
Ethnic Militia Threat to Democracy and Security in Nigeria

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Abstract: *Nigeria's successful transition to civil rule May 1999 unleashed a host of hitherto repressed dormant political forces such as the ethnic militias. Unfortunately, it has become increasingly difficult to differentiate between genuine demands by these forces on the state and outright criminality and mayhem. It is against this background of collective disenchantment with the Nigerian state, and the resurgence of ethnic identity politics that this paper sought to analyze the threat posed by ethnic militias on democracy and security of the Nigerian nation. Using the Desk Study(DS) and Focus Group Discussion(FGD) as sources of data gathering , we found out that the emergence of ethnic militias is a specific response to state incapacity and this development poses threat to democracy and the security of the Nigerian nation in many areas. We therefore recommended that there is the need for the creation of an enduring framework for the democratic resolution of disputes, and this is only possible when all stakeholders agree on this framework through a national dialogue whose outcome will be binding on all and that will lead to security in the nation.*

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic Militia Movements, Security, Democracy and Nigeria.

1. Introduction

The Nigerian state has in recent times been at the receiving end of a dramatic upsurge of ethnic militias. Indeed, it has generally been observed that this has also been the case in a significant number of African and Asian countries seeking to transit from the stage of electoral politics to the consolidation of democracy. Examples abound from Cote D'Ivoire, Niger, Indonesia and Malaysia. The weight of evidence suggests that democratic openings have often aggravated ethnic and communal tensions in divided

societies (Akwetey, 1996; Conteh-Morgan, 1997; Sandbrook, 2000). According to Vickers (2000), we live today in an "era of militant ethnicity", with its grave social, economic, political and human costs. Among the most critical and indeed violent of this new brand of unleashed political forces which many have referred to as 'resurgence' is the intractable phenomenon of ethnic nationality/identity movements. In Nigeria, this development has taken on the guise of ethnic militia movements purportedly representing and seeking to protect their different ethnic interests in a country in which the state is largely perceived as nonchalant to the demands of the ethnic nationalities in the country. The most prominent among these militias include the plethora of the Niger Delta militias like the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, and the Chikoko Movement. Other recent and more visible militias include the O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC), the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC). Indeed, the drive towards ethnic national self-determination, in whatever form it manifests itself, is the greatest challenge facing the security of the Nigerian nation from the 1990s onwards (Shehadi, 1993).

In densely populated slums of Lagos, Warri, Port Harcourt, Aba, Onitsha, Kaduna and Kano, militant groups sporadically unleash extreme violence on civil society as well as on the symbols of governmental authority. The intensity of the carnage wrought by these militant groups is better imagined than experienced. Rampaging youths brazenly overrun state security squads, ransack police stations and take over the streets for days. Curfews are imposed time and again while embattled governmental authorities resort to shoot-on-sight orders to quell riots and restore order in the volatile Nigerian urban communities (Anifowoshe, 2000:2). Official estimates indicate that since the successful elections in 1999, more than 2,000 people have died in sectarian and ethnic feuding (Singer, 2000). This is a country, which apart from its ethnic diversity, is frequently susceptible to religious violence especially in the Muslim dominated north. Ethnic and religious differences are solidified by geographical contiguity coupled with sectoral economic considerations. Being multi-ethnic and characterized by deep-seated social

inequality, uneven territorial development, and a variety of other forms of potentially destabilizing popular identity, including religious identities - 47 per cent Muslim, 35 per cent Christian and 18 per cent "traditional worshippers" (Sandbrook, 2000: 51). The country is susceptible to conflicts and this explains why it has been extremely difficult to address the issue of the "National Question" (Olukoshi and Agbu, 1996:72). The surge in ethnic militias ironically appears to be what unifies Nigerians against the excesses of the state after years of deleterious rule. Generally, Nigerians share a lack of faith in their government, the rule of law, a sense of being oppressed, and of not receiving their fair share of Nigeria's bounty. Whilst the OPC claims to represent Yoruba ethnic group interests, MASSOB Igbo group interests, the APC evolved to protect Hausa-Fulani interests perceived by their elite as being under threat due to the activities of the OPC and the politics of the new democratic dispensation. Apart from these, there are also a significant number of other proto-militia groups linked to the three major ethnic groups of Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani, in addition to those linked to the minority ethnic groups. Common to these militant groups are the attributes of the uncritical use of violence, a preponderance of youth membership, ethnic identity affiliations, and movements of a predominantly popular nature and demanding change over the status quo such as the calls for a Sovereign National Conference or a National Conference as the case may be.

