

Nigeria's Centenary and National Dialogue: Beginning or Breaking Point for Unity

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The root cause of Nigeria's peace and security challenges has always been attributed to the fundamental flaws in its amalgamation processes and the ensuing constitution. Analysts opine that the country's constitutional arrangement and political framework has never taken into consideration the socio-cultural diversities and nuances of the country. This is further compounded by the general perception of lack of consultation and inclusion in the makings of the various constitutions from 1914 to date. They have also argued that the decision by the British colonial masters to amalgamate the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 was done without input from the various ethnic nationalities who live within the territory, which the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo described as "a mere geographical expression"¹

It is therefore not strange that since the return of democracy in 1999 a lot of people and communities have continued to agitate for a dialogue and underscoring the need to "talk" under various guise and names. The agitation has become more persuasive from both

government and the citizenry as the country experiences myriads of security challenges that threaten its continued existence as one nation.

In his 53rd anniversary speech, the country's president His Excellency



Goodluck Ebele Jonathan alluded to the fact that the country was "work in progress" and admitted that it is not the best moments for Nigeria as the country is divided in many ways – ethnically, religiously, politically and materially. He therefore gave his blessings for a National Dialogue with Dr. Femi Okurounmu and Dr. Akilu Indabawa (and 11 others) as Chair and Secretary respectively of an Advisory Committee that will design the framework and structure of the dialogue process

In 2000, the legal luminary and advocate of Sovereign National Conference - late Chief Gani Fawehmi stated that the primary duty of a Sovereign National Conference is to address and find solutions to the key problems afflicting Nigeria since 1914. The concern is to remove all obstacles which have prevented the country from establishing political justice, economic justice, social justice, cultural justice, religious justice and to construct a new constitutional frame-work in terms of the system of government-structurally, politically economically, socially, culturally and religiously².

The point of departure from the President's pronouncement is his understanding and emphasis on dialogue rather than a conference where ethnic nationalities debate from their entrenched positions as has been the case in the past

This policy brief aligns itself with the wishes of the Nigerian people and emphasizes the need for a national dialogue while drawing attention to the need for proper dialogue design, process management, inclusivity and an implementable outcome

¹ JOHN ALECHENU; Punch newspaper - SEPTEMBER 22, 2013

² Nigeria Pilot.com - A quote from Gani Fawehmi in 2000

West Africa Early Warning & EARLY RESPONSE Network (WARN)

The West Africa Early Warning Network (WARN) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARN Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARN covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region.

Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention. One of the goals of

this agreement is to interface WARN with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

2.0 CONTENDING ISSUES AND IMPERATIVES FOR NATIONAL DIALOGUE

The current security challenges in Nigeria especially the intrigues and political dynamics ahead of the 2015 general elections, is becoming a source of concern and drawing conclusions of a “make or mar situation”. The 2004 report of the US government projecting possible disintegration of Nigeria in 2015 based on ethnic fragmentation fuelled by political interest, extremism, poverty, corruption and poor handling of the 2015 general election has created the 'sense of a possible collapse' in the mind of Nigerians.

Given that in (2014), the country will mark 100 years of its existence following its amalgamation in 1914, and in view of the various levels of insecurity, agitations and tension across the country including the anxiety ahead of the 2015 general elections, there couldn't have been a more auspicious moment for Nigerian people to pause and reflect on the lessons of the past 100 years and devise appropriate mechanism for coexistence and management of diversities.

The likely issues that would dominate the dialogue and for which various entities would seek answers to include but not limited to:

- **Perceptions of political marginalization and exclusion:** Since the return of democratic government in 1999 in Nigeria, almost all the geo political zones have laid claims to political marginalization and exclusion in governance. This protest has snowballed into what is today known in the political arena as quest for “rotational presidency and respect for federal character”. While the idea of rotational presidency is not reflected in the constitution of Nigeria or most of the political party's constitution, the recognition of the need for power sharing, federal character and sense of belonging, has continued to shape political discourse in this direction. The current political quagmire within the ruling party stems from the

assumption/allegation that incumbent president had promised his peers and party leadership to complete the tenure



President Jonathan's swearing in ceremony
source: (www.theguardian.com)

meant for the north following the death of Former President Musa Yaradua and return power to the north in order that they take “their” 8 years turn; this has been denied by the presidency whose body language and recent pronouncement is leaving no one in doubt about the readiness of the incumbent President to contest in 2015

- **State/Local Government creation and minority question:** Another issue that has dominated political debate in Nigeria since independence is the crave for state and local government creation and how the proponents assumes that it will address the minority question and unequal development. A major criteria for revenue allocation in the country is on the basis of the federating units (the states and local governments) and therefore, the less states and local government you have, the less your ethnic nationality is favoured on this criteria. As early as 1957, minority groups already started agitating for creation of states and “fair treatment of the minority”. Since then, successive governments in Nigeria (both military and civilian) has been confronted by the idea of state creation, local government creation and how to address the minority question and ensure “balance of power”

- **Revenue sharing formula and**

resource Control: One of the burning issues for dialogue in Nigeria is the “right” revenue sharing formula and the quest for resource control especially by the oil producing states.

