

## **Repositioning Nigeria as an emerging democracy: Dialectics of social dialogue and the 2014 national conference.**

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**Abstract:** In order to identify and evolve frameworks for political processes to sustainable statehood against the background of inter-ethnic stability and co-operation in Nigeria, the Federal Government convoked a National conference in 2014. The National Conference was a collective engagement in the character of political dialogue for peace-building in pursuit of the fleeting peace in an emerging democratic culture in Nigeria. The Conference among other things attempted to articulate an internal peace-building outcome in the democratic process through socio-economic settlement of benefits and political dialogue for cohesion and functional democratic institutions. This paper acknowledges the wide range of dialectical nuances of the debates at the conference, which started from issues rising from the nomination of delegates, unto the pluralistic make-up of the conference members. And it therefore investigates the intergroup relations in the conference in relation to the pluralistic nature of Nigeria. Applying the social dialogue approach in peace-building evaluation, the study examined the inter group relations in the proceedings, resolutions and responses to conference resolutions. The study concludes that since the legitimacy of the resolutions of the conference is already argued even before proceedings started, it follows therefore that its applicability is questionable. Therefore, notwithstanding how plausible the resolution may look, the paper made recommendations that are based on the main thesis of the discussion.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Social dialogue, National conference, Peace building, Dialectics.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The entity called Nigeria, being a result of the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorate by Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard in 1914, has been faced with many crises (ranging from religious, political, ethnic, social and economic), and this challenges its existence as an indivisible entity. This has generated mixed feelings and reactions among researchers, analysts, and extant literatures. Some have seen the amalgamation as a complication to the progressive future of the country; others see it as the beginning of the threat to unity [1-3]. What therefore becomes the stand point of dialectics of social dialogue and peace building in Nigeria?

Nigeria as a country is multi ethnic, multi cultural and multi religious. These ethnic nationalities existed independently until the advent of the colonial masters who brought many changes into the traditional lives of the inhabitants of these different ethnic groups living separately in different geographical locations [2,

4]. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 1914, the Northern and the Southern protectorate were amalgamated to make the entity called Nigeria. But the Nigerian problem as seen in this discourse is not just the amalgamation but the process and reason behind the process.

These ethnic groups have been put at different figures by different reports. Otite [5] reported 250 ethnic groups, though it was countered by Nnoli [4] who put the figure at 374. These groups are with different languages, religious believe and political system, which logically goes a long way to define their world view in differing order which has an implication for a uniting and sustainable statehood and development in all its ramifications.

Apart from the major ethnic divide (Hausa/Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba) of the Nigerian state, there is still a growing contention of ethnic taxonomy, and this calls for critical and prompt concern for a peaceful ethnic demarcation especially in the face of

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recent euphoria of the 2014 Nigeria's national conference. Making a case therefore for sustainable statehood for Nigeria becomes sacrosanct, amidst its pluralized ethnic entity and nature.

The challenge to Nigeria national unity is therefore not to be seen as a result of bringing different people together, but that of doing it without their consent. The argument is if the colonial masters consulted the people of these groups on the issue of bringing them together; they would have expressed their opinions and together chart the path to unity and the foundation for indivisibility with full knowledge of their own culture which define their separate existence. Yet many years have come and gone after independence, Nigeria as an independent country is yet to overcome the challenges that face it as a pluralistic society. This paper is an attempt at a dialectical consideration of critical, controversial and pertinent issues inherent in the post national conference dialogue, with its attendant consequences on Nigeria's peace building as an emerging democracy. The rest of the paper is dissected into relevant sections which collectively will bring its position to bear.

#### **SOVEREIGN NATIONAL CONFERENCE: AGITATION AND EMERGENCE**

Omonze [7] identify that ethno-religious fundamentalism and threats to national security are problems in Nigeria, but not enough reason for the country's disintegration. These according to him are issues that can be explored and harnessed for national development. And on this note, we discuss the agitation for national dialogue and its emergence, in view of balancing the inherent factors of the agitation with the conference proceedings and resolutions so as to determine their practicality.

