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Ethnic Militia as a Social Pressure in Nigeria's Fourth Republic Politics

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Abstract

The character of the Nigerian state which is anchored on rent and the centralization of power have combined to make quest for power in the country contentious. The entrenchment of differences and rivalry among the ethnic groups to control the soul of the Nigerian state led to several violent confrontations prior to the country's independence. The successive post independent regimes failed to initiate far-reaching policy measures to coalesce ethnic differences into positive ventures that could create a pan Nigerian identity. Instead, most of the policies undertaken were rather aimed at suppressing ethnic consciousness and minimize the challenge it poses to the legitimacy of the state or the authority of the incumbent regime. The result of this is the heightened hegemonic contest for power at the centre by the ethnic groups. This competition for ethnic domination has, over the years, assumed varying forms in the politics of Nigeria. However, the phenomenon of ethnic militia as a strategy for political contention seems to have become an instrument for achieving political ends. This tactics is paying off as legitimate way of attaining power. Therefore, this paper examines ethnic militias as a social pressure group in the Fourth Republic for political contention.

Keywords: *Ethnic Militia, Social Pressure, Nigeria, Fourth Republic, Ethnic Rivalry*

1. Introduction

The emergence of Boko Haram, a previously obscure group as the most dreaded militia group in Nigeria, coincided with the failed bid for the country's presidency by northern political elites in 2011 (Onuoha, 2011). However, with the realization of the quest in 2015 by the election of Mohammad Buhari, indicates that a pattern of inter-ethnic competition for political power and control of resources in Nigeria's fourth republic seem to be emerging. That is the resort to violence by ethnic militias and consequent placation of the ethnic group by the national political class (Jason, 2006). This became evident with the formation of Oodua People's Congress (OPC), a Yoruba ethnic militia group that pushed for the revalidation of the 1993 presidential election won by Moshood Abiola of the Yoruba ethnic stock but annulled by the Hausa/Fulani dominated military government (Ibrahim, 1999). However, when another Yoruba man Olusegun Obasanjo was elected president in May 1999, the groups' violent proclivity faded away. That was the precursor to the proliferation of ethnic militia groups as a social pressure for the extraction of political concession for the mother group (Obi, 2001). The same can be said of the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) which arose to agitate for resource control in the oil rich Niger Delta region, impacting heavily on oil production which is the main stay of Nigeria's economy (Douglass et al, 2004). MEND started melting away after Goodluck Jonathan, a man from the Niger Delta ascended power following the demise of Umaru YarAdua from the north. Incidentally, as MEND was fading away after the 2011 presidential election which Jonathan won, Boko Haram from the northeast took over as the

most notorious ethnic militia in the country. The paper examined ethnic militias as social pressure groups in the quest for political power in Nigeria. Specific cases that were examined include OPC, MASSOB, MEND and Boko Haram all of which cut across the length and breadth of the country. Are these groups spontaneous or orchestrated by power hungry elites for narrow parochial interests? The study also probed the dynamics of Nigerian political terrain that creates room for the proliferation of these groups.

2. Overview of Nigerian Politics

Nigeria political history is a chequered one, from colonial era to civil democracy after independence, with the military exercising dominant control in between for a longer period until the present Fourth Republic. Though the colonial governance of Nigeria was not generally accepted by the people, the series of constitutional changes during that era starting from the Amalgamation instrument of Lord Fredrick Lugard in 1914, to the Littleton constitution of 1953, contributed immensely in shaping the nature of Nigerian state.

Nigeria has been chaotic because of British regional policy which heightened the problem of ethnicity especially by the political parties that were ethnically based. In addition, the geographical division (north and south) of the country also conflates with religious division. While Islamic religion has gained iron footing in the north, Christianity appears as the dominant religion in the south. These religious divisions exacerbated the problem of ethnicity. Thus, ethnic politics characterised pre-independence politics and led to the collapse of civilian government that took over from the colonialists.

