

Columnists

# Barkindo: The last wiseman standing in OPEC

By **Ndu Ughamadu**

17 February 2022 | 4:32 am



OPEC Secretary General Mohammed Barkindo of Nigeria speaks during the 3rd GCC Petroleum Media Forum on April 19, 2017 in Abu Dhabi. / AFP PHOTO / NEZAR BALOUT

The indelible imprints of Dr Mohammad Sanusi Barkindo, outgoing Secretary-General of OPEC, have been on the Organisation since June 1986.

Cumulatively, Barkindo, a brilliant technocrat cum savvy negotiator endowed with lots of native Intelligence, has served – still serving- OPEC in different capacities: first, as Nigeria’s official government delegate( in his twenties) to the Conference; second, Nigeria’s OPEC Representative and Member of the Organization’s Economic Commission Board; third, Nigeria’s OPEC Governor; fourth, Acting OPEC SG and lastly, current OPEC SG.

Interestingly, Barkindo’s first official outing to OPEC, June 1986, was on the Island of Brioni, then Yugoslavia (Croatia, presently) when he was Special Adviser to Nigeria’s Petroleum Minister, Dr Rilwanu Lukman. It was at the Brioni Conference that Dr. Lukman was first elected OPEC President, an election that was vividly celebrated in Nigeria. He was later, re-elected Conference President more than five times, the highest in the history of OPEC.

At that time, OPEC was shifting venues of its conferences, which explains why that of June 1986 was held on the Brioni Island- a spectacular tourist attraction developed by the legendary Dr Josip Broz Tito, late President of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. Access to the Island was by boat.

I was in the defunct Yugoslavia to cover that Brioni historic OPEC Conference for the old Daily Times group of newspapers under the leadership of Prince Tony Momoh. It was an insightful and memorable experience.

Coverage of events at OPEC in the 80s and 90s by energy news reporters, was lavishly characterised by a farrago of uncertainties, humour/ glamour and high outcome expectations.

Humour because reporters had nicknames for most of the oil ministers and cracked jokes with them. Uncertainties, yes, because date for a meeting or conference would be obvious but when it could end was an unknown variable. For example, there was an OPEC Conference in Geneva that lasted about two weeks, yet, tentatively, it was programmed for two days. This was when production sharing or quota started in the Organisation. Usually, a slippery and controversial issue to manage among the member countries’ oil ministers. Of course, high expectations on the outcome of the conferences because such would shape and reshape the global oil market, its vagaries and nations’ macroeconomic fundamentals.

As part of the conference humour, reporters labelled a few ministers “ the OPEC Wisemen” to some, “OPEC League of Wisemen” while others called it “ OPEC Faculty of Wisemen”. The “Wisemen” ministers were: Dr Rilwanu Lukman, Nigeria’s Oil Minister and OPEC President; Dr Subroto- one word name-

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Oil Minister of Indonesia and Dr Arturo Grisanti, Oil Minister of Venezuela. The Wisemen cut across the three continents in OPEC: Africa, Asia and South America. These Wisemen later became Secretaries- General of OPEC- Subroto, Lukman and Grisanti.

The electrifying and charismatic Saudi Arabian Oil Minister, Sheikh Ahmad Zaki Yamani – then one of the most popular oil ministers in the world- was referred to, by reporters, as Technical Consultant to the Wisemen while reporters called young Barkindo an “Associate Wiseman”. Though a Special Adviser, Barkindo was equally known as “ Superlative Adviser “. He had positive input in the decisions of the Wisemen.

The Wisemen were greatly influential in OPEC. OPEC, in turn, was preponderantly strong in the global oil market commanding sizeable market shares and weighty economic influence. Infact, whenever OPEC sneezed the International oil market caught contagious cold.

This impactful role of the Organisation arose from the various oil crises, particularly that instigated by OPEC Arab members, that shook the world.

The Wisemen in OPEC, therefore, conscious of the significant place of the Organization in world polity ensured that conferences were managed to yield far-reaching outcomes.

