimes but within a specified period of time. According to him, the first "Long" wave of democratization dates back to 1828 with the expansion of democratic suffrage in the United States. The second, shorter democratic wave began with the allied victory in World War II which continued until around 1962, incorporating a number of Latin American and newly independent (primarily former British) colonies.

The third wave, which began with the overthrow of Caetano dictatorship in Portugal in April 1974, became a truly global phenomenon particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, towards the end of the twentieth century, between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the world perceived a remarkable series of changes or transitions in the international system. The aggressive vacuity of the cold war was replaced with democratization. George Bush captures it thus:

'A new world order is struggling to be born... where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak' (Rourke, 1996, pp. 1-2).

The political transition programmes or processes in Nigeria particularly from the period of Ibrahim Babangida's military era (1985-1993) to 2007 were not only very rough and tortuous but also characterized by arbitrary power, intimidation, subversion of the rule of law, perversion of justice and ethnic chauvinism and jingoism. Its repressive nature has been interpreted through the ethnic prism that accuses the military elites who monopolized power as representing sectional interests. For instance, the abortion of the transition to a

third Nigerian Republic through the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election (which was claimed to have been won by Late Chief M.K.O. Abiola) by the northern dominated military regime served as an index to ethnic cleavages in relation to political transition processes in Nigeria.

The paper, therefore, attempts to examine the roles of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo, the apex Igbo socio-cultural organization in the political transitions in Nigeria from 1985 to 2003. In the light of this, it will explore the historical background to the formation of the organization, its composition, structure and objective. It will also critically examine the contradictions in the roles played by the organization in the various transitions – military and civil regimes.

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

This paper is shaped by four major concepts – Ethnicity, ethnic organization, elitism and political transition. It is, therefore, pertinent to analysis these concepts for the purposes of clarity and better understanding of the issues in question.

Ethnicity in Africa has remained a powerful and positive force in determining and influencing the affairs of the state. It is a fundamental category of social organisation which is based on membership and characterized by passionate attributes and perceptions of common historical origins, memories, aspirations, values, norms and expectations (Jones, 1971, p. 492; Chazan *et al.*, 1992, p. 106). Depending on the analytical inclination of particular authors, and on the specificities and dynamics of particular situations, ethnicity has been variously attributed to the emotional power of primordial given, the struggle for relative group worth, mass-based resource competition, elite manipulation, defective political institutions and inequitable state policies (Suberu, 1996, p. 4; Babawale, 2006, pp. 32-33).

It has been argued that the more the post-colonial state becomes weak or inactive in discharging its legitimate role, the more and stronger national identity is played down and ethnic ties and loyalty are made to provide the basic survival strategy. This is because the only mechanism left for citizens both as individual and group is to garner resources by organizing along ethnic line. It is perhaps, in view of this, Hameso (1997, p. 5) and Moritimer (1999, p. 4) hold that ethnicity emerges as an ideology of competition for increasingly scarce resources which is a feature of colonial, post-colonial borders and strangeness of the state.

Amoo (1997) points out that, the artificiality of the African state, the absence of historical continuity of the political area that constitutes the modern state, the relative brevity and the superficiality of the colonial interregnum, the misgovernment and the abuse inflicted upon the citizenry of many states, and the predatory nature of

some of these state, have all combined to continue to give ethnicity critical salience in the African polity. However, ethnicity gives rise to ethnic group which in turn gives rise to ethnic organizations or association. Ethnic groups share a measure of compulsory institutions such as kinship and religion. It can be associated with a collective identity whereby people define a sense of themselves and others through using different markers such as cultural features.

As indicated by some Nigerian sociologists, there are more than 250 ethnic groups that comprised the Nigerian state. Out of this number, there are three major ethnic groups – Hausa, Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba while others are classified as ethnic minority groups. Though Gurr (2000, p. 74) describes any ethnic group that is at risk of discriminatory treatment or collective adversity as an ‘ethnic minority’, Suberu (1996) argues that in a technical sense, every ethnic group in Nigeria is a ‘minority communal contender’ since no single group constitutes a demographic majority of the Nigerian population. According to Suberu, communal contenders are cultural distinct groups in heterogeneous societies in which no single group constitutes a demographic majority of the and where virtually all groups hold or seek a share in state power.

This brings to focus the concept of ethnic organization. Almost in all societies, various ethnic organizations are formed and individuals are meant to voluntarily join any of their interest. These organizations or associations are also associated with varying names. For example, Smock (1971) refers it to as ‘ethnic union’ while Ossaghae (1994) calls it either ethnic association or associational ethnicity. Ethnic organizations fundamentally seek to articulate and promote the interests of members of the group in competition with other groups over the determination of public policies.

