

Revisiting Ethno-Nationalism in the Niger Delta of Nigeria: An Interrogation of its Achievements and Prospects

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Abstract

Although ethnic pluralism, ethnicity and ethno-nationalism are pervasive characteristics of the contemporary international system, the upsurge of violent ethno-nationalism in Nigeria at the commencement of the current civilian dispensation in 1999 was unprecedented. Several groups from hitherto marginalized parts of the country, capitalized on the statutory regime of human rights and rule of law provided by the democratic space to articulate their discontentment. Similarly, due to the enveloping underdevelopment and poverty resulting from decades of obvious environmental pollution, political marginalization and disregard of the Niger Deltans by the Nigerian state and the Multinational oil companies (MNOCs), youths resorted to the formation of belligerent ethno-nationalist groups. Consequently, insurgent ethno-nationalism worsened insecurity, de-legitimized the status of the state and threatened its continued existence as a corporate entity; with dire consequences, until late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua granted general amnesty to those involved in violent ethno-nationalism in the Niger Delta on 25 June 2009. Against this backdrop, this study derived from a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, re-examines the achievements and prospects of ethno-nationalism in the Niger Delta. It argues that members of the political elite and few leaders and members of the insurgent ethno-nationalist groups are the major beneficiaries of the struggle. Furthermore, with the use of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, it posits that if the causal factors that gave rise to ethno-nationalism are not tackled, counter-hegemonic forces will soon re-emerge in the region.

Keywords: Ethno-nationalism, hegemony, Niger Delta, Nigeria, political elite

1. Introduction

Belligerent ethno-nationalism started in post-colonial Nigeria with the Tiv riots of 1962 in the Northern region. Other instances include: the Agbekoya revolt in the Western region, the Isaac Adaka Boro-led separatist '12 Day revolution' in the Eastern region and the Biafran secessionist war also, in the Eastern region (Agbu, 2004). However, in the post-civil war era, ethno-nationalist militancy was virtually non-existent perhaps, owing to the excruciating experience of the civil war - 1967-1970, the dread of an impetuous military government and the putative economic prosperity due to oil boom in the 1970s (Gilbert, 2010b).

The virtual relegation of other sectors, especially agriculture, prompted a high level of rural-urban migration. Rapid urbanization and the subsequent dwindling economic fortunes from the 1980s to the early 2000s, due to the mismanagement of the oil boom resources, resulted to high unemployment rates and pervasive criminal activities in the country. Closely related to this was the inability of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) to effectively curb the activities of criminals. Thus, there was the urgent need for the formation of neighborhood vigilante groups by non-state groups and organizations in various communities across the country, for the purpose of protecting and safeguarding lives and properties.

For the effective and efficient performance of their roles, arms were illegally acquired for the vigilantes, while some - such as the Bakassi Boys - were legalized as the Anambra State Vigilante Service and given express political backing. It was therefore only a matter of time before the vigilantes grew larger than the established laws of the land, obviously infringed on the prosecutorial powers of the police and the adjudicatory role of the judiciary, and became involved in the perpetration of sordid human rights violations in their various localities (Akinyele, 2001; Sesay, Ukeje, Aina & Odebiyi, 2003; Agbu, 2004; Reno, 2006). These groups therefore became a ready pool of recruitment for the various militant ethno-nationalist movements in Nigeria, especially in the Niger Delta region.

According to Gilbert (2010b: 157):

....ethno-nationalism in contemporary Nigeria arose as a result of the Nigerian National Question (NNQ), which has been a major challenge to the socio-political existence of the country. Fundamental to it is the clamor for the paradigmatic restructuring and redefinition of the defective, colonially-configured Nigerian federation, so as to ensure the elimination of fedro-centralism, hegemony, marginalization and injustice. Simultaneously, this would guarantee the rights of the constituent ethnic nationalities, justice, equity and fair-play in the framework of a congenial democratic environment. The NNQ gained prominence in Nigeria's

political economy discourse during the long-winding political transition program (PTP), the deceptive SAP and the general dictatorial governance foisted on the citizenry by the Babangida and Abacha juntas.

The NNQ has been described as “...the perennial debate as to how to order the relations between the different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groupings so that they can have the same rights and privileges, access to power and an equitable share of national resources...” (Ajayi, 1992: 14).