Even the military that emerged in 1966 were not free from the ethnic bug that infested Nigerian politics. Bar (2004) observes that since independence, Nigeria has been ruled by successive military and civilian governments that have been plagued with ethnic bigotry and corruption. The inability of the military to resolve the problem of ethnicity became evident by the various coups and counter-coups with ethnic colouration and the subsequent civil war from 1966-1970. The military ruled Nigeria from 1966- 1979. Bar (2004) contends that national politics in Nigeria have been characterised by intense struggles for political power among the major ethnic groups manifesting in the form of ethnic and religious conflict. At the heart of the various ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria is the problem of resource distribution among the different ethnic groups.

3. Phenomenon of Ethnic Militia Movements in Nigeria

According to Obi (2011) ethnic militia groups emerged in the Nigerian State in the 1990s when the nation was in the grips of a vicious military dictatorship. The character of the regimes deepened the contradictions and crisis of the Nigerian State, resulting in the rise of ethnic militia groups as one of the major consequences of that process. There are three salient features of these regimes that reinforced militarism and promoted primordial loyalties in the Nigerian State. First are the phenomenon of personal rule and the high concentration of power perpetuated by them (Adejumobi, 2000). The period, 1985-1997, witnessed inter ethnic religious and communal conflicts from the North to the South. The import of this is that ethnic boundary and consciousness became more profound specifically during the Babangida and Abacha regimes (Obi, 2011).

The second salient feature is the contrivance of the public sphere for social expression and political action. Both the Babangida and Abacha regimes were repressive and sought to deal with any group that opposed them.

The final feature to the rise of ethnic militia groups under these regimes was the issue of marginalization and social deprivation that became rife in the country especially for the ethnic minorities of the Niger

Delta region. The oil which is the mainstay of the economy of the Nigerian State is sourced from the Niger Delta whereas the region was characterized by poverty and the people live in squalor.

The pervasiveness of personal rule and high concentration of power on an individual was epitomized by the Ibrahim Babaginda and Sani Abacha military regimes in Nigeria. Both men who dominated the politics of the 1990s, had secret agendas of perpetuating their hold on power through the manipulation of the transition to civil rule programmes which they built on deception with greater tendency at intimidation and intolerance of dissenting view points (Ibrahim, 2003). Indeed, the character of the two regimes deepened the contradiction and crisis of the Nigerian state and the immediate result was the annihilation of civil society, thus driving individuals and groups that opposed the regimes into the trenches (Bach 2004, Guichaoua 2006).

Particularly, Ibrahim Babaginda who nursed a secret agenda of self-perpetuation, engaged in a political chessboard of banning, unbanning and banning politicians in the name of 'learning process' under his transition to civil rule programme offering no choice to the victims than to engage in undercover activities. In that process so many decisions were taken including the cancellations of political parties' primaries and election results which frustrated the politicians and the people (Kaur, 2007). However, the straws that could no longer be swallowed, was the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election won by a Yoruba billionaire businessman Moshood Abiola of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) who was a friend of the ruling military establishment (Faseun, 2005). The fact that he hails from an area of the country that had spearheaded opposition politics in the country gave fillip to the opposition against that regime (Albert 2001; Akinyele, 2001). That election has been tagged a watershed because Abiola was perceived as a symbol of change long desired by the peoples of the geographical south of the country, especially the Yorubas of southwest (Faseun, 2003). Annulment of the election by the Babaginda regime was unacceptable to the political elite mainly from the south west and their rejection of that annulment plunged the country into a crisis that increasingly turned into an ethnic strife localized to the south western part of the country (Okechukwu, 2000).

The most fundamental outcome of this brouhaha was the formation of Oodua People's Congress (OPC) by Dr Fredrick Faseun after he consulted widely with the Yoruba elite (Faseun, 2003). The fact that a personality like Dr Beko Ramsome-Kuti who was a well known civil right activists lent his support in the formation of the organization gives credence to the view that its emergence has something to do with the brutality of the military regimes especially that of General Sani Abacha whose penchant was to brood no opposition following the stalemate that followed Ibrahim Babaginda's stepping aside from the mantle of power (Faseun 2005). The organisation formed originally to champion the revalidation of the annulled election of June 12 1993, has increasingly widened its objectives to include checkmating the injustice perpetrated against the Yoruba by the Hausa-Fulani ruling elite as well as promoting Yoruba cultural heritage (Guichaoua, 2006; Nolte 2007; Duruji 2010). The activities of the OPC which is concentrated in the south western part of the country, led to the formation of Arewa People's Congress (APC) as a direct response to OPC's activities, as well as to defend the entrenched Hausa-Fulani interests in Nigeria (Adejumobi, 2002).

