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Armed Rebellion and the Future of Self-Determination in the Niger Delta

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ABSTRACT

Armed rebellion has remained a constant decimal in the relation between the states and rebel groups in contemporary strategic discourse. The resolve by the Niger people of Nigeria to resort to arms and their agitations appear to have found deeper understanding within the context of history. This paper takes a historical look at the foundations of the agitations of the people of the Niger Delta and the ultimate decision to address their displeasure through the use terror or armed rebellion. It addresses the philosophy underpinning self-determination programmes of the Niger Delta militants and the responses of Nigerian state to the agitations of the Niger Delta militants. The paper therefore concludes that the use of arms as the ultimate ratio may remain the future of relationship in the Niger Delta because of the fundamental defects in the policies of the Nigerian state.

***Keywords*:** Armed Rebellion; Self-Determination and Niger Delta

1. INTRODUCTION

Rebellion is an antithesis to an existing order while
armed rebellion is the climax of the rejection of
its essence - Che Guevara,
(Communism and Man)

Armed Rebellion has remained a prominent feature of resistance against a social order (Melton: 1986: 11). It was considered to be a physical response on the part of a group, community or a race against a state or constituted authority whose values are considered inimical to the realization of the vision of the latter (Welsh: 1993: p-54). History is however repletes with numerous instances of armed rebellions by those willing to assert their independence, for the question of identity and for the reasons of social existence (Thomas: 1982: p-72)

Extant literature on the issue of armed rebellion classified its imminent occurrences into three main categories: Political rebellion (Albert: 1967 p-12) Greenberg: 1979 p-23) (Forseedal: 1989 p-22) (Williams: 2003 p-21) (Fasanmi: 2007 p-23); Social Rebellion (Anthorp: 1972 p-12) (Marthy: 1990 p-76) (Dorothy: 2004 p-54) and; Economics Rebellion (Allan: 1982 p-23) (Willfred: 1996 p-23) (Garnnet: 200 p-123). The classification of rebellion also underscores the reasons why men rebel (Aghri: 1979 p-45).

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The Niger Delta experience, though unique because of its texture and context, but fundamentally the same, as it can be x-rayed within the reasons for why "men rebel". Would a race or a group of people not rebel in the face of constant and deepening socio – political and economic injustice? Would they remain silent against deprivation and injustice? Would the magnitude of local and international conspiracy to deny the people the rights to social existence not be confronted? Has the Nigerian state helped to stem the tide of armed rebellion in the Niger Delta? Could the "amnesty diplomacy" resolve the crisis of armed rebellion in this area? Does the struggle for self emancipation in the Niger Delta have any future? The questions above explain the dimensions of the politics of self determination in the Niger Delta.

This paper is divided into seven parts: the first part is the introduction while the second aspect deals with the nature of relationship between the Niger Delta and the Nigerian State. The third aspect examines the option of armed rebellion embraced by the Niger Delta nationalists. The fourth aspect is the critical appraisal of the amnesty diplomacy of the Yar'adua administration while the fifth part takes a look at the future of self determination in the Nigeria Delta. The Sixth part of the work is the conclusion while the seventh contains the bibliography.

2. THE NIGER DELTA AND THE NIGERIAN STATE

The relationship between the Niger Delta and the Nigerian State has been largely characterized by deprivation, violence and falsehood (Mahmud 2006 p-12). The importance of the Niger Delta was discovered on the eve of independence and its primacy in the economics sustenance of Nigeria has never been dismissed. Its potency for development has long been ascertained by Mary Kingsley as noted by Tony Tebekaemi (1982 p-:57), when she remarks:

> "I believe the great swamp region of the Bight of Biafra is the greatest in the world and that in its immensity and gloom, it has a grandeur equal to that of the Himalayas".

This area is peopled by several ethnics groups. The ethic groups in the Niger Delta include the Itsekiri, Isoko, Ogoni, Urhobo, Ikwere, Ika, Ukwuani, Abua, Ijaw etc. (Ibaba: 2005 p-12).

Primarily, it was an agrarian society in which agriculture and fishing are their commercial occupation. The relevance of this area to the Nigerian State's economic interest is largely enabled by the fact that it houses Nigeria's economic "soul". It has over ninety percent (90%) share of Nigeria's oil production. In fact, oil production in Nigeria started in 1908 by Bitamen, a German Company which commenced exploration in the Araromi area of old Ondo State (Ibaba p-13).

