

Echoes from “Nigeria at 50” Roundtable

In commemoration of Nigeria’s golden jubilee celebrations, CHAIN participated in a roundtable conference that examined challenges and prospects of the nation’s democratic experience.

September 29, 2010 was the date, barely two days before Nigeria rolled out the drums to celebrate 50 years of nationhood. The Civil Society, Media and State House of Assembly Platform hosted the event.

Challenges of quality representation and oversight functions was examined by a frontline politician and retired legislator, Mrs. Florence Ayah, who enthused that there was reason to celebrate since the country has remained as one in spite of its problems. She called for accountability by elected representatives and encouraged constituents to demand quality representation. Where the lawmakers failed to live up to their responsibilities, citizens were told to invoke the constitutional provision of Recall.

Mrs. Ayah described an appropriation bill as that which eventually becomes the budget after due scrutiny and approval by the legislature. She stressed the need for budget monitoring and oversight for accountability. To enhance this, civil society and the mass media were called upon to keep their eyes on the budgets and ask questions at each stage of implementation. She ended by emphasizing that “the earlier leaders realize that they are servants of the people, the better for us”.

Dr Usman Jimada discussed the mass media’s role in sustaining Nigeria’s democracy. By its social integration and “watchdog” functions the media was identified as a vital force in entrenching a democratic culture. To attain these, the media has to be pluralistic (that is, it should give room for expression of varied opinions) and also avoid promoting bigotry, suspicion and ethnicity.

Dr. Jimada, who is a Development Communication expert, encouraged investigative and advocacy reporting that would uncover anti-democratic antics as well as shady activities in business and government. Moreover, he pointed out that the media and civil society should do proper civic education, eliminate political apathy, provide forums for public debate by political aspirants and public officials while also trying to improve confidence in the democratic process. He also asked the National Assembly to accelerate passage of the Freedom of Information Bill.

The interactive session featured incisive contributions by participants on the good and bad aspects of Nigeria’s social, economic and political make-up. Some were of the opinion that the country’s government and process of

political choice was far from being by the people and for the people. Others were optimistic that Nigeria was developing and would reach an appreciable height in the near future.

One of the forum's facilitators, Mrs. Aisha Ibrahim, asked the guest speaker, Mrs. Ayah, (who is over 60 years old) to return to seeking elective posts in government, but she later declined on the grounds that Nigeria needed a generational shift in which old hands in politics should give room for young people with fresh ideas. Another issue raised was Nigeria's image problem which Ibrahim said was made worse by media portrayal of corruption and the diabolical aspects of African culture. Someone also expressed disapproval of the neglect of disabled people in politics and developmental affairs.

Finally, there was food for thought from a youth leader who decried the neglect of agriculture and overemphasis on politics. He stressed the need for a change in the wrong notion that politics and petroleum resources were the only or quickest ways of acquiring wealth. According to him, agriculture had great potential to employ up to 80 per cent of Nigerian youths and hence should be explored as a means of solving Nigeria's economic problems.