The agitation for a national dialogue did not just start from the democratic regime, but right from the colonial days with reference to the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates that created the Nigerian nation, thus describes the nation as a British colonial initiative [7]. This marked the beginning of agitations which started with the early nationalists for a national dialogue that should look at the political development for a united Nigeria.

Juxtaposed with the amalgamation of Wales and the Kingdom of Scotland into the Kingdom of Great Britain on May, 1<sup>st</sup> 1707, it becomes clear that the British colonial masters were fully aware of what they were doing in the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorate of Nigeria, having the experience from their own amalgamation. But the outcomes of the Nigerian amalgamation as evidenced in the ethnic rivalries today goes a long way to prove that the colonial masters were just interested in the easy administration of the territory for their interest most

especially. Else, they would have sought the consent of the people of these regions, as it were between the Parliament of England and the Parliament of Scotland that agreed in an Act of Union in 1707 which brought about the Kingdom of Great Britain. This lack of agreement led to the agitations by the early nationalist for an inclusion of the Nigerian elites in the administration of this new nation Nigeria. The colonial masters paid no heed to this agitations believing it was aimed at displacing the British administration.

They were also agitations for a constitutional conference in response to the Richard's constitution which the early nationalists criticized seriously because it did not seek the opinion of Nigerians [8]. This led to a Nigerian Constitutional Conference held in London between May and June 1957 with Nigerian delegates in attendance. These delegates presented a joint memorandum requesting for self government in 1959, which later materialized in 1960.

The agitations by minority ethnic groups started as far back as 1953 when the minority fears were expressed in the 1953 Constitutional Conference. The issue was considered and the Henry Willinks Commission submitted a report for solution which included that the independent constitution should include creation of states. But this was not honoured by the 1960 Constitutional Conference and this led to further agitations by the minority groups after independence for the creation of states to favor them [9, 10].

These agitations and other crisis led to military intervention in 1966. The military regimes spanned through years with attendant agitations for a return to civil rule and national conference with the reasons that the military as a professional institution should not get involved in politics [7]. Other issues that led to the agitations for a national dialogue during the military regimes include the 1966 crisis which led the General Gowon administration to hold an Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference in August 1966. The major issue of concern in that dialogue was how to organize the country as an indivisible entity with all its constituent parts being involved.

But there were disagreement between the leaders of the Eastern region and the federal government during the Constitutional Conference which in conjunction with the General Ojukwu claims on the 'Aburi' agreement culminated into a civil war in 1967 [11]. After the civil war, agitations continued, seeking a return to civil rule and Constitution amendments. Instead of attending to those agitations, the General Muhammadu Buhari's regime rather attended to economic issues, which led to further crisis that brought the General Babangida into power. The Babangida regime brought about the 1989 Constitution

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of the Federal Republic of Nigeria through series of Constitutional dialogue. After the June 12, 1993 annulment of a presidential election, the agitation changed from Constitutional Conference and national Conference to Sovereign National Conference [12].

The agitations for a sovereign national conference are being made with the reasons as to get answers to issues in constitutional and political structure, resource control, marginalization and injustice as expressed by the minority groups. The agitations became more blaring after the return to democracy, as the proponents of a sovereign national conference started pointing out issues in the 1999 constitution, arguing that it's not practicable and generally accepted until reviewed through a sovereign national conference [7, 13].

The above led the Olusegun Obasanjo regime in 2005 to call for a national political reform conference, which though seen as not successful [13, 14] created the atmosphere that intensified the agitations for a national conference. Then the Good luck Ebele Jonathan's administration, in response called for the national conference in 2014 as against a sovereign national conference which many agitate it should be [15].

The above agitations and responses all points to the faults in the amalgamation process and reflects the blames many Nigerians level on the colonial masters. But how long shall we dwell on that blame and not chart our own course? It is on the way forward that the national conference 2014 was organized by President Good luck Ebele Jonathan like many others before him.

