

The Role of the Nigerian State in the Socio-Political Conflict in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract: *The Nigerian state has been affected by several conflicts socially and politically. The leadership have made promises which were not kept and they have not shown the political will to tackle the conflicts in the country. Hence, the Odua People Congress in the South West, the Boko Haram in the North East and the Niger Delta Militia in the South South of Nigeria respectively. This work focuses on the Niger Delta Conflict which has caused havoc in the country recently. The justification of this work is to attempt to look at the actions and inactions of the leadership of the country which have fueled these conflicts and proffer recommendations to remedy the situation. Expofacto theory was adopted to established the role of the Nigerian state in these conflicts using historical/descriptive and prescriptive approaches. The findings are that; government has not provided employment for the youths, has not clean the polluted environment, misappropriation of compensations, divide and rule policy, lack of consensus among the ruling class as regards the interest of the citizens. Recommendations: Deprivation in the region should be tackle, provide employment for youths, clean the polluted environment, discountenance force and use peaceful means to settle conflicts etc.*

Keywords: *Role, Nigerian State, Conflict, socio-political, Niger-Delta.*

I. Introduction

One the most challenging problem that has confronted the Nigerian-state in contemporary times is the conflicts from the different regions of the state that have engulfed the Nigerian-state. “The conflicts are characterized by internal conflicts, horizontally between different socio-ethnic and cultural aggregates within the national territory and vertically, between groups who feel excluded and marginalized from existing power structures on the one hand, and the central authority on the other”. (Sam, cited from Shedrack, 2006).

In a sense, these conflicts do not only draw attention to the failure of nation building, but the more significant concern, however, is that, these conflicts have considerably weakened the capacity and internal coherence of the Nigerian-state and the ruling elites thereby weakened the capacity of the Nigerian-state to respond adequately to the challenges of globalization, development and poverty. These conflicts are to some extent, responsible to the endemic poverty that characterize the Nigerian-state, the huge financial lost in fighting conflicts and the humanitarian crisis that follow, exacerbate conditions of poverty.

“Conflict is generally seen as a clash between hostile or opposing demands, ideas or forces. Conflict is a state of discord caused by the actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interest”, (Fan, and Hannah, 2015). (Waters, 1995) cited in (Obi, 2004) sees conflict as “a form of interaction among parties that differ, in interest, perceptions and preferences” (Randall, 1984) cited in (Mu’azu, 2015) defined conflict as a relation between two or more parties who believe they have incompatible goals. Conflict can exist when an action by one party prevents, interferes with or injures another.

The Niger-Delta Region is in the South-South Geopolitical zone of Nigeria. It is the Region that lay the golden egg (oil) which for now is the main stay of the Nigerian economy. That is why the budget of Nigeria as a state is predicated on the price of oil. Oil was discovered in the Niger-Delta in 1959 at Oloibri and since then the Region has not known peace for the greater period of oil discovery. The activities of the oil multinationals have left behind a tale of woes for the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria.

Unfortunately, the Federal Government of Nigeria seems to lack the political will to initiate meaningful development projects for the benefit of the people of the region. The Niger-Delta youths most especially have formed militant groups most recently the Niger-Delta Avengers which have held the oil multinationals to ransom. They invade oil platforms and installations, destroy oil pipelines and other properties. This has affected the socio-political and economic life of the Nigerian state. Before the NDA the following groups have existed and are still existing:

- Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (2004-2014).
- Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (2003-2009).

- Niger Delta Liberation Front (2005-2014).
- Niger Delta Vigilante (2004-2009).
- Joint Revolutionary Council (2004-2014).
- Egbesu Mightier Fraternity (2006-present)
- Reformed Egbesu Boys of the Niger Delta (2016-present)
- Red Egbesu Water Lions (2016-present)
- Reformed Egbesu Fraternity (2016-present)
- Niger Delta Revolutionary Crusaders (2016-present)
- A Savanna Deadly Force of Niger Delta (2016-present).
- Adaka Boro Avengers (2016-present)
- Niger Delta Red Squad (2016-present)
- Joint Niger Delta Liberation Force (2016-present)
- Niger Delta Greensand Justice Mandate (2016-present)
- Niger Delta Avengers (2016-present) Daily Post 9th August 2016. Retrieved 7th September 2016.

II. Conflict In The Niger Delta

The current conflict in the Niger Delta first arose in the early 1990s over tensions between foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups who feel they are being exploited, particularly the Ogoni and Ijaw. Ethnic and political unrest has continued throughout the 1990s despite the conversion to Democracy and the election of Obasanjo in 1999. Competition for oil wealth has fueled violence between ethnic groups, causing militarization of nearly the entire region by ethnic militia groups, Nigerian military and police, notably the Nigerian mobile police (Koos, and Pierskalla, 2015).

