



Nigeria: Can a handpicked elite group reform the federal system?

A new "Reform Conference" has its work cut out for it.

BY KINGSLEY KUBEYINJE

Almost since the restoration of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, many, especially in the south, have complained that the country isn't "truly" federal. The central government is too strong, they argue, and dominates local and state governments.

President Olusegun Obasanjo has responded to this criticism by convening a "National Political Reform Conference." The President and the 36 state governors handpicked 410 high-profile delegates who will do a root-and-branch examination of Nigeria's political system over a three-month period. At the end of the deliberations, the delegates should come up with recommendations that could fundamentally change the practice of federalism in the country.

The delegates include such eminent figures as Chief Emeka Anyaoku, immediate past Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, retired Gen. Ike Nwachukwu, two-time foreign affairs minister, Prof. Adebayo Adedeji, former Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa and Prof. Jerry Gana, two-time minister and a serving Presidential adviser.

This conference is the first exercise of this kind since the country got its independence from Britain in 1960. Southern discontent is one motivating factor. But so is a general discontentment about the operation of a federal system that currently favours a politically and financially strong federal government to the detriment of weak state and local governments.

Critics of the present structure, such as Governor Bola Tinubu of Lagos state in southwest Nigeria, have often argued that while the country professes federalism, in reality it is run like a unitary state, with an overbearing federal government.

Tinubu and a number of other state governors have often challenged the federal government in court, for "overstepping" its constitutional bounds. Tinubu and his like have consistently called for the practice of "true federalism" and the introduction of "fiscal federalism" in the sharing of federally collected revenue. They are not comfortable with the fact that the federal government

appropriates for itself more than 48 per cent of revenue, leaving the states and local governments without sufficient funding. Many feel that the federal government should not have more than 30 per cent.

Oil, "indigene-ship" and retooling the presidency

The recently convened conference, headed by retired Supreme Court Justice Niki Tobi, will tackle various contentious and divisive issues, including resource control, an agenda championed by nine southern states from whose region the country derives its oil wealth, which accounts for at least 90 per cent of the country's foreign exchange earnings.

Another contentious issue is the question of "state of origin", under which Nigerians have been classified as "indigenes" and "non-indigenes" and as "settlers" and "non-settlers".

In Nigeria, the fact that one was born in a particular state or has resided therein for a great many years, does not automatically confer the status of, to use the Nigerian term, an "indigene" on the person. A Nigerian not classified as an "indigene" (legally considered indigenous to a region) can be routinely denied certain rights. For instance, a non-"indigene" cannot contest elected office in that person's state of residence but must do so in the state of origin of his or her father.

Delegates will also have to consider what would be the best political structure for the country. While some Nigerians insist that the present federal-state-local government structure should be retained, some others want a return to what they call "regionalism," which was practiced in the

early years of independence. Under the discarded regional structure, the then four regional governments were both politically and financially strong. They controlled the resources in their respective areas, earned all the monies and only paid royalties to the federal government.

The conference would also have to decide whether Nigeria should retain the present presidential system, patterned on the US model and generally seen as expensive or whether the country should return to the parliamentary Westminster model. This system was practiced in the country in the early 1960s.

The delegates have constituted themselves into 19 committees and are now meeting behind closed doors. Their reports will be discussed later at plenary sessions where recommendations for reform will be worked out.



Will Obasanjo's reform conference produce popular results?

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Some believers; many doubters

While many political actors such as Don Etiebet, leader of the main opposition All Nigeria Peoples Party, believe that at the end of the day, the conference will proffer solutions to most nagging national issues, some are of the view that nothing substantial will come out of the talks, for which the president is committing 932 million naira (US \$7 million).

Those who believe that the conference will end up merely as a talk shop point to the “no-go areas” outlined by Obasanjo. For example, delegates are barred from looking into the possibility of any ethnic group or any of the nation’s six political zones – south-east, south-west, south-south, north-east, north-central and north-west – pulling out of the federation, either now or in future.

