

Review

Oil Wealth and the emergence of ethnic militia in the Nigerian political economy: Reflections on the Niger Delta region

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This paper sets out to examine the phenomenon of ethnic militia groups in the Nigerian Political Economy, with emphasis on their emergence, purpose and the impact of their activities particularly in the Niger Delta Region. Relying on the relative deprivation and frustration — Aggression model, the paper traced the emergence of these groups to inequitable social relations that undergird the production and distribution of profits from oil, thereby leaving the Niger Delta people impoverished, neglected, hungry, marginalized, unemployed and economically bastardized. Among other things, the paper advocates the need to strengthen the structure and character of the Nigerian state in order to meet the needs and aspirations of the people. Government should also build social and physical infrastructures that will engender sustainable development in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Keywords: Oil wealth, Ethnic Militia, Political Economy.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the Nigerian political economy has been variously described as skewed in favour of those elites from those ethnic groups who could manipulate their grip on the control of the resources and policies of the nation. This nomenclature has increased tendencies for denationalization of the Nigerian state, which has given rise to the emergence of perceived marginalized elites of various ethnic groups forming frontiers or platforms to pursue their individual or group interests. These groups, in quest of fighting for their rights or redressing injustices, resort to the use of violence and extreme militancy. In the last decade, the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria has experienced its major negative grip of these militia groups with their composition of mainly the youths. The militia groups, have penetrating networks and profound influence among ethnic leaders. The activities of these militia groups initially appeared to reflect a pursuit of a genuine philosophy of redressing the injustice and marginalization of the region by the Nigerian State. It took

a negative dimension recently when events emanating from the region indicate disagreement in the activities and modus operandi of pursuing their aims and objectives. Some of these ethnic militias include the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), etc. These ethnic militias which have made their activities a major issue in the Niger delta has in the last four years assumed the most worrisome dimension; with its variance in vandalization of oil infrastructure, bunkering, kidnapping and hostage taking. These activities have left the Nigerian economy to dwindle especially, since the Nigerian economy is a mono-economy which depends substantially on oil. The extant dimension of the militia groups requires an urgent attention. While some scholars argue it primarily as a security issue against the state, others see it from point of view of manifestations and expressions of frustration that results from the dysfunction of the structure of the Nigerian political economy. It is my argument in this paper, to examine the security implications of the negative activities of the militia groups and their perceived argument of frustration arising from the age long deprivation and marginalization. This is

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with a view to ensuring a political economy that will satisfy all and sundry.

There appears to be symmetry of agreement among scholars and opinion leaders on the issues of genuine struggle for economic and environmental emancipation of the Niger Delta Region. But the seemingly growing armed struggle combined with indices of criminality often displayed by these self styled militia groups puzzles my mind. It is also a problem of this paper to find reasons why there appear to be a disagreement in the aims and objectives of the various groups thereby presenting parallel conditions for downing their tools even in the face of current move by the Federal Government receiving recommendations from the Ethnic leaders through the Niger Delta Technical Committee headed by Mr. Ledum Mitee.

This paper therefore, is set to achieve the following objectives;

The paper specifically seeks to achieve the following objectives:

To identify the character and dimensions of the militia groups and their effects on the political economy of Nigeria; To account for possible reasons why efforts at containing the nefarious activities of the militia groups has been unsuccessful and It hopes to enable generalization and possible prediction of the effects of activities of militia groups on the Nigerian economy.

