



Press Release

For immediate release, Thursday 29TH February 2024

THE FATHERLAND GROUP

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A RETURN TO THE PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM IS NOT THE WAY FORWARD FOR NIGERIA

Background

On Saturday 24th February 2024, the Chairman and Convenor of the Northern Elders Forum, Professor Ango Abdullahi, speaking at a high-level book launch shed some light on Nigeria's move from the parliamentary system to the presidential system when he said:

“ . . in 1976 some of us were old enough to participate in the transition program to move the country from military rule to the presidential system. After the Gowon administration and after the takeover by Murtala and Obasanjo, a Constituent Assembly was being set up. Some of our elders were there, the Maitama Sules, the Malam Aminu Kano were there; some of us the very young ones were also there. The process started and we were hoping that it was going to be a liberal discussion in terms of really looking at the country, having gone through the tragedy of 1966 and the tragedy of the civil war and so on and our 9 years of military experience under General Gowon, we were now ready to return to civilian administration. What we expected as a starting point, having gotten together a Constituent Assembly, was to discuss why the system that was kicked out in 1966 failed us. Was it the system or the operators or both? These are some of the points that should have given us the starting point for our discussions and so on. But to our surprise, Malam Aminu Kano and Maitama Sule and others who were there to give us the guidance in terms of the debate which would ensue, came back to say that they had been told that there was to be no discussion on the parliamentary system of government and that the directive given to those who were managing the process was that there should be no discussion on parliamentary system of government; rather that they should go and search for a presidential system and at that time the two options available were the French model and the American model and



we cried out but . . . we didn't succeed in getting the leadership at that time to change their minds . . . for six years we tried the parliamentary system from 1960 to 1966 and now we have been trying presidential system for 24 years and the failure is so glaring".

Professor Ango Abdullahi had opened his presentation with a call that "a resolution should be made that enough of our failure is enough and something else must give way to our failure. We have failed enough, and I think we should now put a mark saying agreed we have failed enough, we have failed this country enough and this must stop."

He closed his remarks with this message: "The time has come for us to go back to the drawing board so that this country can be saved".

These seminal remarks, from this preeminent Northern Statesman, followed a report in the press that, on Wednesday 7th February, a Bill to return Nigeria to parliamentary democracy had passed the first reading at the lower legislative chamber of the National Assembly. Endorsing the move by the members of the National Assembly, Professor Abdullahi is reported to have said: "If you are talking of failure of the system, it's totally unfair to say that the parliamentary system failed in Nigeria. It did not. Only that it was not given sufficient time".

Statement

- **Fatherland Group agrees** with the Chairman of the Northern Elders Forum that the presidential system has failed. We go further to say that the failure extends beyond the 24 years identified by Professor Ango Abdullahi and includes the 4 years from 1979 to 1983 of the presidential system ushered in by the Constituent Assembly of which he was a member. The period of failed experimentation with the presidential system is thus 28 years in aggregate.
- **Fatherland Group disagrees** with the Professor's claim that "It's totally unfair to say that the parliamentary system failed in Nigeria . . . it was not given sufficient time".
- **Fatherland Group notes** that the 'parliamentary system' is a system of government, in operation in England and France, in which the executive arm of government is a committee of the legislature. It contrasts with the 'presidential system' in which the executive is free standing from the legislature. Both parliamentary and presidential systems are systems of representative democracy, the aim of which is intended to be that of ensuring sufficient fairness between one person and the next, in terms of access to basic means of life (food, water, shelter) the right to found a family and to a fair trial etc.
- **Fatherland Group points to** the book 'Nigeria: The Prospects for Democracy' written by the First Republic Parliamentarian, Chief H. O. Davies, Q.C., in 1959 (and published around January 1961) where, after pointing to the failure of parliamentary democracy in the former British colonies, Burma, Pakistan and Sudan he wrote: "The Sudan was the third newly independent state to fall under authoritarian military regime within a short time. These events, following each other in quick succession, have baffled observers and have raised the



question of whether parliamentary democracy has a chance of survival in any of the former colonial territories. Recent events in Ghana, the first African colonial territory to attain independence, may have a bearing on the problem.” The book posed the question: “Is the British cabinet system which the former colonial territories have adopted suitable to their governmental needs? Or is there any inherent weakness in that system which must inevitably under certain circumstances cause the government to collapse?”

- **Fatherland Group notes** the conclusion in the book that “. . . in a traditional and underdeveloped state, where parliamentary democracy has been adopted as a system of government, economic and industrial growth must be stimulated to bring it as quickly as possible to a level of development equivalent to that of the parliamentary institutions. Any maladjustment between the political and the economic sectors, if not corrected can be so serious as to warrant the intervention of authoritarian agencies and the effect of that intervention, as we have seen is to hold back the democratic institutions of government in order to enable the other institutions to develop. To Nigeria, therefore, as to any other newly-independent underdeveloped state, economic planning and development is a matter of great importance to the prospects of parliamentary democracy.”
- **Fatherland Group does not believe** that Nigeria has addressed these concerns that were highlighted in 1959.
- **Fatherland Group in any case believes** that there is an “inherent defect in the colonial countries which must inevitably under certain circumstances cause the government to collapse”. This inherent defect which neither the parliamentary system nor the presidential system can mask, or cure, is the high level of ethnic fractionalisation which makes it difficult for the necessary political consensus to be formed among Nigerians in order to agree to elect good leadership and to hold the government accountable. We therefore do not believe that our options should be limited to a return to the western parliamentary system because the western presidential system has failed.
- **Fatherland Group agrees** with the Northern Elders Forum that “The time has come for us to go back to the drawing board” and fashion a new constitutional settlement that addresses this inherent defect in this colonially designed country which militates against democracy.
- **Fatherland Group is concerned** that the current governance structure of Nigeria produces unhealthy competition on ethnic lines for a single ball and it calls to mind the words of former British Colonial Secretary, Lord Amery that: ‘Where there are cleavages of race or religion profound enough to rule out crossvoting, self-government of the British type means for the minority element, permanent subjection to the majority’.
- **Fatherland proposes** a new facilitated arrangement of qualified-independence and autonomy of our original nations, that predated the creation of Nigeria, within a new union of shared sovereignty. In this new arrangement, which we refer to as an Orange Union, the original nations will be free to choose whichever of the parliamentary or presidential systems, or some traditional system, best suits their history, culture and aspirations.



Fatherland Group is a global network of forward-thinking Nigerians, armed with a new understanding of our past, our present and our future.

29 February 2024

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