

THE ZONING FALLACY: WHY POLITICAL QUOTAS UNDERMINE THE CORE PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY

By

Cyprian F. Edward-Ekpo, LL.D

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ABSTRACT

In this piece, Cyprian Edward-Ekpo examines the structural flaws of political zoning in Nigeria, responding directly to arguments made by Chief Okoi Obono-Obla. He argues that the institutionalization of geographic and ethnic quotas dilutes true democracy into a "pseudo-democracy," undermining executive competence. Ultimately, the piece calls for a shift toward an unhindered majoritarian meritocracy to ensure sustainable, good governance.

I recently engaged in a public discourse with Chief Okoi Obono-Obla, a prominent Nigerian lawyer and former presidential aide during the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari. Chief Obono-Obla took issue with my thesis advising against the institutionalization of zoning for elective positions. My contention remains clear: zoning is fundamentally alien to democratic theory, and it fails to guarantee executive competence or governance utility. When Obono-Obla was challenged to produce any historical or theoretical precedent where foundational democratic architecture incorporated the zoning of elective offices, he defended his position by characterizing it as a uniquely Nigerian adaptation of democratic principles. Let me quote his words @Chief Okoi Obono-Obla thus:

"There is indeed a universal definition of democracy, but the standards for measuring it vary across nations... The fact that elective positions in Nigeria are zoned does not mean that Nigeria's

democracy is flawed. Every country evolves a brand of democracy that reflects its peculiarities..."

I am persuaded that this conceptualization of governance represents a fundamental misunderstanding of democratic principles. The systematic integration of non-democratic mechanisms into a democratic framework does not broaden the definition of democracy; rather, it dilutes it into a pseudo-democracy. Consequently, while zoning may exist as a political compromise, it cannot be classified as a legitimate democratic practice.

What is democracy? "

"DEMOCRACY "is a system of government, which the citizens represent themselves either directly or through representatives periodically elected by the citizens. Neither geopolitical nor tribal interest forms part of the features and principles of

democracy. The entire paradigm of democratic expression revolves strictly around popularity—manifested through competitive candidates and popular majoritarian mandates. It is an arithmetic system predicated on the principle that the will of the majority must prevail, driven by the collective endorsement of an individual's competence to deliver good governance.

Democratic principles do not recognize allocation based on family, clan, tribe, or politico-geography. To enforce such divisions directly undermines the core strength of the democratic process, which relies entirely on the unhindered will of the majority of the electorate.

To this end, I am emphatic that the principles of democracy, like those of other governance systems, vary only a little from tradition to another, but not fundamentally. Such can be seen in monarchical democracy where a Monarch is separated from a prime minister -- thus making a Monarch a trado-ceremonial leader while the regular form of democracy from office of the prime minister to the least like major prevails itself.

While advocating for political inclusivity and equity is entirely valid within a

developing polity, however, the precedence of zoning in Nigerian politicking does not grant the practice democratic legitimacy, nor does it render it permanent or sustainable. It can, and should, be dismantled, as it constitutes anti-democratic practice.

An objective critique of democracy reveals that it remains the most viable vehicle for sustaining an egalitarian society. The only and primary vulnerability of democracy lies in its susceptibility to majoritarian exploitation, where an uninformed electorate can inadvertently elevate incompetent, destructive, or authoritarian leadership. A populist majority can empower a demagogue who ultimately threatens the structural survival of the democratic system itself. Yet, despite this inherent risk, institutional democracy remains superior to all alternative forms of government.

I am convinced that at a time when good governance and an egalitarian society are essential for everyday citizens, any civilized society should prioritize competence—based on a leader's intellectual prowess, public and corporate policy experience, and character—over the geographical zoning of political leadership.

~ **Prof. Cyprian Edward-Ekpo** is a globally renowned legal scholar, author, public international law and international environmental law specialist, and human rights advocate. He is widely recognized for his leadership roles in global and regional legal research institutions, as well as his outspoken public commentary on governance, constitutional law, and international relations. He can be reached via email: cyprian.edward@uniserl.education and cyprian.edward@ilawdun.us