In the Niger-delta area, the emergence of militant groups calling for an end to injustice, environmental degradation and deprivation followed the same pattern of state repression (Obi 2002). Though agitation in that region of the country predates the era of military rule and even independence, it was the non-

violent campaign led by Ken Saro Wawa and his Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni Peoples (MOSOP) in the early 1990s that prepared the stage for militant ethnic movements in that region (Osezua, 1999; Emmanuel 2006).

It was the Ogoni struggle, coupled with the organizational prowess of Ken Saro Wiwa that not only helped to awaken the entire populace of the Niger Delta to the neglect and destruction that oil exploration brought to the region, but in addition, internationalized the plight of the Niger Delta peoples (Osaghae, 1995). As Osezua (1999) rightly observed, the advent of the phenomenon of mass protest in Nigerian politics was marked by the rise of MOSOP in their passionate demand for a fundamental restructuring of the Nigerian state. The Ogoni revolt succeeded in forcing the multinational oil giant, Shell, to suspend operation in the area for many years (Obi, 2004:104). Though Ken Saro Wiwa paid the supreme price in 1995 when he was hanged by the military administration of Sani Abacha on charges of the murder of four prominent Ogoni chiefs, the flames of agitation and activism in the Niger delta which the Ogoni struggle sparked off, instead of abating, rather reverberated across the Niger delta and increased in intensity. It was this impetus that was arrived at by the Ijaw ethnic group that came out with the Kaima Declaration on December 11, 1998. The issues surrounding the Kaima Declaration changed the coloration of the Niger delta struggle and took it to another level beyond where the Ogonis left it. For instance, the declaration had called for the immediate withdrawal from Ijaw land of all military forces of occupation and repression deployed by the Nigerian state, warning oil companies not to employ services of the Nigerian armed forces to protect their operations; otherwise they will be viewed as enemy of the Ijaw people (Ojeifa, 2004). It demanded that oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area so as to put a stop to gas flaring, oil spillage, blow out etc that have despoiled their environment. It advised all oil company staff and contractors to withdraw from Ijaw territories by the 30th of December 1998 (Ojeifa, 2004).

The immediate reaction of the Nigerian government to that declaration was to unleash violence and manhunt on the masterminds of that declaration. However the youths of the area with memories of the Ogoni struggle were undeterred by the response of the Nigerian state and were determined to carry on with their resolution. The result was the violent militancy approach by the formation of rebellious organizations that challenged state authority. The Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) are the major militant organizations that emerged from the area with trail of clashes with security operatives (Jason 2006). The group's strategy apart from the confrontations with police and other security operatives also include kidnapping raids and asking for ransom, sabotage, bunkering and terrorism. These activities reduced the state revenue and the oil companies explorative capacities in that region.

The core east or the Igbo area is not an exception; violence oriented organizations with different agendas also emerged in the region following the advent of the Fourth Republic. Bakassi Boys was one typical example that enjoyed patronage of state governors in fight for crime before the clampdown on it by the federal government shortly before the 2003 general elections which ultimately reduced its visibility (Babawale, 2004, 53-56). The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) was the most daring through its confrontation with security operatives. Its demand for an independent Biafran state from Nigeria is a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Nigerian state. The group which claims a philosophy of non- violence, has since its formation in 1999 engaged in rallies, use of uniform of former Biafran police and soldiers, hoisting separatists flags and circulating maps that show boundaries of Biafra among many other things (Bach, 2004:5). The organization has also organised

successful sit-at-home calls that were widely adhered to in the Igbo area and beyond (Obi, 2004:10). The Boko Haran insurgent group that operates in the north east region of the country emerged in 2009 but became notorious after the 2011 General elections in Nigeria. From the north east the group has extended its activities across other parts of northern Nigeria (Duruji & Oviasogie, 2013)

4. Politics of Pacification and Proliferation of Ethnic Militias

A clear pattern that has emerged in Nigerian politics of the Fourth Republic is the resort to violence as a means of seeking attention and concession. It has also been observed that these violent groups are organised along ethnic lines (Duruji, 2008).