Theoretical Framework

A wide range of theoretical perspectives have been suggested in the literature on the explanations for the causes of the formation of militia groups, context and the intensity of their activities. Nevertheless, the three main perspectives that have become dominant in the prevailing scholarly discourse are the group deprivation, ethnic nationalism and ethnic regionalism. Although these theoretical orientations are linked, the relative deprivation approach seems to be most applicable to and will be adopted here for the analysis of ethnic militias activities in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Adebisi (2008:9) argues that persisting gaps and inequalities between minority and majority create increasing tension between the groups, born out of a frustration — aggression nexus. Ethnic militia activities revolve around the distribution of national resources and the struggle for power, authority and values. In the face of real or perceived marginalization, ethnicity is viewed as instrumental, forming an effective core around which youths sharing common ancestral view can mobilize support for civil struggles against socio-economic deprivation. The arguments for the emergence and activities of the militia groups therefore is that their realization over the years, that more civil means will take more time to yield dividends. Thus, the deprivation in the Niger Delta is the remote cause of militia groups in the Niger Delta area.

When a man is denied of every good thing of life, he gets angry with his neighbour, himself and even objects around him. This may best explain the situation in the Niger Delta Region.

The activities of ethnic militia groups is also explainable through frustration – Aggression hypothesis. This hypothesis posits that people are pushed into aggression behaviour by drive influenced by frustration generated by the existence of oil in the region and the feeling of exploitation and marginalization in the Niger Delta region of the Nigerian state.

Frustration leads to some form of aggression. This may not take place in all situation since the level of tolerance differs from one group to another. The magnitude of the perceived stumbling block is a function of frustration projection. Given the relative strength of the Nigerian state in the case of the Niger Delta government face off often results into frustration displacement. As a consequence, therefore, the activities of militia groups are directed at government, oil installations and other groups in the region who would ordinarily not be affected (Hewstone and Stroebe, 2001).

Ethnic Militia and Perceived Motives for their Emergence

Scholars and researchers on military affairs tend to agree on the view that militias are substantially different from armies in the sense that their members remain civilians. They may be under obligation to meet and train frequently and must always be ready to obey orders and commands of their leaders and are never mobilized on a permanent basis. Ethnic militias can best be described as youth based groups which are formed for the purpose of promoting interests of their ethnic groups, and whose activities to most cases involve the use of violence. They basically serve as social pressure groups that seek to influence the structure of power in the society, and call attention to the determinations of material condition or political deprivation and perceived marginalization of the groups. Numerous explanations have been argued for the emergence of the ethnic militia groups. Okumagba (2008:375) relied greatly on Akinyele (2001) that the recent emergence of Ethnic militias in the country and in particular, the Niger Delta is the result of the aggressive pursuit of the principle of self-determination by the so felt ethnic groups. It is also argued that the emergence of ethnic militias was imperfection of Nigerian federation. Thus ethnic militia was the manipulation of ethnicity by governing elites across the various regions especially as a means for bargaining for power in the political equation. The organizations were formed as a consequence of mismanagement of ethnic grievances by the Nigerian state and its agents and were meant to be militant organs of expressing defiance against the oppressive rule of the Nigerian state. In his opinions, Danjuma, (2002:12)

asserts, that the upsurge in the formation and activities of the ethnic militias is traceable to neglect by government or perceived neglect on the part of many ethnic nationalities in the Nigeria state. These militia groups that allow their membership from the unemployed youths find themselves in organized violence, has also been attributed to politicians who find and employ them as thugs in pursuance of their personal or partisan objectives. Egbele (2005:32) was corroborating the above assertion when he said:

The three political parties have in their membership leaders of these militants groups. At the formation of the parties, you would find members of the groups being wooed by the founders of the parties. At some occasion rival factions use them to settle disputes. Many of the state governors use them for personal security. Even our ministers have way of reaching out to the groups. During political campaign, you will find our politicians engaging touts, (agberos) and all kind of associations to win elections. So what happens after the elections? They must seek relevance at all cost.

