



OBAFEMI AWOLowo FOUNDATION EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP SEMINAR

'NATIONAL CONFERENCE: ROADMAP TO NIGERIA'S STABILITY?'

THE CONTEXT

Agitations and demands for a national conference in Nigeria have, in our recent past, been restricted to human rights groups, activists and political associations such as the Movement for National Reformation (MNR) founded by the late Chief Anthony Enahoro. The demand went by different nomenclatures such as 'Sovereign National Conference', 'Conference of Nationalities' and 'Conference of Ethnic Nationalities'. Although these terms do not mean the same thing and those using them do not always explain what they mean by them, the underlying consensus appears to be the convoking of a conference in which the nationalities comprising the nation will determine the terms of association and the modalities of interethnic relations. One of the groups proposing the national conference defines the objective as "producing a people's constitution through a national conference and a national referendum".

Impetus was given to the demand for such a conference recently with what appears to be a tacit endorsement by the Senate President, David Mark, who understandably had spearheaded, along with the two legislative chambers, opposition to the demand. Their opposition to the idea of the national conference was based on the argument that the current democratic structures set up under the 1999 Constitution already provide appropriate fora to discuss the national question given, for example, the trans-ethnic character of the Senate and the House of Representatives. Indeed, a constitutional review exercise mounted by the National Assembly had the specific objective of remedying the defects of the 1999 constitution.

Others, however, argue that even the 1999 constitution was drawn up in circumstances less than voluntary, federal or democratic and that it does not provide an adequate basis for renewing the federal bargain or attempting to genuinely answer the nationalities' question.

It must be noted that the question of the nationalities became starkly posed in recent times with the violent insurgency in northern Nigeria, the unremitting violence in Nigeria's perpetually boiling cauldron, the Niger Delta, the resurgence of Igbo nationalism and the allegations of Yoruba marginalization by leading political groups in Western Nigeria. A national conference appears to be more urgent, therefore, against this backdrop and in the context of fiery and intemperate upheavals in the run up to 2015.

SEMINAR OBJECTIVES

The Foundation seeks to bring clarity into the debate about the appropriateness, modalities, ideological underpinnings and expected outcomes of a national conference. It intends to do this by examining the arguments for and against the

conference and by providing a forum for those advocating the conference to sketch out conceptual elucidations and programmatic objectives. For example, what will a national conference achieve and how will such a conference be insulated from political manipulation? Will such an exercise be a one-off or will it be periodic considering that the question of nationalities in any country cannot be resolved once and for all.

Furthermore, by assembling scholars and activists across the nation's geopolitical diversity, the foundation can bring more light than heat into the ongoing contentions over the issue. It might be pertinent in this regard to examine international perspectives by alluding for example to the recent Scottish referendum in the United Kingdom, the uproar over the status and future of Quebec in the Canadian federation as well as the relative successes of federalism in the plural and raucously diverse contexts of India and South Africa.

SUB-THEMES

Including, but not limited to, the following:

- I. The case for a national conference?**
 - a. Historical perspectives
 - b. Lessons from other lands

- II. Modalities**
 - a. Pre-conference consultations
 - b. Representation

- III. Agenda for the Conference**
 - a. Type of constitution – federal or unitary
 - b. Presidential vs. Parliamentary system of government
 - c. The 'National Question' (states creation, rotation of power, etc.)
 - d. 'No-go' areas?

The Executive Leadership Seminar, in keeping with the tradition of the Foundation, aims to come up with policy suggestions encapsulated in a communiqué that will be presented to the Presidency and the National Assembly, as well as published in the media.

The Foundation seeks to provide a forum where the clashing viewpoints of opponents and proponents of the national conference can be reduced to calm discussion and deliberation thereby mapping out a way forward for the nation.