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Revolutionary Pressures and Social Movements in Nigeria: The Niger Delta Experience (Pp. 449-461)

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Abstract

More often than not, social movements by their very nature are predicated on a penchant for change from below which embodies a revolution. An x-ray of the peculiar experience of the Nigerian polity with specific reference to the Niger Delta reveals deep-seated discontent whether expressed or otherwise. Right from the pre to post-independence era, the manifestations of gross marginalization have formed the pivot on which revolutionary pressures and social movements revolve in the Niger Delta Region. Another dimension of this paper is a critique which adopts the political economy model in subjecting the variegated agitations in our study area to the crucibles of scholarly analysis. There is an ethnic bias in the struggle for redress which, if not checkmated, might signal the emissary of national disintegration. In the light of 'failed states' our discourse will be incisively posited.

Introduction

This paper adopts the political economy approach in unveiling the dynamics of revolutionary pressures vis-a-vis social movements in Nigeria in general and the Niger Delta Region in particular. The political economy model as a tool of analysis posits that economic realities form the substructure while other social phenomena like philosophy politics religion etc embody the superstructure. While synthesizing on the methodology under discourse, Ake,

(1981, p.1-2) identifies some of its key elements which include the primacy of material conditions, the dynamic character of reality and the relatedness of different elements of society. Aina (1986, p.1) highlights the importance of the political economy approach as a mode of critical examination and the context within which socio-economic activities and forces operate. There is no attempt in this work to embrace all the tenets of the political economy approach 'hook, line and sinker'. It will suffice to note that the common denominator in revolutionary pressures is rooted in economic factors.

The Prevalence of Revolutionary Pressures in Nigeria

By revolutionary pressures we mean those socio-economic catalysts that have the potential to necessitate sudden change in any given polity. Ake (1978, p.9) posits that

'The dynamics of social forces originate from the primary contradiction of the world economic system'. Some of the volatile issues that constitute revolutionary pressures in Nigeria comprise the National Question cum clamour for Sovereign National Conference, the controversies around resource control formula, the debilitating scourge of corruption, the inhibitions of faulty electoral process characterized by brazen rigging and ethno-religions crises inter-alia. We consider them in sequence.

(i) The National Question and the clamour for a Sovereign National Conference

The National question emanates from the perceived imbalances of the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914. The creation of Nigeria as a nation- state was the contrivance of British colonial agents. As at 1914, the geographical location that came under the political umbrella called Nigeria accommodated not less than two hundred autonomous ethnic groups. While subjecting the formation of Nigerian economy and polity to the crucibles of scholarly analysis, Usman (2005:44) identifies the amalgamation as a critical issue. He opines that in its earliest usage, the name 'Nigeria' was intended to be applied to the northern parts of the country, in order to distinguish those parts from the British Colony of Lagos and the Niger Coast Protectorate.

There is no consensus on the implications of the 1914 amalgamation. Some view it as an invaluable dividend bearing in mind the strategic role Nigeria occupies in the comity of nations, thanks to the huge geographical size and her intimidating population. Out of every four Africans, one is a Nigerian. But Abubakar (2008:31) notes that the late Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sardauna

of Sokoto and Premier of Northern Region once remarked that the amalgamation of 1914 was a mistake. This was against the background of Northern members of the Lower House of Representatives who were embarrassed in Lagos following the refusal to support a motion for Nigeria's self government in 1956. In very remote times, most ethnic minority groups have felt alienated. It is common knowledge that of the three major ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulani dominated the north, the Yoruba in the west with the Igbo in the east. At the same time, the ethnic minority groups of the Tiv, Igbirra, Tiv Idoma, Kataf, Bini, Ogoni, Ijaw, Ikwerre, Ogbah, Urhobo, Itsekiri etc are disillusioned with the ruling oligarchy. Some may dismiss this position as being imaginary but the realities on ground prove otherwise. For example, the declaration of the Ogoni Bill of Rights in 1990 under the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) was a response to the marginalization perceived by the indigenous people. In the same vein, the Kaiama Declaration and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) lend credence to the fact that the National Question is not a wishful thinking. The case of MASSOB under Ralph Uwazurike is very instructive in that it goes to reveal that among the three major ethnic groups, some are more equal than others.

Another dimension of the national question deals with the entrance of major ethnic nationalities enlisting in the quest. After the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 – 1970, the demand for the creation of Sovereign State of Biafra has gathered momentum under the leadership of Ralph Uwazurike. It is revealing to realize that the Yoruba consistently championed the convening of a Sovereign National Conference with the mysterious death of Chief M.K.O Abiola (alleged winner of one of the most free and fair election in 1993). Abubakar (2008, p.55) further notes that the advocates of such a conference believe that while Nigeria is supposed to operate a federal structure, the military had skewed the system in favour of unitary. It must be added, however that the issue of over-centralization draws inspiration from economic under currents. The palpable truth is that politics is juicy and whoever is opportuned to control the centre secures unfettered access to the looting of the national treasury at the expense of the teeming hapless masses. We do well to recall the role of pro-National Conference Organization (PRONACO) in consolidating the demand for a National Political Reform Conference with eminent statesmen like Anthony Enahoro, Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti, Professor Wole Soyinka, Chief Femi Falana etc. in the *Vanguard*.

