

SOVEREIGN NATIONAL CONFERENCE: A PATHWAY TO NIGERIAN NATIONHOOD (1914-2013)

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Abstract

This study posits that mutual trust and tolerance were what Nigeria lack and these are required in developing the capacity to build unity in the country. It therefore opined that the problem of Nigeria being a nation must be resolved not by law, force, or force of law, but by the people. There must be a forum created by free interpretation and interaction that can produce negotiated protocols of national coexistence. The study relied more on secondary data such as Newspaper, magazines and other related textbooks. Historical method was employed in the analysis of the data collected. The study therefore concluded that Sovereign National Conference would form a panacea to address and find solutions to the key problems afflicting Nigeria since 1914 to date. The concern is to remove all obstacles which have prevented the country from establishing political justice, economic justice, social justice, cultural justice, religious justice and to construct a new constitutional frame-work in terms of the system of government-structurally, politically, economically, socially, culturally and religiously, with a view to attaining the much needed nationhood.

The dilemma of nation-building in Nigeria since 1960 is that the desire of governments to create a national spirit and identity, and national character with national ethos has clashed with religion and ethnicity. For this reason, the idea of the federal character principle designed to promote political integration is no longer an effective force and is now used to encourage mediocrity at the expense of meritocracy. After

over 50 years of independence and about 100 years of the north and south amalgamation, Nigeria is still grappling with the idea as to whether or not Nigeria is real. There is the mistaken assumption that Nigeria could go back to where it was in 1914. Others think the country can split into north and south, yet for others, every ethnic group can be granted the right to self-determination (Anyako,2011). In a nutshell, an environment has been created for unnecessary and unhealthy rivalry, particularly among the three major ethnic groups, while the country is left suffering from serious socio-economic problems. More recently, religion has become a major issue, leading to mutual condemnation. There is deep suspicion, fears and anxiety in the relationship between Muslims and Christians, sometimes leading to violence, especially in the north. As a result of the various ethno-religious conflicts, people have been killed, injured or displaced; property destroyed; business closed and investors scared away; and communities are split along ethno-religious line

Before the advent of British rule, there was no entity called Nigeria. The three major ethnic groups, which are Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba, were living separately along with other minor ethnic groups, such as the Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv, Urhobo, and so on. Each of the major groups had different administrative systems . In 1914, Sir Lugard, as the Governor-General, amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates for administrative convenience. Thus, this amalgamation, according to some scholars, was done so that the finances of the comparatively well-off South could be extended to the North. Little wonder then that Adedeji observes that the amalgamation might have caused Nigeria's failures because it was not motivated by high principles of public policy and the wider vision of building a great united and prosperous African country out of the existing small nationalities, but merely for administrative convenience and the fear of rival French colonialists (Eke,2001)

Whether the majority or minority ethnic groups in Nigeria like it or not, they are today all Nigerians. The reason for this is not difficult to find. These people suffered the post-independence setback and struggled hard together to keep Nigeria one. In spite of the excruciating experiences of the civil war, which almost completely led to the disintegration of the nation, the people did not abandon the project of one Nigeria. They fought to live together. There was no single ethnic group, clan or individual that could have single handedly achieved that feat without the other. From this point, Nigerians took their bearing towards the direction that will move them forward. Granted that some errors took place in the past, there is need now to make some tough choices about which way Nigeria should go. The only opportunity we have to do this is the convocation of a sovereign national conference. We need to talk, talk and talk ourselves to true peace, genuine justice and appropriate people's constitution in which all Nigerians will find a fulfillment of their hopes and aspirations and unshaken guarantee of peace, stability and prosperity

Conceptual Clarifications:

The major concepts in this essay are Sovereign National Conference, Nationhood, Nationalism and State.

(a) **Sovereign National Conference (SNC)**

A conference is a meeting of people who confer about a topic while sovereignty is a substantive term designating supreme authority over some polity (Wikipedia the free encyclopedia). The Governor General of Nigeria between 1920 – 31, Sir Hugh Clifford, described Nigeria as “a collection of independent Native States, separated from one another by great distances, by differences of history and traditions and by ethnological, racial, tribal, political, social and religious barriers.” (Nigeria Council Debate. Lagos, 1920). This description captures the problems of today’s Nigeria vividly. The ill-faithed Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference, which got dismissed by Lt. Col. Gowon on November 30, 1966, can arguably be considered the start of demands for a Sovereign National Conference. Describing the purpose of SNC, it was stated that:

