

# viewpoint

## Time to negotiate Nigeria



■ **Chido Onumah**  
conumah@hotmail.com

I borrowed the title of this piece from my new book, *Nigeria is Negotiable*, which is due for public presentation on Tuesday, August 20, 2013, in Abuja. I shall be quoting profusely from the various contributors to the book to buttress the argument for an urgent national dialogue on the future of Nigeria. Since the pre-event publicity started a few weeks ago, I have received numerous enquiries about what I mean by the term “Nigeria is negotiable”.

Some of the enquiries border on the comical; others border on a disturbing lack of appreciation of the enormity of our problems as a nation. Very few actually seek clarification on the main thrust of the book. Of all the comments I have received about Nigeria is Negotiable, none has been as engaging as that of Gen. Alani Akinriande (retd.).

I met Akinriande last week at the MUSON Centre, Lagos, during the 70th birthday lecture for Prof. Ropo Sekoni. At the end of the event, I walked up to the retired general and gave him a copy of *Nigeria is Negotiable*. He looked at the cover of the book intently, turned to me and said, “Of course, Nigeria is negotiable”. He then went ahead to explain his position. According to him, time was running out on the issue of negotiating Nigeria; that we were lucky that people were ready to talk and that we shouldn’t take it for granted; that a time may come when people would no longer be interested in talking.

That statement has resonated with me ever since. It is not that I never imagined that Nigeria could get to a stage where it would be impossible to “discuss” or where war, violence or civil strife would be the

only means of “discussion”; but the tone and how emphatic and unambiguous the retired general was, heightened for me the

inevitability of this urgent national dialogue.

There are three fundamental issues in the debate about negotiating Nigeria. The first is to understand that many, if not all, of the problems that assail us as a nation are rooted in the structure of the country. The second is that restructuring Nigeria through a process of negotiation is not a silver bullet or cure-all for our problems. And the third is to understand that Nigeria has always been negotiated, so there is nothing really new in the call to negotiate the country.

Right from the very beginning, whether we are talking about how the country itself came into being or what happened at independence; whether we are talking about the civil war, how it was prosecuted and what happened when it ended; the situation the country found itself after the assassination of Gen. Murtala Ramat Muhammed in February, 1976; Gen Olusegun Obasanjo’s handover to Alhaji Shehu Shagari in October, 1979; the June 12 debacle; the emergence, first of Ernest Shonekan as the Head of the Interim National Government when Gen. Ibrahim Babangida stepped aside in August, 1993 after annulling the June 12, 1993 presidential election won by Chief M.K.O Abiola; the subsequent emergence of Obasanjo, now, as a civilian president in 1999; and finally, Obasanjo’s decision to double-cross those who made him president in 1999 by selecting a sickly Umaru Yar’Adua as president in 2007, Nigeria has always been a product of negotiation.

The only problem, unfortunately, is that Nigeria was first negotiated on the terms of a marauding band of merchants and empire builders; and has

subsequently been negotiated by a military cabal and its civilian collaborators who do not mean well for the country. Therefore, now is the time to negotiate it on the terms of the mass of our people who bear the brunt of its inequitable features. If we are concerned about the survival of Nigeria, now is the time to embark on the onerous task of negotiating it in the interest of majority of Nigerians.

According to Prof. Anthony Ochefu, in the introduction to *Nigeria is Negotiable*, “Between the official versions of the decolonisation history that give a prominent role to our nationalist heroes for winning independence from the British and others who believe in the “conspiracy theory” of decolonisation, the process of how the region with the least democratic credentials ended up as the driver of a new democratic enterprise epitomises aspects of the negotiated experience”.

When we talk about negotiating or restructuring Nigeria, we are not talking about merely “remapping” the country or creating new fiefdoms for ethnic warlords. We are talking about many things, including the nature of our federalism, the question of resource control, the secularity of the country and the rights of citizens in a federation. These are very tough choices.

As Dr. Chidi Odinkalu noted in the preface, “Nation building is not a project for the faint-hearted or for those with a short memory. It needs statesmen and women, thinkers and active citizens. And it takes very little for granted.

“In law as in politics, countries are defined by a population within bounded territories under a common sovereign. “Boundaries, howsoever defined, are, however, not facts of nature; they are artificial. They can be formed, re-formed, un-formed, negotiated and re-negotiated.

“Within one generation, for instance, the Soviet Empire collapsed into muddling, hardly remarkable, entities; Yugoslavia disintegrated into a collection of warring states and statelets; Germany evolved into one country from two; Ethiopia went the other way, becoming two countries instead of one, (indeed, Menelik II had sold Djibouti to the French about 116 years ago to finance the modernisation of Addis Ababa); Sudan has similarly become two countries (in which further splintering cannot be ruled out) and the United Kingdom itself could be reduced to England and Wales in 2014 depending on the outcome of the proposed referendum on Scottish Independence.

“A little further back in time but still not too long ago, Tagore’s India, the subject of the composition, “Mind Without Fear”, in his Nobel Literature Prize winning collection, *Gitanjali*, went from one territory to three countries (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) in just under a quarter of a century”.

Perhaps, Akinriande’s admonition is one that we ought to heed and urgently too. I agree with Ochefu that, “As a country on its “third missionary” journey to a truly democratic nation, the fundamental questions of nation-building that began over 100 years ago have not been fully and or properly answered.

“The corporate existence of the country has been formally broken once and pronounced broken once. It took a horrible civil war to restore the entity when it was broken and an equally brutal attempted coup when it was pronounced”.

“As we approach 2014 that marks 100 years of our negotiated existence, a ‘humpty dumpty’ scenario can easily be envisaged. If this happens, the colonial map that was drawn in 1960 will certainly change. We must collectively negotiate to ensure that we retain the map but change the way we exist under that map”.