Hitherto, there are numerous ethnic based organisations formed by various ethnic groups for sundry purposes. These include, the Egbe Afenifere, which has remained the dominant ethnic organization in the Western Nigeria and is being directed by eminent, and affluent Yoruba personalities, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), a group of highly visible northern emirs, former leaders, politicians and businessmen that emerged in response to the loss of political power by the North. There are other ethnic organizations popularly classified as ethnic militia groups perhaps due to their radicalism. They are essentially youth based groups formed for the purposes of championing, promoting and projecting the narrow interest of their ethnic groups. These organizations include, the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), Arewa Peoples Congress (APC), Ijaw National Congress, Niger-Delta Volunteer Force and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) (Adejumobi 2002).

The emergence and burgeoning of these organizations is probably tied to the internal contradictions, and dialectics of the Nigerian political economy. For instance,

the formation of OPC dates back to 1994 when a group of Yoruba elite decided to form a grassroots based organization to actualize the annulled mandate of M.K.O. Abiola. The group also was meant to foster Yoruba unity and to ensure that the race is emancipated from all forms of oppression and marginalization. By the same token, some of these organizations were established to serve as mobilization constituencies for political elites and government officials (Ojukwu, 2012, pp. 23-24).

The elite denotes a small, select oligarchy, or more flexible stratum of people who, for whatever reason, claim a position of superior prestige and some measure of influence over the fate of the community of which they are part of. This minority group is characterized by organizational skills, leadership abilities, knowledge and information, drive and ambition. Elites formulate policies, guide activities and decide the significant issues of government and any organization. Thus, it has been argued that elites perceive ethnic and socio-cultural organizations as an instrument to promote wealth, status and power (Leouss, 2001, p. 8). Ethnic elites take advantage of the differences created by modernization to institute ethnically based political movements with the aim of improving the economic and political well-being of their group or region. In other words, they use the benefits of the modernization to mobilize the masses to compete with the other groups for instrumental personal concerns or group benefits (Ojukwu, 2012, p. 70).

Instrumentalists contend that elites use ethnicity or ethnic symbols as instrument of achieving their parochial goals. The resources that are usually used to prosecute this include, religion and ethnic groups which form the gist of the conception of ethnicity as an ideology of inter elite competition. Osaghae (1991, pp. 48-49) posits that the elites are facilitated in this process by the marked inequalities which often exist among ethnic groups in terms of development. In view of this, Graft (1983, p. 195) points out that in competing for resources, ethnic or tribal identity and solidarity are merely used by the elite members of ethnic groups as a means of mobilizing such groups for corporate and collective action against other groups. Besides, to argue that ethnicity is elite manipulated through the instrumentalist approach may imply that the masses are ignorant and can be manipulated at will. It also undermines the social base which the elites claim to represent.

Beyond this, the concept of political transition denotes a change from one form of government to another. It can be a change from a military, dictatorial and undemocratic system of government to a civil, representative and democratic one. This entails either a grafting of new values on an extant social system or an aversion for new values and a defence of the same old. Olagunju, Jinadu and Oyovbaire (1993, p. 10) argue that transition assumes a double meaning, namely, transition from and transition to democracy. Transition from democracy suggests the

military take over of government from the civilian, while transition to democracy suggests the hand over of government to the civilian.

O'Donnel and Schmitter (1986, pp. 9-11) point out that transitions are extremely uncertain in their outcomes, especially if they have to do with transition to democracy. For instance, transition is being contested at every turn by various interest groups and individuals. This, sometimes may lead to varying election malpractices, assassination, intimidation of voters and illegal stuffing of ballot boxes. Perhaps, it is in the light of this, that, Hermet (1991, p. 255) opines that the process of transition to democracy is said to be completed only when that democracy has endeared itself with legitimate institutions and constitution.

Huntington (1991, pp. 124-126) identified three dominant modes of transition: Transformation, Replacement and Transplacement. Transformation explains how those in power in the authoritarian regime take the lead and play the decisive role in ending such a regime and perhaps, changing it to a democratic system. The classic case of transformation was in Brazil between 1974 and 1985. It was a liberation from above, regime initiated liberation or 'transition through withdrawal'. In Spain, it was a question of reformist individuals associated with the incumbent dictatorship initiating processes of political change from within the established regime.

Replacement occurs when a regime (usually a personal dictatorship) refuses to liberalize, and with time, grows weaker and is eventually deserted by its major support groups. In this case, the elite in opposition initiate the change. This kind of transition had taken place in Iran, after the overthrow of the Shah in 1979, in Nicaragua, after the overthrow of General Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship in 1979. In Greece and Argentina, it was a military defeat, their leaders, Viola and Papadopoulos respectively were both forced out of power by another group of elite within the military.