But how was the conference convened and to what extent is the proceedings a representation of the minds of the greater Nigerians? These are issues of consideration, knowing that other dialogues have failed to give permanent solution to the nation's political structure devoid of agitations and rivalry, mostly because of their sovereignty status as it were. Yet, these factors point to the fact that Nigeria can exist as one as has been seen in the collective struggle to hold up national unity, demonstrated by the long standing agitation for social dialogue aimed toward peace-building.

#### **NATIONAL VERSUS SOVEREIGN NATIONAL CONFERENCE: ISSUES ARISING**

To understand and analyze level of participation of members, inter-group interactions and atmosphere at the conference, one would need to take a look at issues surrounding the convening of the conference and nomination of delegates. The debate on its workability has been between sovereign national conference and national conference [15]. While some

say that just a national conference can effect changes in Nigeria, others argue that to take the influence of political office holders away from the conference proceedings and resolutions, it should be a sovereign national conference [15- 17].

The Premium times [7] in their report on the National conference 2014 classified conferences for nation-building into three classes-constitution, national and sovereign, among which this discourse shall look at the national and sovereign national conferences. According to them, "a National Conference is a formal platform for dialogue by constituent units of the nation convened by the national government of a country to discuss issues or problems that inhibit national progress or challenge national cohesion". And "a Sovereign National Conference is the convocation of by and large, civil society organizations, workers' unions, political parties, professional associations, religious denominations, and government representatives to discuss and chart new ways forward for the nation".

The addition of the concept of sovereignty in the definition of the later type of conference differentiates it from the earlier; which is to say that the attachment of the status of sovereignty to the national conference makes a whole lot difference. The convocation of the Sovereign national conference therefore suggests a conference where the state has no influence on its proceedings and resolution; a conference where its resolution can change an existing order. No wonder the President Good luck Jonathan succinctly said in his inaugural speech at the 2014 national conference that the conference can discuss everything except the disintegration of Nigeria. Such limitation would not have been in a sovereign national conference. But the question now becomes, which of this two conferences can really cause the change that is desired for Nigeria?

Many have argued in favour of the sovereign national conference [15- 17] while some believe that just a national conference carried out in sincerity and patriotic mind can do [14]. But the question is can one really be patriotic to a nation he does not believe in? And does Nigerians all subscribe to the notion of 'One Nigeria'? The above questions point to the fact that for any conference to give Nigeria a solution to peace there is the need for an agreement all the way from the nomination or appointment of delegates, down to topics of discussion, proceedings and resolutions.

According to Odendaal [18] in a report submitted to the Working Group on Political Dialogue of the International Dialogue on Peace-building and State-building, the preconditions for a successful dialogue (conference) start from adequate preparation. This preparation will have to take into consideration, an analysis of the subject of the conference, and the

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interest of the groups involved; why past attempts failed and general lessons from the past; ensuring that all parties agree to the processes; transparency of the conference proceedings through the press; political commitment where the groups involved see it as ‘our’ conference and not ‘their’ conference; the identification of collective leadership capability where leaders across ethnic boundaries are expected to unit to execute the resolutions of the conference and adequate inclusion to ensure the acceptance of the resolutions of the conference by all as legitimate.

The above preconditions of success, to a large extent create holes in the fences of practicality and effectiveness of the resolutions of the national conference 2014 as issues came up about the nomination of delegates where some have argued it was not representative enough.

The President of the Arewa Youths Consultative Forum in northern Nigeria protested the selection of delegates to the conference with the point that the North were under represented compared to the South and therefore vowed that the group will “reject recommendations and resolutions that would come out of the ongoing National Conference” [26]. This bias came while the conference was still going through proceedings with no resolutions yet. The argument being that with such bias, it will be difficult for such a group to accept recommendations from the conference no matter how good.

The timing of the national conference and period taken to prepare are issues that many raised questions about, which supports the above assertion by Odendaal.

According to the Root causes/justice theory “It is necessary to address the underlying causes of war, such as injustice, oppression, lack of security, and threat to social identity” [19]. If we observe the Nigeria security and peace challenges from the ethnicity angle, it will be easier to understand as Osaghae [20] supported by Egwu [21] argued that the identity factor is the feature of ethnicity that helps various groups to identify their members against members of other groups by stereotyping.

