
Interview: Dr. Walter Ofonagoro

The constitutional road to genuine democracy

Dr. Walter Ofonagoro is chairman of the Publicity and Conference Convention Committee of the National Constitutional Conference Commission in Nigeria. He is a former associate professor of African economic history at Columbia University in New York City. Dr. Ofonagoro was interviewed by phone in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, on May 31 by Lydia Cherry.

EIR: You are preparing for a Constitutional Conference in Nigeria. There seems to be a lot of disinformation here on this idea.

Ofonagoro: It is what I would call a lot of deliberate and mischievous misinformation by a small, disgruntled segment of our politicians who believe that unless they are in power, the government should grind to a halt. And because they play a role in controlling the print media in our country, they use it to publish false information which has no bearing whatsoever to the reality on the ground.

Our commission was set up in January. The commission is comprised of 19 people, all of them very distinguished. Our chairman is a Supreme Court justice, Sa'idu Kawu. The secretary is a distinguished lawyer from Lagos who is also a Senior Advocate of Nigeria, Chief Debor Okandy. The other 17 members are all very distinguished people; this includes the former secretary to the federal government and a former chairman of the Nigerian Population Commission, Alhaji Shehu Musa. The former secretary to the government of Kano State during the Second Republic, Alhaji Sale Sule Hamma. The former governor of Anambra State, Chief Jim Nwobodo. The former minister of communications in the Shagari government, Mr. Audu Ogbé. The former minister of internal affairs in the Shagari government, Dr. Ibrahim Tahir. The former federal director general, Dr. Bashir Ikara. A distinguished academic political scientist, Mrs. Mariam Ikejiahe Clark. The former chairman of Union Bank, Alhaji Shehu Malami (Sarkin Sudan of Wurno). A former minister of information, Maj. Gen. I.B.M. Haruna (ret.). The former president of Nigerian Labor Congress, Alhaji Ali Ciroma. The longest serving and former president of the Nigerian Senate, Dr. Joseph Wayas. Myself, I'm the former director general of Nigerian Television Authority, former chairman of New Leadership University, and a former Associate Professor of African Economic History at Columbia University

in New York City.

[The five remaining members of the Constitutional Commission are: Dr. Tunji Otegbeye; Chief Ayo Ogbolofami; Amb. Yahaya Kwande; Chief C.A. Agbogi; and Professor Ijioma.]

So, you see the kind of people we have here? Do you think these are the kind of people you put together to pull the wool over the Nigerian people's eyes? We are inviting memorandums from the entire nation, the public at large, interest groups, communities, etc., to tell us exactly what they think is wrong with Nigeria and how we can put it right, and to tell us the kind of Nigeria they want, so that we can have a constitution emanating directly from the people themselves. And for the last five months we've been bombarded with over 1,200 memoranda. Out of these, we have been able to extract an agenda for the conference. We also organized elections. Each ward in the country elects five delegates and these five elect their district delegates to the Constitutional Conference. There are 6,927 electoral wards in this country, each one electing five delegates. So we will have about 35,000 delegates at the electoral college, and these will in turn elect 273 people to come to the conference. These elections have now been concluded, successfully.

The people who are mounting this negative propaganda have constructed a false report that the election was not successful because their call for a boycott was largely ignored.

EIR: Yet the international wire services seem only to be picking up on the statements emanating from this Campaign for Democracy, which now is calling itself the National Democratic Coalition. Is this the group which called for the boycott?

Ofonagoro: By doing this [the media] are doing a great disservice to the international community. Because you can see the kind of people coming to this conference. For instance, the former vice president of Nigeria, Dr. Alex Ekweme. He won the election in his district. The former Senate Majority Leader, Dr. Olusola Saraki. He was elected. Former governors, former ministers, people who have worked hard to put this country in order. So, are we going to listen to a bunch of nonentities, who don't even have the ability to win a ward election in their own villages; a bunch of self-appointed "democrats" who have never won an election, and who cannot win an election anywhere in the country, or tested leaders who have won elections before and have now won again?