Transplacement involves a combination of joint actions. It is often a joint action of governing and opposing elites to free a nation from an authoritarian rule. The process leading to this kind of model is often characterized by incessant strikes, protests and demonstrations, on one hand, and repression, jailings, police violence, state of siege and martial law, on the other hand. The Arab revolutions of 2011 was another classical instance of transplacement. The uprisings showed that the populations of the southern Mediterranean would no longer subject themselves to unaccountable regimes that failed to treat their citizens with dignity. The revolution that characterized popular protest was an expression of values, a new passion for self-determination, driven by population seeking to regain control of their countries from the authoritarian regimes and rulers who for a long time supported some European foreign policy goals that were not beneficial to populace.

In particular, Nigeria has had about ten political transitions since after independence in 1960. These were categorized into three levels, (i) transitions from military to military; (ii) from military to civilian and (iii) from civilian to civilian. The first include, Gowon 1966-1975; Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo 1975-1979; Muhammadu Buhari, 1984-1985; Ibrahim Babangida, 1985-1993; Sanni Abacha, 1993-1998; the second include, Murtala Mohammed/Olusegun Obasanjo, 1979-1983; Abdusalaam Abubakar 1998-1999; and the third level include, Olusegun Obasanjo 1999-2003; Umaru Musa Yar'Adua/Goodluck Jonathan 2007-2011; Goodluck Jonathan 2011-. Ethnic elite organizations played vital roles in each of these transition processes. For instance, Egbe Afenifere was instrumental in the formation of the three political parties in the beginning of the Fourth Republic in 1999. These parties were, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP) and the Alliance for Democracy (AD)

From the PDP where leading lights of the Afenifere were integral to the party's constitution drafting committee, the organization (Afenifere) demanded for an assurance that the PDP would zone its presidential ticket to the south west. The same was the case in the ANPP where the group (Afenifere) played a prominent role in the party's emergence only to back out on the ground that the party was a gathering of late Sani Abacha's acolytes. This led to the formation of Alliance for Democracy (AD).

THE BIRTH AND EVOLUTION OF OHANAEZE NDIGBO

Ohanaeze Ndigbo, socio-cultural organization is argued to be a reincarnation of the proscribed or defunct Igbo State Union. The Igbo State Union was formed in 1934 in Lagos by a couple of Igbo elites essentially to advance and promote the collective interests of the Igbo. At that period, the Union was conceived as the symbol of Igbo unity and identity. It made ceaseless efforts to identify the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) with the cause of Igbo advancement and welfare. It also attempted to secure an overwhelming Igbo support for and solidarity within the party, reconciling the party's factions and making arrangements for the party's campaign rallies (Smock 1971). However, in May 1966, the Igbo State Union and some other ethnic organizations were proscribed by the Federal Military Government for far of working against the unity of Nigeria. This happened within the period the country's political temperature was high vis-à-vis the coups and counter coups that followed the first Nigeria's coup d'état that took place on 15 January, 1966.

Ohanaeze Ndigbo was founded in 1976 by a couple of Igbo elites which include, Late Sir Francis Akanu Ibiam, who also was the first chairman of the organization, Late

Justice Daddy Onyeama, Late Chief Jerome Udorji, who was the first Secretary-General, Professor J. U. Agwu, Late Dr. Michael Okpara, Late Dr. Pius Okogbo, Late Chiefs M. N. Ugochukwu and Dennis Osadabey; and Professor Ben Nwabueze. What stimulated these elites to establish the organization was the lack of centralized leadership in Igbo land particularly after the Nigerian civil war. At the end of the civil war that lasted for 30 months, the Igbo people were disorganized, traumatized, helpless, and without any effective and credible organization like the defunct Igbo State Union to champion, protect and promote the collective interest of the Igbo.

As Nwabueze (2001, p. 24) remarked: 'to lift ourselves from our present marginalized position and realize our group interest in the fierce competition and struggle among the antagonistic ethnic nationalities comprised in Nigeria imperatively requires an effective, credible organization, without this, we will remain rudderless, forever drifting aimlessly with no sense of purpose or direction. In such an organization, lies our only hope of salvaging ourselves from the abyss into which we have sunk. Our defeat in the civil war and the consequent loss of much of our possessions certainly has something to do with it. But with an organization of this nature, the defeat and loss can be made good'.

