

We Need National Conference - Oyinlola

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In this interview with AKIN OLANIYAN and BUNMI ONI, the Governor of Osun State, Prince Olagunsoye Oyinlola, bares his mind on the call for a Sovereign National Conference and the struggle for control of the South-West between the Peoples Democratic Party and the Alliance for Democracy, among other issues. Excerpts:

THE belief before now was that, it would be impossible for a PDP candidate to win in Osun State. And there have been allegations that the AD was rigged out. What is your reaction?

I think Yoruba land is not a place where anybody would want to kill people for votes, because we are very much aware and articulate on the political situation in the country. That is why my response has always been that if my predecessor in office performed like people said that he did, he would not have been voted out or that if the people of Osun were impressed, they would not have given a new entrant into politics like myself any change at all. My experience so far has been so good. This is the government that the people themselves put in place. I have enjoyed tremendous goodwill ever since the end of the election. In my tours everybody had been coming out to receive me.

There has also been talk of what the relationship of the Yoruba should be with the Federal Government. Do you think the South-West has done the right thing by the way they voted in the last general elections?

Our relationship with the centre may have yielded some fruitful dividends because the debt burden on the state was so heavy when I came in. I made the Federal Government to understand our precarious situation and I asked for a leeway from them in our debt financing so that we can have something to finance the manifesto we presented to the people. And the Federal Government was forthcoming. That was how we are able to have a cushioning from the federal. You will agree with me that this is a civil service state because most of our internally generated revenue is derived from the Pay As You Earn. The position of the workforce to the government has been very good. The workers on their own have taken it upon themselves to go out on an aggressive revenue drive for government to have more money at its disposal.

What is your administration doing to attract investment to the state given the low industrial base of Osun?

For any investor to be interested in putting his money in a place, there are a lot of things to be taken into consideration. Chief among them is security. Nobody wants to throw away his hard-earned resources to a place where he cannot guarantee that he will meet the investment the following day. In this regard we are working with the police to combat the menace of armed banditry in the state. We have provided communication equipment for the police in the state to make it easier for the Divisional Police Officers to effectively communicate. We want to create a kind of a venture that will give incentives to the would-be investors. For example, if we get an interested investors willing to come to Osun State we already have industrial layouts, which we will just gie them with the entire infrastructure put in place. What we are saying to them is that establish and employ our people. We would do the road network, water and electricity supply and give moratorium of up to ten years tax concession.

Still on the relationship between the states and the centre, where do you think the South-West should be in 2007?

If the last administration had been in good terms with the Federal Government all the little things that required the federal might to achieve would have been done. Until we practise true federalism states would still depends on the center to get thing done. We cannot compare this time with the period of Chief Olafemi Awolowo because in their time they practiced true federalism. You had few ministries at the center then, External, Internal and Defence. These were the key ministries that united the regions. The economic and educational policies of the West were different from that of the North and the East. As of today what we have is a semi-federalism where we all collect the oil money and share together. Why would you want to turn your back to where the money is distributed? It is not just to collect your money this month and turn your back to a place where you get your money. You should be interested in being part of the centre where the resources are being distributed. The only way to reverse that is true federalism where we can get the best option for our people.

Would you subscribe to the idea that the legacy of Chief Awolowo has been eroded in the South-West with the ouster of the AD in the last election?

I don't think it has been eroded. I think some people just pay lip service to the continuity of Chief Awolowo's legacy. If any government want to make any meaningful impact in the lives of the people of the state it must reinforce those legacies in terms of service to them as practiced by Awo himself. To do any other thing makes the people to have a sense of being deceived. I think what happened in the last election was as a result of that.

What is your relationship with the Afenifere?

I have never had the opportunity of being a member. Apart from reading on the pages of newspaper I don't know what Afenifere is all about or what it takes to

be a member. If it is a pan-Yoruba group that looks for the interest of all Yoruba people I think some of us should be given the opportunity to be a member because I am a Yoruba man. But if it means to belong to a particular political party is the criteria for joining Afenifere I don't think I can be part of it. It is an open secret that there is no difference between Afenifere and AD.

In August there was a conference of Egbe Omo Yoruba in the United States, where it was agreed that there is a decline in the teaching of Yoruba language in schools. The conference also suggested that Yoruba should be accepted as official language in addition to English in the South-West. Is Osun going to accept that suggestion?

I will say that teaching should be carried out in Yoruba up to JSS3, even up to the University. In Pakistan, India and other countries they teach all their subjects at all levels in their languages. Even in military training, if they are saying what they do not want other nationals to hear they change it to their dialect. They explain to themselves first before they change to English. In the next 10 to 15 minutes they are back to their language. I think we need to develop our language up to that level. The intricacies of science and technologies that we need to develop our society could be taught in our language to make them easier for students who usually dread the subjects. I agree with you on the need for a concerted effort to promote the teaching of Yoruba in schools and as a way of conducting parliamentary business in our states. But we must be sure if the people we are asking to speak the language can speak it.

Should the teaching of the language be made compulsory?

I agree with you. The issue is that we need to enforce the matter from the tender age. Karen Barba, is now the head of African Policy or so in Birmingham University (UK). She lived quite a while in Okuku. She speaks Yoruba fluently to the point that she became the Head of Department of Yoruba at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. When I went to Britain to study law, I told my daughter if she can search and get me Barbars email and my daughter was able to get her for me. My daughter wrote her in English that I want to establish link with her. She replied her in Yoruba which my daughter could probably not read. Of course, I wrote in Yoruba and we communicated in Yoruba throughout my stay in Britain. I gave most of the mails to my friends in the UK who are Yoruba and most of them could not read it. It reminded me again what happened when she was in Nigeria. One correspondent was interviewing her in English and she told the reporter that "ti a ba maa so Yoruba, ka so Yoruba, ewo ni amulumala." She said this on the television. If we develop this attitude from the beginning, things will change. Parents should not beat their children for speaking Yoruba. Let them imbibe the culture of speaking the language from the beginning. Things should not be based on one's proficiency in English language as the basis of how a person is useful in the society.

We still want to take you back to the issue of the relationship between the constituent parts of Nigeria. What is your reaction to the calls for a Sovereign National Conference?

I wouldn't want to know what name you call it. We must sit down to discuss the union of convenience we called Nigeria. On the basis of the union, we must determine how we want to live as a people in a united Nigeria. In a true federalism like the federal system in America, the centre does not bother itself with the finances of the state. The states only pay taxes to the federal purse. But all the same, we still have the leeway to execute our projects. In my state I can execute whatever educational programme I want, not the one coming from Abuja for the whole nation. Until Nigeria practises true federalism, which only the conference can engender, we will still have people who will say we are neglected, we are marginalized and all sort. That is the reason why there must be a room for all stakeholders, all ethnic groups to meet and agree on the way we should run the affairs of this country called Nigeria. I do not want to trouble myself with the name given to the conference, the fact is, we must talk.

Lately, there has been a lot of activity surrounding the proposed revenue sharing formula. What is the position of the states to the bill, which is already before the National Assembly?

The views of the governors were that the NNPC seems to be treating the FG as a parastatal, which should not be so. There is a lot of money being deducted from the oil revenue before they are remitted into the federation account. We are saying no, every money must be paid into the federation coffer. As the stakeholders, we are the ones who should say, this is the amount to be set aside for the payment of our debt and this is what our people will do with the balance. That is why we have to call for a new revenue formula that will enable the governors' discharge their duties to the people who elected them. States should be given more funds so that they will be able to provide dividends of democracy for the electorate.

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Forwarded by: Lanre Ogundipe

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