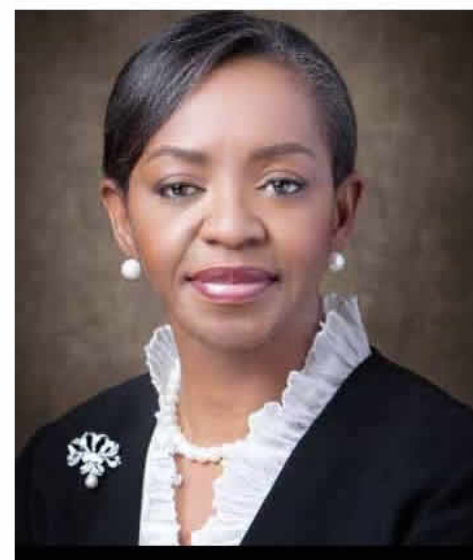


National Conference: Going Beyond Ethnic Nationalities



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Nigeria has had a history of conferences preceding constitutions starting with the Independence Constitution in 1960, the Republican Constitution in 1963 that was then followed by the 1979 Constitution which made significant changes as the country moved from a parliamentary to a presidential system of government. In 1995 we had the General Abacha National Constitutional Conference and then the General Abdulsalami Abubakar Constitutional Conference of 1999 both leading to the 1999 Constitution and finally in 2005 President Obasanjo's National Political Reforms Conference.

Recently President Goodluck Jonathan set up a National Dialogue Advisory Committee led by Senator Femi Okurounmu to plan a National Conference. The conference is to be made up of representatives of the ethnic nationalities, socio-political organizations, professional bodies and the Federal Government amongst several others, with a total of 492 delegates. They will deliberate for some 3 months.

The Nigerian Bar Association has been allocated just 2 slots and has expressed its dissatisfaction accordingly and understandably. As such this brings one to wonder what criteria might have been used for the selection of the delegates of a conference of this magnitude. More so when the terms of reference require that the conference will advise the Government on the legal framework, legal procedure and options for integrating the decision and outcomes of the National Conference into the constitution and laws of the country.

Ethnic groups have been hard at work deliberating on how well they can protect their own interest and how best they can achieve their goals. For instance the Northern governors have adopted a 30 point agenda; the South West seeks regional autonomy and devolution of power; the Igbo seek restructuring and citizenship rights and the South-South seeks 50% derivation, amongst other things.

The 3 political zones of the South organised a two day Leaders Forum which has just concluded in Calabar and convened by Governors Olusegun Mimiko, Peter Obi and Liyel Imoke, where they spoke

on the need for southern unity and cooperation for national development.

The upcoming National Conference though cannot be one of ethnic nationalities alone as there are much wider groupings involved. The key question I believe that ought to occupy the mind of every right thinking Nigerian is what the delegates are going to discuss at the conference. It will go beyond ethnic group agendas to the more fundamental issues of restructuring government (presidential or parliamentary system) fiscal federalism, resource control, devolution of power and the ever vexatious question of state police.

Whether one thinks that the timing is right, being so close to the next set of election, or whether it is money well spent at this time, the undeniable fact is that principal players right across the political and socio-economic spectrum are planning and preparing for the conference. And unlike the 2005 National Political Reforms Conference, this conference has no obvious hidden agenda and as such has a far greater chance of achieving substantive results than its predecessor.