It is germane, at this juncture, to explain the term 'Ohanaeze'. Oha-na-eze is a unity of two poles: 'Oha' and 'Eze'. In a very loose sense, 'Oha' refers to all, public, while 'Eze' refers simply to a king or ruler. But, in its strict and broad sense, 'Oha' denotes the village or General Assembly, an all-purpose body. The 'Eze' represents the council of Elders (Ndichie). Both 'Oha' and 'Eze' are not opposed to each other, neither, they are brought into a relationship of mutuality and functional co-existence. In this context, General Assembly (Ohanaeze) is the highest organ of policy-making and legislation. The Assembly activities and decisions are supreme and binding. It consists of all adults male and female, and decisions are by consensus (Ojukwu, 2012, p. 129).

In Article 2:3 of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo constitution, the objectives of the organization include, to serve as a focal point of reference, of direction and of collective leadership in matters affecting the interest, solidarity and general welfare of the Igbo; to promote, develop and advance Igbo language and culture, to promote honour, dignity and self respect among Ndigbo and encourage their achievement orientation in various aspects of life, to assist and encourage the formation of Igbo self-help, mutual assistance and improvement organizations wherever Ndigbo may reside and to promote peaceful co-existence with other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. The membership of the organization is open to all adult Igbo of Igbo parentage.

The organization in line with its constitution Article 4:4 is organized at four levels: (i) Town Unions and affiliate organizations (ii) Local Government area Ohanaeze

(iii) State Ohanaeze and (iv) National Ohanaeze. The structure also contains Ohanaeze Wings (popular organs) as indicated in Article 23: 20 of its constitution. These include, Women, Youth, Transporters, Traders. It also has provision for Standing Committees as clearly indicated in Article 24: 21 of its constitution. These committees include, Planning and Strategy Committee, Outreach Committee, Welfare Committee, Research, Documentation and Publication Committee, Finance Committee and Disciplinary and Conflict Resolution Committee.

Ohanaeze Ndigbo from its inception in 1976 to 2012 has had a total of seven successive leadership: Dr. Francis Akanu Ibiam 1976-1978; Chief Mathias Ugochukwu 1979-1983; Professor Ben Nwabueze 1984-2000; Justice Eze Ozobu (retired) 2001-2—3; Professor Joe Irukwa 2004-2006; Dr. Dozie Ikedife 2006-2008 and Ambassador Ralph Uwachue 2008-date. Interestingly, these periods were characterized by internal rivalries, bickering, factionalism and litigation. They are also a pointer to the fact that centralized leadership has been a protracted problem in Igbo society perhaps as a result of the society's bending reputation for republicanism which mainly emphasizes independent-mindedness, unencumbered self liberty. As Achebe (1983, p. 48) puts it: the real problem with the Igbo since independence is precisely the absence of the kind of central leadership which their competitors presume for them. This lack has left them open to self-seeking, opportunistic leaders who offered them no help at all in coping with a new Nigeria in which individual progress would not longer depend on the rules set by a fairly impartial colonial empire.

From our studies, Ohanaeze Ndigbo socio-cultural organization has been able to employ various strategies in order to realize its desired objectives. Some of the organizational strategies include, Alliance with other ethnic groups and organization, fraternizing with the presidency, relationship with south governors, and the use of press release. For instance, Ohanaeze saw the need for the entire old Eastern Region to awaken and strengthen the ancient bonds of goodwill and friendship that existed between the people of Southeast and South-South geopolitical zones prior to the infusion of ethnic politics in the Nigerian politics in 1952 (Nnoli 1978). In view of this, in 2007, the Southeast and South-South leaders held a one-day partnership conference in Owerri, Imo State, with a resolve to work together to produce the country's president in 2007 (Irukwa, 2007).

Again, in recognition of the fact that who gets what, when and how in the Nigerian state is largely determined by the Presidency (the seat of power), the Ohanaeze leadership believed that fraternizing and establishing good relationship with the president of the country and his administration might go a long way to make the presidency support the Igbo position on vital national issues. For example, in May 2004, the President General of Ohanaeze Professor Joe Irukwa led a delegation that

was composed of Igbo professionals, eminent traditional rulers to pay a visit to Mr. President, Olusegun Obasanjo. The group used the opportunity to highlight vital issues of Igbo interest for the president's consideration. This include, among others, power shift or sharing (Irukwa, 2007).

OHANAEZE'S ROLE IN NIGERIA'S POLITICAL TRANSITIONS 1985-2003

General Ibrahim Babangida military regime began in August 1985. In January 1986, he announced his plan to return the country to civilian rule by 1990. The actual time the transition programme commenced was in April 1989 when ban on political activities was lifted and the political class was allowed to form political associations and to seek registration as political parties. During this period, Ohanaeze Ndigbo made some robust contributions. For instance, in the gubernatorial elections held in December, 1991, Ohanaeze leadership played vital roles that finally produced the four Southeast governors, Dr. Okwesilieze Nwodo for Enugu State, Dr. Chukwuemeka Ezeife for Anambra state, Dr. Evans Enwerem for Imo state and Dr. Ogbonnaya Onu for Abia State. These personalities were (and still are) key members of Ohanaeze leadership.

