

Crime, Vigilantism, and Electoral Violence In Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT: High rate of crime is always a concern to any society. The transition to democratic rule in May 1999 was accompanied with sudden rise in crime. There were attempts by individuals, groups, communities and the government to address the rising crime wave across the country. One of such response was the establishments of vigilante groups by the citizens. Communities and neighbourhoods formed vigilantes to protect their lives and properties. The co-option of these vigilante groups during elections by politicians to assist in the manipulations of elections contributes to violence and other criminal activities. They serve as ready army that can be deployed by politicians during elections for their electoral gains. The constant squabbles and factionalisation in almost every 'vigilante' group across the country can be attributed to political influence and interference. This study is an attempt to ascertain the roles of vigilante groups during elections vis-a-vis the fight against crime.

KEY WORDS: *Vigilantism, crime, violence and election.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Vigilantism has become one of the ways the citizens' respond to crime fighting in the country. The failure of the government to provide security for her citizens drives the people to this self-help effort. The retreat of the military to the barracks as they handed over political power to civilian elected leaders heralded upsurge in crime and violent agitations across the country. (See; Alubo, 2011, Azogu, 2013) Transition from totalitarian, dictatorial or one-party state to liberal democracy has been found to generate unanticipated upsurge in crime. According to Peter Blau and W. Scott;

Change whether due to new external developments impinging on the organization or to internal modifications, produces situations without precedents. Besides, some exigencies that may arise cannot be anticipated. (Quoted in Dixon, 2000, P.1)

In Nigeria, the change from military dictatorship to civilian democratic rule was unanticipated and sudden following the death of Gen. Abacha, then military dictator. The democratization triggered high expectations of better living standard by the populace after long-crushing dictatorial military rule. The then Minister for Police Affairs General (rtd) David Jemibewon in an opening address presented at a conference in South Africa acknowledged that;

The sudden change which the transition from long years of military rule to a democratic dispensation brought on the country (Nigeria) was so monumental and managing it was daunting.

The daunting challenge of which violent crime is one has remained, despite many efforts. He went further to say that;

The Nigerian Police that we inherited could be said to have suffered gravely from lack of such regulatory institutions and lack of focus ... our new found democracy became to some extent a source of insecurity and lawlessness,...The Police which was not adequately prepared for the violent and criminal eruptions that heralded our democratic rebirth was therefore stretched to the maximum of their capability. (Quoted in Equal Justice, April, 2002, P3)

They people responded by seeking self-help measures to protect themselves and their properties collectively and individually.

In the semi-urban centers and rural communities, youths formed vigilante groups to police towns and villages. These vigilantes were welcomed due to the menace of armed robbery attacks. People could go to bed with the assurance that some people are keeping watch. This was a relief to the people.

The vigilantes were well received initially by the people. However, this did not take long to wean as the people started witnessing the atrocious acts being committed by some members of these vigilantes. Another major concern was the co-option of these vigilantes by politicians who made them their hit-squads and storm-troopers in their political quest. The co-option of these vigilantes by political office holders jeopardized the original role of these vigilantes in the communities. They could no longer be called to order by the people. They switched

their allegiance and loyalty to their political godfathers. And they enjoyed the protection of these politicians from the law and its enforcement agencies.

They politicians saw in them ready tools that could to be used for their selfish electoral successes. They propped them and made them their unofficial ‘police’, introduced the payment of salaries to them and they became an appendage of their political structure.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Violence and electoral fraud have trailed most elections in African countries. There are always complains and claims of violence in the run-ups to elections, during and after an election. In Nigeria, the first post independence election was characterised by violence. The trend has remained the same. In the current democratic dispensation, many of the elections have witnessed outbreaks of violence from local to national levels. This violence has resulted to the loss of lives and properties. The violence is perpetrated by what we refer to ‘political thugs’. There have always been claims that these groups are sponsored by people with political interests. Researchers have shown that there is a correlation between democratic transition and crime (see, Nedcor, 1996, Zvekic 1998, Savelsberg, 1995, Crilinskiy, 1998, Okechukwu Nwanguma, 2002, Azogu 2013)