Other critical factors responsible for the flowering of militant groups of identity politicking otherwise known as ethnic militia include:

- ❖ The commencement of the post-Abacha democratization process by General Abubakar Abdusalami in July 1998.
- ❖ The subsequent enthronement of civilian rule in Nigeria on 29 May, 1999.
- ❖ The dashed expectations of the citizenry with regards to the inability of the civilian government to fulfill the social contract stipulations (in terms of the socio-economic dividends of democracy).
- ❖ The refusal of the government to holistically address the numerous issues underlying the national question in Nigeria.

Consequently, several hitherto marginalized groups capitalized on the statutory regime of human rights and rule of law provided by the democratic space to articulate their discontentment and disenchantment. And this found expression in the flourishing of militancy, insurgency and separatist ethno-nationalist agenda directed against the Nigerian state; perceived as being responsible for the calamitous fortunes of the various ethnic nationalities. Groups like the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Arewa People's Congress (APC) and Oodua Peoples Congress emerged from the three major ethnic groups. While several groups including Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC), Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Niger Delta Strike Force (NDSF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) also materialized in the Niger Delta. This scenario further exposed the distortions and injustices inherent in the Nigerian polity, glaringly demonstrated the failure of the elected civilian governments' to meet the aspirations of the populace and threatened the continued existence of Nigeria as a corporate entity. It further resulted to greater insecurity in the country, negated and confronted the status of the state as the sole legitimate monopolist of the instruments of force, violence and coercion, and exposed the weak loyalty of the populace to the Nigerian nation-building project.

It is against this backdrop, that this paper re-examines the general phenomenon of belligerent ethno-nationalism, which found expression in the incidence of ethnic militias in the Niger Delta. It advances the argument that members of the political elite and few leaders of the ethno-nationalist groups are the major beneficiaries of the outcome of the agitations; while mass of the populace still wallow in abject poverty. Furthermore, with the use of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, it posits that if the causal factors that gave rise to belligerent ethno-nationalism are not tackled, counter-hegemonic forces will soon emerge in the region.

2. Conceptual Explications

Ethno-nationalism is obviously a combination of two words ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nationalism’; and “ethnicity is a derivative of the ethnic group” (Osaghae, 1991: 44). An ethnic group can be described as a group of people with a common identity based on cultural affinities of language, customs, common ancestry, race and religion; while ethnicity on the other hand, is “the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and difference to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or cooperation” (Osaghae, 1995: 11). Therefore, the existence of ethnic heterogeneity in a country does not necessarily foster ethnicity, but when the inherent differences between ethnic groups are strategically mobilized and activated for the achievement of certain individualized/collective goals, then it can be rightly adjudged that ethnicity has ensued. To a large extent, multi-ethnic societies where there exists a high level of competition for multifaceted but scarce resources are always characterized by ‘a specter of sustainable ethnicity’. It is against this backdrop that some analysts have argued that in some multi-ethnic countries like Nigeria, “...only ethnic identification patterns are genuine, and ...national identity is a shallow invention” (Ukeje & Adebani, 2008: 564). This is based on the rationale that “ethnicity is such a powerful sentiment that once mobilized, it cannot always be controlled” (Berghe, 1981: 191).

Nationalism, on the other hand, is more of an ideological political movement predicated on the conviction that a nation ought to have the benefit of equality of rights, status and political autonomy with other nations of the

world (Mansbach & Rafferty, 2008: 712). Like ethnicity, nationalism is also concerned with identity politics and both concepts could be used interchangeably in some contexts due to their overlapping common features. However nationalism differs from ethnicity, because it is a political cum ideological movement, while ethnicity is predicated on cultural affinities (Palmborg, 1999: 10).

Kourvetaris (1996: 1) has defined ethno-nationalism as the mobilization of ethnic solidarity for the achievement of politico-economic advantages (values and goods). Ethno-nationalism can therefore be defined as the organization, mobilization, activation and manipulation of primordial or cultural identities for the realization of the collective socio-economic and political aspirations of an ethnic nationality; and this may include the quest for self-determination. Ethno-nationalism thus becomes manifest when an ethnic nationality experiences denial, exclusion, marginalisation or undergoes some form of intentionally devised oppressive policies in a multi-ethnic state (Joireman, 2003).