In the presidential election held on June 12, 1993, Ohanaeze Ndigbo leadership mobilized and sensitized the Igbo to vote massively for Chief M.K.O. Abiola. Indeed, the South-east states were counted among the 19 of 30 states that the National Electoral Commission (NEC) announced that Abiola won (Wright, 2006, p. 673). In the midst of this, a group known as Association for Better Nigeria (ABN), led by Chief Arthur Nzeribe, a strong member of Ohanaeze leadership filed a suit at Abuja High Court against the June 12 election. The Association succeeded with the help of the military government in power to truncate the transition programme. Apart from ABN's support for the elongation of Babangida's administration, the Association also wanted to prove Abiola wrong that he would succeed in becoming the President of Nigeria without the contributions of the Igbo (Elesho & Ogunaike, 2000, p. 18).

Similarly, it was claimed that Dim Odumegwu Ojukwu and Uche Chukwumerije were used to further condemn the June 12 election. While Ojukwu canvassed Igbo support for the annulment on the ground that the Yorubas did not support the Igbos during the Nigerian civil war, Chukwumerije, a key member of Ohanaeze leadership and the then secretary (minister) for Information in Babangida's government argued that the election in question was annulled because of various factors – judicial indiscipline, incredibility of the judicial process, confusion on election day and lack of legitimacy of the presidential election (Chikendu & Kalu, 1996, p. 81). It was at this point that the Northern elite felt that the

annulment of June 12 election could be compared with the coup of 1983 which led to the removal of Alhaji Shehu Shagari from office. Hence, the government should hand over power back to Shagari if June 12 were to be revisited.

Again, Omo Omoruyi accused Ben Nwabueze, a chieftain of Ohanaeze, of being one of the lawyers that encouraged Babangida to annul the elections on the ground that he (Babangida) would be given strong legal backing. Omoruyi maintained that the legal opinion was a betrayal of the transitional project and democratic rights of Abiola and the Yoruba race and was capable of increasing the dislike of the Igbos by the Yorubas (Irukwu, 2007, pp. 264-65). In contrast, Irukwu (2007, pp. 264-265) argued that the democratization process did not derail because of any intervention by some members of Ohanaeze. It rather derailed or failed because those in power wanted it to be derailed and they stated their reasons for the derailment. He put it poignantly thus:

Nigerians know all those responsible for the annulment of the June 12 elections and the responsibility should be placed squarely where it rightly belongs instead of attempting to find some scapegoats amongst the Igbos thereby attributing their action to some kind of organised Igbo action resulting in the so-called Yoruba-Igbo feud. Though some Igbos may have played some negative and popularly unacceptable roles in the transition process, they seem to have acted on their own probably as friends of General Babangida, but certainly not on account of any organised Igbo action designed to support the annulment of the June 12 elections. This is simply because millions of Igbos voted for Abiola and supported him to the end in order to demonstrate their commitment to the democratic process.

Besides, Nwabueze made some positive contributions toward the June 12 election. He was not only the secretary (Minister) for Education under Babangida's regime, but also the Executive Secretary of Ohanaeze leadership during that period. Nwabueze pointed out, that, legally, the annulment was 'unassailable and perfectly valid in law'. Perhaps, it was in view of this, nobody challenged the legal basis of the decision in spite of all the raised reactions to the annulment. It also suggests that the objections to the annulment were basically political. Nwabueze also challenged government's decision to allow the election to go on despite its knowledge of breaches in the process, particularly when it had laid precedence in the cancellation of the presidential primaries of 1992 (Shagaya, 2003, p. 216).

During the Sanni Abacha regime, Ohanaeze Ndigbo socio-cultural organisation played some significant roles. For example, the organization was one of the vanguards of genuine transition to civil rule, and one of the groups that strongly advocated for the need to convene a National Constitutional conference (NCC). The purpose was to deliberate extensively on the political structure of the Nigerian state; to work out modalities for ensuring good governance. In view of this, on 8 February, 1994, the Igbo speaking people of Nigeria comprising the South-

east, part of Delta and Rivers states under the aegis of Ohanaeze Ndigbo sent a memorandum to the NCC. The issues expressed in the memorandum include, type of conference (sovereign or constitutional); time table for the conference; restructuring the Nigerian polity, revenue generation and sharing formula.

