

Opinion

Further notes on SNC

By Edwin Madunagu

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 three-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 talkshop to discuss the future of Nigeria". He also remembered that 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 talkshop to discuss the future of Nigeria". He also remembered that 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.

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.

• To be continued next Thursday.

Opinion

Further notes on SNC (2)

By Edwin Madunagu

THIS is the continuation of my notes and thoughts on the Sovereign National Conference (SNC), an idea we understand all power blocs or all segments of "power brokers" in Nigeria have now accepted. Fine. In the first essay on 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 pre-empting 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 is already being 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 pre-empt. 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 (corresponding with the present six geopolitical zones), 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 me 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".

- Concluded.
- This column is proceeding on a short break