

The Sovereign National Conference (SNC)

(**The Guardian**, March 1, 8 and 15, 2012)

I.

About twenty years ago, precisely on June 25, July 2, and July 9, 1992, this column carried a three-part article on Sovereign National Conference (SNC). Each of the three parts dealt with a different aspect of the subject and carried a different title: **For a Sovereign National Conference (SNC)** (June 25); **SNC and flashpoints of discontent** (July 2) and **Organising the SNC** (July 9).

I started the first part of the article, **For a Sovereign National Conference (SNC)**, with revolutionary optimism and high morale: "Now that the convening of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) for Nigeria can be regarded as historically inevitable, we turn part of our attention to its historical basis, justification, status, composition, structure, mandate, agenda, tenure and relation to the incumbent government. We must turn attention to these questions so that the conference, when it finally comes, does not descend on us unprepared, as historical anti-climax".

Clarification: By "we" and "us" in this opening paragraph I meant, not "all Nigerians" but specifically, the Radical Movement, that is, the aggregate of Nigeria's socialists, labour unions, popular-democratic formations and radical patriots. I am today aware, more than I was in 1992, that there are genuine democrats and radical patriots who are only opposed to "Nigerian capitalism" and "Nigerian system" and not to capitalism in general. The federation of "we" and "us" has spaces for all such compatriots.

The opening paragraph of the 1992 essay was furthermore restrained, so to say, by the second paragraph, from going over the roof. And this was the restraint: "I hasten to add, however, that the actual historical point at which this conference - that is, the SNC - will be convened cannot be predicted. We cannot say if it will come before the end of the present transition or after it. Since I am not a soothsayer, I cannot say whether it will come peacefully or not. What is abundantly clear is that the way forward passes through a National Conference and no where else".

The phrase "whether it will come about peacefully or not" appears to introduce a contradiction into this advocacy because a national conference, sovereign or not, was - and is- supposed to prevent a one-sided, or unilateral and therefore violent, resolution of a fundamental political crisis. So how can it come about violently? In other words, how can a "peaceful alternative" be conceived as a project which may be brought into being by violence? I now see that my 1992 formulation in this instance was too dry. I ought to have added two notes by way of illustration: **One**, that an actual armed confrontation can force a Sovereign National Conference on the nation; and **two**: that, generally and historically, a violent action, or actions that threaten to use force, may be inevitable in laying the foundation of a system that is envisaged as peaceful.

In the third paragraph of the article I said: "A Sovereign National Conference becomes the only viable historical option, not all times, but precisely at those points in a nation's history when a crisis, signifying the bankruptcy of a social order or an existing political structure, cannot be resolved either by the existing state or by any other coalition of forces. At those points, the **nation in crisis** can advance in one of three directions: Either it degenerates into anarchy (Liberia and Somalia) or disintegrates (Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union), or the **whole nation** meets to save itself. The way to national recovery and renewal therefore lies in the third direction".

The only comment I should make today on this arguably idealistic formulation is that I was - and I am - interested in the question of Sovereign National Conference principally because of the role I believed - and believe - my "constituents", that is radical patriots, genuine democrats and leftists, would play in such a gathering and the specific weight of the interests of Nigeria's popular masses in it. Otherwise, I would not be talking politics. **I may however add that neither in 1992 nor today would I conceive a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) as a gathering of Nigeria's ethnic nationalities, however articulated. Nigeria is not, and has never been, the arithmetical sum of ethnic nationalities.**

In the fourth paragraph, I attempted an implicit definition of a Sovereign National Conference by differentiating it from a Constituent Assembly: "A Sovereign National Conference (SNC) is not a Constituent Assembly, and must not be confused with it. A Constituent Assembly is normally put in place by an incumbent government under its own rules....Whatever form it takes, a Constituent Assembly comes into being only when a basic direction of national renewal has been agreed upon, or imposed. The Assembly then works out the mechanisms or details". I would today replace "Constituent Assembly" with "Constitutional Conference" to correspond with our own political lexicon.