The quantity discovered here cannot be compared to that of Oloibiri in 1956. The Paradox has been the fact that rather then positive transformation (Socio – economic wise) despoliation and backwardness have been the story of the Niger Delta.

Colonial politics and primitive accumulation syndrome of the Nigerian political class are partly responsible for this situation (Osoba; 1999 p- 14.)

The discovery of oil in large quantity and the lack of vision of the Nigerian State led to the transformation of Nigeria as a country where oil serves as the mainstay of its economy.

The unproductive Nigeria political class whose primary source of wealth is the national treasury could not see how the Niger Delta area should be developed, despite the reports of the different commissions such as the Willink Commission, which stated the need to develop the area. Worse still, the federal predatory slogan of the "minority ethnic group" has not helped the situation. To them, "the emperor must dance naked". The wealth of the region must be used to develop other regions while the Niger Delta's privileged class and groups must share from the bounties. This partly explains the nature of protection which both the Nigerian State and the Niger Delta political class have given so far to the multinational oil corporations to the detriment of their Kinsmen and ancestral homeland. The relationship between the Nigerian State and the Niger Delta is that of clear disharmony. The politics of deprivation, despoliation and primitive accumulation of a neo-colonial Nigerian State, the inimical activities of the multinational oil companies, the avarice of the Niger Delta political class created violence which forces the Niger Delta nationalists to seek alternative and embrace the option of arms. The seed of rebellion has been sown and the struggle for alternative social order was becoming glaring with the political philosophy of Isaac Boro. His rejection of the existing order becomes clear when he says:

> "We cannot continue to deceive ourselves, we must
> define our missions and a vision for our Niger Delta.
> It is only a social – welfarist state that can do it for us.
> We should begin a struggle for its realization
> (The Punch. Nigeria,Sept.,4th, 1987 p-3).

Boro's statement above explains the basis for the option of armed rebellion and the desire for a revolution in the Niger Delta. Secondly, it explains that a Nigerian State would not be able to give the Niger Delta of their vision. For a primarily pro-North Isaac Boro to accept an alternative, the seed of rebellion becomes watered (Sanni, 2008: p-7)

3. THE OPTION OF ARMED REBELLION

> The people of the Niger Delta have suffered untold
> injustice over what is theirs. The recklessness of the
> Nigerian State, the inhuman activities by the profit
> seekers and attitudes of the Nigerian leaders
> and local conspiracy leave them with the only
> option of violent resistance. (Obayuwana: 2004 p-34)

It should not be conceived that the people of the Niger Delta did not give a peaceful option any chance; in fact, they did. Peaceful option was indeed enabled. It's failure and continuous sufferings of the people led to the "Kaiama Declaration". The Yakubu Gown's regime insensitivity to the Obasanjo's high – handedness helped to sow and water the seeds of armed rebellion and violent method of self determination. The advices of the Niger Delta Labour Advisory council and the Niger Delta Oil Council fell on deaf ears of the Nigerian State and the oil companies. The persecution of the agitators continued. The response of the people marked the beginning of armed rebellion for self determination in the Niger Delta.

On January 22, 1966, a volunteer service was established. It recruited youths ranging between the ages of eighteen and thirty years. The volunteer service later became known as the Niger Delta Volunteer Service. The primary duty of the service was to present an action front and dissociate entirely the Niger Delta area from any support whatsoever of the newly formed military government of Nigeria. The volunteer force launched armed campaign,

confronted the federal government and took over Yenagoa, Oloibiri and Nembe (Solomon; 2005: p-77). The dark jungles and the hidden creeks became the abode of the nationalists. By 6^{th}-7^{th} March 1966, the rebellion was suppressed but not without huge losses and heavy causalities on the side of the federal government. This was just the beginning of more sophisticated methods of armed rebellion and self determination in the Niger Delta.

The arrival and campaign method of ken Saro Wiwa's group was, though diplomatically methodical at the beginning but, it took a new dimension because of the unchanging attitude of the Nigerian State. The Neo-Colonial agenda and seeming visionless autocracy of the General Sanni Abacha's regime worsened the situation. The agitation of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) took a violent dimension. In the Ogoniland, there exist other several movements. They are the Ogoni Welfare Association (OWA), Federation of Ogoni Women Association (FOWA), the National Council for Ogoni Youth (NYCOP). Although, their methods may differ but the goal remain the same:the survival of the Niger Delta.