Vigilantes are organized, and ready to resist or cause violence. In any community where they exist, they are one of the gate-keepers and politicians understand this, hence the need to co-opt them. Vigilante groups have been linked to ‘political thuggery’. Some receive backings and sponsorship of politicians. And they are turned against political opponents during elections, using them to intimidate, and suppress oppositions. In some extreme cases they are used to eliminate (murder) opponents. The destructions and violence during elections involving members of vigilantes are in some cases alarming.

Okonta (2005) gave a chilling account of such violence that took place during electioneering;

By the evening of July 6, when primary elections came to an end in Nembe and the other local councils in Bayelsa State, 40 people had been killed in election-related violence, most of them in Nembe and Brass... The two factional leaders and their storm troopers were at the heart of the political violence that engulfed Nembe and forced many of its residents to flee. ...one the factional leaders was head of ... a cultural organization ... that metamorphosed into one of the most feared youth vigilante groups in Nembe.

This narration is not far from what obtains in other communities during elections. Eliminating electoral violence is one the greatest challenges facing democracy in Nigeria.

We examined the involvement of vigilante in crime fighting and electoral and election related violence as to ascertain the connection, if any.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The emergent of vigilante groups in fighting crime is not new. The pre-colonial African societies have one form of security apparatus or the other. Some had standing armies and police that maintained law and order, others were operated in ad hoc fashion. In the South-Eastern part of Nigeria where they operated acephalous system, the security of the communities was the duty of young able bodied men. They enforce the decisions of the council of elders, arrest and hand over people violating the laws and customs of the people.

The origin of vigilante in Nigeria has been traced to pre-colonial administration in Nigeria. (See Baker, 2002a, CLEEN, 2002)

The modern state maintains the monopoly of force, however with the high incidents of crime and the inability of the police to protect the people, gave rise to the current trend of vigilantism in the country. Vigilante groups gained popularity with increased crime waves across the country that followed military hand-over of power to civilian leaders when the military dismantled their security outfits. The activities of some of these vigilantes have left many in doubt as to their usefulness to the society. CLEEN in one their document accused them of promoting disunity in the country and being politically partisan, (CLEEN, 2002,)

The activities of vigilante groups in Nigeria are well documented. They have been accused of criminality, abuse of authority and violation of human rights. They have even been fingered in the exacerbation of ethnic and communal violence.

Pratten (2008), argues that,

Since the return to democracy in 1999...vigilante groups have proliferated. Beyond fighting crime, these groups spearhead contemporary political contests between the politics of identity and citizenship, and represent divergent aspirations for Nigeria's future, including a pro-shari'a movement in the north and ethnic nationalism in the west. (P1).

The vigilante groups have remained inconsistent in their goals and objectives. This is buttressed by CLEEN when they assert that;

“Nigerian vigilante movements have an ambiguous relationship with the state. While they sometimes (in their state-sponsored guise) defend against insurgency, they are also actively part of insurgent processes”. (CLEEN, 2002).

The roles of vigilante groups in crime fighting.

The sudden exit of the military from power and the run-down police force that they bequeathed to the civilian regime made it impossible to cope with crime upsurge in the country. To fill the gap, people formed vigilante groups. These vigilante groups go by different names across the country. The primary reason for setting them up was to protect the people from incessant raids by armed robbers in their neighbourhoods. This was captured by CLEEN when it put it thus;

Local communities across Nigeria, as in many other countries in Africa and elsewhere, have created their own informal or sometimes formal structures to try to ensure the security of the population. These groups have usually been composed of individuals from the local community. They have derived their credibility, and unofficial authority, from the community in which they serve. One of the main purposes of these initiatives has been to complement the police in identifying and handing over criminal suspects to the appropriate judicial authorities. They have also sometimes tried to settle other conflicts between individuals in the community. Local leaders have on occasion abused their power and used these groups for other purposes. (CLEEN, 2002, P.3).

