

Democratization and the Challenge of Electoral Violence in Nigeria: Reflections on 2003 Elections in Rivers State

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Abstract

As Nigeria returned to civil rule, expectations were high that democratic governance would facilitate the constructive resolution of conflicts threatening to tear the nation apart. Rather than aid the amelioration of conflict especially in the Niger Delta, the violence that has characterised democratic competition since 1999 has worsened the situation by introducing new dynamics to the region's conflict trajectories. Using the qualitative research method where data is gathered through primary and secondary sources this study assesses the high stake politics and how actions of political stakeholders have worsened the conflict situation in the region. It discusses the commodification of violence, the militarisation of anti-state oil protests, and violence that ravaged the wider Niger Delta focusing on Rivers State. It argues that the spectre of violence in Rivers State and the region in general can be located within the context of the nature of Nigerian politics, in particular the struggle for the capture of the state and the control of oil rents. The Nigerian experience highlights the important position of contextual variables in the discussion of the conflict mitigating potential of democratic governance.

Introduction

Scholars of democracy have long held the view that democracies are inherently better at resolving violent conflicts between and within states than other forms of political arrangement (Huth and Allee, 2002; Bennett and Stam, 2000; Dixon, 1993). This becomes possible given that democratic institutions create procedures through which demands can be peacefully negotiated and conflicts resolved within the political process without recourse to violence. Much as this might be taken to be true, the experiences of developing democracies continue to highlight the fact that the relationship among democracy, political stability and development is but a complex one. Indeed, the potential of democracy to enhance political stability and mitigate violent conflicts depends on the nature

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of democratic politics and numbers of context specific variables within a particular democratic polity (Bastian and Luckham, 2003: 3).

The experience of Nigeria since the return to civil rule in May 1999 aptly demonstrates that the potential of democracy to promote stability and mitigate existing conflicts greatly depends on the nature of elite competition, the efficiency of political institutions and the willingness of political leaders to accommodate difference and resolve contentious issues through dialogue in line with democratic dictate. Since the return to civil rule, Nigeria has witnessed series of outbreak of conflicts within and among its numerous socio-political groups (Adebanwi, 2005: 339). Although not all of the conflicts that Nigeria has witnessed are attributable to electoral competition, however the tension created by competition for political office, which are often violent has aggravated existing conflicts and engendered new ones. The vicious contest for power is driven by the fact that the capture of the state is the most assured means for accessing wealth (oil rents) in Nigeria. Thus political contestation, most noticeably since 2003 has been played out in what Nigerians now refer to as “do or die” politics (Tenuche, 2007).

This nature of political competition is however, not a new trend, it has been a recurring phenomenon in Nigerian political history. Indeed, the collapse of Nigeria’s first and second republics can be partly blamed on the urge of section of the ruling elite to maintain their hold on political power at all cost deploying all means at their disposal inclusive of violence (Joseph, 1987). While the dynamics driving political violence in Nigeria’s fourth republic differs across states of the federation, yet there are certain themes common to all. In ethnically segmented states; ethnicity, indigeneity, and religious divisions often play a greater part in defining the lines of conflict through the manipulation by politicians as was played out in the outburst of ethnic violence in Plateau and Kaduna States in North-Central Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2005). In the oil rich Niger Delta, political conflict is often compounded by the desire to control the relationship between local communities and oil companies given the economic advantage derivable from the status of host communities. Be that as it may one major factor underlying political violence is the urge to gain control of political power and the access to oil rents that come with it (Omeje, 2006).

The analysis in this article will be informed by transcribed information gathered from in-depth interview conducted with individuals from sections of the society mainly in Rivers State in the oil producing Niger Delta in 2009. It also makes use of press interviews, opinion pieces, commentaries and editorials from Nigerian news dailies and weekly news magazine. Relying on data from the aforementioned sources, the article discusses the militarisation of anti-state oil protests and the violence that engulfed Rivers State before and after the conduct of the 2003 general elections. The study situates the cycle of violence in Rivers within the nature and form of Nigerian politics, in particular

the struggle for the capture of the state and the control of oil rents by the region's political elite. The paper contends that violent electoral competition among many factors immensely contributed to the state of instability in the region. The experience in Rivers State and the wider Niger Delta demonstrates the important position of contextual variables in the discussion of the conflict mitigating potential of democratic rule.

