

# Govs Forum Will Not Be Used For 2011 Polls – DG

*The Nigeria Governor's Forum (NGF), has been in the news in recent times, but not for all the right reasons. In this interview with SHUAIB SHUAIB, the director general of the Forum's secretariat, Asishana Okauru states its stand on the leadership tussle and why the Forum is best at remaining a non-partisan body.*

*Of what relevance do you think the NGF will be to the 2011 general elections?*

Right now, we have two of our principals in the presidential race. One is running under the PDP and the other under the ANPP. We have a number of our governors; over twenty governors that are out to run for re-election. Of course, that will affect our activities here. But this ordinarily is a research centre for policy matters. We are not partisan in any way. But that is not like saying that there is no need for service. Whether it is in Kano or Lagos, we are going to be involved. Beyond that, we are eager too to help inject some integrity into our electoral process. We have been doing that and we plan to continue to do that. So, whether you are talking of voter registration or you are talking of ensuring that the rules are adhered to, whether it is about internal democracy at the party level, we are going to be very interested. We are just going to be out watching and suggesting, but I do not think this Forum is ever going to be used.

*Do not think that the Forum has in any way deviated from its goals?*

I don't believe so. The leadership is much focused. The secretariat is manned by a team of very professional people and I think our democracy is growing and it is on track. Remember that you cannot stop people from doing what they want to do, but you have to be ready to counter that.

*The secretariat just survived a massive crisis if judged by any standard. Do you think the attempt to replace the Forum's chairman in an informal meeting can be linked to lapses by the secretariat in terms of your rules?*

First of all, I think we have gone beyond that. We are somewhere else right now. We have really progressed. But it is important to let you know that the secretariat is responsible for the membership of all thirty-six governors and we take directives from the chairman. I directly report to the Chairman. The Chairman is an appointee of the 36 governors. At every time, there is a procedure for calling meetings and there is a procedure regulating affairs within every meeting. We have been doing this for quite some time now.

*Was the secretariat aware of the meeting at which Governor Gbengu Daniel was reportedly elected as Chairman?*

No, we have said that. We were not informed and we have already put that in public space.

*The present constitution of the Forum limits the tenure of the Chairman to two years. Has this time frame ever been adhered to?*

No, because there was really no constitution so to say. Remember that under section 40 of the 1999 Constitution, the people could come together and form an association. It is freedom of association. This Forum started in 1999. Between 1999 and 2009, they had always met informally. When we came on board two years ago, we felt that there was need to further institutionalise the Forum by securing a legal instrument from the Corporate Affairs Commission. That was a thing that was started by my predecessor. We just completed it and got our instrument on February 29, 2009. Of course, you are right.



Okauru

If you look at the instrument, you will know that the tenure of the Chairman is fixed for two years. If you were to use that as benchmark, from February 29, 2009, the Chairman was supposed to have finished serving his tenure on February 29, 2011 in the first instance. If you read the constitution again, it provides that he may actually be re-elected.

*But the forum is meant to be non-partisan...*

(Cuts in) It is non-partisan, not that it is meant to be. It is a non-partisan association.

*But partisan politics is threatening to tear it apart as it appears it is being used as a launch pad for presidential campaigns.*

That is not correct.

*A number of governors have spoken about the partisan nature of the forum. Shekarau said: Fashola, I believe spoke about it too that PDP governors alone cannot determine who heads the Forum without their consent. How would you respond to that?*

That is correct. But the PDP governors were saying that. Now let us clear this. Not just the governor of Lagos, Kano and Edo that are saying it, even PDP governors do. I could give you names. In fact, that is essentially the point the Chairman was making; that there is need for procedure and that it was wrong for just PDP governors to have done it and the Chairman is a PDP governor.

*The general feeling among Nigerians is that the Forum is a destabilising factor to democracy rather than enhancing it; where do you stand on that?*

You know that that is not correct. We

have added a lot of contents, not just to our democracy, but to our development. You know that no matter what you do in a society like this, you will definitely find someone that will criticise it. Some will be constructive and others will not be constructive. So, I will just leave people to their views.

