

# Fortunate Misfortunate? Death and the Dynamics of Political Succession in Nigeria

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## Abstract

This paper is an exploratory inquiry into the strategic implications of death-engendered political succession in Nigeria. This is against the backdrop of the rising fatality involving political incumbents which necessitates abrupt change in political tenure-ship. By way of qualitative discursive analysis, predicated on secondary sources, the paper posits that death-engendered political succession holds strategic implications for 'redistributive politics' in the context of deep-rooted political cleavages that characterize the Nigerian federation. In this regard, the demise of a political incumbent often occasions dramatic 'power shift' that alters the pattern of political succession.

**Keywords:** Political succession, power shift, distributive politics, political incumbent, death.

## 1. Introduction

The possibility of dying in power is one of the glaring existential realities that confront political tenure-ship in the world. This is an unpalatable fact that all political incumbents must do well to appreciate. Even in the most absolute political regime, the eventuality of incumbent's death is clearly acknowledged as the ultimate determinant of regime prospects and survival. Faced with death, the sense of virtual immanency of the absolute ruler in this context comes to naught.

The continuities and changes that characterize political succession in political systems of the world are determined by a combination of factors, prominent among which is human frailty - ageing and death (Jinadu, 2008). With reference to authoritarian political systems, Jinadu opines:

...no matter for how long political power is monopolized by a single, 'messianic' leader, who patronizingly or paternalistically harps on his or her indispensability the reality is that, sooner or later, the ineluctable dynamics of the process of economic and socio-political change and the manifestations of human frailty, like ageing and death will unfold themselves to complicate the leader's political succession calculations, and show that he/she is fighting against time: political succession is merely delayed, and will remain a constant item on the political agenda (2008:6).

The significance of death as a factor in political succession cannot be over-emphasized. Even in democracies, with constitutionally mediated and moderated political tenure-ship arrangements, the demise of political incumbent have often engendered fundamental outcomes that defy conventional permutations of political succession. In Africa, there are three recent prominent occurrences that point to this direction. In 2010, Nigeria lost a serving president, Alhaji Umar Musa Yar'adua following a protracted ailment (Adeniyi, 2011). This inevitably led to the inauguration of his vice, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan as the substantive president. In May 2012, Malawian president Bingu wa Mutharika, died in power as a result of health attack. He was succeeded by his vice, Madam Joyce Banda. In a rather dramatic quick succession, Ghanaian President Atta John Mills also died in July, 2012 as a result of a cancer-related medical condition (*Time* July, 2012: cover).

In Nigeria, which, by design, is the focus of this paper, two serving state governors have died in power since 2009, necessitating thereby an abrupt 'power shift' in the 'political equations' of their respective states. There is also a cognate instance whereby a serving governor has 'lost power', de facto, as a result of a fatal air mishap that rendered him partially incapacitated and therefore unfit to govern (*Weekly Trust* October 26, 2013:1). This significance of the foregoing events does not lie, per se, on the pattern of political succession they entail; they hold much deeper implications for the Nigeria-style redistributive politics based on sectionalism and minority/majority sentiments. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the phenomenon of death-induced political succession in Nigeria with a view to situating its strategic political utility and implications.

## 2. Conceptualizing Political Succession

The notion of political succession has been generally understood in two fundamental senses (Jinadu, 2008:5). In the first sense, it refers to "the transfer of political power from one person, group (e.g. political party, ethnic, religious, linguistic group), government or regime to another" (Jinadu, 2008:5). In this sense, political succession denotes ascension to power by a person or a group of persons. The second conception of political

succession refers to the processes and procedures of political transition, whereby power is transferred from one government, regime, or political order to another (Calvert 1987:1).

Political succession, therefore, refers to how power is ascended and transferred in a polity. This is based on a number of constitutional or arbitrary rules and procedures, depending on whether the polity is democratically or autocratically oriented. In a democratic polity, the process and procedures of political succession are regulated by the constitution and adjunct statutory instruments, such as the electoral law. In non-democratic political systems, political succession is a matter of 'might is right'. In this regard, violent revolutions, coup d'états and other relevant forms of organized violence readily become indispensable in wresting power, or seeking transfer of power.