The vigilantes rose to the challenge of combating the spiraling crime waves across many cities in the country especially in the early years of democratic transition. Initially there was a reduction in crime. Commercial activities picked up in the commercial cities of Aba, Onitsha, Lagos, etc. and people could move around freely once again. The acclaimed success of the Bakassi Boys in reducing crime in Aba, resulted to the clamour for and the introduction of this group to Onitsha (Anambra), and Owerri (Imo). Their feats in ‘catching’ and ‘fishing-out’ criminals were legendary across the south-east. They won the admiration and goodwill of the people. However with time these vigilante groups in most cases deviated from the original purpose for which they were formed to engaging in other activities such settling civil matters, recovering debts, ejecting tenants for landlords and in some cases meddling in husband and wife matters, and serving as ready hands to unleash violence during elections.

Vigilantism and political interference

These vigilantes made some successes in combating crimes in the country. Their operation restored some sense of safety for the people. In some commercial cities where armed robbers almost paralyzed activities, witnessed a returned to business as the armed robbers were either killed or chased away. Their successes within those brief period won them peoples’ goodwill, admiration and support. The politicians were quick to cash in on the successes, public acclaim and respect that these vigilantes have gained for their own political survival. They openly supported them. They initiated legislations to give them legal backings, and placed their members on salaries. The leadership and control of these vigilantes were taken away from the people. It became the prerogative the politicians to determine who leads them. The contestations for political space in the ensuing elections since the 1998/99 transition have witnessed the deployment of violence by the various parties. From internal parties’ primaries elections to the general elections, violence is becoming a common feature. It now seems that whosoever that is capable of deploying violence wins election. Politicians have taken over the control of these vigilantes for their political gains. Just like the vigilante groups in the cities became the appendage of the governors in those states, the community vigilantes came under the influence of the local government chairmen. These local government chairmen control them through the payment of their monthly stipends and provision of logistics for their operations such as vehicles; in some cases they secretly armed them. An excerpt from CLEEN document puts it thus:

A combination of political, economic and social factors in Nigeria-including high unemployment, poor relations between the police and local communities, widespread corruption, and absence of confidence and trust in the state and its institutions-has meant that it has been easy to recruit people to these vigilante groups, and for these groups to flourish. The situation has been aggravated by influential political figures, including several state governors, who have sought to rely on armies of thugs who are on standby to intervene when events do not go in their favor. In general, state governments have tolerated if not encouraged these vigilante groups, and have been unwilling to take decisive action to dismantle them or call their backers to account. (CLEEN, 2002, P.3)

IV. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The major objective of this study was to examine the relationship between vigilantism, crime and electoral violence in Nigeria. Specifically, the study was designed to examine the role of vigilante groups in crime fighting and their involvement in electoral violence.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical approach used in this work is the Exchange theory as opined by Peter Blau. He identified four stages in interpersonal social exchange. In his analysis, he focused on rewards and reactions of social exchange. He maintains that once social associations are established, the rewards that this social association provides to each other serve to maintain and enhance the bonds. The opposite situation is that with sufficient rewards, an association will weaken or break.

In every social relationship there a reciprocal exchange that takes place, they can be intrinsic (love, respect, affection) or extrinsic (money, physical labour). Almost all the members of these vigilantes come from the poor and lower class. The poverty and high unemployment in the country makes this group vulnerable. The political class offers money, jobs and protection from criminal prosecution (monetary and material) while the vigilante members assist in neutralizing tough opponents, snatching and thumb printing ballot papers during elections (physical) and other fraudulent acts to ensure their electoral victories.