According to Nagel, contemporary ethno-nationalism can be categorized into two: historical nationalism and secessionist movements (as cited in Kourvetaris, 1996: 4). Historical ethno-nationalism was the first wave of nationalism witnessed after the Second World War (WWII), which eventually culminated in the political independence of several colonized territories of the world, especially in Asia and Africa. However, soon after political independence, the second type of ethno-nationalism, described by Gurr (cited in Kourvetaris, 1996: 4) as “peoples against states”, which involved secessionist sub-national movements, became manifest. This was due to the “colonial partitioning of the continent without due respect to the...diversity and compatibility of divergent ethnicities” (Gilbert, Uzodike & Isike, 2009: 269), and the zero-sum nature of politics in emergent post-colonial states especially, in Africa.

In Nigeria, this second variant of ethno-nationalism (sub-nationalism) manifested itself during the Tiv riots of 1962, ‘Boro’s 12 Day Revolution of 1966’ and the Biafran secessionist attempt between 1967 and 1970. However, the oil boom and consecutive repressive juntas suppressed various ethno-nationalist aspirations in the country until socio-economic and political decline accentuated by the policies of the respective military governments triggered the phenomenon. This second variant of ethno-nationalism involves “the expression of nationalisms along ethnic lines” (Ukeje & Adebani, 2008: 566), which commenced in the 1990s, attained unparalleled proportions since the commencement of the democratization process in 1998 and the opening of democratic space in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic on 29 May 1999. It was in this context that belligerent ethno-nationalistic groups sprung in the Delta region for the advancement of their collective group interests.

3. Interrogating the Achievements and Beneficiaries of Belligerent Ethno-Nationalism in the Delta Region

Violent ethno-nationalism made invaluable contributions to the elevation of the plight of the Niger Delta in international discourse, ensured the focus of the global community on developments in the region and induced both the Nigerian state and the MNOCs to start changing their entrenched negative behavioral disposition towards the Delta people. For example, when MEND emerged as a ‘counter-hegemonic force’, the leadership of the PDP intentionally handpicked Dr. Goodluck Jonathan (the first Niger Deltan to occupy such office) as the vice-president in an attempt to assuage the political marginalization foisted on the people since the pre-colonial era. Belligerent ethno-nationalism as expressed by MEND’s activism, also led to the unconditional release of Alhaji Asari Dokubo, Chief Diepriye Alamieyeseigha, and Henry Okah, all notable sons of the Delta region involved in the struggle (Gilbert, 2010b). It impacted terribly on the oil industry and exposed the oppressive and high-handed disposition of the Nigerian state to the international media. In addition, insurgent ethno-nationalism compelled the Nigerian state to grant a general (blanket) amnesty to all militants in the Niger Delta region.

In contradiction, the major recipients of the ‘dividends of belligerent ethno-nationalism’ in the Delta region are members of the political elite and a few ex-agitators. Despite the fact that Niger Delta politicians were not the direct sponsors of insurgent ethno-nationalism, the prevalent socio-political cum economic benefits arising from the rigorous ethno-nationalist agitations has been cornered/appropriated or ‘won’ by the political class to the detriment of the mass of the delta people. For example, the elevation of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan to the position of Vice President and eventually, President was basically beneficial to members of the political elite.

Furthermore, the massive inflow of revenue to the Delta region during and after the period of violent ethno-nationalism benefited members’ of the political class rather than the generality of the Delta people. Regrettably, some of them used their privileged political positions for personal enrichment to the detriment of the Delta

region. For example, it is on record that:

out of the total sum of \$6 billion allocated to 36 states of Nigeria in 2004, four main oil-producing states received about one-third of the money (ICG, 2006a: 21-22). Similarly, a total sum of N1,767,500,000.00 was allocated to Niger Delta states between 29 May 1999 and 31 December 2005 In the same vein, in December 2008 alone, the four major oil-producing states of Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers received N13.7 billion; N9.6 billion; N9.4 billion; and N20.6 billion respectively; while four non-oil producing states of Bauchi, Ebonyi, Ekiti and Zamfara collected N3.3 billion; N2.4 billion; N2.4 billion; and N2.8 billion respectively This is indicative of the general pattern of revenue allocation since the increase of the derivation fund to 13 %. Unfortunately, some political elite in the Delta region have either mismanaged or outrightly looted the resources meant for the development of their land and people. The oil bearing communities are still bereft of minimal infrastructural facilities due to the corrupt proclivities of their political leaders (Gilbert, 2010b: 144).

