

# viewpoint



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

## National conference: Matters arising

**D**URING his Independence Day broadcast on October 1, President Goodluck Jonathan announced to a somewhat surprised nation his intention to facilitate a “national dialogue” on the future of Nigeria. To this end, he set up a 13-member Advisory Committee which was inaugurated a few days ago. It is understandable if Nigerians have mixed feelings about the national conference announced by President Jonathan considering his opposition to such a conference in the past. I shall return to this.

This intervention has become necessary for a number of reasons. Whenever the issue of Sovereign National Conference comes up, some people become agitated and defensive. First, let me note that the hysteria that has gripped the opponents – and in some instance, proponents – of the SNC is completely unnecessary. Second, it is important to respond to the crippling ignorance of those who ought to know but would rather obfuscate this issue, just as it is imperative to highlight the insufferable indifference of those who are in a position to act, but have refused to do anything.

Third, we need to confront not just the arrogance and hypocrisy, but the egregious folly of those who think this piece of real estate called Nigeria is their grandfather’s barnyard. Once the issue of the SNC is mentioned, all you hear are weasel words and fear mongering: “We want Nigeria to break up”; “Nigeria won’t break up”; “We are not afraid of break-up”; “We will survive if Nigeria breaks up”. These have become the refrain of ethnic chauvinists in our midst. If you ask them to define who this mythical “we” is, they can’t offer any coherent answer.

Of course, unless we sit down to have a sincere and meaningful national dialogue, this country will disintegrate before our very eyes, but not in the way some people envisage. That is why the SNC is imperative. The SNC comes about

when a nation is faced, as we are currently, with a lingering and intractable crisis. The basic aim is to rescue the nation.

The SNC will not “solve all of Nigeria’s political and social problems”. The SNC is not meant to address – as some people erroneously think – the problem of corruption, the crisis in the education sector or other sectoral problems plaguing Nigeria. These are minor problems in the scheme of things. It is the survival of the country that is at stake. As a matter of priority, we need to build a nation out of the contraption fashioned almost a century ago; what we didn’t do at independence some 53 years ago and have refused to do ever since. Until we do that, we’ll be wasting our time talking about corruption and other social ills that have become part of our national ethos.

Nigeria is not working, and here, I don’t mean the collapse of education or public infrastructure. I am talking about the very essence of nationhood which ensures that even though we may not have a “common descent, history, culture, or language”, after decades of being an entity, we ought to have developed a common future, national identity and philosophy. Unfortunately, we have not been able to do this basic thing. That is where our problem lies.

Who is a Nigerian? What does being a Nigerian mean to any person who accepts that tag? Fifty three years after independence, we have managed to alienate one another so much so that people still see themselves as northerners, southerners, and everything in-between. And yet we want to tackle corruption; we want to fix our education and health system and solve the issue of impunity and the security challenge across the country.

Very few people believe in this country, never mind the hypocritical verbiage that emerges daily whether from the Presidency, the National Assembly, or the sundry institutions erected to create a semblance of national cohesion. That explains the mindless looting of the national treasury and the attendant impunity.

Don’t get me wrong. The SNC is not a silver bullet. We may convoke one and realise that we have more problems than we imagined, in which case the resolution may be far-reaching and radical. But we have to convoke it anyway because there is no greater self-delusion than to think there is any other meaningful way out of the current quagmire.

Back to Jonathan and his national conference. Those who accuse the President of insincerity may have a point. It is possible, as some people have argued, that the President wants to use the conference as a diversion from his incompetence and the 2015 elections. All this, however, is in the realm of conjecture. Let’s give the President the benefit of the doubt and wait and see what he actually offers.

Clearly, what Nigeria needs is a Sovereign National Conference. For those who oppose the planned “national conference” because it does not have the term “sovereign”, I would say it is not for the President to determine *ab initio* the nature and structure of the proposed dialogue. This national dialogue or conference should and ought to go beyond President Jonathan. The President may have facilitated it, either because he genuinely believes there is no viable alternative or because of personal interest, but he would be mistaken to think he can tamper with it to suit certain interest or for partisan political reasons.

The focus, therefore, should be on the Femi Okurounmu-led advisory committee and the first four points of its terms of reference: (i) To consult expeditiously with all relevant stakeholders with a view to drawing up a feasible agenda for the proposed national dialogue/conference; (ii.) to make recommendations to government on structure and modalities for the proposed national dialogue/conference; (iii) to make recommendations to government on how representation of various interest groups at the national dialogue/conference will be determined; (iv) to advise on a time frame for the national dialogue/conference.

The President has merely set in motion a process for us to talk. It is left for Nigerians to

decide how they want to talk and what they want to talk about. We’ll wait to see how the committee goes about the onerous task of collating the input of Nigerians. Clearly, six weeks is not enough time to undertake this task. When the conference does take place, the outcome, for it to be meaningful, can only be altered by a referendum, not by the National Assembly, not even by the President. It is not in the interest of the new Nigeria we envisage to give the National Assembly or the President such powers.

For me, the one thorny issue about this national dialogue is representation and the selection process. But I am clear about one thing: Ethnic nationalities should take a “back seat” in this conference. Let me reiterate the point that this conference should not be about our ethnic nationalities. Even though ethnic nationalities form the bedrock of our nation, “Nigeria is greater than the sum total of its ethnic nationalities”.

It is important, of course, to build an egalitarian society that addresses the needs and concerns of the diverse groups and interests that make up Nigeria. And many of these needs and concerns can be addressed when citizens have access to and are in control of their resources. If we can find a way to ensure this happens then Nigerians can begin the arduous task of harnessing these resources.

Top on the agenda for the national conference, therefore, should be how to restructure Nigeria to make it work. And one way of doing that is to get the states to work. Let every state take control of its resources: natural, human, etc., and contribute to the Federal Government. Every state in Nigeria today can boast these resources in abundance. Let states decide the number of local government areas they desire. Let them have their own electoral bodies as well as police and make laws for the good governance of their states, subject of course to federal laws where applicable. Above all, let every “Nigerian” have the right to claim and reside in any state of his or her choice.

If we want to build a “perfect union”, now is the time to take that bold step. Tomorrow may be too late!