

# **OKOTIE'S BRIDGE ACROSS TROUBLED WATERS**

**By Bolade Obanla**

Every election year presents its own peculiar drama and dramatis personae. 2011 is no different, in both the content and style of the campaigns, and true to type, Nigerian politicians never fail to disappoint, with their mediocre performances on the political turf across the party divide.

As expected, the campaigns are not issue-based. No distinct ideology and special message separate the parties; we see a rehash of old promises, most of which are carryover from 2007. The worst of the culprits, the PDP, for instance, banded a 7-point Agenda in 2007. Till date, no single item on the Agenda produced any degree of success. To its shame, the party in power since 1999 has still not been able to apologize from failing the nation, instead, it has overheated the polity, almost bringing the nation to the boil with ill-tempered squabbles over zoning; endless litigations over nominations into elective offices, and politically motivated murders across the nation. The party at centre is certainly not running on record. It is relying on the power of incumbency to ride back to power.

However, the PDP's zoning policy which guarantees rotation of key political offices was launched on the front burner, in the run up to its presidential nomination recently. And for the first time in recent years, the north was pitched against the south in a dangerous contest for power at the centre. As we may recall, the influential northern clique within the PDP had challenged the legitimacy of President Goodluck Jonathan's candidacy in the 2011 presidential election. This is on the ground that, under the party's zoning arrangement, a northern candidate should be fielded since President Umaru Musa Yar 'Adua, the incumbent president elected in 2007 died midway into his first term, and so, conventional wisdom dictates that the north fields another candidate to fill the "vacant" slot. Put it straight, 2011 is the north's turn to produce the president. That informs the emergence of former Vice President Atiku Abubakar as the consensus candidate of the north on the platform of the Ciroma panel.

The stage was set for a thoroughly fragmented PDP Presidential nomination due to the bad blood generated by the pitched battles over zoning and the decision of Jonathan's camp to rubbish the arrangement. Of course, the President has triumphed and Atiku and the north left to lick their wounds, trying to fight back to restore its pride, is the dilemma of the once powerful, monolithic north.

While all these are going on, an unlikely voice came singing a new song which even the north would find astonishing. And that voice is that of Rev. Chris Okotie, himself a contender for the presidency on the platform of the Fresh Democratic Party, FRESH. Lately, in various media interviews, the reverend has taken a position, which seemed at first, to compromise his own long-standing quest for the Presidency. He says without any fear of contradiction that the PDP ought to respect its zoning policy in the interest of democracy. This unexpected, yet gratuitous comment, must have rattled the northern power brokers.

Okotie reasons that if the party could jettison its own internal agreement just like that, as we say, then its avowed opponents are not safe, especially considering the way and manner it routinely amends the constitution. He told a correspondent recently; while justifying his position on zoning or rotation of power: "Within every democratic setting there are institutions enshrined in the constitution that guarantee joint participation, an all embracing philosophy for the people so that democracy will take natural progression. That was why within PDP, there was a zoning agreement that was enshrined in their constitution. When a political party circumvents its own constitution arbitrarily based on some personal agenda, it erodes the authenticity of their pursuit of democracy. In a federal system for instance, you have centrifugal and centripetal forces which combine in such a way to guarantee the security of the weaker units so that federalism is strong and their place within that union is established."

"Within an executive, you have Legislature, Executive and Judiciary. In the PDP, what happened during the primary was a circumvention of the constitution. It was done with such impunity that it creates a situation of fear in the hearts of people like me. This is because if a political party can circumvent its own constitution, it shows that it is the beginning of autocracy and totalitarianism.

With this kind of circumvention, the ruling party can exercise a whole part of this country through an executive fiat.

“There had been a debate on workability of relocating those of us from the South-South. The PDP has the power to do it with what it has done now so blatantly. My take on this is: If our democracy is to be guaranteed, then the North must respond and all progressives in Nigeria too.”

Being an avowed progressive, Okotie, says he is responding to what is certainly not his “business”, because it could affect the entire polity. Working round the obvious logic that had the PDP been faithful to zoning fielded a northern candidate, his own chances would clearly be jeopardized, the FRESH Presidential candidate thinks otherwise.

He affirms the acceptability of his candidacy and strongly believes that given a level playing field, he would turn the table against anyone fielded by the PDP. However, he agrees that he’d need to reach out to other power brokers to forge strange alliances.