

A CASE FOR AND AGAINST THE CONVOCATION OF SOVEREIGN NATIONAL CONFERENCE IN NIGERIA

Cali Ojimba

Abstract

It will be most appropriate and purposeful at this onset to define the premise upon which this study will revolve. The defining prepositions will centre on the following concepts. What is Sovereign National Conference? Why the clamour for Sovereign National Conference? Are there any measures that could be taken to mitigate against the call for Sovereign National Conference? Can the experience of Similar Continental Jurisdictions like U.S.A., Canada, or Germany be shared with Nigeria with a view to finding how these countries resolved similar National Questions of theirs? These are basically, the burning issues which this paper will amongst other things attempt to address.

(a) What is Sovereign National Conference?

Sovereign National Conference simply means call by the several federating units in a federation for a clear and definitive principles of governance within themselves to forestall fear of political and economic domination by another. Decisions arrived at such conferences are usually carried out undiluted and binding on all the federating units.

(b) Why the Clamour for Sovereign National Conference in Nigeria?

The call for SNC in Nigeria has assumed an alarming proportion over the last four decades. Those arguing against it have equally thrown up dissenting opinion. The clamour came about because, the concomitant euphoria associated with the attainment of political independence in Nigeria in 1960, blurred the least likely possibility of predicting a crises that will engulf the Nation in times to come. These crises included the January 1966 coup, the July 1966 counter coup, the 1967-70 Nigeria Civil War, the over three decades of military dictatorship in Nigeria with the resultant imbalance in power sharing that tilted in favour of the North. And as was customary with the outbreak of crises, questions were not in short supply. Why did these crises occur in the first instance? Was it bordered on the experiment of different types of government by the Nigerian leaders? Was Nigeria a mere geographical expression? (Ditto PA. Awolowo). Can an expert consensus on the causes of the crises be relied upon to guide against the occurrence of future crises? Are there any similarities and differences between the Nigerian experience when compared with other developed and developing countries of the world? As earlier pointed out, this paper will attempt to elucidate, sift and proffer solutions or assumptions on the crises and make necessary recommendations as a stop-gap measure to guide against future occurrence. To get to the root of this matter, we shall start by taking a critical look at the history of Nigeria.

Abridged History of the Nigerian Federation

In the year 1900, the present territory now known as Nigeria was divided into three distinct and separate entities. The first was the Colony and Protectorate of Lagos with Sir Williams Macgregor as its Governor General (1899-1904) Okibe (2000). The second was the protectorate of Southern Nigeria with Ralph More as its high commissioner (1902-1902) and the third was the protectorate of Northern Nigeria with Sir Fredrick Lugard as its High Commissioner (1900-1907) Okibe (2000).

The administration of these protectorates was directly overseen by the colonial office in the UK. With the passage of time and due to financial constraints and scarcity of manpower in these territories, they **were**; further merged into the colony and protectorate of Southern Nigeria with Walter Egeon as its Governor General (1906-1912) Okibe (2000).

That was the position until in 1914 when Lord Lugard, acting in concert with the colonial authorities in U.K. amalgamated the colony and protectorate of Northern and Southern Nigeria into a unified entity called Nigeria and he became the first Governor General (1914-1919). What this latest development means is that an Agglomeration of diverse groups of about 250 ethnic groups moved into an inchoate political union called Nigeria. The assemblage of these diverse ethnic groups like Ibo's Yorubas¹, Fulanis, Tivs, Igala, Birom Irshekeri together each with disparities in religion, culture, language is what actually precipitated the crises of National Re-integration Okibe (2000).

From these amorphous relationships, it was apparent on the face of it that the concept of true Nationhood was not in existence before Nigeria got her independence in 1960 as events later unfolded.

The next logical question that could be asked at this juncture is, was Nigeria Truly a Federation? Answer to this question will compel us to define the concept of federalism.

Definition of Federalism

Professor K.C. Wheare a leading scholar in federalism, defined it as:

A system of government whereby the federating units share power between themselves and the Central government with each sphere coordinate and independent.

Explaining this concept further, HE prescribed certain conditions under which a true federal concept can thrive. They included that:

- (1) A federal Structure must have a written constitution with rigorous process of amendment
- (2) An Independent Judiciary.
- (3) Division of legislative powers amongst various levels of government,
- (4) Control of resources derived from the source of the federating unit.

These outlined variable did not *Ipsofacto* fit into the Nigerian federal structure, for example though Nigeria has a written Constitution, the process of its amendment is not as rigorous as was prescribed by Wheare.

Secondly, her Judiciary is not as independent as it ought to be in the true sense of the word as mere are regular cases of interference. A case in point is the Late Chief Awolowo's treasonable felony trial where the presiding judge, openly told the court that his "hands are tied".

Thirdly, while it is obvious that the legislature is not suppose to interfere with the functions of the executive, in most cases they do as the executive at all levels of governance put pressure on the legislature to initiate policies that suits their various ethnic interests.

What this indices connotes is that 'true' federalism is practiced when it suits a particular purpose and regionalism is practiced when it suits another purpose thereby making the inherent conflict that is normal in federalism more apparent, complex and more pronounced as is found in the Nigerian federalism Okibe (2000).

These conflicts led to separatist agitations, such as the Ogoni peoples demand for self determination, the unprecedented growth of militancy in Niger Delta over resource control and the Nigeria Civil War which took place between 1967-1970. This then means that Nigeria's Political practices never really fitted into concept of true federalism as was defined by K.C. Wheare Ugwu (1988).

Fourthly, structurally, the component units in Nigeria are supposed to be immuned from federal interference but functionally, they are not as they share many activities with the federal Government without forfeiting their policy making roles and decision making organ. And in order to organize a Federal Government, one has to determine the boundaries of component unit distribution of powers and functions between the federal and other levels of government as it were, using structures of governments in US, Switzerland Canada, Germany, Pakistan and India as a reference point Ugwu (1988).