2. Theoretical Framework

Anifowoshe (2000:3) noting the conceptual difficulty of a general definition, observes that violence can be used to describe every variety of force, militancy, coercion, destruction and aggression directed against persons, properties, and symbols of perceived sources of discontent. This includes such phenomena as riots, armed robbery, arson, guerrilla warfare, civil wars, coup d'etat, assassinations, insurrections, rebellions, revolutions and the like. He however, identifies mass violence and in particular, civil violence as suited to the understanding of situations in which violence is directed at people or things that are symbols or agents of the political or civil order. He identified

three probable theoretical explanations for the resurgence of civil violence in Nigeria. The first, which derives from psychological studies, is what he terms the "relative deprivation, rising expectation and frustration-aggression hypotheses" The central thrust of this school of thought is that aggression is always the result of frustration and anger, especially when we feel thwarted in our attempt to get something we want. We are likely to get angry, and when we get angry, the most satisfying inherent response is to strike out at the source of frustration. Anifowoshe (2000) thus observes that the origins of the O'odua People's Congress and the other ethnic militias are traceable to mass misgivings over perceived political marginalization, poverty and unemployment, collapse of social infrastructure and state welfare programmes as well as the perceived inefficient and corrupt state security system. He therefore notes that an effusion of rising expectations that have generally remained unsatisfied accompanied the advent of democratic dispensation.

The second systemic model which he identified just as Nnoli (1995a) did is the widespread belief that there is a paradoxical relationship between modernization and political disorder. Most post-colonial African states are going through a period in history in which there is tremendous stress and strain on the traditional, social, economic and political systems. In fact, it is a period in history that we have referred to in various other writings as one of "total crises" (Agbu, 1995; 1997; 2001).

Since May 1999, the spectra of violence perpetrated by ethnic militias has been haunting many of Nigeria's urban communities. Indeed, these communities have become huge theatres of violence. In the south-western part of the country, the OPC has literally become a parallel security outfit with its involvement in vigilante services and its running battle with criminal gangs. In the course of prosecuting its self-assigned crusade, it has been in confrontation with the Nigerian Police. In the south-eastern part of Nigeria the exploits of the Bakassi Boys, another ethno-militant outfit, has become legendary. It is known to have apprehended and summarily executed suspected

criminals in Aba (Abia State) and Onitsha (Anambra State). The OPC and Bakassi Boys have had open confrontations with police leaving casualties on all sides. In some cases, the militias were able to overrun the police. Ironically, state and federal security agencies have not been able to effectively face the challenge posed by these ethnic militias.

The origin of the Bakassi Boys has been traced to the determination of traders in Aba in southeastern Nigeria to stamp out the menace of armed robbers who for months made life unbearable for traders in Anambra and Abia States. They emerged as a resistance army to the criminal activities of armed robbers and hoodlums. Originally, they were funded by the traders themselves and some form of assistance from the state government and "well-meaning" individuals. Bakassi Boys initially comprised about 500 youths and middle-aged persons but has since increased its numerical strength. Expenses on wages, investigations and operations are sourced from the monthly contributions of traders and voluntary donations. This militia became so generally accepted by the people that the then Governor of Anambra State, Chinwoke Mbadiniju integrated it into the state's security network with the legal imprimatur of the state House of Assembly. It has since had its name changed to "Anambra Vigilante Services.