*This question has been asked everywhere. Is the Forum really necessary?*

Yes, absolutely necessary. We have done a lot. In the area of polio for instance, we worked closely with the Bill Gates Foundation and things changed. It has been possible to look at the electoral reform going on right now. Without the role of the governors, it would have been impossible to get it to where it is right now. On minimum wage, governors are involved. When our teachers embarked on their strike action and it became a national issue, the governors were involved. The excess crude account too; remembers that a number of states went to court. I mean we saw this as controversial and some argued that it was illegal. The governors came together. The crisis in Jos; again, the governors were involved. Remember too that the governors took the federal government to court. They intervened, talked to their colleague and this brought results. So, the Forum has helped in dousing tension within our polity. The Forum is a grouping of equals who share common practices. They were equally involved in peer reviewing themselves. The governors have a strong secretariat that put a team of experts to go round the states. We have finished the first

phase; we have gone round the states. Today, we have best practices, we have benchmarks and we have been able to identify challenges in various states. We have also seen priority programmes and today we can better connect with not just our governors but the network of people around our governors. So I think we have done a lot. We also help the states looking forward to an induction programme. We are thinking of an induction programme for new governors. We launched strategy plan, which I think is going to guide us for the next three years. We have opened up relationships with a number of development partners- in fact, all the development partners in the country today. We also formed new alliances and contacts with our counterpart in the US. We are equally doing a lot with all the MDAs in the country. We have opened up relationship with a research outfit in Canada. So, I think there is a lot in favour of this group. We are equally putting our principals under pressure to pass their public procurement bills and fiscal responsibility bills. So, the Forum is clearly necessary. This is a big country. You have to keep devising ways to reach out to those at the local government and state levels. There is no way you can deploy development here by doing it from the center alone.

*You have mentioned as policy achievements, the solution to the excess crude account. How it was done, a lot of people do not like the influence the Forum had on the National Assembly. Some people are suggesting that the Forum is actually competing or even undermining the ability of the federal government to get their own policy through the National Assembly. Is this the case?*

You know that that again is not correct. That is a view. And again, you allow people to express their own ideas. But, this is a federation. The states are eager to ensure that we practice actual federalism. So, whether we are talking of fiscal federalism or you are talking of the management of our assets and liabilities in the country, they are interested in actual federalism where there is some degree of autonomy at the center and there is some degree of independence at the state level. Then you talk of the local governments too and in fact, the ward level. So, what you are saying is not correct. Take our development plan for instance. The vision 20:2020 is a thing all the states have keyed into. The National Education Policy is also a thing all the states have keyed into. I do not know of any state that is just on its own, not looking at what is happening at the federal level. They have all looked into ways to key into such programmes. So, if you talk of counter productivity, I would say no. One area I think we have to strengthen on our end is creating better relationship with the National Assembly. A lot of things happen there on a daily basis. They pass laws that could potentially impact on the states. I do not think there is sufficient monitoring and input from the states. Again, we want the Forum through the secretariat to be responsible for doing this. ■

## Governors set to elect new leader amid strife



Saraki

From Simon Nwabazika, Mbarik

**T**ODAY, the Nigeria Governors Forum, (NGF) will attempt to resolve a leadership crisis that burst out last weekend. The Forum will clarify if the Ogun State governor Gbenga Daniel has been elected as its new chairman to replace Kwara State Governor Bukola Saraki who is nursing presidential aspiration.

Protests from some governors had trailed last Saturday's reports that Daniel was the new chairman. The present confusion and controversy over the leadership is seen in the light of the presidential ambition of President Goodluck Jonathan and the desire of some governors to stick with a leader disposed to the president.

Benue State Governor Gabriel Suswam had told journalists that if governors met at Abuja over the weekend and resolved to remove Saraki because his leadership had become dormant due to his presidential ambition. He said that Saraki abdicated his responsibilities and "many things were happening in the country, which needed the response of governors, but which was not forthcoming, because we had no leadership. The leadership was engaged in presidential campaigns."

He said that the 11 governors wanted a change of leadership to revive what he termed the "dormant forum." Suswam pointed out that the 11 governors have already achieved their aim in view of today's meeting.

He noted that there was nothing wrong with today's meeting convened by Saraki because "we need a governors' forum and we need to be responding to issues. We felt that we should have a leadership that should be responding to issues, if it of us have decided that it should be Daniel, it was meant to mean that it of us constitute the governors' forum."

He said: "We were becoming quite agitated and concerned. Things were happening and the governors' forum didn't respond. There was bomb blast and there was no response and there are other issues that the forum did not respond."

Saraki said that there were procedural defects in the moves to replace him with Daniel. A statement released on his behalf by the director general of the NGF, Mr. Aishana Okauru stated that "Saraki has received complaints from several governors who have denied any knowledge of, or involvement in the action. They argued that the meeting where the action was taken was not convened in accordance with the laid down procedures that have been followed over the years. They see this development as inimical to the internal democratic process, the culture of inclusiveness and consensus on which the NGF was built, and on which it has operated."