It is imperative to note that Nigeria's revenue sharing debates have revolved basically around three issues namely: (i) the relative proportions of federally collected revenues in the federation account that should be assigned to the centre, the states, the localities and the so-called 'Special Funds' (vertical revenue sharing), (ii) the appropriate formulae for the distribution of centrally devolved revenues among the states and among the localities i.e. local governments (horizontal revenue sharing) and (iii) the percentage of federally collected mineral revenue that should be returned to the oil-bearing states and communities on the account of the principle of derivation and compensation for the ecological risks of oil production³

While some segments of the society opine that devolution of power to the federating units and a revenue formula that encourages competition is the best for the country, others believe that it is better to allow powers in the centre in order to balance the national income, which is not evenly distributed

- **Indigenship and citizenship question:** Indigenship and citizenship question has been responsible for several violent conflicts in Nigeria since its independence in 1960. The current skirmishes in plateau state, the famous Aguleri/Umuleri conflict in Anambra state, the Jukun-Tiv conflict in Taraba state, the Zangon Kataf conflict of Kaduna state etc. are all attributed to the indigenship and citizenship question

The Nigerian constitution defines a citizen as any person who owes allegiance to a sovereign state and receives some levels of protection within the state. Indigenship on the other hand means a person who shares an ancestral link to the land and is therefore indigenous to the area.

What the above ambiguity connotes is that one person can be a citizen of a

³ Suberu 1995:8-9

particular state and an indigene of another with benefits and privileges thereto. There is no doubt therefore that this apparent confusion has been responsible for several conflicts in the country would be a subject for discussion at the proposed National Dialogue

• **Insecurity and Violent extremism:** In barely 10 years of its democratic governance following years of Military rule, Nigeria's internal security has weakened at a very alarming state. As the country was battling with the militancy in the Niger Delta and responding to small arms and light weapons (SALWs) proliferation, sea piracy, armed robbery, assassination, human trafficking, kidnapping, and ethno-religious conflicts, a new dimension occasioned by the emergence of violent extremism through the members of the Islamic sect – Boko Haram skimmed. The group is predominately based in the North Eastern part of Nigeria and has an



Violence in Northern Nigeria
source: www.hrw.org/news

ideology that is opposed to western education and is seeking the enthronement of Islamic state in Nigeria and the north especially.

The root causes of these various dimensions of conflicts, insurgencies and general insecurity is a source of concern and would be a possible subject for discussion at the national dialogue. Stakeholders would seek solutions to these myriads of violence including discussions around state police, management of natural resources, devolution of power, unemployment and developmental challenges, corruption and governance deficit among others

3.0 FEARS AND PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE

While there is goodwill and enthusiasm

on the proposed national dialogue in Nigeria, a lot of the citizens and some stakeholders have expressed concerns and reservations about the dialogue.

Hours after President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan mooted the idea of a national dialogue in his Independence Day broadcast, fierce debates engulfed the political and media spaces as a flurry of press statements and counter-statements by different interest groups endorsing or deriding the initiative. Just as Afenifere, Ohaneze, South-South leaders drummed support for the convening, a host of other groups are justifiably scared, pressing for a more productive alternative for structured engagement and national rebuilding⁴. It is important that the Advisory Committee is aware of these concerns and devise means of addressing them in order to create the needed confidence for the success of the dialogue

• **Motive and Sincerity of purpose:** The question on the lips of Nigerians and as reported in the media is the motive of the government in calling for a National dialogue at this moment when the public perception of the current administration is that it has not done very well in the areas of security and public services. While some argue that the government is listening to the wishes of the people for an opportunity to talk, others think that it is diversionary tactic to reduce government criticism

• **Timing:** Another concern that has

been raised by some segments of the society is the timing of the proposed dialogue. While some think that it is so close to the next election of which the

incumbent president is a likely contestant and therefore may be simply used to score a political point, others believe it is the most auspicious moment to enable the country take stock of its unity as it approaches its centenary in 2014

• **Cost:** Various people has also raised the

issue of cost of such dialogue and its place in the gamut of issues confronting the nation while others think that there is no cost equal to peace and unity of the county. Unfortunately, past experiences of a deriled process under the guise of a conference rather than dialogue has resulted in huge allowance, hotel bills and other logistical arrangements with little or nothing to show as outcomes. This is also happening at a period when the universities and some high schools have been closed down for over 3 months due to lack of funding. Others have also raised the issues of the budgetary provision for such conference and how the Advisory Committee will be sustained since the process was not catered for in the current budget

• **Legitimacy:** People have also raised the issue of legitimacy of the national dialogue and how the outcome of the process can be translated into law especially that the national assembly recently concluded a constitution review process that is still awaiting passage into law

• **Participation:** The last but not the least concern being raised is the criteria for participation/selection of participants, inclusivity and decision making.