The delegates are also forbidden from discussing religion, in spite of the fact that many blood-letting riots which had occurred in the country were instigated through religious differences. While a good number of Nigerians prefer that the country be considered a secular state, others insist that it be regarded as a “multi-religious” state. Still others believe that it would be best to Islamize the country, a fact reinforced by the fact that some Northern governors have implemented Islamic Sharia law in their states and expect strict compliance from all.

Some of those who believe that nothing useful can be achieved through the government-sponsored conference are planning an alternative event, that they call the “Pro-National Conference” (or “Pronaco”). The brains behind this alternative meeting, which the government is somewhat jittery about, include Nobel Laureate Prof. Wole Soyinka, Chief Anthony Enahoro, who in 1956 moved the motion for Nigeria’s independence, fiery Lagos-based lawyer Chief Gani Fawehinmi and a host of other human rights activists. The “Pronaco” conference may take place sometime in June.

Some critics also believe that since the government single-handedly appointed all the delegates, those delegates will do the state’s bidding and implement the government’s agenda, often citing a well-known Nigerian proverb that “only ingrates bite the fingers that feed them”. Much as many delegates have tried to allay that fear, the emergence recently of a draft constitution (associated with pro-government delegates) further aroused the suspicion among many Nigerians that the federal government, for one, has a hidden agenda, one that notable includes the much-rumoured ambition of President Obasanjo to serve a third term. While the present constitution prescribes only two terms of four years each, the draft constitution prescribes a single six-year term. And some delegates, such as Greg Mbadiwe, are already campaigning for the prolongation of Obasanjo’s stay in office, when his second term expires in May 2007.

In addition, the National Assembly (the official name for the federal parliament) has tacitly distanced itself from the conference – and by inference its decisions – by refusing to approve the 932 million naira the president sought for hosting the conference. Indeed, 52 members of the Assembly dragged the president to court for organizing the conference, which they say is unconstitutional. Although the group has withdrawn the suit, many believed that the parliamentarians are determined to trash the conference

report, whatever it says. In addition, political analysts and observers say the National Assembly has the power to refuse constitutional backing for the decisions taken at the conference.

When the National Assembly gave him a cold shoulder, the president was forced to look elsewhere for the money. Although the government has yet to disclose how the money was raised, it is believed that the president took it out of his hefty security allotment, for which he normally does not have to account.

North and South – can the twain meet?

More significantly, many fear that unless deft political moves are made, the conference recommendations may be rejected outright by a section of the country – the predominantly Muslim northern Nigeria — which was not in support of the idea in the first place.

The North is Nigeria’s most populous region, dominated by the country’s largest ethnic group, the Hausa, and northern elites have been skeptical about the motives for the conference, which they fear is an attempt to diminish their region’s political stature and influence.

Indeed, northern leaders have raised a number of objections, which if not properly handled could jeopardize the conference’s outcome. For example, a group of prominent northern leaders led by the powerful Sultan of Sokoto, Muhammad Maccido, have consistently denounced the composition of delegates, insisting that it was skewed in favour of Christians, who are predominantly from the south. They have opposed the fact that both the conference chair and the secretary are Christians, even though the secretary is from the north. President Obasanjo has since succumbed to the pressure and appointed a southerner, who is also Muslim, as co-conference secretary.

To drive home their objections, a number of Islamic groups have threatened to wage Jihad against the federal government, if their objections were not quickly and adequately addressed. Some of the groups insist that another Muslim be appointed as co-chairman.

It is a fact that the idea for the convocation of what was then referred to as a “sovereign national conference” originated in the south, particularly in the southwest. Southwestern Nigerians still have bitter memories of the surprise annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential election which the late Moshood Abiola, a politician from that geo-political zone and a billionaire businessman, was almost certain to win. That annulment by the then military administration of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, a northerner, was seen as a clear evidence of the north’s unwillingness to have citizens of other parts of the country govern Nigeria. Before that election – acclaimed by international observers as the fairest and freest in the nation’s history – six northerners had ruled independent Nigeria for a cumulative period of 28 years and 4 months since October 1960, compared to only three years by two southerners.

Now, with a President from the Southwest, and powerful political forces in the North, Nigerians are still grappling with the ethnic and regional tensions that caused a civil war in the 60s and 70s and a number of coups and counter-coups since then. ⑥