These Wisemen moved in a group lobbying members in their cozy hotels’ oily presidential suites to accept some proposed agreements. The strategy worked and reduced a lot of tensions at OPEC conferences.

To many watchers of OPEC affairs and the International oil market, it was no surprise that Barkindo, a member of the League or Faculty of OPEC Wisemen, was, decades later, appointed the Secretary-General of the all-important and purposeful OPEC.

The SG is the CEO of the over 60-year old International organisation headquartered in Vienna, Austria. He runs its day- to – day affairs especially, liaising with member countries and other non – member nations. What makes the appointment of an SG more serious, sensitive, volatile and complicated is that it is by a consensus, and no dissenting voice or vote.

Should there be a dissenting voice from a member country, some definitive options are left for OPEC on the position: ask an incumbent to be acting (extension of tenure) or members taking their turns to act in the position for a short period.

A Secretary-General is usually appointed for a period of three years and – rarely-renewable for another three years. Simply put, a maximum of two terms.

In 2016, the coveted position of OPEC SG became vacant. Qualified candidates from the Organisation’s member countries were invited to apply. Expectedly, a lot of countries showed interest.

For Nigeria, like other member countries in Asia, South America and Africa- the selection processes and procedures were highly competitive. Then inspiring and result-oriented Nigeria’s Minister of State, Petroleum, Dr. Ibe Kachikwu, supported by other technocrats handled the Country’s headhunt exercise for the job. Several candidates with intimidating and tested credentials were shortlisted. The list included some former ministers of different ministries petroleum inclusive.

After weeks of painstaking screenings, Mohammad Sanusi Barkindo, a former NNPC Group Managing Director, ex-Nigeria’s official government delegate to OPEC and Country’s Representative, Nigeria’s Governor for the Organisation and one time Acting Secretary General of OPEC was shortlisted as the Nigeria’s Candidate for the position.

Accordingly, his name was forwarded to the OPEC headquarters for the race. Going by antecedents, countries do raise lobby teams to canvass support for their candidates.

In the case of Nigeria for Barkindo, little of such was done. For a reason, the name Barkindo was a brand in member countries- he had, before the job, visited all member countries, severally and was friendly with heads of government of member countries, their ministers and other oil technocrats. In the end, Barkindo was, in 2016, unanimously, appointed the SG of OPEC. With an impressive performance in office at his first term, he was reappointed for a second and last term in 2019.

A man of great principles, Barkindo, who is the Wali of Adamawa (Nigeria) does not believe in staying in any office an hour longer than is necessary. He was quoted,” God has been kind to me granting me about 30 years services to OPEC and the global communities including the United Nations.”

Achievements:

Barkindo has seen it all in OPEC and the international oil market. He has witnessed eras of oil boom, oil plunge, oil competitiveness, alternatives to fossil fuels- the renewable, politics of appointments and elections in OPEC, the increased role of

America, Russia and several non-OPEC countries in the global oil market, geopolitical factors in OPEC and oil market, among others.

an standing in the Organisation and, indeed, the end of a golden era in the Institution.

Ughamadu, a former chief editor of the old Daily Times, Business Times of Nigeria, covered OPEC events for several years.

He assumed office as OPEC Chief Scribe at a time many member countries had exited the Organisation. With concerted efforts using instruments of shuttle diplomacy and persuasive communication some of these countries were brought back to the fold. Equally important, membership of the Organisation grew from 11 to 14 until recently when Qatar left mainly to focus more on gas than oil.

Besides, under Barkindo, Africa is having a louder and stronger voice in OPEC in addition to increase in the number of African countries presently in OPEC.

As SG of OPEC, Barkindo was not shy identifying with the Continent. Arguably, he” domesticated “ OPEC, as a brand in Africa. The awareness he created about the Organisation on the Continent is unprecedented. He presented papers at several engagements on energy, environment, economy held in Africa.