Some are called minority, others majority. While some see themselves as marginalized, others see themselves or are perceived as seeing themselves as the rightful owners of political power. These are the challenges of a pluralistic society that must be taken into consideration in discussing the issue of national or sovereign national conference.

But the concern here is how much preparation and consultation did the committee set up to draw the framework for the conference make when they had only

six weeks to work out modalities and submit blueprint for the conference? Is six weeks enough to submit a blue print for a national conference in a country with as much as 373 ethnic groups? How inclusive did their framework make the process when the AREWA group started protesting even before the conference started?

With the above foundation, one will begin to wonder how possible it is for people of different groups seeing one another as members and representatives of differing groups, come together and sincerely chart the course for the progress of an entity that is meant to keep them as one indivisible group. This could have been possible only if the different groups were shown the need for that unity and the benefits that accrues to each group, with good assurance of equal treatment. For the unity of Nigeria therefore, there is the need for an agreement between the constituting ethnic groups on issues concerning the different ethnic groups. A sense of belonging, a complete removal of the minority-majority clause as no ethnic group agrees to be inferior to the other no matter how small they may be.

Therefore, one can begin to appreciate the mindset of the different representatives at the national conference of 2014 as IDEA [22] argues that while the local and national authorities contend and contest the decentralization of the political system, the tension created by such contest is another issue to worry about as it is capable of creating serious threat to peace. Therefore, the protest by the AREWA youths can be understood in this light, that they are not satisfied of not being well represented in the discussion of issues affecting their existence as a people. This can affect the performance of the ‘representatives’ of the northern extract whom the AREWA has described as traitors for accepting to be part in a conference that to them is not ‘national’ since it does not represent their interest.

#### **LESSONS FROM THE NIGERIA NATIONAL CONFERENCE: IMPLICATION FOR AN EMERGING DEMOCRACY**

The country Nigeria, by the amalgamation of 1914 became a pluralistic society, with many ethnic and different religious inclinations. Laguda [23] saw pluralism as a state of having divergent views. This suggests that the amalgamation of the protectorates into the entity now known as Nigeria is a marriage of divergent views into an entity expected to exist as an indivisible whole.

The Abagen [24] view of ethnicity as a factor of identity, where individuals identify their affiliates by stereotyping and labeling explains the minority – majority clause in Nigeria. And this is further strengthened by studies reported in Egbefo [25] which described ethnicity as relating with pluralistic societies; giving people a superior complex of their culture over that of others; a means by which a people source their

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share of the national resources especially in a pluralistic society as Nigeria; and a means of political mobilization [5, 21, 22].

From the above arguments, it becomes very clear that the issues plaguing the growth of the Nigerian democracy has been nothing but the fact that the power of ethnicity has been over time undermined in Nigeria. Ethnicity from the above argument is both positive and negative, so that the motive behind its use in any particular time can make or mar the growth of any democracy. It is therefore argued that the convening of any national dialogue must take into consideration of the pluralistic nature of Nigeria especially in selecting delegates so as to avoid imposing a delegate on a people. It was easy for the military to organize a national or constitutional conference and execute resolutions with or without the consent of the populace because they were not democratic in their approach.

Democracy entails the supremacy of the rule of law, which implies that if the resolutions of any national dialogue should be implemented, it must represent the opinion of the nation. And if its implementation must bring the result it is aimed at, it must be accepted by the constituting ethnic groups. This goes to say that the National conference 2014 can be seen as a brick on the structure ever laid by past governments through national dialogues to better the structure which holds the country as one. This is so because it has once again raised more consciousness on the issues affecting the unity of the Nigerian nation.

Nevertheless, some squabbles from some groups cannot be ignored as baseless, if the intention is to build a peaceful democracy devoid of rivalries. The agitations by some for sovereign national conference as against national conference, and some argument against the representativeness of the delegates are issues that will challenge the general acceptance of the conference resolutions. If the framework of operation was carefully formulated, taking time to consult the ethnic groups, we would have been able to avoid the same mistakes the colonial masters made in bringing different groups together without their consent.