Democratization and the Commodification of Violence in Nigeria

There is little doubt that some relationship exist between democratization, ethno-nationalism and violence in divided societies that are going through political and economic transitions. The controversy remains however, whether this relationship is 'positive' or 'negative' in its manifestation, in regard to national unity or democratic consolidation (Agbu, 2004: 8). The literature is replete with instances in which democratization and the liberalization of the political environment have generated incidences of low intensity conflicts, heightened violence and tensions (Akwetey, 1996: 103). Highlighting the link between democracy and political violence especially in low income countries, Collier notes that *Wars, Guns and Votes* are intrinsically related. As Collier argued the predominant route to power in developing societies has been through violence (Collier, 2010: 1). The incidences of violence irrespective of their manifestations are geared towards the acquisition of political power.

In the summary of one of its reports, the Human Rights Watch documents that Nigeria is enmeshed in a crisis of governance noting that the conduct of many of Nigeria's public official and government institutions is so pervasively characterised by patronage, corruption and the unbridled deployment of violence in political competition (Human Rights Watch, 2007). This has made the political process to incline more towards criminal activity rather than democratic governance. This is in agreement with Collier's position that Nigerian politicians have practically resorted to socially dysfunctional strategies of winning vote and acquiring political power (Collier, 2010: 39). Politics within the Nigeria context continues to be underpinned by an over-centralization of power by the ruling elite through a patrimonial network deployed to capture and retain political power which grants access to economic resource (oil rents). In this process all available means including violence are deployed to capture and retains power at all cost by those seeking state power.

The current crisis of democratic governance can be said to have stemmed from the peculiar nature of the Nigerian politics and its political economy. Oil revenue on which the Nigerian state critically depends is controlled by the federal government to be re-allocated to other tiers of governments. The outcome of this centralised control of oil revenue was that other tiers of governance are bonded to the centre through an insidious form of a clientelistic relationship predicated on the political economy of oil rents. While the federal government manages the oil, it does not unilaterally determine the sharing of national revenue accruing from oil. The sharing formula for national revenue

under the charge of the Revenue Mobilization Allocation and Fiscal Commission is entrenched in the constitution. However, there are other substantial state resources other than oil proceeds which are under the control of the federal government which are deployed for dispensing patronage and creating clientelistic relationships with other levels of government. Given this context, the struggle for political power becomes highly vicious as it is through the capture of political office that access to oil rent is assured. This in a way aided the crude criminalisation of politics and the political process as access to power by all means possible underpins political competition (Guichaoua, 2010: 1658).

The implication is that the nature of the state fosters a brand of politics that thrives on the centralization of power by patrimonial networks of elite that reproduce themselves through state capture. Governance within this patrimonial context is thus reduced to hegemonic economic and political projects, solely directed at sharing the spoils of oil, but excluding the opponents of the ruling faction of the political elite, and holding onto power if necessary through fraud and violence. This provides the context for the use of violence in the contest for access to power and resources. In such contest all cautions are thrown to the wind as violence becomes a veritable option of contending political forces resulting in the overt militarisation of political competition as witnessed across most parts of Nigeria especially the Niger Delta since the second elections of 2003 (Obi, 2004: 7).

Though dysfunctional and anathema to the tenets and ideal of democratic practices as it limits people's participation in the political process, violence has remained a recurring issue in Nigerian political history. Politically motivated violence resulting from representational, campaign, balloting, and result conflicts, has been a recurring problem in Nigerian politics since the 1950s (Albert, 2007). Since the return to democratic rule, Nigeria has been troubled by waves of violence reminiscent of a re-enactment of the nation's history of political violence (Abdullahi and Saka, 2007). Commenting on this, Joseph has noted that a major cause of electoral violence in Nigeria usually relates to the bids of ruling party and politicians to move from being a ruling party whose strength exceeds that of other parties, to one which enjoys monopoly of power within the political system (Joseph, 1987: 178). While this is not necessarily the only factor pre-disposing Nigeria's power elite to employ harassment, intimidation and violence, yet given the patrimonial nature of politics and the profitability of state capture, the urge to monopolize power within the political system to the detriment of other contenders becomes a central issue fuelling violence.