What you have here is the political elite that were overthrown in the military coup of 1983; they have now gone back to their base and won election to draft the constitution, along with a large group of new breed people, new generation politicians who participated in the briefly aborted democratic experiment of 1990-92.

The coalition was calling for a boycott, and they claim they were successful. In Lagos, there are 195 electoral wards;

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elections were successful in 183 of these wards, and by-elections became necessary only in 12 wards. These are concrete statistics which you can check. So what kind of a batting average is that? If you call for a boycott in your headquarters, your home base—which is what Lagos is—and there are 195 electoral wards and elections are successful in 183, and you succeeded only in 12 in disrupting the elections, and those 12 have now had by-elections, are you really that successful?

EIR: The western press, for example Reuters, is systematically playing up people connected to the National Democratic Coalition.

Ofonagoro: But who are these people? The fact is, you have a country organized around a constitutional convention to bring in democracy, and I'm the chairman of the Publicity and and Conference Convention Committee charged with the responsibility to convene this conference, and Reuters has made no effort to talk to me. I challenge them to point out any of these so-called Campaign for Democracy people who have contested an election anywhere in this country before.

You also have a tinge of tribalism in this, ethnic hegemonism. The sort of thing you saw with the Inkatha Freedom Party in South Africa, over the status of the Zulus. Or the kind of thing you see among the Serbs.

Most of the people are more rational than that. But in every situation you find a few diehards. But it is generally understood that [the way] to tackle any perceived grievance or injury, is through dialogue. [Former ITT chairman and Nigerian billionaire Moshood] Abiola alleges that he won an election and was not sworn in. But the fact is that Abiola was never declared the winner of any election in this country by any competent body.

EIR: Would you explain the Abiola situation?

Ofonagoro: We held elections last year in this country. Two days before the elections, a court in Abuje directed that the elections should be stopped because of allegations that there were malpractices in the primaries that led to Abiola having been selected as a candidate for his party.

The Electoral Commission first ignored the court injunction and went ahead and held the election, and while the results were being announced, the court gave a second injunction, stating that an election held in violation of a court order was improper and therefore null and void, and directed

that election results be stopped.

In compliance with this second order, the Election Commission stopped announcing these results. This was June 15 of last year. Some people were printing their own results but the official results announced by the Electoral Commission were for 12 seats out of 31—state results. No official results had been declared by the Electoral Commission. But Abiola began travelling around the world claiming that he had won and was being cheated. But because of the fact that various groups began organizing civil disobedience around Lagos and part of western Nigeria where Abiola comes from, the government decided to annul the elections completely. The decision was made to start afresh. To win election in Nigeria you have to win in at least 20 states; Abiola's ethnic group controls five states. The election was not a tribal affair; it cannot be. To fight about a perceived grievance on a tribal basis makes no sense as to the pretension to national leadership.

The Constitutional Convention will look at all grievances, including whether there were grievances in last year's debacle. There are grievances out of the military coup of Dec. 31, 1983. There are grievances about the civil war. There are grievances from the oil-producing areas—the minorities feel they are being cheated out of the revenue that comes from their territory. There are all kinds of grievances. But you cannot run a country; you cannot move forward unless you are able to sort out these problems and find constitutional solutions to them.

What has to be understood is that Nigeria is no stranger to democracy. We fought for independence and we've had democratic governments ever since, except for when we ran into constitutional and ethnic problems and the military intervened to save the country from *falling apart*.

The unfortunate thing now is that some western governments thought that they were financing democratic movements but they have now fallen prey to vicious groups over here that are fighting for ethnic power under the guise of democratic movements. Some of the "democratic" movements you are sponsoring over here, have been fighting each other internally over the money that you send them from America. This has been very embarrassing. The fact is that democracy is not new to us. A military government is something we do not want, but it is something *we cannot do without for now*. But a military government is not the ideal; it is a stopgap between the last attempt at democracy and the

next attempt at democracy. Because of the way in which we take democratic government seriously here, the military will not be allowed to rest until they make sure that the process of restoration of democracy is in the offing. This conference is a major step.