The Sovereign National Conference will give ethnic Nationalities an opportunity to examine the questions that have made Nigeria such a disaster and come up with some answers such as the right of every nationality to have greater control over their resources. (Council debate, 1920)

According to Abubakar Atofarati, a student of US Marine Command and Staff College, “the federation of Nigeria, as it is known today, has never really been one homogeneous country, for its widely differing peoples and tribes. The former colonial master decided to keep the country one in order to effectively control her vital resources for their economic interests. Thus, for administrative convenience the Northern and Southern Nigeria were amalgamated in 1914. Thereafter the only thing this people had in common was the name of their country since each side had different administrative set – up. This alone was an insufficient basis for true unity. Under normal circumstances the amalgamation ought to have brought the various peoples together and provided a firm basis for the arduous task of establishing closer cultural, social, religious, and linguistic ties vital for true unity among the people. There was division, hatred, unhealthy rivalry, and pronounced disparity in development” (Abubakar, 1991).

The History of National Conference and Why it has not make Considerable Impact in Nigeria

A National Conference is a phenomenon that grew out of the French political culture. It was copied in the francophone countries in Africa after the fall of the Berlin Wall first in the Republic of Benin and later in seven other francophone African

territories. It was used to address a crisis in the political order and used to fundamentally resolve it. On the buzzword, Sovereign National Conference, there is an assertion in some quarters that Sovereign National Conference only occurred in states that were collapsing unlike in Nigeria where the state was intact. In some African countries, it was the National Conference that declared itself sovereign and proceeded to take other actions in consonant with the act of sovereignty. In the Republic of Benin, the delegates declare the conference sovereign, dissolve National Assembly and strip president Kerekou of most of his power and appoint an interim government. In Congo, delegates declare the conference sovereign and strip president Debi Sasso Ngusso his power and appoint a World Bank official, Prime Minister and head of interim Government. In Mali, delegates convene as a Constituent Assembly and adopt a new constitution and electoral code and a charter for political parties. In Niger, delegates declare the conference sovereign, suspend the constitution, strip General Ali Saibou of all powers, dissolve the National Assembly etc. In Chad, conference declared itself sovereign but agreed to maintain the president in office. Only two countries, Togo and Zaire, where the reigning presidents, Eyadema and Mobutu respectively manipulated the National Conference that are still the two countries out of the eight countries where National Conference could not succeed. The problem was not with the ideas of a national conference, the problem was with the powerlessness/importance of the delegates and the relative omnipotence of the president (Robison, 1994).

Nigeria had many conferences in the past. First was the series of conferences organized under the auspices of the British colonial administration. These conferences were meant to address two kinds of problems in the process of decolonization, which were the mode of governance and the mode of living together of the various ethnic nationalities. Britain left Nigeria with some semblance of what is called a federal system at independent which cannot be called a “true federalism”, Second was the series of conferences sometimes called Constituent Assemblies organized under the auspices of the military junta. These were meant to address the issues in the transition, which also centred on the mode of governance and the mode of living together of the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria. From the three Constituent Assemblies, 1977/78; 1987 and 1994, only the Constituent Assembly of 1977/78 could be said to have addressed the fundamental issues in the mode of governance and in the mode of living together as part of the process of transition. It should be noted that all these Constituent Assemblies were governed by specific decrees. On the mode of governance, the military inspired conference changed the mode from Parliamentary to Presidential system. Today, Nigeria is faced with the third type under the auspices of a democratically elected administration. This conference is meant to address some issues in the crisis of governance as distinct from fundamental political crisis that the first two types dealt with in the past. It is assumed that this conference is expected to engage in proposing some reforms that would make the existing order to work better.

Sovereign National Conference: A Pathway to Nigerian Nationhood (1914-2013)

In previous conferences, composition of membership and the interest to represent were major problems. Nigerians woke up one morning to read of names of persons in the newspapers that were nominated to represent them in the conference. There were no clear cut basis for which the nomination were made. Maybe the President and the Governors took certain interests into account before making the nomination, and those who were nominated by the President were characterized as “Respectable Elder Statesmen” while those who were nominated by the Governors were called “State Representatives”. Consequently, one may ask if the presidential nominees were expected to guard and guide the President’s interest and the Governor’s nominees to guard and guide the interests of the Governor. What about the nominees of the political parties, the labour unions and others. What were the members from the various states of the federation representing? In other words, the representatives did not know what was their interests nor how to defend them at the conference (Robinson, 1994).