Nonetheless, critical observers are worried by the limitless powers enjoyed by this militia and its indiscriminate execution of suspected criminals with scant regards for the due process of law. In its recklessness, it executed a well-known prophet and a local party Chairman of All People's Party (APP). In one instance, in the year 2001, 36 suspected criminals were publicly executed.

The OPC began as a militant resistance movement to the marginalization of the Yoruba in the Nigerian power structure by the Hausa-Fulani faction of the Nigerian governing elite. Its origin dates back to 1994 when a group of Yoruba elite decided to form a grassroots based organization to actualize the annulled mandate of Chief M.K.O Abiola (a Yoruba) who was widely believed to have won the presidential election of June 12, 1993.

According to its founding president, Dr. Frederick Fasehun, the OPC was formed to "defend the rights of every Yoruba person on earth" (Newswatch, 2000:6). Following some disagreements in 1999, a faction of the group led by Ganiyu Adams broke away from the main group. The OPC, especially the more militant Adams' faction has been engaged in a running battle with the Police. The catalogue of the militia's clashes with the police shows that the police establishment has incurred substantial losses of men and material during these confrontations. In October 1999, clashes were reported between the police and OPC members in Ilesa, Osun State. Other clashes took place in the same month in the Ajegunle area of Lagos State where 23 people reportedly died. Earlier in July 1999, a clash between the OPC and Hausa settlers in Shagamu, Ogun State, left 50 people dead. A retaliatory strike by the Hausa against Yorubas in Kano resulted in the death of over 100 people.

Another clash between the OPC and Hausa traders in the mile 12 area of Lagos State resulted in the death of about 114 people. In October 2000, there were also violent clashes between the OPC and the Hausas in Apapa, Agege, Oworonshoki and several other parts of Lagos resulting in the death of over 100 people. Earlier in January 2000, a clash between the police and OPC members led to the death of the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) for Bariga area in Lagos, Mr. Afolabi Amoo.

The story of the ethnic militias is not all about violence. Some good deeds have been credited to the OPC and Bakassi Boys especially in the area of combating crime. The general perception is that the police are corrupt, inefficient, ill equipped and unreliable while the militias are incorruptible and efficient. In June 2001, the then Governor of Lagos State, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, publicly announced his willingness to invite the OPC to assist the state to combat criminals who seemed to have overwhelmed the Police in Lagos State.

This announcement was greeted with applause and approbation by the residents of Lagos who have had to sleep in their houses for months with their eyes wide open

because of constant harassment by armed bandits. The general public seems to hold the view that the Police can no longer discharge its constitutionally assigned functions effectively.

The Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) and the Igbo Peoples' Congress were formed in response to the activities of the OPC. Apart from the issuance of occasional threats of counter-violence, not much is known about the activities of these two groups. The APC is led by a retired army Captain Sagir Mohammed who in January 2000 declared that the objective of the organization is "safeguarding and protection of Northern interest, wherever it is. And to respond to further attacks on Northerners in any part of the country, particularly Lagos State where the OPC is unleashing terror on innocent and defenseless citizens from other parts of the country" (The News, 2000:17).

The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) appears to be one of the most vocal ethnic militias. The organization campaigns for a separate state of Biafra for the Igbo nation and the Leader, Chief Ralph Nwazurike made an unsuccessful attempt to declare a state of Biafra on 27th May, 2000.

The Egbesu Boys of Africa represents the militant wing of the Ijaw youth movements that have been resisting the exploitation of the mineral resources (oil) of the Niger Delta by the Nigerian State and oil multinationals. They were reported to have sabotaged oil installations, kidnapped oil workers, and attacked police stations in their bid to free the Delta communities from the ecological degradation of their towns and villages and the pillage of the oil resources by the Nigerian state.

In their confrontation with the Nigerian State, members of the Nigerian armed forces destroyed entire communities such as Umuechem and Odi. It is important to emphasize the fact that these agitations by the militias were largely borne out of frustration with the failure of the Nigerian state to promote equity among its component units; ensure equal representation of the units in national

institutions, and compensate these communities for the degradation of their environment.