In the NCC, the Ohanaeze group was led by Dr. Alex Ekwueme and Professor Ben Nwabueze. The main issue the organization articulated was the zoning system and rotation of political offices particularly the presidency which was considered as a mechanism to break the perceived monopoly of the centre by the North. Ohanaeze argued that true nationhood in a multiethnic and multilingual society is impossible without fostering a sense of belonging among all the units. In its proposal, six geopolitical zones were proposed by Ekwueme – Northeast, North west, North central, Southeast, Southwest and South-south (Onwudiwe 2004: 273-74).

Understandably, Ekwueme's six zonal structure was viewed to be a strategy for the Igbo to be able to produce a president in the nearest future after the political and economic setback of the civil war. It was probably the same reason that the Yoruba embraced the formula as the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election which Abiola won was still fresh in their memory. Relatedly, Ohanaeze delegates in the NCC articulated the problem of the southern minority group. It called for the entrenchment of a true federalism that would give recognition to the rights of states to exploit and develop their resource potentialities, such that state is permitted to keep about 50 percent of the revenue derived from its territory. Arising from this, the six zones system was used as a guide for the creation of new states in 1996 by the Abacha administration.

The Ohanaeze Ndigbo's role under Sanni Abacha government was also visible in the 'All Politicians Summit' that was held on 14 December 1996 in Lagos. The essence of the summit was appraise Abacha's transition programme that hinged on 'stage by stage' hand-over process. In the summit, Ohanaeze was represented by Alex Ekwueme, Chukwuemeka Ezeife and Edwin Ume-Ezeoke. The summit argued that for the transition process to be completed successfully, the implementation process should be carried out as a single package. This implied that irrespective of whatever date the military had decided upon for the final disengagement from politics, all elections for various levels should take place within a specific period (Ekwueme 2005).

Though, the summit also attracted some other groups perceived to be pro-Abacha government, it was able to set up a 21-member committee led by Alex Ekwueme to meet with the military in order to arrange for their orderly exit. Ekwueme captured the situation in thus manner:

Today, Nigeria stands at the cross roads of history. Nigeria, hitherto held in high esteem, draws sanctions from the commonwealth, the European Union and now the United Nations.

This is unprecedented. It threatens our very existence. Nigeria must be restored immediately to democracy as that is the only way out of the current bashing by the international community. Nigerians as a people are entitled as a right to democracy (Ekwueme, 2005).

It suffices to note, that the 'ALL politicians summit' was later metamorphosed to Institute for Civil Society (ICS) from whose platform the group of 34 eminent politicians later known as G34 wrote to General Abacha warning him not to succeed himself. Alex Ekwueme was both the chairman of the ICS and that of the G.34. The G.34 was subsequently transformed to the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Ekwueme put it thus:

In December 1995 we held a very successful "All politicians summit" at Eko Hotel, Victoria Island, Lagos which I had the privilege to chair. I describe the summit as very successful notwithstanding its disruption by agents of the government. It was obvious that General Abacha was in no hurry to disengage. We then formed the institute of civil society, which again I had the privilege to chair, one of whose objectives was to sensitize the Nigerian public on the need for an early return to democratic ethos as we considered military rule which is imposed on us, a vicious form of colonialism. It eventually materialized that Abacha set October 1, 1998 as the date for the transition from military to civilian government. But it was soon clear, judging by the decisions of all the five registered political parties to nominate him as the sole presidential candidate... some of us did not think that this was the right thing for Nigeria and at a meeting of the G.34 in April 1998, we decided to advise Abacha by a well considered memorandum not to countenance the prompting by sycophants that he should succeed himself. Within two months of the G.34 memorandum, Abacha was dead and so the question of self-succession also died a natural death.

It is also imperative to point out that during the Abacha regime, some members of Ohanaeze leadership contributed in some measures in pushing for Abacha's self-succession. To be sure, the roles played by Arthur Eze and Arthur Nzeribe were striking. The duo planned and led a retinue of about fifty Igbo leaders (most of whom were Ohanaeze chieftains) to Aso Rock with a mission to persuade Abacha to contest for the presidency. This was under the guise that the visit was to thank Abacha for the befitting and colourful state burial his government accorded late Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe who incidentally was the only patrian Ohanaeze Ndigbo has ever had. The duo took advantage of that mission (to the chagrin of Ohanaeze leadership) to prosecute their narrow political interest (Bakoji and Nzenwa 1997; Shagaya 2003).