Ethnic militia groups emerged in the Nigerian State in the 1990s when the nation was in the throes of a vicious military dictatorship. Specifically, the context for the rise of these groups was the Babangida and Abacha regimes. The character of those regimes deepened the contradictions and crises of the Nigerian state which resulted in the rise of the ethnic militia groups as one of the consequences of that process. There are some features which reinforced militarism and promoted primordial loyalties within the Nigerian state. The first is the phenomenon of personal rule and the high concentration of power perpetuated by the Babangida and Abacha regimes, evidently, the concentration of power in the hands of an individual entity whether in a military or civilian leadership, has a strong potential of promoting ethnic tension in the community, as such individuals usually construct an 'ethnic state access map' through which they distribute social goods and scarce resources and create polarization and division amongst ethnic groups in order to perpetuate their role (Adejumobi, 200:123-124) The other dimension to the rise of ethnic militia groups under the Babangida and Abacha regimes for Adejumobi (2002) was the issue of marginalization and social deprivation that became life in the Nigerian state particularly for the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta region. The politics of oil played a key role in the emergence of ethnic militia groups. This is so because while oil, which constitutes the mainstay of the Nigerian economy is sources from the Niger Delta region of the Nigerian state, the inhabitants are in abject poverty and lack of basic social amenities. The social conditions of these communities and tribulations of the Niger Delta people have well documented severally (Civil liberties organization, 1996; Obi , 2002; Human Rights Watch, 1999 and Osaghae, 1995).

The response of the Nigerian state to the crisis in the

Niger Delta region has been to militarize the environment by moving military personnel to occupy the oil producing communities with the sole aim of keeping the militia groups at bay through the use of force of arms in order to ensure the free flow of oil to the Nigerian state. Driven to frustrated heights, some groups in those communities also resorted to armed reaction ostensibly in self defense. Several militant youths groups emerged, while the existing non-violent youth wings. The main objective was to consider the violence created by the state and to divine home their point of deprivation and marginalization. Adejumobi, S (2002) Ethnic Militia Groups and the Nation Question in Nigeria GSC Quarterly.

Ethnic Militias and their Impacts on the Political Economy of the Niger Delta Region.

Militia activities in the Niger Delta which has often led to violent activities by militant youths involving hostage taking and the killing of expatriates and non-expatriate workers, the vandalization of oil installations and illegal bunkering activities, and increasing wave of organized crime in the region have not only become a frequent routine but also has assumed a worrisome dimension. This question that is often asked by critics is why are the militias restive and involved in violent attacks on lives and properties and other organized crimes. The answer to the above question is found in the frustration resulting from the dysfunction of the Nigerian state and the perceived inequality in the distribution of the wealth of the nation which a huge sum is derived from the region. This is therefore the root of the crisis in the Niger Delta region. It is therefore, of paramount importance for the crisis resulting from the militia groups to be properly managed and curbed by the federal government. The activities of these groups have led to colossal loss of both human and material resources. Further, the activities of these militia groups can be traced to factors such as poverty, neglect of the region and perceived inequality and injustices. These crises are on the increase because of the perceived inequality in the distribution of the national income which is largely gotten from the oil being tapped from their soil by laws governing oil exploration in Nigeria and the land use Act. The view that militia groups are formed to aggressively compel the federal government to yield to their requests and demands of redressing the perceived injustices, deprivation and marginalization, has nonetheless led to more woes of economic and human loss. Even so, the fight is yet to be won. Akinyele(2001:624) attempted the graphic analysis of the activities of the militia groups and posits that:

“although the philosophy of their fight is clear and commendable, the concomitant and negative effect of their action add less to the already dwindling economy of the region”.

Seizure of Oil Rigs, Wells and Flow Station

The youths in the Niger Delta have protested against the ravaging of the environment by the activities of oil companies doing business in the area. Over the years, the oil producing companies in Nigeria have lost billions of dollars due to the disruption of the production by the host communities between October 1 and October 15 1997 when a group of Ijaw youths laid siege to almost all oil installations in the Ijaw area, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and her NNPC joint venture partner lost about \$90 million or N7.74 billion. Shell Forcados Terminal used for loading crude oil for export was closed down, thus stalling export for several days. Even if we agree that these obstructions bring their grievances to the fore, its ripple effects leaves our economy on a downward trend.