As implied in the foregoing, political succession in democracies is ordered, procedural and constitutionally moderated. This is usually affected through civil procedures such as elections, referenda, and reforms. Apart from these established procedures, political succession can also be necessitated by the occurrence of natural or man-made fatality, leading to either the death or incapacitation of the political incumbent. This circumstance compels an 'emergency' political succession designed to fill the vacuum in political leadership.

### 3. The Operational Context of Politics of Succession in Nigeria

Political succession is a critical issue in Nigeria (Onwudiwe, 2006). This is largely because of the high premium and stakes associated with politics in the country (Joseph, 1991; Iyayi, 2004; Uduma, 2013). This scenario has been complicated by Nigeria's peculiar multi-faceted diversity, which tends to engender politics of primordialism and sectionalism (Nzekwe, 2005; Ngare, 2012; Uduma, 2013).

The character of the political elites who ride on ethno-regional and religious structures to ascend and sustain power is a critical issue in this direction (Okoli, 2009). Besides, the desperation for power among the political elite in Nigeria vitiates the possibility of politics of civility and rule of law. The gives rise to a perplexing political ambience wherein power is sought by all means and at all hazards. As brilliantly observed by Isah:

Though politics generally involves intrigue, it is particularly intrigue-ridden in Nigeria due to the virtual absence of rule of law, which makes power struggle often desperate. Aspirants and candidates jostling for power go to any length to get it, and those who manage it become even more desperate in order to retain it for as long as possible and at any cost. And even when they have to relinquish it, they still want to be succeeded by their chosen candidates to ensure the continuation of business as usual (2012: para 1).

The intense, irrational struggle for political power in Nigeria is an existential imperative. The state power guarantees all prospects of secure and sustainable livelihood. Hence, access to state power means access to grandiose fortune. Conversely, lack of access to state power means lack of basic welfare – utter misery. The prerequisites of power in Nigeria are so immense that a man of politics literally passes for a man of riches. A corollary of this is the existence of bogus political institutions with copious 'larger than thou' personae and essence. In this regard, the Nigerian presidency has been likened to 'a storehouse of value' that avails inestimable power and resources. To this effect, Onwudiwe poignantly cautions:

When we leave this kind of resources in the hand of one man or women, we create an office to die for, an imperial presidency that might call for loyalty more urgently than merit in public service. In the face of such power in the hands of one man, few of us will behave differently and many of us in that position might seek self-succession (2006: para 11).

The point being underscored in the foregoing is that the peculiar character of politics as well as the structure of political economy in Nigeria affects political succession, albeit negatively. In essence, political succession in Nigeria has largely mirrored the general complexion of politicking in that context. Overall, political succession in Nigeria has, in the main, been characterized by the following untoward tendencies:

- i. Abrupt violent changes exemplified in military coups and counter-coups
- ii. Failed and/or inconclusive democratic transitions which have ended in national crises (e.g. The June 12, 1993 crisis)
- iii. Irregular, controversial electioneering experiences that are bereft of democratic essence, leading often to electoral violence and crisis
- iv. 'Sight-tight syndrome' and/or tenure elongation/regime perpetuation drive by the political incumbents
- v. Political exclusion in the fashion of domination and near monopolization of national leadership by one section of the country, leading to the clamour of power shift and consociational federalism, etc.

In the light of the afore-mentioned, political succession in Nigeria has become a thorny issue, manifesting all forms of excesses and anomalies. In their desperation for power, or quest "to change the political equation in their favour" (Isah, 2012: para. 2), the Nigerian political elites would stop at nothing toward pursuing their selfish political ends. In this regard, political opposition becomes so crude and deadly that it can as well entreat to goodness for the death of the incumbent so as to wrest power. And if, per chance, the incumbent dies

in the process, the opposition and its followership gratify themselves with utmost sense of partisan gladness and fulfillment.