The “Carry-Go” Syndrome: Politics, Gangs and Violence in Rivers State under Democratic Rule

The use of violence as an instrument of political competition continues to underline the logic of politics in a rentier state like Nigeria. As was the case in the short-lived second republic, orchestrated violence directed at real or perceived political enemies and their support base remains an indelible blight on Nigerian politics and political competition since the return to democratic rule in 1999. Though all parties are involved in the use of violence as instrument of political contestation, the People Democratic Party, PDP is however, the major culprit given its deployment and control of mindless violence to retain control of political power at all level of government when it was in power.

Prior to the commencement of the present democratic experiment the Niger Delta has been witnessing simmering conflicts. The region's armies of unemployed and aggrieved youths that spearheaded the confrontation against the state towards the end of the 1990s and participated in communal and inter-ethnic conflicts have become willing pool of recruits for regional political elite in the battle for political supremacy and the capture of political offices since 1999. The political elite in the region organise and generously fund these private armies, provide them with sophisticated weapons, shield them from the wrath of the law and reward them with patronage. These armies of youth were deployed as instrument to intimidate, terrorize and harass political opponents and ordinary citizens in a bid to gain the upper hand in the battle for political power (Courson, 2009: 16).

While the brazen use of youth gangs as instrument for orchestrating political violence spread across the States in the region, the extent at which, youth gangs were deployed as instrument of political terror in Rivers State was unprecedented in Nigerian political history. Rivers State occupies a unique position in the logic of Nigeria's rentier political landscape. The state is the capital of Nigeria's oil industry and its government is the wealthiest in Nigeria, posting a budget of \$1.4 billion in 2007 and around \$2.51 billion in 2008. The vast oil rent accruable to the coffers of the state government is what informed the high-stake competition and the use of violence that characterized the struggle for power in Rivers state. Using intimidation, violence and rigging the PDP when in power maintained a monopoly on elective offices in the state since 1999. The 2003 and 2007 elections in Rivers were more violent and more brazenly rigged than in most other parts of the region and the country no thanks to oil rent (Human Rights Watch, 2007: 80).

In the run up to the 2003 general elections hell was let loose in the Niger Delta most especially in Rivers State as rampaging armies of political thugs conducted campaigns of violence directed at dislodging opposition and laying the foundation for electoral success. Many parts of Rivers state were thrown into conflagration as factions within the ruling party positioned themselves for the coming electoral battles resulting in the death of more than a hundred

people. Perhaps the most prominent of opposition silencing was the assassination of Chief Marshal Harry, the All Nigerian People's Party national vice-chairman for the south-south zone. Harry's assassination was symbolic given the fact that the then ANPP had a stronghold in Rivers and was likely to gain electoral victory at the polls. The assassination followed a pattern of violent repression of ANPP and other opposition candidates and stalwarts across Rivers state and other states in the region.

The instrument of intimidation and violence used by then Governor Peter Odili's administration to secure a second term in office was Asari's Dakubo's Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force NDPVF and Tom Ateke's Niger Delta Vigilante, NDV. The brute force wielded by these two armed militia groups and their affiliate gangs and cult groups was highly instrumental to the questionable victory of Governor Odili and the ruling PDP in Rivers state in the 2003 governorship poll. Reports have it that in the run up to the election officials linked to Governor Odili and then Federal Minister of Transport, Abiye Sekibo worked closely with Asari and Ateke to secure electoral victory (Human Rights Watch, 2003). Asari and Ateke assiduously worked to ensure the success of the "carry go" re-election of Odili using weapons provided by their patrons to intimidate and harass opposition politicians and their supporters. Asari was reported to have stated that he promised only to work for the re-election of Governor Odili and not Obasanjo, given the then President's perceived anti-Niger Delta policies. In his own admission, Ateke was quoted to have stated that then Governor Odili had promised cash and jobs in great quantities for himself and his 'boys' and that in return, "Any place Odili sent me, I conquered for him. I conquered anywhere" (Human Rights Watch, 2007: 81).