From 2004 on, violence also hit the oil industry with piracy and kidnappings. In 2009, a presidential amnesty programme accompanied with support and training of ex-militants proved to be a success. Thus until 2011, victims of crises were fearful of seeking justice suffice for crimes committed against them because of a failure to prosecute those responsible for human right abuses (Hrw.org. Retrieved 2011-04-23).

Nigeria after nearly four decades of oil production, had by the early 1980s become almost, completely economically dependent on oil which at the time generated 25% of its GDP. This position has since risen to 60% as of 2008. Despite the vast wealth created by oil, the benefits have been slow to trickle down to the majority of the population. While many skilled, well paid Nigerians and most especially the people of the Niger Delta states and the for north have become poorer since the 1960 (Essentialation.org. Retrieved October 2014).

The Niger Delta Region has a steadily growing population estimated at more than 30 million people in 2005, and accent far more than 23% of Nigeria's total population. The population is expanding at a rapid 3% per year and the oil capital, Port Harcourt, and other large towns are also growing quickly. Poverty and urbanization in Nigeria are growing, and official corruption is considered a fact of life. The resulting scenario, is one in which urbanization does not bring accompanying economic growth to provide jobs (Okonta and Douglas, 2001). Ogoni land is a 404 square mile (1,050km)² region in the south east of the Niger Delta basin. Economically viable Petroleum was discovered in Ogoni and in 1956 just one year after the discovery of Nigeria's first commercial petroleum deposit. Royal Dutch Shell and Chevron Corporation set up shop there throughout the next two decades. The Ogoni people, a minority ethnic group who call Ogoni land home were forced by the government to abandon their land to oil "companies without consultation, offering negligible compensation. (The Human Rights Watch, 1999)

The Ogoni's threatened mass action to disrupt oil company operations if they failed to comply with MOSOP demands, and thereby shifted the focus of their actions from the unresponsive federal government to the oil companies producing in the region. The rationale for this assignment of responsibility was the benefits accrued by the oil companies from extracting the natural wealth of the Ogoni land, and the central government neglectful failure to act. The government resounded by banning public gatherings and declaring disturbances to oil production acts of treason. Oil production from the territory slowed to a trickle of 10,000 barrels per day (1,600m³/d) (.5% of the national total) (Haller; et al 2000).

The December 1998 all Ijaw youth conference crystallized the Ijaw's struggle for petroleum resource control with the formation of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) and the issuing of the Kaiama Declaration. In it, long – held Ijaw concerns about the lost of control over their homeland and their own lives to the oil companies were joined with a commitment to direct action. In the declaration, and in a letter to the companies, the Ijaw called for oil companies to suspend operations and withdraw from Ijaw territory. The IYC pledged "to struggle peacefully for freedom, self determination and ecological justices", and prepared a campaign of celebration, prayer, and direct action, operation climate change, beginning December 28, 1998. The military government as at that time responded by sending troops to the area. Nonetheless, operation climate change continued, and disrupted Nigerian oil supply through much of 1999 by turning valves through Ijaw tertiary. In the context of

high conflict between the Ijaw and the Nigerian Federal Government (and its police and army), the military carried out the Odi massacre, killing scores if not hundreds of Ijaws (Aghadiuno, 1999).

In August 2008, the Nigerian government launched a massive military crack down on militants. The patrolled waters and hunted for militants, searched all civilian boats for weapons, and raided numerous militant hind outs. On May 15, 2009, a military operation undertaken by a Joint Task Force (JIT) began against MEND militants operating in the Niger Delta region. It came in response to the kidnapping of Nigerian soldiers and foreign sailors in the Delta region. Thousands of Nigerians fled their villages and hundreds of people died because of the offensive (Wale, 2009).

The Present conflict which started in February 2016 by the Niger Delta Avengers began with the explosion of a pipeline operated by Shell Petroleum Corporation, a Royal Dutch Shell subsidiary to the Shell Facades export terminal halted both production and imports. The Minister of State for Petroleum said Nigerian production was down 300,000 barrels a day as a result. On May 11 Shell closed its Bonny oil facility. On May 19 Exxon Mobil's Qua Iboe shut down and evacuated its workers due to Militant threats (Ugune and Faul, 2016). The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), a militant group in the Niger Delta have attacked oil producing facilities in the delta, causing the shutdown of oil terminals and a fall in Nigerian's oil production to its lowest level in twenty years. In late August 2016, NDA declared a ceasefire and agreed to negotiate with the Nigerian government (Pulse.ng. 2016). The NDA has been described as the nation tormentor –in-chief (Ogedengbe, 2017).