The people of Nigeria have never had the opportunity to make inputs into, accept or reject any constitutional frame-work through a referendum. Consequently, the masses have always been treated as aliens in all constitutional processes from 1914 to date as all constitutional frame-works have always been imposed on them whether they like them or not. The Sovereign National Conference being advocated, is to rebuild this single sovereign nation from its collapsing foundation and not to tear the country into several sovereign nations. We must prevent the experiences of Rwanda, Burundi, Strilanka, Somalia, Sierra-Leon, Liberia, Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia from happening in Nigeria.

(b) Nationhood

Nationhood is the state of being a nation. Nation may refer to a community of people who share a common language, culture, ethnicity, descent, or history. However, it can also refer to people who share a common territory and government (for example the inhabitants of a sovereign state) irrespective of their ethnic make-up; that is, a nation state. Nation carries varying meanings, and the connotation of the term has changed over time.(Henry, 1986).

An ethnic community shares a common myth of origins and descent, a common history, elements of distinctive culture, a common territorial association, and sense of group solidarity. A nation is much more impersonal, abstract, and overtly political than an ethnic group. It is a cultural-political community that has become conscious of its coherence, unity, and particular interests (Smith, 1983).

(c)Nationalism

Nationalism is a belief, creed or political ideology that involves an individual identifying with, or becoming attached to one's nation. Nationalism involves national identity, by contrast with the related construct of patriotism, which involves the social conditioning and personal behaviors that support a state's decisions and actions (Rothi, 2005)

From a psychological perspective, nationalism (national attachment) is distinct from other types of attachment, for example, attachment to a religion or a romantic partner. The desire for interpersonal attachment, or the need to belong, is one of the most fundamental human motivations.

From a political or sociological perspective, there are two main perspectives on the origins and basis of nationalism. One is the primordialist perspective that describes nationalism as a reflection of the ancient and perceived evolutionary tendency of humans to organize into distinct groupings based on an affinity of birth. The other is the modernist perspective that describes nationalism as a recent phenomenon that requires the structural conditions of modern society in order to exist (James, 2006).

(d) State

There is no academic consensus on the most appropriate definition of the state. The most commonly used definition is Max Weber's, which describes the state as a compulsory political organization with a centralized government that maintains a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a certain territory. General categories of state institutions include administrative bureaucracies, legal systems, and military or religious organizations (Earle, 1997).

Weber's definition of state places empirical characteristics such as a legal monopoly on force and territory as key factors for a group to form a state. However other theorists such as international scholars gave priority to the juridical rather than the empirical attributes of statehood. For example, Ian Brownlie, a British legal scholar, describes the state as a legal person, recognized by international law, with the following attributes: (a) a defined territory, (b) a permanent population, (c) an effective government, and (d) independence, or the right "to enter into relations with other states (Robinson,2013). Being recognized legally as state by the international society is important. Such definitions reflect the importance of jurisprudence and international law over empirical attributes. Many groups like the Kurds in Iraq, Abkhazians and South Ossetians are considered stateless nations, therefore do not gain the rights of states such as membership in the United Nations. In contrast, many developing countries lack many empirical attributes of Weber's definition, even a monopoly of force, yet they persist as members of the international society of states.

Confounding the definitional problem is that "state" and "government" are often used as synonyms in common conversation and even some academic discourse. According to this definitional schema, the states are nonphysical persons of international law, governments are organizations of people. The relationship between a government and its state is one of representation and authorized agency (Crawford,2007).

Problems Militating against the Nigerian Nation

Nigeria has been unable to evolve a full-grown nationhood status that commands the trust of her citizens because group or ethnic consciousness has always transcended national consciousness.

We are swarmed by ethnic and religious conflicts. For example, in the 1990s, a religious sect in the North called the “Shiites” attacked fellow Nigerians, police stations and even prominent northern Nigerian leaders. The group was led by Sheik Mallam El Zak-Zaky. Asked to shed more light on his religious beliefs and perception of the government, Mallam Ibrahim El Zak-Zaky observed during an interview:

Simply. I have no Lord except Almighty Allah. That means I recognize the authority of none, obey none, and bow before the authority of none but Him. Now others wish I should accept them as lords after [they] have rebelled against the Almighty Allah and His Laws. How can we obey who has rebelled against Allah....We are bound to obey only the authority of Almighty Allah. Those who rebel against Him, we rebel against them and we are not only ready for their prisons but their dell fire, if they have any. What we fear is the fire of Almighty Allah...And here are some people who call themselves leaders but do not recognize the authority of Almighty Allah as the sole Lord, they feel they are supreme authorities, calling themselves all sorts of names, Supreme Military Council, supreme this and supreme that, rebelling against Allah and His messengers and then expecting us, we that surrender before Allah and His messengers ... to bow before them. (Weekend Concord [20 April 1991).

