



Features: IN SEARCH OF ONE NATION THROUGH NIREC

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ABUJA, NIGERIA -

Whenever the lyrics of the National anthem are echoed, the Nigerian citizens are reminded of their pledge to “serve our fatherland” as “one nation bound in freedom, peace and unity.” In 1960, this building project of one nation was taken over by those who thought that the human beings who were amalgamated from different empires and tribes would have a common national identity. It was presumed that Nigeria’s independence was the end of slavery and colonialism. Unfortunately, Nigeria is still gasping for breath like a patient on oxygen and life support machine. The national identity remained fractured into Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba, Igbo and other tribes that have been labeled ethnic minorities. The civil war slogan, “to keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done” indicated that this project to build and grow one Nigeria has not been feasible. The civil war should have taught the ruling class in Nigeria that the gun cannot kill an ideology and the yearning for human dignity. This can only be achieved through justice, equity and peace.

It appears that the drive to rule in Nigeria is not ideas that last forever but material wealth that is very transient. This could be the reason why Late Prof. Dora Akunyuli who led the Ministry of Information and Communications in the “Rebranding Nigeria Campaign” died without realizing her dream. Another sword in the heart of Nigeria is ethnicity

and abuse of religion. During the political campaigns in 2015, President Muhammadu Buhari lamented that religion and ethnicity have eaten deep into the core of Nigeria. He said: “Wicked propagandists continue to spread vicious lies about me for political gain, including claiming that I once asked Muslims not to vote for Christians. This must be the height of absurdity. How could I ever say that, when whoever voted for me would be voting for the Christian running with me on the same ticket? And how could I ever say that of Christians when my own holy book, the Qur’an, tells me that in the entire world those that are nearest in love to me are those who believe in Jesus Christ? I ask, who, intending to win any election, ever does that? How can I choose southern Christian running mates (Chuba Okadigbo of blessed memory, Pastor Tunde Bakare and Pastor Yemi Osinbajo) and with them by my side make such silly utterances” (<https://www.thenigerianvoice.com/news/267533/2019>) ?

The immediate past Presidents has expressed his frustrations in his recent book: “Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, *My Transition Hours*, Kingwood, Ezekiel Books, 2018.” Just a few quotations may drive home our points in searching for this one nation: “It takes conscience to use power as a shield and ego to use power as a sword” (Page 2). “When some individuals preach one Nigeria in public, those who know them better in private simply chuckle. One Nigeria, where there is equity, fairness and justice is what I believe is best for the people of this country” (Page 17). “In Nigeria, during football matches involving the national teams and foreign teams, both Christians and Muslims sing and dance to the tune of the same music. That is patriotism. In politics, I am yet to see such patriotism” (Page 20). “Until African politicians consider their countries’ interest first in whatever they do, the continent will continue to lag behind. Politics should be about the people and not about fighting to occupy offices (Page 26).

One then may be right to ask: “If the search for one nation has been so difficult, why this search for one nation through the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC)? My answer would be that we must not give up on Nigeria. We

must keep trying until we get it right. The preamble to the Constitution of NIREC is like a compass that points to the direction of our quest: "We, the representative of the two Principal Religions - Islam and Christianity in Nigeria, having voluntarily decided by ourselves to come together to form an association on the 11th day of September, 1999, and the association having been inaugurated on the 29th day of September, 1999, guided by our divine revelations and the dictates of our CREATOR, determined, within the context of our religions, to forge Inter-Religious harmony and concord, having firmly and solemnly resolved, within the confines of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, to live in unity, harmony and peace for the welfare, security and prosperity of our peoples and our Nation under God, do hereby make, enact and give to ourselves this Constitution to guide and direct our collective endeavors." With this declaration, I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of our Religious leaders in this resolve grow and promote an ideal nation.

I would love to take my office as Executive Secretary of NIREC as a mission given by God through the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and the Executive of NIREC. I would love to do all that is humanly possible and leave the rest for God who has not abandoned Nigeria. Article 3 of the Constitution of NIREC points to a direction that can help our mission with the following aims and objectives: To honestly and sincerely understand the true teachings of the two religions; promote dialogue between Christians and Muslims; inculcate moral, ethical, social and cultural values of the two faiths for the rebirth and rebuilding of a better society; to provide a forum for mutual co-operation and promotion of the welfare of all citizens in the nation; to create fora and channels for the peaceful resolution of any friction or misunderstanding that may arise from time to time; to serve as an avenue for articulating cordial relationship amongst the various religious groups and between them and the Government; to assist the Federal, State, and Local Governments of Nigeria and the Populace by emphasizing and accentuating the positive roles religion should play in nation building and development; to serve as a forum to achieve national goals, economic growth, national unity and promotion of political stability; to consider and make recommendations to the Federal and other levels of Government on matters that may assist in fostering

integral and spiritual development of Nigerians; to make recommendations on such other matters as the Federal and other levels of Government may from time to time refer to the Council and to network with organizations of similar aims at home and internationally, for the furtherance of the objectives of the Council.

I believe that NIREC can reposition Nigeria if the members prefer the common good to selfish interest. NIREC Secretariat should be a home for every Christian and Muslim. Given that the NIREC office is situated in the Federal Secretariat, the staff of NIREC should begin simple dialogue by engaging the staff of the Federal Secretariat in a way and manner that the Federal Secretariat could be a model of what a nation should be. At resumption of office as Executive Secretary of NIREC, I visited the Imam in charge of the Mosque and the Police officers in the Police Station at the Federal Secretariat. I also visited the Chapel and the Mosque where the staff of the Federal Secretariat meet to pray. The people I met expressed the need to work together as Nigerians to harvest peace, progress, justice, freedom, contentment and all that can give happiness to humanity. We could take NIREC to the grassroots by visiting the different States with the message of building a nation. If the Nigerian government could provide an office space for NIREC, then the council could work to discover the God given capacity that could be explored to put smiles on the faces of every Nigerian. May this our search for one nation through NIREC not be in vain!

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