Armed militia and cult groups were also used by two rival politicians who are members of the ruling PDP in Rivers state in the battle for the soul of Bodo in Ogoniland. The two figures at the heart of the Bodo crisis were Kenneth Kobani, former commissioner for Finance under Governor Odili and Gabriel Pidomson who served in the State House of Assembly within the same period. Pidomson employed the service of the Deewell cult while Kobani used the Deebam cult to retaliate. The Bodo war of attrition that commenced from 2003 resulted in the loss of dozens of lives on both sides and led to serious crimes against residents of the community (Center for Environment, Human Rights and Development, 2006). By 2007 Kobani through his Deebam cult had wrestled control of Bodo from Pidomson and chased Deewell cult group out of Bodo. While this spelt the end of violence in Bodo, it also left the community at the mercy of the Deebam cult members who flaunted their new found influence through terrorizing innocent members of the community with near impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

Violence as it relates to contestation for political control and conduct of elections was not restricted to Rivers state alone, it was indeed a delta wide

crisis. Months before the 2003 elections, armed groups belonging to Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo communities had unleashed reign of terror over the oil city of Warri. Violence over political contestation was not new to Warri, however the stake and extent of destruction that resulted from the 2003 crisis was monumental and highly unprecedented in the history of violence in Warri. The cause of the 2003 round of mayhem centred on the number of local government wards to be used in the conduct of party primary election for the PDP Delta South Senatorial Seat (Courson, 2007). While all the sides to the Warri crisis employed the use of ethnic militia groups, the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, FNDIC militia emerged the most organized of all. Though prominent, the above noted instances were just but a tip of the iceberg in the instances associated with the 2003 and 2007 general elections in the Niger Delta. The deployment of armed youth groups for violent electoral acts not only resulted in the loss of lives and property, violence was also maximally used as a tool to deny the people of the region the rights to partake actively in the electoral process.

The result of the commodification of violence that characterized the conduct of elections in the Niger Delta was such that it impacted negatively on legitimacy and credibility of the elections. The Transition Monitoring Group, TMG reports that the highest level of violence during the 2003 elections was recorded in the south (Niger Delta states) and the southeast, where PDP governors and their supporters universally succeeded in undermining the electoral prospects of the opposition parties. These were also the areas where the greatest rigging and fraud were recorded by election observers. The report noted that in these areas, the direct link between violence and electoral frauds was clear. More than three quarters of the incidents of 'violence, intimidation, harassment, ballot box stealing and stuffing and vote buying' reported by TMG observers occurred in the Niger Delta and southeast states (Transition Monitoring Group, 2003: 85).

The use of violence as a tool for electoral malfeasance in the Niger Delta states was worse such that the Environmental Rights Action that monitored the elections in the region characterized the process as "low intensity armed struggle" (Environmental Rights Action, 2003). Similarly the EU election observer mission listed Cross-Rivers, Delta, Rivers and Imo all oil bearing states as among the eleven states in which the 2003 elections did not even meet the minimum democratic standards (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2003: 4). The glaring perversion that characterized the electoral process in the region made Naneen to assert that Rivers state did set a macabre trend of electoral fraud in the 2003 elections (Naneen, 2004: 6). According to official election result; 98% of registered voters were alleged to have participated and voted for the ruling PDP in the National Assembly, Presidential, and Governorship elections. The ruling PDP awarded itself all the 23 seats in the State House of Assembly and the trend was repeated in the March 2004 local government elections. In effect, Rivers state became a one party state having hounded all opposition parties out of the electoral process.

Similar trend was replicated in other states in the region and across the federation.

In an apparent turn-about, Asari that worked for the ruling party in Rivers state during the elections ended up condemning the results. Asari was quoted to have stated that:

Before the general elections of April 2003, we agreed that they should not rig the election for Olusegun Obasanjo in the Ijaw areas of Niger Delta. We appealed to all governors of the states where Ijaw are found not to rig election for Obasanjo.... But there was no election. They colluded with INEC and allotted votes for themselves. There was no election in Ijaw land. So as the president of the IYC, I stood up and condemned the election in a press statement. (The News Magazine, 2004: 20)

In fact there was not even an election, so they did not rig. They only allocated votes to Obasanjo. Before the election, we had warned the governors of the Niger Delta that we will not compromise with anybody if the elections were rigged. And they rigged the elections and we said no, no, no. (Chigbo, 2004: 16)

These statements by dwelling more on the rigging of the elections for President Obasanjo without relating it to the general context of the fraud that was the hallmark of the elections in the region seem to give credence to the notion that Asari did collaborate with Rivers state government to ensure the re-election of Governor Odili. Asari's assertion that there had never been credible elections in Ijaw land and his condemnation of the electoral conduct and the characterization of the election as a 'carry go' exercise marked the turning point in his relationship with the government of Rivers state (The News Magazine, 2004: 37).