Dialogue Advisory Committee
source: www.vanguardngr.com

⁴ Daily Times – Oct 7 2013

4.0 SCENARIOS

In view of the forgoing analysis, we foresee the following scenarios playing out in the proposed national dialogue in Nigeria

Best Case Scenario

The members of the Advisory Committee are as inclusive as possible in their pre-dialogue consultations; the structure and framework for the dialogue submitted to the president and approved are acceptable by the major stakeholders. The dialogue takes place in early 2014 with a lot of goodwill from the stakeholders and political will for the implementation of the outcome including going for a referendum and eventual constitutional amendment. The 2014 centenary celebration ushers in a new sense of patriotism and citizens confidence in the country

Realist Case Scenario

Arguments relating to sincerity of purpose continue to bug and undermine the dialogue process and dampen the confidence of the Advisory Committee; any proposed framework and structure for the dialogue process is debated and subjected to criticism from the sides that are not "favored". The dialogue process is postponed and the party conventions, primaries and campaign ahead of 2015 takes center stage and relegate the discussion on national dialogue to the background. The eventual postponement of the dialogue process is used as campaign tool against president Goodluck in the 2015 general election

Worst case Scenario

The Advisory Committee Completes its assignment in 6 weeks and with little or no consultation from major stakeholders, a structure for the dialogue including criteria for participation and terms of reference is proposed and made public; major stakeholders reject the proposed framework with many threatening to boycott the dialogue. The government convinces a few people representing diverse groups to attend the national dialogue and suspends implementation of the outcome until after 2015 election. The major political parties continues to use the dialogue as campaign tool and this snowball into

chaos in some parts of the country during and after the 2015 election

5.0 ENSURING A CONSTRUCTIVE AND SUCCESSFUL DIALOGUE

In a country like Nigeria where over the years perceptions of exclusion, marginalisation and ethnic cleavages continues to undermine its unity and existence, national dialogue if effectively designed and managed can become the turning point for its harmonious coexistence. On the other hand, if the process is not well designed, managed and its outcome implemented, it could be counterproductive. To guarantee an enduring process, the Advisory Committee should ensure the following:

Appropriate Design: The design phase of the dialogue, in particular the inclusiveness of the process, is important to its ultimate success. National dialogue processes are multifaceted, interest based and political in nature. An inclusive dialogue design and content has proven to be very useful. It contributes immensely to reducing potential tensions that may emerge in the dialogue. It may even help to unravel some of the nuances of the contending issues. The Advisory committee should take the following into account:

- a) Pre- dialogue consultation with relevant stakeholders with a view to developing acceptable dialogue structure and criteria for equal/equitable representation of all stakeholders including consideration for gender, youth and vulnerable groups
- b) A thorough and objective, analysis of the context and dynamics of the contending issues as well as the interests, concerns and fears of all the stakeholders
- c) Review of the past national conferences and dialogue

structure/outcome with a view to learning lessons from past experiences, particularly the reasons for past failures.

- d) Developing a realistic timeframe with roles and expectations of each stakeholder including support actors.
- e) Development of a media strategy and engaging with the media to ensure professionalism and circumspect in the reportage of the dialogue process
- f) Setting up a subcommittee to deal with funding, logistical arrangements and security for all participants

National Ownership: A key element for the success of the dialogue is the level to which the people own the process from "A to Z". The Nigerian communities, ethnic groups, and indeed all stakeholders must see themselves in the dialogue; they must drive the process and environment for them to feel free to speak their minds without fear of retribution provided. The process should allow for transparency, to help build trust and create a feeling of inclusiveness and accountability.

Facilitation and Process Management:

The Advisory Committee should opt for experts in process management and facilitation skills. The dialogue processes can fail if not supported by negotiation and facilitation expertise, as well as sufficient and predictable administrative and budgetary support. It is essential to have capable facilitator that all parties accept and feel comfortable with in order to make the process fair and unbiased as possible. The facilitator so chosen must ensure that people feel capable of expressing their views at all times.

Rules of engagement/Ground Rules:

Ground rules may cover a range of issues from respect for one another, to behaviour, rights and responsibilities of parties as well as decision-making procedures, strategies for handling disagreement and ensuring implementation of agreements and rules governing interaction with the media. Some may observe 'Chatham House' Rules, generally meaning issues discussed cannot be mentioned outside and no participant can be quoted without their express permission. In this type of dialogue, it is necessary that the Advisory Committee and the

facilitators negotiate the rules of engagement with the stakeholders and ensure that the participants sign it as a sign of commitment and as a document they can be held by.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The condition for a national dialogue in Nigeria is ripe and timely. If the process is well planned, managed and implemented, it would go a long way to resolving many of its national security questions and developmental challenges.

However, the process should not be used to score a political point as this could be counterproductive to its current efforts at ensuring peace and stability

It is not, and should never be an exercise anchored on haste, propaganda, regional scheming or purely private

presidential ambitions. It is not a political party affair or a regional agenda. Instead, it should be an organic process and arrangement that enables a broad spectrum of the citizenry to participate in ways capable of transforming their social, political and economic conditions. It should be an activity framed around the objective of expanding the capabilities and choices of citizens to determine their future, and carried out in a participatory, accountable, transparent and non-discriminatory manner that improves equity and justice⁵

⁵ Daily Times – Oct 7 2013

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