#### 4. Death-Engendered Political Succession in Nigeria: An Overview

Dying in office as it relates to executive political incumbents is becoming a common trait of political leadership in Nigeria. Since independence, all the deceased heads of state or presidents in Nigeria died while still in office (Eze, Ugochukwu and Nzegwu, 2010). They include sir Alhaji, Ahmadu Bello (1960-1966), General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi (January 1966-July 1966), General Murtala Mohammed (1975-1976), General Sani Abacha (1993-1998), Alhaji Umar Musa Yar'adua (2007-2010). The bulk of these leaders died as a result of political assassination while the rest died following different cases of ill-health. Table 1 hereunder shares some insights in this regard.

**Table 1: Causes of Death among Nigerian Former Leaders**

Leader	Cause of Death
Alhaji, Ahmadu Bello (1960-1966)	Coup-motivated assassination
General J.T.U. Aguiyi Ironsi (January 1966-july 1966)	Coup-related assassination
General Murtala Mohammed (1975-1976)	Coup-motivated assassination
General Sani Abacha (1993-1998)	Died of a controversial ailment associated with cardiac arrest
Alhaji Umar Musa Yar'adua (2007-2010)	Died of a heart-related medical condition called pericarditis

**Source:** Authors

Since the advent of the current democratic administration in Nigeria (1999-present), Nigeria has witnessed dramatic changes in national and state levels of political leadership as a result of death of the political incumbents. Cases in point are described in Table 2 showing is hereunder.

**Table 2: Prominent Nigerian Leaders Who Died in Office (1998-2012)**

Incumbent	Cause of Death	Date of death	Successor
General Sani Abacha (1943-1998); was Nigeria's head of state from 1993-1998; was a Kanuri Muslim from Kano State in Northern Nigeria	Controversially held to have died of cardiac arrest or complications relating to heart dysfunctioning or poisoning	June 8, 1998	General Abdulsalami Abubakar who led a transition to civil rule that culminated in the emergence of Olusegun Obasanjo as the elected president in 1999
Alhaji Umar Musa Yar'adua (1951-2010); was Nigeria's president from 2007-2010; was a Hausa/Fulani Muslim from Katsina State in Northern Nigeria	Heart-related condition called pericarditis	May 5, 2010	Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, an Ijaw-man from Bayelsa state of the Niger Delta in South-South Nigeria
Governor Patrick Yakowa (1948-2012); was the governor of Kaduna State from 2010-2012; was a southern Kaduna Christian	Helicopter crash	December 15, 2012	Alhaji Mukhtar Ramalan Yero, an Hausa/Fulani Muslim from the northern region of the state
Senator Mamman Bello Ali (1958-2009); was the governor of Yobe State from 2007-2009; was from Yobe South Senatorial District	Complications of liver problem called leukemia	January 27, 2009	Alhaji Ibrahim Geidam, a politician from the Yobe North Senatorial District

**Source:** compiled by Authors

As could be observed from Table 2, the death of these political incumbent has been associated with unexpected and abrupt changes, "which also considerably changed the political equation to the detriment of some and the benefit of some others" (Isah, 2012: para 5). Of all the instances highlighted in Table 2, the case Kaduna state typically stand out as the most intriguing. As observed by Isah:

Interestingly enough, late Mr. Patrick Yakowa, former Kaduna state governor, who has recently lost his life in an aviation accident, had benefitted on two major occasions from such death incidents; the first of which was when he first rose to the position of the deputy governor in the wake of the sudden death of the former Kaduna state deputy governor Mr. Steven Shekari in 2005, only to emerge as governor following the death of former President Yar'adua, when his successor – president Jonathan – appointed the then Kaduna State governor, Alhaji Namadi Sambo, as vice president (2012: para. 5).

In addition to the afore-stated cases of 'emergency' exiting and ascension of power, the incident in Taraba state is worth a mention. Following an aviation mishap on October 25, 2012 which rendered governor Danbaba Suntai partially incapacitated, the deputy governor of the state has been empowered to perform the role of 'acting governor' in order to ensure that there is no vacuum in the state's machinery of statecraft. The situation in Taraba state has since been a subject of politicization in the state so sharply divided along ethnic, religious and geo-political lines.