The struggle for self determination in Ogoniland predates Nigeria's independence. In the late nineteenth century, the Ogonis began to resist colonial incorporation. Unlike most ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, the Ogonis refused to sign the so-called treaties of protection with the British agents after the Berlin Treaty of 1885, which provided the basis of colonial occupation (Banjo, 1998 p-3). They pushed for a policy of armed resistance to colonial conquest until they were finally subdued in early 1908.

They were subsequently incorporated as part of the Opobo Division of Calabar Province. They first organized anti-colonial political protest in 1940's and won their demand in 1947 to be constituted into a separate administrative division. The Ogoni joined the other groups in the present River State to press for the creation of a separate Rivers Province which was granted in 1948. This was followed by the agitation for the creation of Rivers State achieved in 1967. The Ogoni, like other Delta minorities, had consistently alleged domination and discrimination under the Eastern Regional Government. Their struggle as persistent agitators and fighters for self emancipation has been well documented elsewhere (Ken: 1989 p-13); (Ken: 1992 p-21).

It is thus clear from the above that the responses of the Nigerian State could not have curtailed the rising desires of the Niger Delta Nationalists. No wonder, the responses inflamed their desire for armed rebellion and steady march for self emancipation. The exit of Ken Saro Wiwa and the seeming incapacitation of MOSOP which the Nigerian State thought that it would bring peace into the area were to increase the revolutionary feelings of the Nationalists.

Today, other groups such as Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), launched severe armed campaign against the Nigerian State. Their confrontation of the Nigeria State and oil firms appeared total. The Niger Delta remained ungovernable and profit motive of the oil firms turned to a sorry tale of losses. Kidnapping, maiming and other social vices are now common to the Niger Delta. New group of leaders with more vigour and determination emerged. Even if their focus, visions and primary desires have been questioned (Busari 2009 p-17) the fact remains that the enemies of the past remain the enemies of today and the questions raised by Isaac Boro and post Boro's Niger Delta Nationalists remained unanswered and problems still in search of solutions.

It dawns on the Nigerian State and the regime of president Musa Yar'dua that the old methods must change. The regime, in search of National peace, harmony and undisrupted source of national wealth embrace the alternative agenda of National Amnesty.

4. THE AMNESTY DIPLOMACY

As the Niger Delta was becoming too hot for the Nigerian State to handle; since the rave was becoming too explosive for government to solve; as the military option was loosing its essence, Nigerian government came up with olive branch for the warlords and their foot soldiers.

The Amnesty deal became the new alternative agenda to stem the wave of violent rebellion and agitation for self – emancipation in the Niger Delta. The Amnesty deal involves:

* The laying down of arms by the Nationalists.
* Withdrawal from the creeks
* Renunciation of violence
* Re-integration into the large society
* Provisions of sources of livelihood (Times, London, Sept., 2009 p-4)

With the amnesty offer came a flurry of activities from government, non-government organizations, international agencies and other stakeholders jostling to ensure a new social order that would guarantee employment opportunities and empowerment strong enough to dissuade the (militants) nationalists from returning to the creeks. Some of the militants came in their thousands and accepted the deal, while few such as MEND gave condition for the acceptance of the amnesty deal. This forced the government to extend the date earlier vowed never to extend.

At this point, the following questions are germane: does the government know the actual number of the nationalist (militant) groups in the Creeks? Were their entire war weapons released to the government? Are the budding ones existing? Can a neo–colonial state with the problems of social transformation and development keep the promises of the deal? Is there possibility of negative responses from other regions on the issue of deprivation? Would the Niger Delta problems not best resolved within the context of a larger Nigeria's development agenda?

The question above must have partly informed the response of Kimse Okoko, (The Guardian, Nigeria, November 27th , 2009 p-8), to the problems of the amnesty deal. He says that the amnesty deal:

> Has been politicized because there are characters on that programme that are desperate to achieve their political ambitions and they are trying to use the programme to get the attention and support of the federal government to actualize their selfish dreams. Those kind of characters cannot bring about any meaningful progress in any establishment; their focus is to explore it to their political advantage.

This position amplified fundamental problems arising from the difference in the interests of the inept political class who negotiated the amnesty deal, the interests of the nationalists and the desire of the entire region. The fear expressed by Kimse Okoko appears genuine Few weeks after the deal was strucked, nothing concrete has been done. On the 6th of December, 2009, the Presidential Committee on Disarmament and Amnesty for the militants in the Niger Delta, headed by the Minister of Defence, Major General Godwin Abbe (rtd) came under intense pressure for the militants. The militant became restive over the alleged suspension of the re-integration programme planned for them by the federal government. It should be noted however that the nationalists had promised to return to the Creeks if nothing

concrete was done in a short time ,just as they doubted the sincerity of the Federal government at the beginning. Thus, from the beginning, the amnesty deal reveals signs of inadequacy. It was in the same vein that Kimse (Ibid) stated with conviction that:

> The problem being encountered today is because the programmes were not thought through from the beginning; they are just doing it on a day-to-day basis. They are just stumbling and when you only stumble over a programme, the success of it becomes problematic. Again, they throw into it bad leadership; over-ambition politicians who know nothing but intrigues, lies and deceits. All these have created go slow into the amnesty programme.