3. Violent Threat of Ethnic Militia on Democracy and Security in Nigeria

The specific emergence of the phenomenon of ethnic militias as a specific challenge to the Nigerian nation-state cannot be divorced from the opening up of the political space for the exercise of rights and for electoral activities. For years, the military held sway under the jackboots of authoritarian leaders like General Muhammadu Buhari (1983-1985), General Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) and the late General Sani Abacha (1993-1998). The result of course, was that arbitrariness and mediocrity were consciously and unconsciously celebrated and a gradual but steady militarization of the Nigerian society continued until the successful elections of 1999 that led to the emergence of Chief Olusengu Obasanjo as the elected president of the country. Rights were trampled upon with significant instances of extra-judicial murders. Most Nigerians were afraid of the military, knowing fully well the financial and military might that the government wielded. There was little doubt that the Nigerian State under the military was a strong state and with the centralized command structure that it enjoyed, its tentacles could indeed reach far and wide. The fear of its might was the beginning of wisdom for many. Nonetheless, the Nigerian military was not cohesive as an institution as greed and petty jealousies among the officer corps resulted in coups and counter-coups which not only robbed the country of the crop of its trained officers, sometimes at great expense, but also further militarized the society unconsciously enthroning a culture of violence. Tired of the military as Nigerians were, they could do very little until the presidential elections of June 12, 1993, when with one voice they broke the age-long jinx of ethnic, sectional and religious politics. However, there was to be no celebration as the military under General Babangida annulled the “freest and fairest” elections ever held in the country, purportedly won by the late Chief Moshood Abiola,

a millionaire politician. I would argue that it was at this stage that something broke in the Nigerians' psyche or in their resolve for a better country. While some resigned themselves to faith, others, especially members of the civil society engaged the Babangida government in a running battle on the streets for the soul of the country. Organizations worthy of note include the Campaign for Democracy (CD), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Human Rights Africa (HRA) and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). At this stage, groups began to organize for more sustained resistance (Agbu, 1998), and did not have any compulsions about resorting to armed struggle if necessary. The emergence of the OPC coincided with this period in Nigeria's history of autocratic rule under General Abacha.

The point is that there is a history to the emergence of ethnic militias in Nigeria and this is inextricably tied in with the dynamics of its political governance and the underlying ethnic connotations. Solutions must therefore be all-embracing, reaching to the roots of the problem by revisiting the history of governance and the nature of federalism in the country. As was noted by Anifowoshe (2000:23), the conditions that gave birth to the proliferation of the ethnic militias include the declining economic climate which created acute discontent and frustration among the people, especially residents of the urban slums who had always had their grievances against the government, coupled with a sense of relative deprivation. We quite agree with his observation to the extent that brute force was used to bottle up the pent-up fury of the aggrieved masses, which was only to be given an outlet with the dawn of the democratic era, itself accompanied by a euphoria of expectations and an exaggerated air of freedom to express grievances without restraint as was the case in South Africa when the Apartheid regime was defeated.

The point remains that millions of Nigerians are dissatisfied with Nigeria as it is presently constituted and it would be foolhardy to pretend that this is not so. At the broadest level, democracy, devolution of power and power

sharing have been recognized as the three major institutional paradigms of ethnic conflict management. Democracy can indeed be an element in the successful resolution of ethnic minority grievances because it provides representation for various opinions through multiparty competition. The most common devolutionary mechanisms include confederation, regional autonomy, regional administrative decentralization and community autonomy (Gurr, 1993:299). There is little doubt however, that democratization is central to any effort at the re-structuring of the post-colonial African state in terms of its ability to manage ethnic diversities. Democratic conflict management requires a substantive distribution of power between the centre and the periphery and among the various groups in the society. A balance must be maintained between steps taken to check tendencies toward the over centralization of political power and steps taken to contain centrifugal forces that could lead to the demise of a multicultural state. There is also a tension between the liberal emphasis on individual rights and the assertion of group rights and identity that the democratic polity must find a way to balance (Diamond and Plattner, 1994). While it is difficult to generalize on the hydra-headed problem of ethnic based conflicts, it is possible to point an accusing finger at the 'ideology of exclusion' as a major reason for the growing ethnic differences in the developing world. The failure of governments in the countries experiencing ethnic conflicts to meet basic social economic welfare needs and provide greater levels of human security, in general, have created a heightened ethnic consciousness in a majority of the people, urban and rural alike as they retreat to their ethnic communities in search of security and social welfare support.