The problem is the false propaganda. These “democracy groups”—what is the criteria by which the western governments give them money? Many are operating out of their own living rooms. They go out and hire thugs and hooligans in the streets; they are connected to drugs. Is this democracy? Democracy is not going to be obtained through arm-twisting, fascistic methods. Democracy can only be obtained through the promotion of dialogue between various contending interests and forces.

EIR: The fact is that your government has backed away from market reforms and the International Monetary Fund [IMF] dictatorship is connected to what is going on right now.

Ofonagoro: I’m speaking for myself now, not for the government, but as an individual, a thinking individual. Do you know any country in the world where a free-for-all economic policy is allowed; a country where you can bring in anything you like and take out anything you like without controls, where their currency can be hawked in the streets like toilet paper?

When I left New York to come back to Nigeria, \$1 was exchanging for 50 Nigerian cents. Then it was half a dollar; now it is 70 naira. There have to be controls of some sort. The idea of free-market society doesn’t exist anywhere. I know what you are saying: The reversal of the SAP [structural adjustment program] of the Babangida regime by the Abacha regime could be responsible for the kind of pressure we are now getting from the so-called pro-democracy forces. I agree with you. In fact I said it in July of last year, when this operation began in the streets of Lagos. I said that judging by their methods, it sounds like CIA-orchestrated disinformation. I then found out that in fact, these groups are being funded by funds provided for democratization by the State Department and various parts of the U.S. government. I think they should be much more concerned with our well-being; we are not communists. We have a population of 100 million people.

Keep in mind there has been no military government without the injection of a lot of civilians who make it possible for them to rule. Otherwise it is not possible. The ratio of soldiers to civilian population is such that you could not impose a military regime in this country. We’ve never had one before. We had to make certain adjustments to the policy of hook, line, and sinker acceptance of IMF prescriptions, because no Third World country has survived their prescriptions to date. Do you know any Third World country that accepted those prescriptions and survived? We don’t want to die!

Interview: Gov. D.M. Komo

The Ogani ethnic ‘cause’ is a sham

D.M. Komo, administrator/governor of Nigeria’s eastern state of Rivers, was interviewed by telephone on May 31 by Lydia Cherry.

In early February, Ken Saro-Wiwa, a representative of the small Nigerian Ogani ethnic group, was afforded a heavy interview schedule by U.S. media to protest “human rights abuses” by the Nigerian government. The sponsor of the trip was the U.S.-based Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization. According to Harry Lewis, a spokesman for UNPO, his organization is currently acting as a liaison between the Ogani people and the Nigerian government; the Ogani people and Shell International; and the Ogani people and Shell Nigeria. Governor Komo makes clear that the fight for the Ogani “cause” is not what is being packaged in the West.

EIR: Can you explain what is happening with respect to the news reports that the Ogani people who live in your state are having their rights violated?

Komo: After the first attack by the Oganis on Shell Oil, Shell has now stopped operations into Ogani land. Their installations are still there, but they are no longer operating in Ogani land. However, on the 21st of this month, the youth wing of Movement for the Survival of the Ogani People, led by Ken Saro-Wiwa, attacked some prominent Ogani leaders who were holding a meeting to decide on how to organize a reception for two of their distinguished sons, one who had just been made a commissioner in the state, and the second who was appointed chairman of a local government in Ogani land. The youths killed four of the leaders. Right now, security agents are making arrests of the youth that carried out that attack, and investigation by police is continuing.

EIR: Is this youth wing connected with other international non-governmental organizations?

Komo: The Movement for the Survival of Ogani (MFSO) has been dealing with the United Nations. Nicop is the youth wing—a sub-organization under MFSO; MFSO itself is connected to the Endangered Peoples Movement.

Some of the leaders killed, were not only prominent citizens of the state, but were those who founded MFSO, to advance and fight for the rights of Ogani people. It was only later that the militant wing, the Nicop sub-group I mentioned, was introduced by Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the difference of opinion developed between those who wanted a non-violent