According to Eze Ozobu and Nwabueze, the organization never supported Abacha in his bid to be the president of Nigeria. Nwabueze remarked thus:

We made it very clear to Abacha that we are not supporting his self-succession plan at all and so Ohanaeze was not in his good book because of the position we have taken". No doubt some members of Ohanaeze leadership are sycophants. They are people who want to use that medium project themselves for one political position or the other. The common Igbo man knows what Abacha is doing. If you go to the common Igbo, they do not need these people to tell them what to do. They are not even close to the grassroots and they have never spoken for the Igbo

people before, rather they have been speaking for themselves.

The sudden and mysterious death of General Abacha triggered the last transition that eventually ushered in the Fourth Republic. At that point, General Abdulsalam Abubakar took over the helm of power on June 8, 1998. On assumption of office, he set anew agenda for transition to democracy and also embarked on reconciliation and consultations with various interest groups and organizations, asking for suggestions and demands on the system.

In response to this request, Ohanaeze Ndigbo was one of the other interest groups that made demands. These include promulgation and publication of the 1995 constitution, dissolution of the five political parties, dissolution and reconstitution of transition agencies, release of all political detainees. For instance, the organization demanded that Abdulsalam government should action the national agreements reached by the representatives of the various interest groups at the 1995 Constitutional Conference. The agreement and recommendations, include, the rotation of the presidency and proportional representation at all levels of governance. It also requested that the five political parties that were formed in Abacha's regime be proscribed. The parties were United Nigeria Congress Party (UNCP), Congress for National Consensus (CNC), National Conscience Party of Nigeria (NCPN), Democratic Party of Nigeria (DPN) and Grassroot Democratic Movement (GDM). The organization claimed that these parties did not represent the interest of their members as well as the entire Nigerian population (Ohanaeze Ndigbo press briefing June 10, 1998).

The argument was that the manner at which Abacha's government manipulated these parties made a lot of people to lose confidence both in the parties and the transition programme. Though, it is really difficult to form political parties that would reflect the interests of every citizen in the society. Abdulsalam government succumbed to the pressure generated by the organization and civil society by dissolving the political parties for what it called lack of credibility (Ojudu 1998: 14-15; Abubakar 1998: 19-22).

Between 1999 and 2001 the Ohanaeze Ndigbo socio-cultural organization made remarkable contributions. It was one of the organized groups that made presentations to the Human Rights Investigation Commission (HRIC) constituted by Olusegun Obasanjo's administration in 2001. The object of the Commission was to enable individuals, groups and organizations to openly express their bottled-up grievances which perhaps could not be expressed openly during the repressive years of military rule. It was believed that would go a long way to promote justice and reconciliation in the management of the nation's affairs particularly in relation to transition processes.

The leadership of Ohanaeze Ndigbo submitted a detailed memorandum titled: *The violation of Human and Civil Rights of Ndigbo in Nigeria, 1966-1999 to the Commission in Enugu on 25 April 2001 and in Abuja on 25 and 26 July 2001*. The memorandum provided an opportunity to revisit and to refocus the attention of the Nigerian public and the international community on the atrocities and injustices perpetrated against the Igbo nation in Nigeria.

Again, the organization was an integral part of the group called, 'The Patriots' that sponsored the Referendum Bill which was prepared and sent to president Obasanjo and the National Assembly in 2001. The leader of 'The Patriots' was Chief Rotimi Williams, and the group was composed of Ohanaeze, Afenifere and the Middle Belt Forum. 'The Patriots' pointedly told Obasanjo that he had failed and what the nation needed was "a leader who is a fence-mender, who will build and sustain bridges of understanding, promote accommodation across ethnic, religious, generational and other divides" (Obineche and Agwu 2008). The Referendum Bill was a bill for an act to make provision for convening national conference of the peoples of Nigeria for purposes of preparing a constitution for consideration and adoption by the peoples of Nigeria at a referendum. As Rotimi Williams put it:

The major objective of 'The Patriots' proposal is to find a solution to the problem of unity in Nigeria because we are fully conscious of the fact that unity is lacking. In addition, we believe that unless the problem of unity was addressed, we were going along the road which will lead to the break-up and the disintegration of the country (Okocha, 2001).

From 2002 to 2007, Ohanaeze's clamour to produce the president of Nigeria became central to the group's political configuration. As Onuoha observed:

Although issues like citizenship rights, exclusion and marginalization, both in political and economic terms, all find expression under the Igbo question in Nigeria. The Igbo presidency project seems to have become a cardinal negotiating point in the Igbo quest for reinventing Nigeria. This assumption forms the basis of the tripod theory which holds that stability can only be achieved in the Nigerian federation when there is a balance between the three major ethnic groups. But the inability of the Ohanaeze Ndigbo and the entire Igbo leadership to throw up a formidable presidential candidate underscores the disarray in Igboland

Ben Nwabueze (2002: 25) presented the organisation's resolve to produce the Nigerian president in 2003 as thus: we reaffirm our determination to produce the next Nigerian president. 'We also affirmatively declare that the objective remains non-negotiable and that no political bargain, arrangement with any group or political party is acceptable except on the basis of that objectives'.