Shortly after his fall-out with Governor Odili, Asari alleged that attempts were being made to eliminate him by the Rivers state government using Ateke NDV/Icelander as proxies. Sequel to the said instigated attacks on Asari and his interests by Ateke, Asari was quoted to have stated that he reluctantly decided to take on the responsibility of defending himself and the hapless indigenes and residents of Rivers state from fear of death, daily incidents of extortion and intimidation by Ateke Icelander and affiliated cult groups (Chigbo, 2004: 20). By this, the face-off between Asari's NDPVF and Ateke's Icelander/NDV and their affiliate groups commenced in mid-2003.

Between 2003 to late 2004 the two rival groups engaged in tug of war that resulted in the death of hundreds and left tens of thousands of people in Rivers

state homeless. Buguma, Bukuma, Tombia, Amadi-Ama, Okrika communities were badly destroyed in the raging war of supremacy and the control of oil bunkering turf. In a daring bid to show his capability, Asari launched series of attacks on areas in and around major oil installations in Port-Harcourt thus extending the theatre of battle. The successful coordinated attacks on Port-Harcourt forced the federal government to respond to the state of lawlessness by deploying a combined joint military task force and Asari responded by threatening to launch an 'all-out war' against oil installations. When this militaristic approach failed to give desired results, the Federal Government in collaboration with Rivers state government called the two groups for a peace meeting in Abuja. The result of the meeting was an October 1st peace deal that called for immediate ceasefire, disbandment of militia and militant groups and disarmament and arms buy back spearheaded by Rivers state government (Chigbo, 2004: 12).

Asari continued to anger the federal government by joining the rank of growing voice of dissent in the southeast and southwest calling for the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference with the mandate to discuss the health of Nigerian federalism and the future of the union. He also became a strident voice of the Niger Delta on the issue of resource control, derivation and fiscal federalism. Asari was arrested on treason charges on the 20th of September, 2005 a move seen by many as an attempt at curtailing his growing criticism of the state on issues bordering on the Niger Delta question. Asari's arrested was interpreted by Niger Delta militants as a fore warning of state plot to decimate militant groups by incarcerating vocal leaders and this they considered as a signal to go under-ground (Ukiwo, 2007). The incarceration of Asari compounded the fear and anger of the Ijaw as it coincided with the arrest of Bayelsa state Governor DSP Alamiyeseigha in London on money laundering charges and the arrest of Chief Ebitimi Banigo and the closure of Banigo's All-States Trust Bank (Courson, 2009).

The incarceration of Asari resulted in the re-grouping and formation of new organizations by militants in the western and eastern sections of the oil region prominent of which are the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND; the Martyrs Brigade, the Reformed Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, RNDPVF, the Coalition of Militant Action in the Niger Delta, COMA, the Niger Delta Strike Force, NDSF. Of all these disparate groups MEND has evolved to be highly coordinated in its military operation and coherent in its political demands for the Ijaw and other Niger Delta minority groups. MEND evolved as a face-less organization using the internet to communicate its mission within the Nigeria polity through the press in an apparent lesson from past decimation of MOSOP and NDPVF. The core objective of MEND is to destroy the capacity of the Nigerian government to export oil (International Crisis Group, 2006).

MEND's military tactics has largely been directed at crippling the oil industry through attacks on critical oil installations. The group's main political tactic is abduction of oil workers, crippling attack on oil production

installations, and face off with state security force. The group maximally uses the media to create awareness on the plights of the Niger Delta people, its activities and its impacts on the oil industry and the state (Obi, 2009). MEND military attacks on oil installations which commenced in January 2006 have had adverse effects on the operations of the oil industry and by extension the Nigerian economy and state income. The federal government responded to the threat of MEND by deploying large scale military force code named Operation Restore Hope. The commodification of violence and the new phase of militarization of dissent that MEND's emergence represents have given rise to complex economies of violence in the region (Ikelegbe, 2005).