On the other hand, a Sovereign National Conference "proceeds with no assumption whatsoever; it is national in the truest sense of the term; it is virile; it is self-constituted and, while it lasts, it is superior to any other political institution in the land, including the incumbent government. This is the type of conference I consider now inevitable in the country". **I do not see the need for any modification of this formulation,** although I admit that it is "extremist" and "maximalist". But that is it. If you are not comfortable with this, you may talk of another conference, but not a Sovereign National Conference. I may also add, for completeness, that only a referendum can alter even a single word in SNC's decisions.

In the sixth and seventh paragraphs I argued that a Sovereign National Conference (SNC), as I had conceived it "is a social revolution, regardless of the fear which conservatives have for the term. There are two types of social revolution: the national but radical; and the class-based. A Sovereign National Conference is a revolution of the first type. The Conference need not aspire to address all questions. It should limit itself to the fundamental question of our national existence. Other questions will be taken up by an elected Constituent Assembly when the terms of

our continued existence have been agreed upon by the SNC and the foundations of a New Nigeria have been laid". My comment here is by way of clarification. By "national existence" or "continued existence" I did not mean-and do not mean - ethnic cohabitation". I meant - and I mean - the prevention of a Somali-type situation. We all know that, today, Somalia simultaneously exists and does not exist.

This first part of the 3-part article ended with a "distillation" of what I had called the "fundamental question of our national existence". I listed four elements of this "fundamental question" and added a fifth one in the second article. They may be summarized. The first element is the **national question and structure of national unity**. "Under this, the **SNC should deal with the question of relationship between the various nationalities that constitute Nigeria. It should make** a choice between confederalism, federalism and unitarism. It should deal with the nature and elements of the choice that is made". My hope here was - and is - that my "constituents", as I defined them above, would fight for either the retention of states as constituent units of a Nigerian federation or the empowerment of the current geopolitical zones. **But not restructuring along ethnic lines.**

The second element of the fundamental principle of our national existence, as I saw it in 1992, is **Fundamental human rights**. Here the SNC should "agree on a list of enforceable and justiciable human rights to be enjoyed by all Nigerians with immediate effect, not at an unspecified future". The third element is **State and religion**. "Here the terms of relationships that should exist between organized religions and the Nigerian state should be stated in clear terms". I added that "there should be no ambiguity here". The fourth element is the **Philosophy of government and political system**. I now believe that the fifth and last element, **Economic system and property relations**, sounds too suggestive for the type of conference that is envisaged. It may come under fundamental human rights.

I would like to end with the obvious: Just as nothing guarantees the victory of a revolution before it is launched, or even as it is launched, the SNC, **as conceived above**, is not guaranteed of victory. In fact, it can hasten the advent of the "doomsday", as some people now warn - honestly or dishonestly. For instance, there may appear irreconcilable disagreements on the composition of the conference, on the agenda or on the mode of taking decisions. There may also be threats of, or actual, extra - SNC interventions in the course of the proceedings!

II.

The piece, **SNC: Original conception revisited** (Thursday, March 1; 2012), listed some of the problems which may arise before, or in the course of, a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) in Nigeria -assuming, of course, that agreement had been reached, in principle, to hold such a conference, and - before that - that agreement had been reached on who and who should reach the first agreement. The problems include those of definition, composition and representation, organisation and structure, agenda, sovereignty (or independence) and extra-SNC intervention. What I wish to do in the present article is to further examine some of these preliminary and substantive problems - as well as doubts - on the road to, and from, the SNC. To begin with: I think it is necessary to state categorically that I support the idea of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) for Nigeria; and that I have been in support of the idea since its modern conception between late 1980s and early 1990s. And since my 3-part article on the subject in June and July 1992, not less than 25 articles in support of SNC have appeared in this column. Since the appearance of that opening article in 1992, I have been concerned with making elaborations and clarifications and raising problems. I do not believe, therefore, that the very idea of an SNC, either historically or in Nigeria, is "mischievous" as suggested by Sanusi Abubakar in his column in the **Daily Trust** of Tuesday, February 14,2012: **Sovereign National Conference: Opening a Pandora's Box.**

I know, and admit, however, that there are mischievous and opportunistic co-travelers in the SNC campaign - as in many struggles, campaigns and advocacies in Nigeria and worldwide. I may also add, for completeness, that there are opportunists and mischief-makers in the anti-SNC movement. What happens to the idea, or more specifically, whether the opportunists and mischief-makers on both sides will succeed in killing the idea, rather than allowing it to be exhausted, or transcended, or realised, ultimately depends on what happens on the ground of political struggle. Having said this, let me also say that I am in substantial agreement with several points made by Sanusi - especially his logic - in his February 14 article.