In Nigeria, the increasing problem of communal conflicts and the periodic massacres of people on the basis of ethnicity can easily be understood from the elite and economic perspectives. While the elite manipulate the ordinary people into violently attacking age-old neighbours for selfish and political ends, the fact of poverty and the inability of the government to alleviate this, further creates the condition for a seemingly more economically advantaged neighbour to become a target of ethnic envy. The attacks and

massacres of people of other ethnic groups in one part of the country usually contribute to the heightening of ethnic consciousness in the other parts. In actual fact, it is a no-win situation. The alarming dimensions of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria reflect the loss of state monopoly on the use of force. This has most recently been expressed in the violence that has attended the various border disputes. Earlier, this had manifested itself in the Tiv riots, the ethnic pogroms that preceded the civil war, the Jos riots and the Kano riots. This is an indication that individuals have arms sources independent of the government. The possibility of the unregulated use of violence creates social insecurity and ethnic consciousness (Nnoli, 1995b:251). It is indeed very disturbing to see the amount of firepower in the hands of the militias. For quite a long time in Nigeria, it has been taken for granted that citizens can carry deadly weapons like sheathed swords, bows and arrows, guns, machetes, and knives freely without much harassment by the law enforcement agencies. It appears that it never occurred to the federal government to take seriously the banning and confiscation of such lethal weapons until quite recently, after they had been used in the maiming and killing of thousands of Nigerians. It was only recently, that the government announced a general embargo on the granting of arms license to the public by state commissioners of police and the possible withdrawal of the licenses. It is believed that at least one million Nigerians may possess handguns, many of which are abused by the licensed holders who instead of using them for sports and games deploy them for self-defense or hostile action. It has also been discovered that approved handguns form the bulk of weapons retrieved from combatants at scenes of ethnic and religious conflicts. No fewer than 5,000 weapons were recovered from combatants at the scene of the last bloody religious riots in Jos, Plateau state in 2001 and 2009 by the joint military and police teams sent to quell the riots. Many of these were licensed weapons (Akparanta, 2001:1). Though democracy embodies the recognition and respect of individual rights, this should not be allowed as an excuse by those who decide to exploit this for individual and group advantages through violent means. The question remains however, that fundamental to finding a

sustainable solution to the Nigerian problem of managing its diversity is a re-visit of its federal practice.

4. Conclusion

The emergence of ethnic militias and their violent activities has posed a serious threat to security in Nigeria. The long years of debilitating military rule with the violence and arbitrariness associated with it created a society in which violence having been cultivated over a long period of time, about sixteen years of unbroken military with a very minor interruption by the transition government, eventually found an outlet in the post-transition environment. Ethnicity and the conflicts associated with it oftentimes are directly related to the centralization of power. At the end of the day resolving the conflicts boils down to the creation of the conditions that can enable conflicting interest and forces to accept arrangements and procedures for addressing social and political contradictions. There is the need for the creation of an enduring framework for the domestic resolution of disputes, and this is only possible when all stakeholders agree on this framework through a national dialogue whose outcome will be binding on all. For Nigeria, a country with immense human and material resources, the future will be assured and democracy consolidated when its leaders and elite decide that it is now time to build a nation based on justice for all. With the kind of pressure emanating from the civil populace such as the activities of ethnic militias, this decision must either be made now by the political elite and their representatives or others will make it on their behalf.

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