The OPC violent proclivity in the southwest region particularly, Lagos the commercial nerve centre of Nigeria, compelled the ruling class to consider placating them by conceding the country's presidency to the Yoruba ethnic group in 1999. As a social pressure, OPC's strategy in conjunction with other subtle Yoruba organizations such as the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), succeeded in compelling the rest of the country to pacify their ethnic group for the injustice of the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential elections by conceding the presidency to them in 1999.

Ralph Uwazurike an active player in the transition politics of 1998/1999 and his MASSOB followers as observers of the Nigerian political system felt that if a similar militant oriented organization were to be founded for the Igbo people, it will help to advance the interests of the Igbo in Nigeria (Duruji, 2010). For the MASSOB, the conditions were different. Nigeria has just transited into a democratic dispensation. There were no comparable targeted government action against Igbo people beyond the level the military left it, but one must consider the dynamics of that transition to civil rule in 1999 from the perspective of the Igbo. The decision to concede the presidency to the Yoruba by the ruling military class and their civilian allies and actualize it using state machineries as a way to pacify the ethnic group for the wrong of June 12, 1993 presidential election annulment produced victims of Igbo elite. In both the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and ALL Peoples Party (APP), Igbo candidates had sour stories of their presidential bids. For instance, in the PDP Alex Ekwueme, the former Vice president who was instrumental to the formation of the PDP and has been tipped to emerge as flag bearer of the party lost the presidential ticket of the party to retired General Olusegun Obasanjo who was drafted straight from prisons into the party that happened to be the most promising to actualize the goal of presidency of Yoruba extraction. The same played out in the APP where Ogbonaya Onu who won the primaries unceremoniously gave his ticket to Olu Falae of the Alliance for Democracy (AD) to run on the party ticket under the so called joint ticket, thus dashing the hope of Igbo people to see one of their own assume the presidency since the end of the civil war. The disappointment that followed those unsuccessful bids was compounded by the vulnerability of Igbo people as victims of repeated ethnic and religious riots and disturbances in other parts of the country and the inability of the government to identify and punish the culprits (Duruji, 2010). These incidents which occurred simultaneously, re-in forced the long held view of marginalization by the Igbo which was enough to arouse ethnic solidarity that helped Uwazurike in the mobilization joiners of MASSOB. The activities of MASSOB is yet to attract concession in the magnitude comparable with those of the other, but the intensified militancy in the southeast shortly after Mohammadu Buhari was sworn in lays credence to the view that such placation may come in the next political dispensation to see if it can douse the loud agitation for the state of Biafra.

In the Niger-delta area, the Ogoni struggle awakened agitation in the region but taken to the next level of violent militancy by NDPVF and MEND.

In response to the militancy in the Niger Delta, the government, apart from setting up the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) by act of the National Assembly and the Coastal States of the Niger Delta, has also increased derivation principle of oil revenue from 3 to 13 percent. The implication is that the revenue collected by the states in the Niger Delta has tremendously increased making states in that region the envy of the others in the federation (Duruji & Azuh, 2014). That not being enough, an Amnesty programme was offered to the militants and a Disarmament Demobilization and Rehabilitation Commission was established with an initial budget of \$63million for the rehabilitation and reintegration of thousands of militants covering their allowances and running of the programmes for the period of two months. Each of the militants is expected to receive \$135 a month plus \$100 a month for food. According to former Governor of Central Bank of Nigeria, Sanusi Lamido, the Federal Government has spent \$1 billion (N158 billion) on the Amnesty programme between 2008 and 2013 (Nwokoji & Amumihe, 2013). The programme was further extended to December 2015. Through the Programme militant youths were trained in Ghana, South Africa, the Philippines, Russia, Ukraine, India, among other countries. Also, more than 5,000 youths have been enrolled in formal schools and various vocational training centres within and outside the country. Available data show that no fewer than 5,067 of the total beneficiaries had already graduated in skills acquisition fields such as welding and fabrication (1,847), entrepreneurship (1,609), pipe fitting (150), carpentry & plumbing (206), oil drilling (32), electrical installation (232), ICT (125), marine related courses (564) and others (302). (Nwokoji & Amumihe, 2013).