The problems raised by Abubakar Sanusi blend, in several parts, with those raised by two editors and columnists of **ThisDay** newspaper: **Simon Kolawole** (Sovereign National

Conference, February 5, 2012) and **Kayode Komolafe** (When not to call a national conference, February 8, 2012). The significant difference between Sanusi and the other two is that the former was writing in the context of "North - South divide" which is currently enjoying a field day in the country's media discussion. I hope to return to the three personages.

A major confusion in the definition of Sovereign National Conference, or SNC, is rooted in two assumptions or reductions. First is the reduction of Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to Conference of Ethnic Nationalities (CEN). But the Nigerian nation, I strongly hold (and have strongly held), is not equal to the **arithmetical sum** of the ethnic nationalities in it - even when these nationalities, big and small, have been accurately identified and listed. A very simple illustration is that a wall is not the sum of the separate blocks used in building it - ignoring what binds the blocks and what fills the other interstices. This is a very simplified illustration, but it conveys the point I am making.

The second reduction which creates confusion in the SNC discussion is the assumption that the **main** - if not the **sole** - item on the agenda of SNC is the ethnic **nationality question** understood here to mean the complex of relationships between the ethnic nationalities in Nigeria or, more narrowly, the ethnic power relations in Nigeria. This was how Kayode Komolafe captured this second reduction in his column cited above: "Even when a case of incompetence in governance can be established some advocates would rather call for a Sovereign National Conference as the panacea. It is difficult to fathom the national question in all these issues of governance. They would still arise even if you create 450 countries out of Nigeria unless they are solved as specific governance problems".

I agree with Kayode Komolafe; but I can see that he laboured to choose his words and expressions in order to carry as many people as possible with his argument; and specifically, in order not to be accused of "ideological bias". But the point he was making is clear and convincing even if it is put more strongly. The bottom-line is that every issue cannot be reduced to ethnic nationality question. It is however necessary to insist that we are not just dealing with "incompetence in governance", but also **conscious class interests** in which ethnicity becomes a weapon, and that in real life it is sometimes difficult to separate incompetence in governance from conscious class interests. Furthermore, we are dealing not with "primitive accumulation" in general, but specifically **primitive capitalist accumulation**.

The last point Komolafe made, namely, that even if 450 separate countries emerge in Nigeria, "incompetence in governance" would be reproduced in each of them, is one key plank in the platform of the Left provided it is understood that "incompetence in governance" includes not only corruption, stealing, and "incompetence" in its ordinary sense of "lack of skill or ability", but also class exploitation and oppression.

Although I can hear some Nigerians say, cynically, that seekers of a Sovereign National Conference only want their own exclusive geopolitical spheres to control and exploit, many others, including myself, would insist that there is ethnic nationality question in Nigeria, and that this has to be in the agenda of a Sovereign National Conference. But this cannot be the only item on the agenda. I would not even suggest that the ethnic nationality question would be the main item because the interplay of social contradictions from time to time makes one element in the complex of contradictions dominant, though not determinant. This thesis is frequently confirmed in real life - the latest confirmations being by the **Boko Haram** phenomenon, the petrol price war, the Jos "civil war" and the struggle for minimum wage. In these four explosions we saw ethnic nationality question, religious sectarianism as well as exploitative political economy. Each of these must feature prominently in any SNC.

I think I should make this final point before I proceed: I do not dismiss the concept of Conference of Ethnic Nationalities (CEN). All I am saying is that SNC should not be reduced to CEN. In fact, most of the opponents of SNC and reluctant converts to the idea have been attacking Conference of Ethnic Nationalities rather than Sovereign National Conference. If, indeed, SNC is equated to CEN and the agenda is reduced to the ethnic nationality question, then those who fear that such a conference could lead to disintegration, or even allege that there is already a grand design to use it to break up the country, may have a **prima facie** case.