Granted that a few governors have performed commendably and cognizant of the several years of environmental, socio-economic and political marginalization of the region, the 13 % derivation fund could not have transformed the area overnight into the much desired Eldorado , "however, if the amount of money channeled to the Delta states since 1999 were judiciously used, the region would have been a better place" (Gilbert, 2010b: 145). Yet members of the political elite have not been able to translate such resources into meaningful development for the amelioration of the plight of the populace and the justification of the costly and sacrificial agitations embarked on by ethno-nationalist groups like MOSOP, NDPVF and MEND.

Financial resources are yet to be pragmatically deployed for timely interventionist reconstructions that would have benefited the ordinary people in the Delta region. Regrettably, in spite of the occupation of the presidency by a Niger Deltan, there are no strategic developmental projects so far implemented towards the amelioration of the infrastructural imbalance in the region. Even the East/West road, which is the only major road linking at least six of the Niger Delta states (including the President's state, Bayelsa) and would have been very beneficial to the generality of Deltans is yet to be completed.

Expectedly, the second group of beneficiaries from the outcome of belligerent ethno-nationalism are some of the ex-leaders of the belligerent ethno-nationalist groups and their members. For example, in August 2012, it was revealed that five Niger Delta ex-agitators were awarded a contract by the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) valued at N5.6 billion annually, for oil pipelines security in the region (<http://www.osundefender.org/?p=36613>; accessed 04/09/2012). The ex-agitators are:

- ❖ Chief Government Ekpumopolo, alias Tompolo.
- ❖ Mujahhid Asari Dokubo.
- ❖ Ebikabowei Victor Ben, alias Boyloaf.
- ❖ Ateke Tom.

In fact investigations revealed that Tompolo is the major beneficiary among the ex-agitators (Adebayo, 2013). Besides, the 26, 358 disarmed ex-agitators (20, 192 ex-agitators accepted amnesty during the first phase while 6, 166 did so during the second phase) have so far received so much attention ranging from monthly financial inducements to re-integration training in various parts of the world, including Nigeria. While one is very much in support of the adequate re-integration plans being organized for the ex-agitators, it is pertinent to note that the concentration of excessive attention and resources on them portrays the Federal government as equating the personal interests of just 26, 358 ex-agitators with that of over 31, 224, 587 million Niger Deltans. The generality of the short-changed Niger Deltans are still impoverished.

4. Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony and the Prospects of Belligerent Ethno-nationalism in the Niger Delta

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an Italian intellectual and legislator that held on to his socialist ideological inclinations until death. While in prison, he developed the Marxist concept of hegemony, which is relevant to the interrogation of the prospects of belligerent ethno-nationalism in the Niger Delta region. He posited that the superiority of any social group is achieved by both physical force and willing acquiescence of the dominated people. According to Gramsci:

[T]he supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as "domination" and as "intellectual

and moral leadership". A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to "liquidate", or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise "leadership" before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to "lead" as well (Litowitz, 2008: 518).

In other words, any form of socio-political cum economic control (hegemony) entails both overt coercive state apparatus (domination) and subtle co-optation and indoctrination of people with the dominant group's idiosyncrasies to the point where such beliefs are widely accepted as globalist views (direction). Advisedly, the state will sustain its hegemony if she persuasively control people through direction and occasionally uses her coercive forces (the universalization of the particular). However, when a group or groups of people become conscientized and synergize to the point of challenging the authority and legitimacy of the state, then counter-hegemony would have materialized. Furthermore, if the state intensifies her coercive domination, several people will become estranged and more will likely network with the counter-hegemonic forces against the state (Okeke-Uzodike & Isike, 2010).

Interestingly, the Niger Deltans believed in the legitimacy of the Federal Government. They also welcomed the MNOCs and granted them unhindered access to their natural environment for the purpose of hydrocarbon exploratory and exploitation ventures until their consciousness increased especially, through the enlightenment campaigns of late Ken Saro-Wiwa and MOSOP. The use of coercive state forces against MOSOP and the eventual judicial killing of Saro-Wiwa and some of his kinsmen alienated several people from the state and motivated more people to embark on violent ethno-nationalism (counter-hegemony) until the granting of amnesty in 2009.

If the fundamental issues that gave rise to belligerent ethno-nationalism are not sufficiently addressed by the Nigerian state, given the current high level of consciousness in the Delta region, counter-hegemonic forces will likely spring up again and perhaps, insecurity and its contagion effects might be worse than we have ever witnessed in the region, Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea.