VI. METHODOLOGY

The panel survey design was used in this study. This design is chosen because firstly, it affords us the opportunity to study the society as it is. Secondly, it affords the possibility of carrying out a study of a social process as being undertaken. Thirdly, it is the best non-experiential technique. Finally it generates a large body of information about our respondents. The design is more suitable for longitudinal study of this sort.

The research setting

The research was carried out in Oguta Local Government of Imo State Nigeria. Ten autonomous communities within the Local Government were selected.

Population of interest

Our population of interest consisted of members of the selected communities and the members of the vigilante groups in the various communities, opinion leaders and traditional rulers, security personnel, and politicians.

This study was carried out in ten autonomous communities in Oguta Local Government of Imo State. The Local Government is divided into two; Oguta North and Oguta South for political convenience. We selected 5 communities from North and 5 communities from South. See the table below.

Table: Showing the sampled Respondents and Communities.

COMMUNITY	VIGILANTE	TRADITIONAL RULER/LEADERS	POLITICIANS	COMMUNITY MEMBER
Oguta	3	2	2	5
Orsu Obodo	3	2	2	5
Egbuoma	3	2	2	5
Nkweshi	3	2	2	5
Egwe	3	2	2	5
Umunwama Izombe	3	2	2	5
Ejemekwuru	3	2	2	5
Awa	3	2	2	5
Mbano Agwa	3	2	2	5
Ezi Orsu	3	2	2	5
TOTAL	30	20	20	50

=120 samples

Sampling techniques

In selecting our respondents, we adopted the purposeful sampling method. This technique was used in selecting the entire 100 sample. The Local Council Area is divided into North and South for political convenience. From the north we randomly selected (five) 5 communities and (five) 5 from the south. For the traditional rulers, there was no need for sampling, but for opinion leaders we randomly selected from the names

given to us. Some communities have no recognized traditional ruler due to internal dispute, in such case we used opinion leader or respected member of the community. In the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) we engaged members of the communities sampled. Our questionnaire was structure to meet the objective our study.

Method of data collection

Sources of Data Collected

Our data were obtained principally from two sources. They are the secondary and primary sources. The secondary sources were; documentary which comprised of records from the Nigerian Police, the newspapers and magazines reports, records from the local vigilante, while the primary sources were questionnaire, interview and focus group discussion. Our questions and the questionnaire administered were structured to meet the objective of the research. The FGDs were for the ordinary members of the communities, questionnaire for the security office, (they were unwilling to engage us on further discussions for obvious reasons), the preferred anonymity, interviews were with local vigilante members, traditional/ opinion leaders, and politicians.

Method of data analysis.

In analyzing the data collected in this study, the researchers made use of sample percentage, tables. Also the descriptive method was employed in the presentation of findings.

Findings.

From the study we were able to find out the following;

1. The vigilantes engage in electoral violence.
2. They are willing tools in the hands of politicians due to some leverage the politicians have over them.
3. They are ready to create situation conducive for perpetrating rigging/manipulating elections results.
4. They act as thugs and enjoy protection from their political benefactors.
5. Their involvement in politics breaks their ranks, thereby leading to factionalisation and intra-group conflicts.
6. They are emboldened to display open violence due to the protection they enjoy from their political backers

VII. CONCLUSION

From our findings, we were convinced that politicians contributed to a large extend in making the vigilante groups part of the crime problem in the society. Despite the atrocities alleged to have been committed by members of these vigilantes none has been charged to court or prosecuted. Whenever they are detained their political god-fathers quickly intervened and got them freed from police detention. There was an instance of one who hacked another boy to dead in broad daylight. The security agents did not arrest or detain him. He just disappeared from public view for a while and later resurfaced.

They are dreaded by ordinary people in the towns because they can do anything and go scot-free. The security agents, police and secret security service (SSS) can do little as long as they enjoy the covering of their political malfeasants. Their association is a mutual exchange that benefit both parties.

It is not surprising that the leaders lack the political will to address this problem because they are the beneficiaries. The conduct of free and fair election in the country has remained an albatross in the country's history.

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