The series of attacks and counter attacks between MEND and affiliate groups and the Nigerian Armed Forces since 2006 have resulted in catalogues of rights abuse, loss of hundreds of lives, destruction of property and instances of total military onslaught and destruction of Ijaw communities in the region particularly in the Delta State axis. Though the 2009 amnesty deal and disarmament and demobilization package have restored a sense of order in the region the prevailing peace can be likened to a "peace of the grave yard" as some elements of MEND opted not to be part of the deal.

Recent occurrences emanating from the 2015 electoral process in the Niger-Delta region suggests that the restoration of peace, stability and order in the region is not in sight. Prior to the 2015 general elections political stalwarts within the PDP had sent the signal of what can be described as a reminiscent of Obasanjo's phrase of describing the 2007 election as "a do-or-die affair". At a meeting held at the Bayelsa State Government House in preparation for the 2015 elections, Niger-Delta militants led by Asari Dakubo threatened that they were ready to go to war. This was reported in the following words: "for every Goliath, God created a David. For every Pharaoh, there is a Moses. We are going to war. Every one of you should go and fortify yourself" (Ezeamalu, 2015). The threat soon became a reality when a governorship rally organised by the All Progressives Congress on the 17th of February, 2015 in Port Harcourt the Rivers state capital was disrupted by explosions and gunshots (Egobueza and Ojirika, 2017: 6). One police officer, was reportedly killed while several others including a reporter sustained varying degrees of injury during the fracas which was believed to have been perpetrated by militants supportive of the PDP and former President Jonathan who is from the region.

The attacks were not limited to the venue of the political rally as other facilities and properties belonging APC stalwarts and supporters were destroyed in other parts of the state (Egobueza and Ojirika, 2017: 6). In the month of March and first week of April when the 2015 elections got to its peak at least 58 people were reported killed in Rivers state. There were series of violent political rallies in Port Harcourt and consequent politically motivated killings. Several PDP members were reportedly killed in Akuku-Toru and Ikwerre. APC members were reportedly killed in Eleme, Obio/Akpor, and Tai.

There were also clashes between supporters of the two parties in Port Harcourt and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni. The brutal political killings seemed to get to their peak when a Local Government Chairman and his family of six were brutally killed by gun men (Niger Delta Election Violence Update, 2015). Following these ugly incidences a state-wide dusk to dawn curfew was imposed in Rivers state on March 2015.

The services of cult groups, militants and political thugs were employed by politicians during the National Assembly and State House of Assembly re-run elections in Rivers State that was conducted on March 21, 2016. Violence also marred the re-run election of December 10, 2016 that was necessitated by the inconclusive nature of the re-run in March. It was observed that in Etche LGA, hoodlums prevented INEC staff from deploying personnel and materials to the following areas; Afra Ward with 20 Polling units and 3441 registered voters; Mba Ward 18 with 14 Polling units and 4503 registered voters; Udofor Ward 8 with 8 Polling units and 2373 registered voters; Ogwi/Obiro Ward 6 (had result sheets snatched); Obite Ward 10 with 6 Polling units and 1866 registered voters; Ulakwo Ward 13 with 21 Polling units and 5420 registered voters; Obibi/Akwukabi Ward 9 with 12 Polling units and 2444 registered voters (Vanguard Newspaper, 2016). Such number of voters deprived of casting votes no doubt has significant negative impact on the outcome of the election. The voting process deteriorated to the lowest ebb when in polling unit 32/11/13/012 in Ulakwo Ward in Etche Local Government Area sack bags had to be used as ballot boxes. This was as a result of the snatching of ballot boxes from INEC officials by hoodlums (*Vanguard Newspaper*, 2016).

Cross River state also had its fair share of violent attacks which characterised the region during the March and April 2015 polls. Not less than five people were reportedly killed between March and the first week of April. The incidents were as a result of election and communal violence. Through hired thugs and militants, members of the PDP and Labour party engaged themselves in a free-for-all-clash in Yakurr Local Government. The incidents left four people dead and fifteen injured. Several houses were also destroyed. The violent clash occurred when hired hoodlums barricaded a road in an attempt to disrupt a Labour Party's political rally (Niger Delta Election Violence Update, 2015). If one accepts the argument of Naneen, the descent into anarchy in the Niger Delta especially between 2003 to 2011 and in the violence that characterize the contest for the 2015 general elections is but the price to be paid for the PDP's constriction of the political space up until the party was defeated at the poll, the reification of politics as war and enthronement of corruption and patronage as the defining act of governance rather than service delivery (Nannen, 2004).