He was actually talking about the Nigerian state officials and their official malfeasance. In 2012, Abua Qaqa, the former spokesperson of Boko Haram sect in northern Nigeria said “ The Nigerian state and Christians are our enemies and we will be launching attacks on the Nigerian state and its security apparatus as well as Churches until we achieve our goal of establishing an Islamic state in place of the present secular arrangement” (The News, September 3, 2012).

Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) was recently reported to have declared Ogoni land a sovereign state. Militants in the Bakassi Peninsula did same thing. Both of them are merely responding to the frustrating environment within which they live. In the 1990s, the Nigerian state killed Saro Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders but this has not stopped the degradation of the people’s communities by oil companies. The federal government has found it difficult to rehabilitate those displaced from Bakassi ten years after this part of Nigeria was ceded to Cameroon.

Bayelsa state already has a national flag, Osun state is moving in same direction. It now calls itself “The State of Osun” and not “Osun State”. There are several other states in which the people are still hiding their national flags awaiting the much expected doom-day being manufactured by politician. The Oodua People’s Congress (OPC) says :

Homeward journey. Homeward journey the sons of Oduduwa.
If we don’t know where we are going, we should not lose consciousness of where the journey started from. Let us dispense with Ogbono soup that fails to draw and give better attention to Okro soup. Homeward journey. Homeward journey the sons of Oduduwa. (National Anthem of the OPC)

What the OPC is saying or singing here is not different from what the members of other non-state armed groups in Nigeria are saying. Boko Haram members are asking for a return to pre-1914 practice of Islam in northern Nigeria. This is their own way of calling for “homeward journey”.

The point the paper is trying to make by circumlocution is that Nigeria is wobbling. The hands of our leaders are full. As people experience different forms of stresses and strains, they blame their problems on anybody they could find around them. They swap bellicose rhetoric. No nation is built that way.

It is in the light of this that the call for an evolution of national project is crucial to address the cosmetic farcical unity surrounding the deeper viruses of disunity. The prescription of this study is that Sovereign National Conference has a role to play in managing the problem of nationhood.

From Sovereign National Conference to Nationhold

Recently, President Goodluck Jonathan constituted a Presidential Advisory Committee on National Dialogue to look into the modality of having the much talk about National Conference. The committee in its report, observed that Nigerians throughout the country are committed to having a National Conference where issues militating against their collective development will be adequately discussed and strategies mapped out for addressing them through constitutional, legal, policy and other strategies. The committee also observed that except for the determination to maintain the corporate existence of Nigeria as a united country, Nigerians believe that there should be no, no-go areas at the proposed conference. They however, seem to place a lot of emphasis on some major issues bordering on their immediate concern for national development, justice, peace and progress in the country.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Nationhood flourishes best when the climate for it to develop is conducive. This is the only way by which Nigeria could be transformed into enduring nationhood. To begin the process of transforming Nigeria into nationhood the following conditions must be met

First, national identity must replace or, at least, supersede previous ethno-cultural loyalties before sustainable nationhood could be entrenched. Citizens' attachments to ethno-cultural loyalties must be made to interlock positively with their attachment to national interest.

Secondly, all violent national conflicts must be confronted with the resolve to critically examine them so as to capture their substance. This is one of the objective ways by which nationhood can be nurtured and sustained.

Thirdly, the state must be depersonalized so as to enable public policy to establish strong institutions that will make compliance with the ethos of nationhood appeal to all Nigerians.

Considering our recent political experience, any constitution devised should seek to eliminate cut-throat political competition based on a system or rules of winner-takes-all. As a corollary, it should discourage electoral malpractices. It should also discourage institutionalized opposition to the government in power and develop consensus politics and government based on community of all interests rather than interests of a section of the country.

Finally, it is hoped that Sovereign National Conference would drive the tremendous human and material resources available in Nigeria to evolve a true nation where national interest will override primordial ones, where the safety of lives and property of Nigerians will be guaranteed in any part of the country.

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Sovereign National Conference: A Pathway to Nigerian Nationhood (1914-2013)

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