Buttressing this, Ojukwu (cited in Adegbamigbe 2002: 22) remarked:

Igbo presidency project in 2003 is no more a secret. Let us tell our friends from Arewa and Afenifere that Igbo president in 2003 is no more a clandestine issue, but an open matter because it is our turn to rule Nigeria. Ndigbo remain an integral part of Nigeria and would not be intimidated into taking a back seat or being relegated in any form.

Orji Uzor Kalu (2002, p. 25) on his part, submitted that Ndigbo should remain steadfast in ensuring that the presidency shifted to the Igbo in 2003. He put it succinctly thus:

All those who are hustling to be campaign manager and running mates to Hausa-Fulani and Yoruba presidential candidates should forget the idea. Do not make any mistake about it, if the Igbo fail to produce the president in 2003, then, we will be sentenced to political wilderness for the next 20 years. It is, therefore, obvious that 2003 is our date with destiny. Our children and grand children will not forgive us if we fail to claim the opportunity.

Interestingly, within the Ohanaeze leadership some members were in doubt as to the possibility of realizing such a goal. The doubt was not premised on the fact that Ndigbo cannot produce a formidable candidate who would be able to steer the ship of the Nigerian state but rather on the fact that Igbo elites find it difficult to unite or remain cohesive in political matters. As Nzeribe argued, an Igbo could not be president of Nigeria in 2003 and those agitating for it were being deceitful. There was nothing concrete on ground to show that the Igbo were serious about that project. Though the talks about it had been going on since 1999, the seriousness was not there in terms of presenting a consensus candidate from the zone (Nzeribe, 2002).

Uwazuruike, (cited in Insider Weekly 2004, p. 28) the founder and leader of MASSOB held that the Igbo will never be allowed to rule Nigeria even if they waited for another 40 years. The reason is that those Igbo elite that ought to have championed the cause of the Igbo presidency have been settled with insignificant positions in the government hence do not have the clout to challenge their political bosses. It was in view of this, MASSOB called on the Igbo not to participate in the 2003 presidential election. The group claimed that no matter the candidates the Igbo may nominate, the elections will always be rigged by the people who hate the Igbo.

In a related manner, Okechukwu Ibeanu in our interview with him, stressed that the Igbo concern and worry should not be tied to Igbo presidency since there is nothing like Yoruba presidency or Hausa-Fulani presidency. The concern rather should be on why it has proven difficult for an Igbo man to emerge as a consensus nominated presidential candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) which is the current ruling political party in the country. He argued that the characters of the Igbos in the PDP are their greatest undoing. Thus, Igbo politicians need to become better political analysts in order to be able to strike better political deals with the other ethnic groups in the country. Their display of

mediocrity and naivety in politics since after the civil war gives them (Igbo elites) out two cheaply.

Amidst the circumstance, in 2002, preparatory to the 2003 elections, over ten presidential aspirants of Igbo extraction emerged from different political parties. They include Senators Ike Nwachukwu, Chuba Okadigbo and Jim Nwobodo; Dr. Pat Utomi, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, chief Olisa Agbakoba, Dr. Ogbonnaya Onu, Chief Rochas Okorocho, Dm Chukwuemeka Ojukwu. In view of this, Nwabueze at an interview with the researcher argued: "it is not possible for the Igbo to produce only one candidate and there is no way Ohanaeze would have done that hitch-free. I do not believe you can force Ndigbo to produce only one candidate. It is not possible even among the Yorubas or the Northerners. Ohanaeze cannot persuade all political presidential aspirants to step down for one person. The only thing is that if we can get Nigerians accept rotation and to zone the thing to us, it is only then it is possible one of the aspirants will win".

CONCLUSION

The paper attempted to examine the salience of ethnic elite organizations, particularly, Ohanaeze Ndigbo socio-cultural organization in political transitions in Nigeria. It explored how the organization has played a central role in politics of distribution in Nigeria's transition. Its role reflects and unravels the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in viewing ethnic organizations as pressure groups especially as standing in opposition to the state or holding the state to account.

The study also reveals that some of the elites that comprised the leadership of the organization could not suppress narrow interests for the common interest of the Igbo. The organization was rather used by these elites to gain and consolidate their political influence. This was largely why the group was unable to select a consensus Igbo presidential aspirant in the 2003 and 2007 elections.

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