When Democratization Generates Violence: Evidence from Field Report

There is convergence of opinions on what constitutes the immediate cause(s) of the violence that pervades the Niger Delta among intellectuals, youths, members of civil society, public commentators and ordinary people in the region. People in the region are of the opinion that the nature and forms of political competition since the return to civil rule contributes in large part to the present situation in the Niger Delta. Many are also of the view that the patrimonial nature of politics largely fuels resource plundering and corruption that characterize governance in the region and by extension the Nigeria state. The perspectives of the interviewees and those extracted from the print media are mostly in line with dominant views in the extant literature about the crisis of governance in the Niger Delta. When asked whether there is any link between the nature of political competition and youth uprising in the Niger Delta, respondents interviewed in the course of fieldwork in the area stated that there exists strong relationship between the two issues. According to one interviewee:

There is no doubt that in the recent past, political criminals have used some of the youth to rig elections in the Niger Delta. I totally agreed that the nature of political competition in this country is really a contributory factor to the crisis in the region. In fact, it is my contentions that the political process in this country and in the Delta in particular is in the hands of political criminals who have took over the political space and criminalize the acts of politics. Elections were not held particularly in the riverine areas in this region in past elections. It is in this part of the world that people do not die when it comes to voting such that the number of registered voters will tally with the total votes cast in elections and all votes for one party. (Key Informant Interview conducted with a Male Professor of Economics on 15 May, 2009)

Echoing similar view an interviewee working with a prominent civil society organization in the region in his response averred that:

To some extent politicians have through the deployment of youth as electoral thugs aided the emergence of militancy in the region. For instance during the 1999 general elections, there was low level of activities with regards to voting and other balloting related exercise. To be frank voting did not really take place in Akassa

kingdom during the elections but at the end of the exercise votes were counted and winners announced. This brazen corruption of the electoral process could only have happen via the use of youth as political thugs to intimidate oppositions and voters alike from exercising their legitimate rights to partake in the electoral process... Deriving from the use of youth as political thugs is the emergence of militancy as some youth thugs have capitalize on the genuine struggle of the people of the delta to make their living by carrying arms to engage in oil theft, kidnapping for ransom among other nefarious activities in the name of the Niger Delta struggle. (Key Informant Interview conducted with a Male worker of a prominent Civil Society Organization on 18 May, 2009)

Amplifying this position Chief A.K Horsefall in a newspaper interview was quoted to have state that: ‘what happened in the 2003 elections was the ‘carry-go syndrome’, in which politicians set up various militia camps resulting in regular breaches of security and political assassination” (Ofiebor, 2009: 25). Noting the gradual worsening of the security situation and the increasing influence of armed militia and cult groups, Horsefall states that:

I recall that I warned that politicians at various levels were partly responsible for instigating the violence for their selfish ambitions. They believed that with the instigation of political violence through their various militia groups, they would win without votes. I warned the politicians that they may be unable to deal with the outcome of their actions. And of course, as a former security and intelligence officer, I knew what I was talking about. (Ofiebor, 2009: 26)

While arguing that the state of insecurity, lawlessness and violence that pervades Rivers State and by extension the Niger Delta was a creation of politicians; Professor Kimse Okoko was quoted as stating that:

Let me make it clear, and I’m speaking authoritatively, that this latest ugly development is a creation of our useless politicians. And let them not hide their heads as if they don’t know what is happening. They have created monsters! The politicians created these monsters (cult, gangs and militia groups). So it’s not militant’s struggle. In Rivers state, it is two political forces generated by politicians. They created it, nurtured and watered it. And now, the real monsters have emerged! (Tell Magazine, 2008: 82)

Thus the positions of Horsefall and Okoko, amplified the view that the militarization of politics and attendant violent youth uprising in the region should be blame on regional politicians and the nation's undemocratic political culture. Their views was similar to the findings of a report by Small Arms Survey, in which it affirmed that politics is extremely competitive and elections perceived as zero-sum contests in Nigeria particularly in the Niger Delta. This according to the report has led to the increasingly militarized nature of politics, the use of violence as an electoral tool, and the inculcation of culture of violence in society (Ofiebor, 2009: 25). Similar view was also expressed in the report of Human Rights Watch on post-elections violence in Rivers State released after the 2007 general elections.