Vandalization of Oil Pipelines and Sabotage to Oil Installations and Properties owned by Oil Companies

There have been reported cases of the willful racing down of offices buildings and equipment owned by the oil companies. The vandalization of the oil pipelines which criss-cross the length and breadth of the region has spelt disastrous consequences, not only for the national treasury, but also the safety of citizens. For example, in October 17, 1999, more than 500 people died in Jesse, Ethiope-West Local Government Area of Delta State When fire started during its illegal siphoning of petroleum products from a broken pipeline.

Harassment of Trawlers and kidnapping of Individuals and Businessmen

The restive youths in the Niger Delta have constantly harassed trawler owners operating in the region, having added them to the list of those responsible for environmental degradation (Sokoh: 2003:337). In a collective letter to the presidency, the fishermen said they have lost over N300 million to the youths who now constitute themselves into militia groups and have continued to attack their vessels for failure to pay royalties ranging from N50,000 to N300,000 per fishing vessel. There have also been unconfirmed reports of the harassment of traders, craftsmen, artisans and other businessmen especially those who come from other parts of the country (Ibid). Violence on the part of these Niger Delta militia groups recently took a new turn with the hijacking of oil installations and facilities as well as the kidnapping of the employees of oil companies and even relatives of well to do Nigerian relations According to (Akinyele 2001:16) *"Hostage taking is the new phenomenon that has crept into the mutually suspicious and at worst, violently*

antagonistic relations between host communities and oil companies in the Niger Delta".

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has been examining the emergence and growth of militia groups in the Niger Delta Area, and their impact on the Nigerian political economy. There is no doubt that most scholars working on the activities of the region tend to agree that their activities are never unconnected with frustration arising from the negative effects of oil exploration and exploitation which had almost left the region barren. The insurgence of militia groups in the region has been blamed on perceived injustice associated with the redistribution of Nigeria's wealth, as well as the severe degradation of the region's environment attributable to bad practices of oil companies operation in the region (Igbayo and Igbinedion 2003:382). There are some who tend to argue that since the Nigerian state had failed to yield to initial moves to redress these injustices through dialogue, resorting to militia groups will solve the problem. It is my view in this paper that dialogue still remains the best option to resolving any problem depending on the framework adopted by stakeholders. The need to address the issue of ethnic militia and conflict can not be over emphasized. Given the huge loss both in human and material resources and the huge revenue loss resulting from the activities of these groups make, an urgent means of checking the activities of the militia groups is necessary.

The stakeholders may find answers to the protracted crisis {problem} in the following recommendations:

1) There is the need to strengthen the structure of the Nigerian state through constitutional means that will ensure satisfactory regional interest.

2) That all stakeholders to the Niger Delta crises must recognize the need for dialogue as the most effective instrument in the resolution of the emergent crisis in the region. Thus, the federal and state governments in the region as well as community leaders, militia groups and civil society organizations should embrace dialogue at the local regional and national level and articulate effective policies that will bring peace, equity and justice to the people of the region.

3) Now that the ministry for the Niger Delta has been created by the federal government, the leaders of the region must prevail on the militias groups to stop criminalizing the struggle and offer the federal government the opportunity to work towards correcting the wrongs.

4) Adopt a more equitable derivation formula, perhaps one of the most troubling issues in the Niger Delta is the 13 percent derivation that is allocated to the oil producing states from the federation account. Many see this as an injustice, thus it could be raised to 20% if

not 50% at least to show to the people of the region that they should continue to have hope in the structure of the Nigerian State.

5) That, local, states and federal governments should accelerate infrastructural development in the region. The dearth of social and physical infrastructure in the Niger Delta is a binding constraint to the sustainable development of the region. In the rural areas, lack of access to motorable roads, hospitals, schools and communication networks is an impediment against sustainable livelihood. The absence of these initiatives may increase the number of militia groups and their activities which will constantly threaten the unity of the Nigerian state.

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