5. Concluding Remarks and the Way Forward

Currently, the Niger Delta is relatively peaceful while the North-East and North-Central geo-political zones are the flashpoints of insecurity in Nigeria due to the incidence of terrorist activities by Boko Haram and other related ethno-religious and political conflicts that have become prevalent in the regions. Nevertheless, the Niger Delta Question (NDQ) is yet to be addressed and permanently resolved. The region can be likened to a time bomb waiting to be ignited again. Critical issues such as environmental remediation, the provision of infrastructural facilities, provision of gainful employment opportunities, pragmatic methods of transfer of wealth to the mass of individuals in the area through poverty alleviation mechanisms, revocation of the obnoxious Land use act and the practice of true fiscal federalism are yet to be tackled with the desired political will.

Environmental remediation for example, cannot be overemphasised. Farmlands, rivers, ponds, the natural habitat and means of livelihood of the Delta people have been systematically and persistently polluted and destroyed through decades of hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation in the region. In fact, on August 04, 2011, the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) submitted a scientifically researched report on Ogoniland to the Federal Government. The fundamental findings of the report is that decades of hydrocarbon pollution in Ogoniland is by far more pervasive than initially thought. For example, it is reported that the level of pollution is up to five meters deep in 49 researched sites and that the concentration of benzene (a cancer-causing chemical) in drinking water, is 900 times higher than World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended levels. Of course, this is indicative of the general pattern of environmental pollution and health hazards in the region since the commencement of hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation in 1957. The report further recommended that government should not delay but set up an Ogoniland Environmental Authority with an initial funding of about \$1 billion for environmental remediation purposes in the first five years. Otherwise, the annual heavy rainfall in Ogoni land will likely spread and deepen the spectre of contamination in the territory.

Sadly enough, the Federal Government waited for series of peaceful protests and almost one year (July 2012) before setting up the Hydrocarbon Pollution Restoration Project (HPRP), which will be responsible for the implementation of the UNEP's recommended environmental clean-up and also conduct environmental assessments in other polluted parts of Nigeria. So far, the Federal Government is yet to pragmatically implement

the UNEP's report with regards to the remediation of the environment in Ogoniland.

Ogoniland is just a small proportion of the total geographical territory of the Niger Delta. Whereas the Ogonis' occupy about 1,050 square kilometres, the Niger Delta extends over an area of about 112,000 square kilometres. While the Ogoni people are about 1.5 million, the total population of the Delta region is well over 31 million (Census, 2006). One could therefore imagine the magnitude of environmental pollution and devastation and the destruction of lives that the people of Niger Delta have been subjected to by the combined efforts of the Nigerian state and the MNOCs since the discovery of oil at Oloibiri in 1957. It is only the genuine resolution of issues of this nature that will to a great extent checkmate the re-emergence of more sophisticated and deadly counter-hegemonic forces in the nearest future in the Niger Delta region in particular and Nigeria in general.

Perhaps, the inability of the Nigerian state to properly address the NDQ till date (despite the occupation of the presidency by a Niger Deltan for over three consecutive years) is indicative of the fact that it cannot be resolved in isolation from the NNQ; as it constitutes just a fraction of the NNQ --- which relates to the deliberate and complete restructuring of the Nigerian federation in a way that would be satisfactory to the constituent units. Unless the NDQ is holistically addressed within the framework of the NNQ, it may never be realistically resolved, notwithstanding who the president, governors and Local Government Chairmen may be.

Obviously, this can only be pragmatically done through the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference (SNC) _ (Gilbert, 2010a; Gilbert, 2010b). As an assortment of ethnic nationalities forcibly devised by the British colonial government in 1914, it is desirable to allow the "...constituent units to decide the basis and terms of their co-existence, which they will be bound to respect" (Gilbert, 2010b: 263). Fortunately, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Jonathan has recently come to this realization. In his 53rd independence broadcast on 01 October 2013, he announced his government's plan to convene a national dialogue to interrogate the fundamental issues bedevilling the Nigerian state. Consequently, he has inaugurated a 13-man Presidential Advisory Committee on National Conference headed by Senator Femi Okorounmu to work out the modalities for the proposed conference. Even though, the President did not propose a sovereign conference, it is instructive that the constituent ethnic nationalities of Nigeria should be adequately represented and the outcome of such a discourse should not be presented to the National Assembly (the bicameral federal legislature) for approval. Rather, it should be subjected to the people for ratification through a properly organized referendum.

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