

The National Conference: Are we Finally Ready to Move Forward?

When the National Conference was inaugurated this March 17th by President Goodluck Jonathan there were mixed reactions, ranging from the euphoric all the way down to the outrightly sceptic, as we have been down this road before. There was particular criticism of the timing and the sincerity of the government at setting up such a mammoth committee of 492 delegates so close to the next general elections. Furthermore one of the key questions being asked - and it became a cause for great debate - was whether the conference had the capacity to address the pertinent national issues of the day and if it had the power to draft a new constitution.

The Conference got off to a great start with the President's speech and thereafter the Conference Chairman Justice Idris Legbo Kutigi (rtd), Vice Chairman Professor Bolaji Akinyemi and Secretary Dr (Mrs) Valerie-Janette Azinge swiftly got down to the business of the day, starting with a series of plenary sessions which were followed by the setting up of 20 committees, namely: Devolution of Power, Political Restructuring and Forms of Government, National Security, Environment, Politics and Governance, Law, Judiciary, Human Rights and Legal Reform, Social Welfare, Civil Society, Labour and Sports, Political Parties and Electoral Matters, Transportation, Land Tenure and National Boundary, Foreign Policy and Diaspora, Public Service, Agriculture, Economy, Trade and Investment, Energy, Religion, Public Finance and Revenue Generation, Science, Technology and Development and finally, Immigration. These committees it is clear, covered an extremely wide spectrum of government activities.

Time no doubt was of the essence and the committees were duly set up to fast track the process, which I believe was a laudable intention. However, looking back at the deliberations these past four months, one wonders if the terms of reference and the committees themselves should have been whittled down to only the core issues and areas of contention to save time and money as some of the issues dealt with were everyday problems that if some in Government had a more listening ear they might well have already addressed. As it stands some of the recommendations include that government: take measures to review the current national electricity policy to make the sector more result oriented; completely overhaul the nation's transport sector to meet the demands of the new world economic order; review the Petroleum Act of 1969; impose the stiffer penalty of life imprisonment for peddlers of fake and adulterated drugs; place restrictions on medical tourism as Nigerians spend a huge amount of money seeking medical treatment abroad; and ensure that foreign airlines should be encouraged to employ Nigerian pilots and other workers, amongst a whole host of other recommendations.

The conference also voted and agreed on some notable issues namely: removal of the immunity clause from the constitution; that 35% affirmative action for women should be in the Nigerian Constitution and also in the constitutions of all political parties; that the office of the Attorney General of the Federation should be separate from that of Minister of Justice at the federal and state level; and that there be the established constitutional,

anti-corruption and other special interest courts.

It must though be said that some of the other issues voted for and agreed upon baffled one and leave one nursing a sense of disbelief and disquiet, such as the agreement to build mini refineries in all states of the federation. This I believe is one recommendation that will never see the light of day. It was also agreed that any group of workers that remain on strike for more than four weeks shall not be entitled to salary and yet some of the conditions under which a depressing number of employees currently work is truly pitiful. For judicial officers convicted of corruption or perversion of justice it was now to be 50 years imprisonment and the loss of all official entitlements including gratuity and pension. 50 years appears rather too stiff for judicial officers most especially in a country laden with corrupt political office holders, where we should rather start with stiffer sentences, that is if they ever get to be arraigned in the first place. The conference also recommended the creation of eighteen (18) additional states and one further for the south east zone. This recommendation beggars belief in a country with 36 states where some are not viable at all and are as good as towns, virtually dependent on government for handouts. Why would we want to add more? As for those who feel that this is the only way that government can reach their people, the rejoinder is that surely the greater, accelerated economic development of their existing states is the answer.

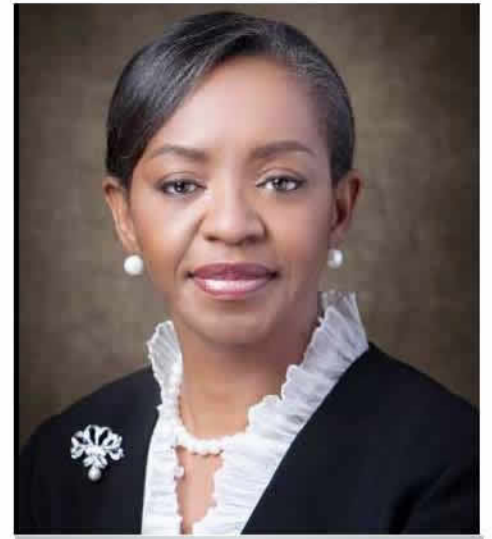
At one stage a delegate went as far as calling for a law against 'reckless divorce by northern men' and another called for the enactment of a law to regulate fees being charged clients by lawyers! All these and much more besides emanated from a bevy of conference delegates but all the same, all delegates had the opportunity to air their views and grievances which was indeed an inclusive and praiseworthy development.

As with any conference of this magni-

tude, disagreements are to be expected but in this case so many of the disagreements are age long and are constantly re-hashed whenever the opportunity presents itself and until this bull is taken by the horns and dealt with squarely we will only go yet another circle as was the case with the 2005 National Political Reform Conference, where no decision was arrived at on controversial issues of national importance. Here we are in 2014 and a similar scenario is about to unfold.

Due to some irreconcilable differences between Northern and Southern delegates, the July 14 plenary session came to a close without any agreement on the controversial issue of resource control and the proposed 5% national intervention fund to counter insurgency and internal conflicts. Likewise the conference specifically adopted the report of the Committee on Devolution of Power but without reaching a conclusive decision on the vital issue of derivation principle and what percentage should be paid to mineral producing areas.

The details of the resolutions reached at the meeting of the leaders and principal officers of the conference reads: 'Having critically examined the issues in contention, conference recognises the need to: a) review the percentage of revenue to states producing oil (and other resources); b) reconstruct and rehabilitate areas affected by problems of insurgency and internal conflicts; and c) diversify the Nigerian economy by fast tracking the development of the solid minerals sector. The Conference therefore recommended that the government should set up a technical committee to determine the appropriate percentage on the three issues and advise government accordingly. The technical committee, according to the delegates, would advise the Federal Government on the sharing formula of revenue which accrues to the Federal Government, the percentage of derivation to oil producing states and the mineral resources fund as well as the special fund for reconstruction and rehabilitation of areas affected by problems of insurgency and internal



MAY AGBAMUCHE-MBU

LEGAL
EAGLE

may.mbu@thisdaylive.com

conflict.

At the 2005 National Conference the delegates also failed to reach a decision and adjourned indefinitely, whilst urging the federal government to set up a technical committee to resolve the crisis.....

Nigerians have indeed lost much interest in the confab, to be quite frank. There is also undoubtedly a feeling of distrust even amongst the delegates, with the rumour mill running amok, with Northern delegates are rumoured to be planning to stall the conference report when it is eventually sent to the National Assembly, whilst Lagos State took out an advertorial in a national daily on July 21st titled 'For the Records - Matters Affecting Lagos State at the National Conference' which accordingly presented the state's submissions, all duly signed and dated.

It will be an overarching shame if all the work, time and money spent ends up coming to nothing when the dust finally settles on this conference. The draft report it is, said would not be ready in time for the resumption date of 4th August so the date has been moved to the 11th. If upon resumption no concrete achievements are made in some of these aforementioned areas of contention, the confab will be declared a predictable failure. If so, when then will we as a nation learn and sincerely agree to move forward?