While asserting that there is a strong relationship between the two issues another interviewee was of the view that electoral competition is a major factor among many factors. The respondent averred that:

Electoral competition is a major factor among many factors. However, there is the need to realize the fact that the militant groups have been nurture over time. It is just that at the time of electoral competition they become an easy recruit as foot soldiers for electoral related vices by contending politicians in the region. It should not be surprising that armed youth groups got engaged by the politicians given the violent nature of Nigeria's electoral competition, thus it becomes imperative that there will be a meeting point between the politicians and armed youth groups. Reports have it that many of the militant leaders are in the good book of state governors or aspiring politicians in the delta or political godfathers in the region. Really the militants are well connected not only with politicians at the regional level but also with the big men at the federal level. (Key Informant Interview conducted with a prominent Professor of political science on 19 May, 2009)

To buttress this, Cocks (2015) averred that the involvement of armed groups in the democratic process in the Niger-delta region has indeed elevated the leaders and members of the armed groups to position of political prominence and wealth. According to him prior to the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as the President of Nigeria, the Niger-delta region had a feeling of being left out in the political configuration of the country. Through violent activities the Niger delta Militants craved for a greater share of the oil wealth. This continued until the Amnesty programme was established. The amnesty deals provided the militants with multimillion-dollar monthly payment. This was also in addition to

profitable government contracts such as securing and protecting oil pipelines. The programme which was due to end in 2014 was extended because of fear of violent backward reaction with the 2015 general election fast approaching. In this regard, it was believed that victory for the opposition at the polls will definitely signify termination of the payment and juicy contact agreement (Cocks, 2015). To prevent this, the militants were bent on doing everything humanly possible to prevent the opposition from gaining political power. One of the militants was quoted to have stated that: "with Goodluck as President we achieved what we are fighting for. It's our right. If they refuse us our right, by rigging the election, I don't think there will be peace" (Cocks, 2015). It was on this basis that the militants who have greatly benefitted from the Jonathan administration publicly declared their support for the re-election bid of their kinsmen and were determined to ensure his re-election either by the 'hook or by the crook.'

Conclusion

From the foregoing it can thus be safely deduced that while other factors might have work to reinforced the trends of armed dissent in the Niger Delta, yet the arming, organising, financing, and deploying of youth gangs and militia groups by regional politicians has contributed in no small measure to heighten violence and insecurity in the oil bearing region. This study has aptly showed that the overall situation in Rivers State and the Niger Delta in general has not witnessed much appreciable improvement since the return to civil rule in 1999. Rather than aid peaceful resolution of underlying socio-political tension, the violence that has characterised electoral politics in the region has worsening the conflict situation. Against popular expectation democratization has failed to bring the much anticipate peace and tranquillity to the Niger Delta. Instead, democratic politics has been the harbinger of violent conflict and human insecurity in the region and the nation's at large.

More so, the failure of government at all levels to make appreciable impact in the underlying poverty helped to fuel popular discontent while increasing violence and insecurity generated by democratic politics compounded the region's woes. The rise in the tide of violence in the Niger Delta has in turn moderates the dynamics of the region's agitation. Armed dissents has emerged the preferred mode of expressing the region's feelings of marginalization and neglects to the state-oil alliance in place of non-violent agitation of the early 1990s. In the same vein armed groups whose modes of operations is a blend of armed political militancy and criminality have emerged the vanguard of the region's popular agitation and struggle for ecological restitution, self determination, resource control and the restructuring of the federal arrangement.

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Key Informant Interviews

- Key Informant Interview Conducted with a Professor Economics in a Federal University in the Niger-Delta, 15 May, 2009.
- Key Informant Interview Conducted with a Worker of a prominent non-governmental organization, 18 May, 2009.
- Key Informant Interview Conducted with a prominent Professor of Political Science who occupies a senior management position in one of the universities in the Niger-Delta region, 19 May, 2009.