On the other hand, it need be pointed out here that this amnesty is not the first measure to curb the menace. For example, in 2004 the Federal Government made an attempt to buy over some of the militants leaders like Ateke Tom and Asari Dokubo by paying them \$2,000 for each of the 360 AK-47 they surrender to the government.

More so, in a bid to replicate the development at the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), a ministry of Niger Delta was created by the Umaru Muas Yar Adua administration. In addition to this, is the massive Amnesty Programme which involves training of former militants in schools in the country and abroad, the payment of a minimum of N65, 000 monthly to these combatants, the integration of their leaders through government patronage such as the concession of lucrative contracts of safe-guarding oil pipelines that fetches millions of naira to them monthly.

Among all these gains by the Niger Delta political bloc, the most significant was the making of Dr Goodluck Jonathan who hails from Bayelsa state as the president. His meteoric rise to the exalted office of the presidency owes a lot to the agitations and activities of civil society groups and militants from the Niger Delta.

The Boko Haram insurgency intensified in 2011 after the failed bid by the north to have one of their own occupy the presidency after the sudden death of Umaru Yar Adua who hailed from the north paved the way for Jonathan to ascend power. The Boko Haram insurgency has been variously interpreted as not just mere attempt by religious bigots to sanitise what they perceive as a failed system but also attempt by northern elites to stop Jonathan from having a second term in office. The election of General Muhamadu Buhari as president in the 2015 election against, were largely attributed to his failure to handle the security situation that Boko Haram posed throughout his regime.

It is very clear by these developments that a pattern has emerged in the inter-ethnic competition for power, particularly the office of the president in the Fourth Republic. The resort to violence by ethnic

militias and consequent placation of the ethnic group by the national political class seem to be paying off for the ethnic groups that can dare the risk. Just as the militia groups from the other regions has faded after someone from their ethnic extraction becomes the president, Boko Haram insurgency may follow the same pattern as some observed indicated (Iredia, 2015). Repressive strategy by the state has not succeeded in abating the activities of the groups but has rather aggravated the situation. No wonder the constant resort to dialogue and placation that seem to encourage more groups to embrace violence against the state.

5. Implications on Nation – Building

The proliferation of ethnic militias in Nigeria and the heightened ethnically motivated violence across the nations since the inception of the Fourth Republic democratic dispensation is posing a great danger for National integration in Nigeria (Duruji 2010). The activities of these militias and the subtle sympathy from the ethnic group they claim to represent have also raised the bar of mistrust among the various Nigerian groups. That national integration process in Nigeria is rendered difficult due to the patronage of ethnic divisions using militancy as the tool for appropriating state power. The activities of these groups have led to the relocation of many Nigerians residing outside of their ethnic homelands due to fear of insecurity.

Even national programmes such as the National Youth Service Corp, which was designed and established in 1973 for young Nigerian graduates to interact and mix up with other Nigerians outside of their state of origin is currently under threat by the activities of ethnic militia group, more so when they are vulnerable to attack by these groups.

In as much as the polity continues to produce such dysfunctional behaviours, the attitude of the political elite towards these development and overlooking to address the Nigeria's national question, has tended to compound the situation. The selective pacification as a response strategy to the phenomenon of ethnic militia movements across the country has turned out counterproductive following the proliferation of these behaviours. Consequently each ethnic group that forms a militia expects to be treated the same way the other were treated, which encourages cycle of demands that would be difficult to put a stop to.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined the phenomenon of ethnic militia as a social pressure in Nigeria's politics. This became necessary because of the preponderance of violence-oriented ethnic organizations and the centrifugal nature of their activities that impact negatively on the course of nation-building in Nigeria. This new form of ethnicity which is pervading the country has its root in colonialism. The militarization of the civil society, stemming from many years of colonial and military rule was confounded by the character of the Nigerian state and its political economy. The result is the proliferation of ethnic based organizations making various demands on the Nigerian state and operating outside the confines of the law. The response of the political elite to pacification, though has doused violent proclivity of specific ethnic militia ends up encouraging its proliferation across the country.

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