On the origins of the SNC campaign - the ultimate source of the reductions I have been talking about - I rely here on Simon Kolawole and Kayode Komolafe. The former, kolawole, recalled that the campaign started "when General Ibrahim Babangida was in power and was playing games with the transition - to-civil-rule programme, activists started clamouring for a talk shop to discuss the future of Nigeria". He also remembered that the need to resolve the ethnic nationality question was part of this clamour and that Major Gideon Orkar's broadcast during his abortive coup of April

22,1990, "had set the tone". Further down, Kolawole reported that "those who proposed SNC said the decisions would be 'final', subject to a referendum. In other words, the executive and the legislature cannot alter any of the recommendations".

Kayode Komolafe's recollections agreed essentially with those of Simon Kolawole. But Komolafe, in addition, provided the global context of the emergence of SNC campaign in Nigeria: Collapse of the communist regimes in the "Soviet block" the second "wind" of democracy in Africa and agitations for SNCs in some Francophone African countries. Komolafe also remembered that at the beginning of the SNC campaign in Nigeria, the "radical input" was that the composition should not be exclusively ethnic nationalities but also the large sociopolitical sphere many people now call **civil society**: Labour, students, women, professional bodies, etc. That is the historical origin of the SNC campaign in Nigeria. We can trace the trajectory of the campaign from late 1989.

III.

This is the continuation of my notes and thoughts on the Sovereign National Conference (SNC), an idea all power blocs or all segments of "power brokers" in Nigeria appear to have now accepted. Fine. In the first essay of this series, **SNC: Original conception revisited** (March 1, 2012), I recalled the series I wrote on the subject 20 years ago when the idea was first presented to the Nigerian public - during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. I summarized the first part of the article - dealing with general principles - slightly revised it, and re-presented it. In the second essay, **Further notes on SNC** (March 8), I indicated the problems and doubts I envisaged would be encountered during and on the road to, and from, the conference.

The problems I foresee include those of definition, composition and representation, organization and structure, agenda and what I called extra-SNC intervention. I wish to continue the discussion of these five problems from where I stopped on March 8 - but not individually or in the order I have listed them here. The starting point today is the observation that many contributors to this debate, including the vanguard gladiators, are confusing the agenda for SNC with the necessarily partisan positions groups and individuals would take at the conference.

Let me explain. In the essay **SNC: Original conception revisited** (March 1) I gave the agenda I would suggest for SNC as: **Ethnic nationality question and structure of national unity; Fundamental human rights; State and religion;** and **Philosophy of government and political system.** I had, in the 1992 series, included a fifth item, namely, Economic system and property relation, but have now decided to remove it because I now feel that it is "too suggestive". That is to say: it would be preempting what I would like my own "constituents" to push at the conference and inadvertently substituting an agenda of a meeting of potential opponents with a partisan platform which would be pushed at the meeting. I have now reserved this fifth item for discussion under fundamental human rights.

The particular confusion which I have observed relates to treating ethnic or geopolitical restructuring and separation or "true federalism" - together with the various meanings attached to them - as if it has already been adopted as agenda or, worse still, as a ready-made proposition for adoption, or for debate and adoption. What I believe is on the agenda, or can be on the agenda, at the moment is what I have formulated as **Ethnic nationality question and structure of national unity.** This is general enough; it does not pre-suppose and does not preempt. Anyone who is opposed to this, even as a basis for discussion, is opposed to SNC fundamentally and should say so.

The bottom-line is this: Ethnic separation or geopolitical autonomy or "true federalism" is not on the SNC agenda, but every Nigerian following this discussion knows that large segments of Nigeria's political community are dissatisfied with the present federal structure and have developed platforms on restructuring. One of these platforms now includes "regional integration", that is, a return to the pre-1966 regional arrangement - but with six regions (co-extensive with with the present six geopolitical zones), or eight regions instead of the four pre-1966 regions.