The amnesty deal came without concrete arrangements on how to engage the problems already created by several years of agitation, violence, mistrust and social vices. This seems to be another foundation for the transformation of the struggle for self-emancipation in the Niger Delta. One of the possible transformation has been identified by Omotoye Olorode (The Guardian Nigeria. December 8th, 2009 p-4). To him:

> Definite transformation of the Niger Delta resistance into a political resistance that combines the ethos of resistance with a paradigm ethos of negotiation would be a veritable template for the overall resistance of the working people in Nigeria.

This dialectical position fails to explain how this would happen but the metamorphism into a working class resistance may be more violent than already witnessed. However, the complexity of this position is that, it also fails to explain how rebellion for emancipation would suddenly become a class conscious one. The importance of his contribution could be seen within the context of the contemporary Nigeria's political -economic policies which are generally antithetical to the realization of the goals of development and lessening of tensions in the Niger Delta. This however points to the future of rebellion and the struggle for self-emancipation in the Niger Delta.

5. NIGER DELTA AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN FUTURE

Cosmetics arrangements have not, anywhere in history, resolved the problems of rebellion and self determination. The Irish experience has remained a vivid example. The amnesty diplomacy appears to be another exercise in futility. This is because the basic issues that informed militancy and nationalists' rebellion may not be resolved by the integration and accommodation of the fighters. What the amnesty deal seems to be envisaging was that the rebellion was nothing but the activities of self-serving and hungry groups who could be engaged by some palliative measured. The perceived inadequacies of the amnesty deal may throw up new challenges in the Niger Delta.

Several reports of panels on the Niger Delta seems to have been jettisoned and have no place in the amnesty consideration, Thus, the amnesty politics appears to have de-appreciated the critical nature of agitations in the Niger Delta.

The Militants/Nationalists may not have surrendered all the ammunitions in their possession as they could not trust the success of the deal. The sources of their war weapons

have largely not been addressed and situations that could encourage future agitation or encourage the struggle for self-determination not really addressed.

The political-economic factor in the struggle for self-determination in the Niger Delta seems to be ever present. The status of the Niger Delta in the Nigerian Federation remains largely a problem which the political class of other ethnic climes in Nigeria may not wish to accept.

This is because, this problem may drive the country back to the basic foundational question of Nigeria's existence.

Two different schools are vivid in this different. A Federalist School, Ben Nwabueze (2007 p-25), Hakeem Tomori (2009 p-6) argued based on Federalist thesis that the different states should control the resources in their environment. The unitarist argument, Ibrahim Tahir (2004 p-7). Adamu Ciroma (2006 p-23), argued for national control of the resources with a just sharing formula. Whatever the contentions of the schools, the facts remains that a neo-colonial Nigerian state with unproductive political class cannot sufficiently define the character of a just sharing formula or judiciously allocate resources due to its obvious inadequacies; the problems of primitive accumulation and the crisis of responsibility.

The Nationalists/Militants have access to resources to prosecute the struggle for self-determination. Recently, over one hundred and fifty (150) illegal local refineries were located in creeks. Thus bunkering became the order of the day and as well as a source of huge financial wealth to continue the struggle for self emancipation. It may be safe at this point to say that the Niger Delta may just be setting the basis for another dimension of self-determination and character of which may be difficult to determine.

6. CONCLUSION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been attracting both local and international attention because of the character and dimensions of violent rebellion and the struggle for self-emancipation in the area. The agitation predates Nigeria's Independence and the area has witnessed different Nationalist characters. The bases of the agitation remain largely the same from the different epochs but the responses of the Nigerian state has not been different completely from that of the Colonial Nigerian government until Yar'dua amnesty deal. The deal may at the end be another cosmetic attempt at reducing tensions in the area or at best, a policy seeking a limited peace but not a lasting solution to rebellion and struggle for self emancipation. The amnesty deal could, in a limited time, just set the basis for the transformation of the struggle for self emancipation in the Niger Delta.

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