### **5. Death-Engendered Political Succession in Nigeria: Strategic implications**

The death of the political incumbent in Nigeria has been reacted to in two distinctive ways, depending on how the populace perceives of the integrity and legacies of the deceased leader. If the deceased had endeared himself to the people by dint of lofty leadership deeds and achievements, he would be so passionately mourned and fondly remembered for good. But if the deceased had alienated himself from the people as most politicians in Nigeria tend to conduct themselves in power, the tendency is that people would 'celebrate' his exit. This is usually the case when the deceased had been perceptibly infamous by popular reckoning. A case in point is the demise of General Sani Abacha, which was so lavishly celebrated by most Nigerians, particularly people from the southern part of the country (Nzekwe, 2005; Isah, 2012).

Beyond the impressive and expressive sentiments of shared love and hate, the exit of the political incumbent in the event of death holds immense strategic values and implications for the political prospects and future of the people. In Nigeria, one of the strategic significance of such an occurrence is its queer revolutionary value. This implies the capacity of the death of a political incumbent to bring about fundamental changes or alterations in the socio-political architecture of society. For instance, the death in power of General Abacha in 1998 marked a radical departure from the *status-quo*. Hitherto, General Abacha had craftily designed and perfected a self-succession stratagem by which he wished to return himself to power as an 'elected' civilian president. In his peculiar political machination, Abacha had hoodwinked virtually all relevant political forces into buying into his grand design. A few dissenting voices left were intimidated into utter acquiescence or annihilation. The sudden demise of Abacha in June, 1998 providentially turned the table and set the pace for the pro-democratic currents that culminated in the 1998/1999 transition to civil rule (Nzekwe, 2005; Ngare, 2012).

In addition to its queer revolutionary value, death of the political incumbent in Nigeria has served purpose of redistributive politics in the context of the abiding political cleavages that define Nigerian federalism. The death of Alhaji Umaru Musa Yar'adua in 2010 led to the ascension of Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan to power. The significance of this development is historic. For the first time in Nigeria's long-standing national history, a man from the so-called minority ethnic nationalities had the privilege of assuming the position of president of Nigeria. Hitherto, the Nigerian Presidency had been widely perceived as an exclusive reserve for the ethnic majors – the Hausa/Fulani, the Yoruba, and the Igbo. Remarkably, therefore, the exit of Alhaji Musa Yar'adua occasioned a historic 'power shift' that could have hardly been achieved through a revolution or reform.

Significantly, death-induced political succession in Nigeria has so far favoured the ethnic or sectional minorities. In the case of the ascension of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, the attendant 'political equation' favours the people of the South-South geo-political zone in general and the Ijaw ethnic nationality in particular. These groups have been agitating or political and fiscal equity within the Nigerian federation (Azaiki, 2006). In the case of the Kaduna state, the emergence of the southern Kaduna man, Patrick Yakowa, as a governor was a remarkable development, which was only made possible by the death of President Yar'adua. The death of governor Yakowa in December, 2012, occasioned yet another dramatic 'turning around' in the geopolitical power calculus of the state as exemplified in the emergence of Ramaran Yaro who is from the northern zone of the state as the substantive governor. The dynamics of 'power shift' in Kaduna state amidst the afore-mentioned scenario clearly underscores the import of incumbent's death in determining the 'equation' of political succession in Nigeria. This is also true of other cases that have been highlighted in the course of this paper.

The implication of the foregoing discourse is that the death of a political incumbent does engender significant outcomes that hold far-reaching implications for political succession in a polity. The instances considered above may not be sufficient to establish a general pattern regarding the implications of death-engendered political succession; suffice it to note that the discursive views and perspectives shared in this paper would go a long way in stimulating further scholarly thinking capable of situating the subject matter more meaningfully.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the strategic significance of the death-engendered political succession in Nigeria. By way of a discursive review of relevant instances, it was observed that ‘dying in power’ has been a crucial political problematique in contemporary Nigerian politics. Much as the death of the political incumbent has been bemoaned and celebrated as the case may be, it has also served the strategic purpose of power redistribution in the context of the ever deepening political cleavages of the Nigerian federalism. More importantly the death of the political incumbent has been instrumental in engendering radical regime change(s) with impactful outcomes on how power is ascended or transferred in a polity. To say the least, the exit of the political incumbent in the event of death holds strategic implications for the prospects and direction of political succession in Nigeria and beyond.

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