We also know that other segments of the nation, including some political institutions of state (the Presidency and the National Assembly, in particular) are satisfied with the present structure and would prefer changes that come through the normal processes of democratic and constitutional reform. There are other segments which, while not dismissing the need for political restructuring, hold that the immediate problem with Nigeria lies elsewhere, namely, the character of the Nigerian state, the political economy, and type of governance. A couple of

weeks ago, General Ibrahim Babangida, former military president (1985-1993), expressed the view that certain matters ought to be taken as "settled" and ought not to be on the SNC agenda. These, in his view, include national unity, states as constituent units of the federation, republicanism, and capitalism. My provisional response here is that this is his platform. He should push it, or cause it to be pushed, at the conference.

Some weeks ago, a comrade, in a private dialogue, said that the concept of "true federalism" should be jettisoned because it is "not scientific". I took it upon myself to explain to bemused younger compatriots what the elder meant by "true federalism" not being "scientific". I simply told them that they were being asked to go historical and dialectical. They would see that the concept and practice of federalism originated in particular historical circumstances and have developed over time and have acquired various forms that are historically determined and conditioned. This is exactly why in my writings I always put "true federalism" in inverted commas. However, the point being made should just be noted. It is not appropriate for political engagement - at least not yet.

The problems which immediately spring up from the question of composition and representation are rooted in the reduction of **Sovereign National Conference (SNC)** to **Conference of Ethnic nationalities (CEN)**. Sanusi Abubakar, in his article which I cited in my last piece - **Sovereign National Conference: Opening a Pandora's Box (Daily Trust, February 14, 2012)** - articulated the problem in his own way. I am splitting his statement into two: preamble and substantive. First, the preamble: "The biggest risk may end up being that those asking for Sovereign National Conference, with whom I have now added my name, may end up not happy with the genie they are letting out of the bottle. That is even if we assume we can easily resolve this fiction of "sovereign ethnicities" to start with".

Well, I do not know what "sovereign ethnicities" means, so I cannot say whether it is fiction or not. I would rather ask how much of the fiction would be removed if we distinguish SNC from CEN and insist that we are dealing with the former? Sanusi Abubakar's substantive submission was this: "Let us humour them by agreeing that each ethnic nationality, however defined, would have one representative. Let us assume that the Hausa, Fulani, Nupe, Kanuri, Tiv, Idoma, Igala, Epira, Yoruba, Igbo and Edo have one delegate each, making 10 in all. Would these 10 succumb to any agreement forced on them because about 350 other groups, who

probably have less than 20 million together, are united on it? Would they not veto it? All modern democracies are, after all is said and done, based on population".

Sanusi Abubakar's questions, however you may frame or re-frame them, are concrete questions and will definitely arise as soon as you reduce SNC to CEN. Well, Comrade Sanusi, I am not considering your questions and the historical and practical problems they envelope. I am not considering them because I am not thinking of Conference of Ethnic Nationalities (CEN), but Sovereign National Conference (SNC). However, I considered similar questions in the context of restructuring about 12 years ago in my article: **Impossibility of ethnic separation (The Guardian, November 4,1999)**. The article was a comment on late Chief Anthony Enahoro's proposals on political restructuring.

On several one - on - one meetings I told the veteran radical patriot and nationalist that though being invited by him was a great honour to me and though hearing him was like going to school, and although I agreed with him on many points, I still found it difficult to endorse separation along ethnic nationality lines. It is not a question of not liking the idea, but the question of what is possible and what is impossible. The level of social, economic and political integration is at the root of this impossibility. Not that Nigeria cannot disintegrate. It can, but it will not be along ethnic nationality lines. If Nigeria disintegrates it will be through wars (not war) and each component will have ethnic majorities and minorities. Remember Biafra; remember Yugoslavia.

What I have just said is not an argument against Sovereign National Conference (SNC). I am only foreseeing problems and raising them in the context of my support for the Conference. I am aware that the preceding paragraph mixed problem-raising with my partisan positions. I am confident, however, that with what I had earlier said in this piece, the reader can easily draw the line. I would like to end this piece with the conclusion to my 1992 series: "Our country is in deep crisis, and can be rescued only through a Sovereign National Conference (SNC). For the frustration, discontent and anger in this land have grown beyond the point where they can be assuaged or neutralized or contained by intimidation, repression, co-optation or nominal policy amendments. They are very deep and very wide".