These include the African Energy Week, African Oil Week, Nigeria International Petroleum/Energy Summit, Nigeria Oil and Gas Conference and Exhibitions, African Refiners and Distributors Association (ARDA), among others. Not done, he embarked on several official visits to African countries for bilateral meetings with their heads of government-Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea, Nigeria, etc.

The Wali of Adamawa is consistent and unapologetic in asking advanced economies to factor the energy poverty ravaging Africa in many International policy decisions. For him, energy poverty in Africa poses a danger and calls for the urgent assistance of advanced economies arguing that this issue should be addressed along with the climate change.

The OPEC SG is of the contention that many African countries are endowed with crude oil resources and the revenue accruing from the sale is needed to develop these economies. Thus, oil in the fossil fuel mix, should play a key role in the energy transition.

The former Chief Executive Officer of Nigeria’s State Oil Corporation is a respected voice on the international arena. He participated actively at the World Petroleum Congress (WPC), World Energy Congress (WEC), CERA WEEK (Cambridge Energy Research Associates) Houston, OTC (Offshore Technology Conference) Houston, Moscow Energy Week, ADIPEC (Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference, among others.

It is to the credit of Barkindo, an astute mediator, that after over 35 years, an OPEC Secretary-General Designate to run a statutory full-term of three years, was appointed from the Gulf Region. He is Haitham Al- Ghais of Kuwait. The last time was in 1983 (by mandatory rotation and compulsory acting capacity, 2005). Barkindo, according to informed sources, prevailed on member countries to adopt the consensus clause and discard any veto power in the Al- Ghais appointment.

The outgoing SG introduced a lot of positive internal restructurings in the Organisation which have manifested in improved quality and new-look of some of its flagship publications. These publications are celebrated internationally with fanfare at the public presentations. An example is the World Oil Outlook that was given a unique space and mention at the last ADIPEC, Abu Dhabi. In fact, a special panel discussed the Publication.

Besides, under Barkindo, the yearly OPEC International Seminar became a cynosure of all eyes attracting global investors and students to learn. Also, he introduced a pragmatic CSR Programme in OPEC liaising with the government of Austria, City of Vienna in particular, to award scholarships to students interested in studying petroleum-related courses at higher educational institutions.

Furthermore, the Wali of Adamawa developed strong, positive and dynamic relations with many international organisations: IEA, World Bank, IMF, WEF, OPEC Fund, UN, COP, G8, G 20, among others.

The outgoing SG, who visited almost all member countries of OPEC and OPEC+, stood tall before America, Russia and other world powers. He constructively engaged the US on shale production and its implications for the oil market. He succeeded!

These countries appreciated his efforts in stabilising the volatile oil market. History of OPEC +, an alliance of 23 major oil producing countries, would not be exhausted without Barkindo. He was the first Chief Coordinator of the Alliance which has made gargantuan contributions in stabilising the world oil market. He introduced monthly meetings, via webinar, in both OPEC and OPEC + prompted by challenges in the oil market as a result of the COVID-19. Relevant committees of the two bodies also brainstorm monthly.

With all these noble achievements, it is no surprise that recently, the authoritative Iranian state-owned news agency described Barkindo as “a respected world leader”. The Nigerian-born diplomat is a shrewd and persuasive negotiator who has excelled in OPEC and OPEC + engagements. With his fine skilful engagement attributes, he played significant role in upward trends in oil prices which the futures prices, for example, dropped to minus zero dollar per barrel on a particular day early last year. The long-awaited 60th Anniversary of OPEC fell under Barkindo’s tenure. He had prepared and consulted extensively for its celebration in September 2020 in Baghdad, Iraq, but for the rampaging COVID-19.

As Barkindo, the Wali of Adamawa, completes his tenure July 2022 in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries, unarguably, it will be the exit of the last Wiseman standing in the Organisation and, indeed, the end of a golden era in the Institution.

Ughamadu, a former chief editor of the old Daily Times, Business Times of Nigeria, covered OPEC events for several years.

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