In as much as this discourse is not suggesting the disintegration of Nigeria, it points to the fact that to achieve unity, the parties involved need to be fully engaged in the peace-building process, so that a situation where some group questions the legitimacy of the resolution of a national conference as it were should be revisited. And considering the pluralistic characteristics of the country, a look at the local systems will not be a bad idea. Decentralization and federalism as has been identified by IDEA [22] remains a good system for a pluralistic society like Nigeria.

Mexico faced a situation similar to the one Nigeria have faced since independence, as the local Mayas saw themselves as being marginalized which led the peasants in Chiapas to rebel in 1994 against the Mexican government. The uprising led to war which created a situation where millions of Mexicans became aware of the aspirations of the Mayas. This led to a peace agreement which terms included a promising local autonomy and indigenous customary laws [22]. It's not only Mexico that has achieved national peace by decentralization as countries like Bosnia, Afghanistan, Uganda and Ethiopia have recently decentralized their political system.

#### **POLICY IMPLICATION/CONCLUSION**

Peace-building in an emerging democracy and especially pluralistic society like Nigeria, which must involve social integration, raises questions like what should be done when there is a misunderstanding between groups or how can misunderstanding be avoided?

Nigeria from independence has faced many crises that have threatened her existence as an indivisible entity. Various governments have tried different means of resolving the long standing ethnic differences, which many have attributed and labeled as colonial legacies. Yet, Nigeria and the many diverse ethnic groups tagged along into this 21<sup>st</sup> century and contemporary society when dialogue has been seen as one good solution to crisis.

The Good luck Jonathan led government, finally granting the agitation for dialogue between these ethnic groups made it a national conference against the argument and suggestions of some analyst for a sovereign national conference. This led to the argument of how effective the resolutions of the conference will be in resolving the challenges of the nation. This discourse have identified the weaknesses in the framework and blueprint that organized the national conference, which is in the timing and period of preparation, its inclusive character which has reflected in the rejection of recommendations by a group even before the conference started proceedings.

The above conclusions draw the nation's attention back to the root of our problem which is majorly, ethnic differences. Therefore, for us to build peace through dialogue it becomes necessary that we appreciate the pluralistic nature of Nigeria. When this is done, this discourse suggest that any national dialogue that will solve the problem of ethnicity as identified must have the sovereign status, for that is only when the resolutions will be accepted for whatever it becomes. This argument is based on the fact that sovereign national conference has been identified to give no particular person or group the chance to manipulate the proceedings and resolutions of the dialogue.

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Therefore, the paper urges that the resolutions from the conference not be taken as final, but converted to a blue print for the formulation of a framework for further dialogue. This subsequent national dialogue should be made sovereign as to give it the legitimacy it needs to scale through ethnic differences. Such continuous restructuring of framework for the dialogue will help satisfy all the constituting groups as its scope will always widen to accept new issues of agitation, and as well keep strengthening the democratic tenets.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above conclusions, the discourse recommends as follows:

- The decision to convene a dialogue between the ethnic groups should not be carried out in haste for political reasons. The international recommended standards for organizing such peace-building conferences should be followed to the later.
- The convening of a conference of a national status should first start with a town hall meeting or a public opinion survey to determine what the nation wants between national and sovereign national conference. This should be preceded by a public awareness campaign on the differences between these two classes of conference and what each entails.
- Then the convening of the conference should be done in line with the result obtained the survey. This will go a long way to offer the resolution of the conference some level of legitimacy notwithstanding the class of conference it is, because the groups have been given the chance to contribute in the decision and the contributions considered in decision making gives them a sense of belonging.
- Nevertheless, further research should be sponsored by the Nigerian government into the workability of the decentralized system of government along the ethnic lines. This will grant the ethnic nationalities some independence and sense of identity. This can further be used in the process of deciding the framework for national dialogue.

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