But in Nigeria, this was not to be the case. Within three years of political independence, Nigeria adopted the Republican Federal Constitution in which residual powers were allotted to states and this experiment was later to fail as there were overlapping and over bearing functions amongst federal and state governments giving way to a system that was co-operative and interactive which has a mixture of duai federalism and unitary system of government Ugwu (1988).

Why these crises in the Nigerian federation? Answers to these posers will be highlighted under the following sub-headings.

(a) Multi-Ethnic Composition Of Nigeria

As earlier pointed out, the greatest obstacle to National integration in Nigeria is the diversity of her ethnic composition as she is a heterogeneous society with close to 250, different ethnic groups with diversity in religion, culture and

history. To mould these groups into a formidable unit for the purpose of achieving nation building became a great challenge to achieving true Nationhood Okibe (2000),

(b) Inherent Conflict in a Federation

The inherent conflicts embedded between the centre and the federating units, the problem of equitable distribution of resources amongst the federating units and over concentration of powers at the centre tends to breed conflict resulting in agitation for political power and resource control Okibe (2000).

(c) Power Sharing

Over the past four decades of Nigeria independence, covertly or overtly, one section of the country has dominated political leadership of the country thereby denying others a sense of belonging in a Nation of equal partnership. The political crises precipitated by the annulment of June 12 1993 presidential election purported to have been won by M.K.O. Abiola - a southern created doubt about the reality of the corporate exercise of Nigeria Okibe (2000).

Re-enforcing his unbelief in the corporate existence of Nigeria, the Late Ken Saro Wiwa (1993) articulated the concept of the Nigerian National question in the following phrase.

The issues that made up the Nigerian National question are the political structure of the country, the relationship between the different ethnic groups, the political system to be adopted in taxation, revenue generation, the relationship and responsibilities between different levels of government, fundamental human rights, social justice, prevention of the environment and the defence of the nation.

Viewed from that perspective, the National question in Nigeria therefore becomes those series of issues that borders on tribal and cultural cleavages that has besieged Nigeria since independence which in our submission are highlighted as:

- (a) Domination of political power by the North,
- (b) Control of the economy by the South.

(d). Economic Exploitation

The ethnic minority in Nigeria - particularly those from the Niger Delta region complained about the sorry state of their oil producing communities. According to them their land bears crude oil, Nigeria foreign exchange earner but they seem to get more problems than benefiting from the pollution of air, water and land Mbah (2001).

(e) Revenue Allocation

Successive Nigerian governments - particularly since the oil boom era have turned their back on the issue of using derivation to share revenue and as was the case before and after independence, it has generated bad blood amongst the oil producing communities (Mbah

2001).

Ways of Achieving National Integration and Unity in a Federation

a) Equal Opportunities for all Citizens

The generally acceptable position in a federation is that for the political system to function effectively under certain condition of minimal friction and maximum efficiency there must be balanced development of all units and equal opportunities, and attainment of the highest political office in the land. Nigeria, certainly cannot survive as a nation where one section of the country continues to dominate the political leadership of the country at the expense of others. Important political position should be rotated and conceded to all in the spirit of equity, fairness and National integration Mbah (2001).

(b) Religions Tolerance

This issue is vital to the survival of any nation. In Nigeria, Muslims and Christians have tried to divide themselves along religions line and religious violence has affected the political stability of the Nation. Religion crises in Jos, Maiduguri, Abuja and Bauchi in recent times have undermined the concept of nationhood Mbah (2001).

(c) Comparism with other Jurisdictions

In Germany, it took Bismarks Political skill and diplomacy to get the territory to form a union in 1871 Okibe (2000).

Tuppers effort (the premier of Nova Scotia) resulted in the formation of the Canadian union when he introduced a legislation that delegates should be appointed to confer on the possibility of forming a union Okibe (2000).

The United States of America, Britain and even India creates equal opportunity for appointment for their citizen in all fields of human endeavour.

Revenue allocation in the U.S.A is based on the principles of true federation but in Nigeria most policies are confirmed on the principle of deception and this has led to great mistrust amongst the different federating unit.

Conclusion

The debate on Sovereign Nation Conference in Nigeria must of necessity start on an honest note by addressing the Nigeria National question - which is already highlighted in the body of the essay. This approach was adopted by India, USA. Canada and Germany and the correction of these injustices led to the formation of a credible union. And it is true to say that some Nationalities have fears on the concept of Nigerian true corporate existence. White others have grievances which cannot be wished away.

Again in Nigeria most policies are formulated on the principles of deception and this has led to great mistrust amongst the different federating units.

An adequate remedy lies in the creation of Nationally integrated economy and political class that will properly and carefully resolve the crises of the Nigerian National identity and create a level playing field where every citizen will be

treated fairly, equitably, and justly in her quest to realize her full potentials without discrimination of any sort and when this is done, a new need to identify with concept of the new Nigerian federation which constantly looms large in the horizon will be achieved.

References

Dike, K.O. (1958) *Trade & politics in (he Niger Delta 1830-1885* Oxford, the Clarendon Press.

Journal (1993) *Tell Magazine*, December 13

Whcare, K.C. (1963). *Federal Government*, London University Press.

Mbnh, C. C. (2001). (*jorcrnmcht & politics in modern Nigeria*. The Search for an orderly Society, l'tfiK'ttlional Publisher L.T.D. Onitsha.

Ukibu, II. (2000). *I'olilical evolution and constitutional development in Nigeria (1861-1999)*, Auto century publishing company Enugu.

Uguw, Sam (1988). *Federal system, the Nigeria experience*, M