"In keeping with the desire of majority of NGF members, he calls on the general public to disregard the said newspaper reports; saying that a meeting has been called where a decision will



Suswam

be taken on the issue of leadership of the NGF in keeping with the laid down procedures of the Forum.

Saraki explained that, "for the NGF to continue to play a critical role in the politics and governance of this country in the future, its leadership must be positioned to readily inspire the confidence of all its members and be seen to be guided by laid down standards of democratic practice."

Critics have faulted Suswam's position by noting that if Saraki were encumbered by his presidential aspiration to lead the NGF, then he (Suswam) and Daniel as zonal coordinators of the Jonathan campaign in their areas would also be hampered.

Sources at the NGF said that the report of Daniel as Saraki's successor was aimed at pre-empting today's meeting. It was also aimed at passing a message to Jonathan that his associates in the forum are prepared to sink or swim with him.

The NGF, a non-partisan group of the 36 state governors, without any constitutional backing, has in the last 10 years fashioned itself into a major pressure group, influencing policies. Between 2003 and 2007, the Forum played critical interventionist roles during the administration of former president, Olusegun Obasanjo.

Two governors seen to be leading the pro-Jonathan group are Suswam and Daniel, both are zonal coordinators of the President's campaign. It did not therefore surprise many when Suswam made the announcement that Daniel was the new chairman of the NGF.

The crisis is part of the struggle to gain control of the political machinery within the NGF. That struggle started after Jonathan reached out to governors like Suswam and Daniel, initially opposed to his presidency.

Suswam had led the fact finding team to Saudi Arabia to ascertain the health condition of the late President Musa Yar'Adua, after the forum had insisted on knowing his condition before allowing acting presidential powers to be transmitted to Jonathan, then Vice President.

Another cause of the tension is the desire of the other PDP presidential aspirants who are seeking the support of the governors to enhance their chances of success at the primaries. The presidential aspirants are: Saraki, Jonathan, former military President, Gen. Ibrahim



Daniel

Babangida, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar and Gen. Aliyu Mohammed Gusau.

Saraki, who his leadership of the forum in the last three and half years, is considered the most colourful, has attempted to deploy the forum to drive home his quest for the presidential ticket much to the ire of the pro-Jonathan group.

One of Saraki's sins is his alleged use of the NGF to influence the killing of the Executive Bill from the president to the National Assembly, seeking to empower the caucuses of the party at the state and national levels to determine the presidential and gubernatorial candidates of political parties.

Saraki was alleged to have refused to convene meetings that would engender a common front in the forum to push for the bill.

Babangida has tried to solicit the attention of the Forum through his relationship with Niger State Governor who is also the Chairman Northern Governors' Forum, Muzau Babangida Aliyu. It was this platform that stopped Vice President Namadi Sarbo's quests to have the northern governors endorse the presidential aspiration of President Jonathan by voting against zoning.

Suswam has not had things easy pushing Jonathan's campaign in the North Central zone where it is said that Aliyu and Saraki have restricted his reach in the states that have refused to endorse Jonathan outright.

Recently, Saraki quietly visited Makardi to lobby Suswam to have a change of heart on his position on the presidential elections. It was learnt that Saraki had placed before Suswam their long-standing friendship, which had helped in unifying and promoting the positions taken by the forum on critical national issues. The meeting ended without Saraki eliciting any assurances from Suswam.

President Jonathan, who had resolved not to get involved in the politics of the NGF, had a change of heart when he realised that key political moves required the blessing of the forum. Therefore, the appointment of six governors as campaign coordinators was a plan aimed at ensuring that he had his eyes in the forum.

However, the governors might not be disposed to be running the day-to-day campaigns. In Benue, the administrative leg work of the campaigns has been substantially abdicated to a

team led by Mr Joseph Ikyagba.

Itauchi State Governor, Isa Yuguda, accepted the job to coordinate the campaigns in North East, to ward off the advances being made by the FCT Minister, Senator Bala Mohammed, who is allegedly being propped up against Yuguda because of his relationship with the family of the late Yar'Adua.

Incidentally, ahead of the announcement of Daniel as the NGF Chairman, a meeting was held at the Presidential Villa after a fund raising dinner organised for Jonathan. It was after this meeting that the decision was taken to ensure that the forum is brought under the control of President Jonathan's men.