Niger Delta conflict: Theoretical perspective

Structural conflict theory

The main argument of this theory is that conflict is built into the particular ways societies are structured and organized. The theory looks at social problems like political and economic exclusion, injustice, poverty, disease, exploitation, inequality etc as sources of conflict. Structuralists maintain that conflicts occur because of the exploitative and unjust nature of human societies, domination of one class by another. This case is made by radicals like Freidrich Engels, Karl Marx, Joseph Lenin and Mao Tse Tung.

Frustration Aggression Theory

The main explanation here is that aggression is not just undertaken as a natural reaction or instinct but that it is the outcome of frustration and that in a situation where the legitimate decision of an individual or group is denied either directly or by the indirect consequence of the way the society is structured, the feeling of disappointment may lead such a person or group to express his/her anger through violence that will be directed at those who are directly or indirectly related to them.

The fundamental issue of disagreement between the orthodox and Marxist approaches to conflict lies in the conceptualization of the tension producing elements" in terms of the character of the social forces contesting for the control of the state and by extension the Niger-Delta Region. In the unsettled milieu of forces and the terrain of conflict is defined in primordial terms in the structural and class contradiction.

The attendant socio-political conflict in the Niger-Delta Region could be explained from the wider context of the ongoing intra-class struggle in the Nigerian state arising from the structures therein and the frustration this has resulted on the part of the citizenry and the eventual aggression. "The intra-class struggle in Nigeria is defined by the character of her ruling class" (Eteng, 1998) cited by (Duru, and Tandu, 2008). In this struggle among the dominant class, all forms of available instruments and tactics such as ethnic chauvinism, religious sentiments, ecological problems and other sectional sentiments are employed to ensure victory. It is against this background that we can appreciate and explain the role of the Nigerian state in the socio political conflict in the Niger–Delta Region of Nigeria.

The role of the Nigerian state in the conflict

The importance of oil as the main stay of the Nigerian economy has led to the domestic ruling class using their position in state institutions to capture economic resources. This has therefore, caused a great deal of disaffection between the ruling class faction of the oil producing areas and those of the non-oil producing sub-nationalities. It became a source of conflict between the factions of the Nigerian ruling class who sometimes resort to the pursuit of their factional interest by enlisting their people to fight for their share of the national cake. "The struggle became more intense and pronounced from the early 1990s" (Olusanya, 1984). This falls in line with the structural conflict theory which stated that class domination results to conflict in a society.

Oil exploration and production come with it environmental degradation on the oil producing areas and destroying all forms of economic activities. The oil producing communities therefore become more restive pressing the federal government for greater share of the country's oil revenue to take care of their degraded environment. "The move made by the federal government to assuage the feelings of the people of the oil producing areas were seen as not enough as they have continued in their agitation for a greater control of the oil

revenue” (Owabukeruyele, 2000). The structural conflict theory sees the destruction of the environment which brings about disease, poverty etc as a cause of conflict.

Misappropriation by the leaders of the state as regards compensation programmes put in place to cushion the impact of the environmental degradation. It is on record that embezzlement and misappropriation have largely characterized the activities of especially the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the Current Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC). “These programmes never really succeeded in achieving their intended objectives and this leaves the people in the Niger Delta more frustrated and agitated than before” (Akinyele, 1998). Misappropriation of compensation causes frustration and aggression which leads to conflict according to frustration and aggression theory.

The Federal government has employed repressive mechanisms. The coercive instruments of the state such as the police, Army, Navy have been in the application of force to suppress the people of the Niger-Delta Region. Hence, they have been bullied, terrorized, intimidated, brutalized, maimed, killed, etc, in order to abandon the struggle. “The most celebrated of these was the execution of the Ogoni activist, Saro Wiwa in 1995 and the Oddi Massacre” (Duru and Tandu, 2008). The Ogoni people became frustrated and aggressive because of deprivation by the action of government.

The Nigerian state has also used the instrument of divide and rule by manipulating communities or groups against the others. This is essentially to break their unity and ensure that they do not present a common front in their agitations. This was especially used at the peak of Ogoni land crisis in the 1990s (Dura and Tandu, 2008). The conflict reflects the character of the Nigerian state leadership and the leadership of the oil communities in the Niger-Delta Region. The Nigerian state leaders at the centre and the leaders in the Niger-Delta Region do not bother about the masses in the Niger-Delta Region because their demands and interest does not reflect the interest of the mass people of the region. “For example they demand for greater representation in the federal institutions, improved revenue allocation, job opportunities, political autonomy, etc”. (Ogoni, 1991). They do not demand for those issues that are in the interest of the peasant farmers who suffer the greatest brunt of environmental degradation. The masses interest were neglected and they took to arms because of frustration.