Another issue that is hinted at in today's meeting is the dominance of PDP governors. The position of consensus being canvassed amongst the non-PDP governors is that no governor with attachment to any direct connection with any presidential aspiration would be allowed to head the forum because of its non-partisan nature.

Okauru had harped on the forum being non-partisan. The challenge therefore before the PDP dominated forum is would the party relinquish chairmanship to the opposition? The other political parties look set to decide who heads the NGF with their eight votes. Another question that will be answered today is why has the leadership of the NGF been dominated by PDP governors. This leadership style would be in consonance with what is obtained in the United Nations where the position of the Secretary General has been rotated amongst countries other than the five members with veto powers to ensure equilibrium within the fold.

Apart from Suswam's group of 11 governors who elected Daniel, the position of the pro-Jonathan governors in the forum are in the minority, as there are 17 other PDP governors in the NGF.

Even if the governors' forum is to elect a PDP governor as chairman, then there is a precedent on the ground. In 2006, when Akwa Ibom State Governor, Obong Victor Attah declared his intention to run for the Presidency, he resigned as chairman and his tenure was concluded by another governor from the South-South, former Edo State Governor, Lucky Igbinedion.

This might have set a precedent and it is therefore expected that with the exit of Saraki, another governor from the North Central zone should conclude his tenure. Where that is not possible, then another governor from the North should complete the tenure.

The significance of today's election cannot be over emphasised. It might showcase the readiness of the governors to apply themselves to the tenets of a free, fair and transparent election ahead of the 2011 elections.

Protests from some governors had trailed last Saturday's reports that Daniel was the new chairman ahead of today's meeting when discussions will be held today to elect a new chairman. The present confusion and controversy over the leadership is seen in the light of the presidential ambition of President Goodluck Jonathan and the desire of some governors to seek out a leader disposed to the president.

# Everyone needs Nigeria Governors' Forum

By Bode Aiyenimelo

THE article written by Steve Osuji in *The Guardian* edition of November 8, 2010 titled, "Who Needs Governors' Forum?" was quite interesting: witty, humorous and laced with sarcasm. However, it suffered from lack of research and thus was replete with inaccuracies and outright falsehood. This rejoinder therefore puts in proper perspective what the Nigeria Governors' Forum, NGF, is and its efforts at stabilising the polity and engendering economic growth and development in the country. NGF is neither a "Special Utility Vehicle contrived during the Obasanjo era" nor has it "grown from an *owambe* party that partied around the world which came into the limelight during the 2003 presidential election when the governors ganged up against Obasanjo" as Osuji mischievously put it.

On the contrary, NGF emerged from a well thought out programme for the elected governors in 1999 as a platform to resolve and take decisions on issues of common interest. In concept, it is modeled after the National Governors' Association of the United States which is more than 100 years old. NGF is a legal entity operating within the ambience of the law. It is registered under Part C of the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 1990 with registration No.CAC/IT/NO/31439. So Osuji should be rest assured that the forum is not "a modern day contraption, operating in breach of Nigeria's constitution" as stated in his article. Indeed, the NGF has a functional secretariat manned by thorough bred professionals that serves as policy hub and provides good linkages between the states and their counterparts all over the world.

For the records, Dr. Bukola Saraki is the fourth chairman of NGF. The first chairman was Alhaji Abdullahi Adamu then governor of Nasarawa State followed by Obong Victor Attah of Akwa-Ibom State and then Chief Lucky Igbinedion of Edo State. *Wetin NGF dey do se!* Osuji cheekily asked. A lot I dare say. They have been able to build consensus among the members and assisted in deepening our democracy. The most memo-

orable of course was their pivotal role in the National Assembly's passage of the Doctrine of Necessity when the nation was on the verge of the precipice on whether the current president should be made the Acting President. Remember the debilitating national teachers' strike of 2008? It was the NGF that broke the logjam.

What of the contentious issue of excess crude account that led some states to take the federal government to court? Again, it was a consensus reached among the governors that saved the day. And if today polio is becoming a thing of the past, NGF must be commended for collaborating actively with the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation. Moreover, the Peer Review Mechanism, initiated by the governors has created a healthy competition among the various states and enhanced development all over the country. Thankfully, as the immediate past Chief Press Secretary to Governor Ikedi Ohakim of Imo State, Osuji can at least testify to this. Bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, UNDP and DFID among others, are also collaborating with the NGF on development programmes across the states of the federation. And to achieve meaningful impact in the states, Ministries, Departments and Agencies, MDAs are more and more tapping into the network of NGA. Now let us address some other issues raised by Osuji.

According to him, "NGF which has grown into a formidable influence group is Saraki's bargaining chip to wrench support of the North for his Presidency. If he can deliver the NGF by installing its chairman, he can get the NGF to work for the North's Presidency". How puerile? Are the governors infants that can be manipulated in sundry manners as a puppeteer his puppets? This is an unbridled insult to the integrity of our state governors who are not only highly educated and widely exposed but have a clear vision of where they intend to take their various states to. These men have minds of their own and express these as occasions warrant.

Is Osuji insinuating that Dr. Saraki is such a superhuman to subsume the general opinion of these strong characters and

great minds? Surely, it would take a man with magical feats to achieve this. And Dr. Saraki we dare say, does not possess one. We invite Osuji to attend any of the meetings of NGF to see for himself the rigorous debates, the interplay of opinions and the way and manner consensus is arrived at. It is a study on how different people with different views can achieve compromise without egos being bruised. At stake is the common good. Politics without bitterness? The NGF personifies it. So Dr. Saraki the current chairman or any future chairman for that matter cannot use NGF for any self-serving purpose.

This is where Osuji's prediction that NGF may never recover from what promises to be a huge schism in its fold and will not be the same again falls flat on its face. If there is any organisation in Nigeria today where internal democracy is at work, it is the NGF. No sooner had the announcement of Governor Gbenga Daniel of Ogun State as chairman was made, for instance, than the governors put machinery in motion for due process to be followed. A few days after, the governors met to take a decision. And instead of the bang many expected, what followed was a whimper to the disappointment of cynics like Osuji. At present, the Governor Babatunde Raji Fashola of Lagos state-led committee set up after the governors' meeting is working assiduously for the emergence of a new chairman of NGF based on consensus. This is equally in the spirit of give and take which the NGF is noted for that other organisations should emulate.

So, to the pertinent question asked by Osuji on who needs the Governors' Forum? I dare say everyone interested in the progress and development of this country. It is heart-warming that governors can come together in spite of belonging to different political parties to speak with one voice on issues of national interest at critical periods. NGF should be commended for stabilising our polity at this time when there is so many hue and cries on issues dividing rather than uniting us.

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## Nigeria Governors' Forum Waxing Stronger

**I**t is surprising, indeed disheartening that despite repeated efforts stating the status of the Nigeria Governors' Forum, NGF, in the public space, commentators, analysts and essayists have either chose to ignore it or deliberately following their preconceived notion of the forum. This is not good enough. Writers especially those using the mass media should educate and enlighten the public from the position of knowledge and not ignorance, otherwise, they befuddle the citizenry. Emeka Nwosu, whose piece, "The Bickering in Governors' Forum" appeared on November 09, 2010 in THISDAY newspapers is not exactly unknowledgeable. He had a good grasp of his subject and to an extent provided a fresh insight to the issue at hand. How then could he have written that NGF "is unknown to the constitution of the land?" Or that the NGF "is on the verge of losing relevance" and

turned the patriotic role the NGF played when democracy was almost at breaking point to stave it off on its head? We cannot even hazard a guess.

And so for the umpteenth time, we make bold to state that NGF is a body known to the Nigerian constitution. It is registered under Part C of the Companies and Allied Matters Act (CAMA) 1990. The registration number for those still in doubt is: CAC/IT/NO/31439. We enjoin Nwosu and others of his ilk to visit the offices of Corporate Affairs Commission for confirmation. In any case, is the right of association not enshrined in the Nigerian constitution? What's this furore about the NGF being so powerful anyway? When the chief executives of the 36 states of the federation gather, do we expect anything less. Happily, this bi-partisan body has been using its much touted influence for the public good.

We would not refer to what is happening at NGF at present as "bickering" but a challenge.

Where ever people congregate, they are bound to disagree at one point or the other. It is how these differences are resolved that determines their staying power. The NGF has shown exemplary leadership in building consensus and so has endured. What happened at the meeting to address the seeming succession problem occasioned by the premature announcement of a new chairman clearly shows that NGF is waxing stronger and not losing relevance. The masterminds were asked to apologize in a widely circulated communiqué. They did not play the spoiler by walking out and all agreed to abide by the outcome of the work of the committee set up to ensure the emergence of a new chairman of NGF that is acceptable to all led by Lagos state governor, Mr. Babatunde Fashola, SAN.

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