The conflict in the Niger-Delta Region has lingered principally because of lack of consensus among the dominant class in Nigeria which has given rise to intense intra-class rivaling. As a result, the role of the Nigerian state through the federal government should have been to reconcile those opposing interest of the factions of the class in Nigeria. But the Nigerian state has been unable to play this role as a result of its basic character. “According to Ibeanu (1996), instead of appearing as a representative of the general interest of the Nigerian people, the Nigerian state is divided along ethnic, religious, class and other interest lines-to that extent, the Nigerian state and its leadership has been ineffective in resolving the conflict rather has aggravated the conflict in the Niger-delta Region”. The structural conflict theory falls in line here because the class structure have left the people of the region with no option but to take up arms to fight for their interest

III. Recommendations

Generally, violence conflict and crime occur to a greater extent among the deprived and poorer sections of society. The Niger Delta people have been deprived for a long time and frustration set in. Probably this is due first to the greater grounds for dissatisfaction which they have with their life. “In addition, better off groups in society have greater opportunities to sublimate violence, release tension or divert aggressive tendencies into creative or physical activity” (Leeds, 2001). The creation of employment opportunities in the Niger-Delta for the youths will go a long way to eliminate or reduce the restiveness of the youths in the region. “Youth’s unemployment in the region is among the highest in the county, providing a fertile area for the recruitment of youth or young people into violent association like the Niger-Delta Avengers” (Ikelegbe, 2005).

Leaders of Nigeria both at the Niger-Delta and Nigeria must discountenance force, falsehood and illusions. They must seek for solutions by searching for the broken links in our relationship as a people and once again take or chart a new course not only in the Niger-Delta but in all regions of the federation. Specifically, if the promised 13% royalties promised by the leaders of the Nigerian state on oil production are actually paid to the states and spend judiciously in the Niger-Delta, and if the Niger-Delta Development Commission (NNDC) functioned properly, they might offer enough funds to leverage meaningful local cooperation in the development and implementation of Development plans in the area and this will go a long way to check the conflict in the Niger-Delta Region (Duru and Tandu, 2008). The Niger-Delta region conflict can also be resolved using what is called the voluntary processes and the involuntary processes. The voluntary processes are those in which parties have same control over the outcome. They include fact finding, in-depth research and case studies, facilitation, negotiation, conciliation, mediation and brokage. The involuntary processes on the other hand, are more often than not, outside the control of the parties to the conflict. The third parties who broker the process may sometimes hand down outcomes, which the parties have to accept either in principle or in law. “These options include arbitration, adjudication and law enforcement-using the coercive apparatus of state” (Shedrack, 2006).

Negotiation as a strategy can also be adopted to solve the conflict in the Niger-Delta region. Negotiation is a direct process of dialogue and discussion taking place between at least two parties who are faced with a conflict situation or a dispute. Both parties come to the realization that they have a problem, and both are aware that by talking to each other, they can find a solution to the problem. The benefits of compromised solution, it is believed, outweigh the losses arising from refusal to negotiate. The goal of negotiation according to Jike, (2004) is “to reach agreement through joint decision making between parties”.

According to Duru and Tandu (2008) government misconception of the people of the Niger-Delta must be done away with. “The idea that, the small size and population of the Niger-Delta region cannot threaten the stability of the country and affect its continued economic development must be done away with if we have to work for peace in the Niger-Delta Region”. The recent developments in the region has shown that, you cannot underrate any region. The region activities (Niger-Delta Avengers) has brought the government of Nigeria to her knees, the oil supply has dropped drastically and this has affected the revenue of Nigeria and recessions has set in. Development projects should be taken to the committees through their community relation officers by the Multinational Corporation. According to Frank Efeduma, one of the External Relations Managers of shell as reported in the News watch edition of December 3rd 2001 stated that “community development and assistance projects are a must to us these days. We cannot just go to communities, extract oil and leave the people in absolute poverty. The objective is to bring in something that will benefit both stakeholders and shareholders”. He further stated that, “his company (shell) deals with remote areas and not everybody can reach the big city to get work. So when you take jobs and development to them right at their doorsteps, it gladdens their hearts”.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study is of the opinion that the militancy in the Niger Delta came about as a result of the activities of oil multinationals and Nigeria’s state leadership lack of commitment in tackling the issue in contention. It is crystal clear that the oil multinationals activities in the Niger Delta are not environmental friendly and have left a lot of destruction on the environment and the Nigerian state leadership on the other hand has not shown enough commitment and political will to find a lasting solution to the conflict in the Niger Delta Region. For the purpose of eliminating or at least reducing the militancy in the Niger Delta Region some recommendations have been attempted in this paper which are not exhaustive and if properly at hared to could go a long way to eliminate or reduce to the barest minimum the conflict in the Niger-Delta Region.

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