When the national question is not properly addressed, it assumes the status of a revolutionary pressure with the potential of derailing the process of democratization. The national question has been identified as a major force to be reckoned with in the Sudanese Civil war. Puah (2000:39) observes

‘Why has the Sudanese conflict so far eluded substantial peace? The question can be partly understood in terms of the inability of the warring parties to achieve a political and constitutional arrangement which would resolve the contradictions on which the civil war is premised. The dominant feature of these contradictions is the national question on the Sudan...

i. Resource Control:

The Achilles’ hill in pre- and post- independent Nigeria is the dilemma of solving the resource control equation. The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stipulates that 13% of all revenues should be the exclusive preserve of the host communities. In 2007 pressure was brought to bear on the National Assembly that the derivation formula should peak at 50% until 25% agreement was recommended awaiting due process for its implementation.

The resource control principle in Nigeria’s federalism suffered a setback under various military regimes which employed repressive mechanisms in wresting the sharing formula. The resource control controversy has crippled the activities of the Shell Petroleum Development Corporation in Ogoniland. Adilije (2008, p.967) notes that a major demand of the Ogoni Bill of Rights is that the Ogoni people should be conferred with the inalienable rights to use a fair proportion of Ogoni economic resources for Ogoni development. In the same vein, the Kaiama Declaration of the Ijaw Youth Congress of December 1998, in no uncertain terms, stated that the cardinal issue revolves around the ownership and control of the environment that generates the bulk of the national resource: crude oil.

ii. A Disarticulated Process of Democratization

The Nigerian polity witnesses another revolutionary pressure from a deplorably faulty process of democratization. Democracy is synonymous with representative government which is participatory. Democracy provides that leaders be duly elected into designated offices under the umbrella of a

party. There should be no coercion but persuasion. Unfortunately in the Nigerian example, decency is relegated to the background when it comes to election. To many politicians, election and political office is a 'do or die' affair. In other words; they can deploy all unconventional means to capture power. More often than not, politicians have perfected the art of hiring thugs and assassins to either intimidate or eliminate their opponents. Most election results are fraught with litigations in various courts of jurisdiction. It is disheartening to note that till now, most politicians are in court seeking redress for an election that took place since April 2007. In fact, the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (I.N.E.C) is being questioned.

Adejuwomi (2000, p.250) takes a continental overview of the abysmal electoral process in Africa and concludes that

Elections appear to be expedient political exercise for ruling regimes, partly because of its economic implications in terms of external aid flows and economic assistance and partly because of its public relations advantage, in propping up the political profile of the regimes in territorial arena.

This view justifies the adoption of the political economy approach to the dynamics of revolutionary pressures and their relationship with social movements. The annulment of the election result which allegedly declared the late Chief M.K.O Abiola winner in 1993 provoked wide-scale protests and left a chain reaction from which the nation never fully recovered. Eguavvon (2009:34) submits that 'election rigging and violence have continued to pose a threat to the national democratic process. As will be demonstrated later, some aspects of militancy and armed struggle in the Niger Delta could be traced to the blunders arising from elections and the political process.

iv. The Scourge of corruption

Balewa (1994, p.211) defines corruption as 'a sign of erosion of civility and traces its origin to the intrusion of money into the politics of Nigeria from the 1950s characterized by the sale of votes to the highest bidder. Because of the "spoils of office", most political contestants are in the habit of borrowing huge amounts of money to induce the electorate. When they eventually succeed, they loot the treasury to settle their commitments.

Many incidences of corrupt enrichment abound in Nigeria. Several former governors have been arrested and tried for corrupt enrichment while in office. Corruption, indeed, is the root of political instability in Nigeria. Zamako (2009) observes with dismay

For several years, Nigeria has consistently been voted by Transparency International in its perception index as either the most corrupt nation or one of the most corrupt in the globe (p. 55).

El-Rufai, the former minister of Federal Capital Territory (FCT) once alleged that some members of Senate demanded from him the sum of N54 million as bribe to confirm his ministerial appointment. The same accusations of corruption are rife in the judiciary, the banking sector, the public service and the construction industries cum educational establishments. The anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (I.C.P.C) are warming up to the challenges of fighting this hydra-headed monster of corruption. Corruption produces a devastating effect on any society.

(v) Ethno-religious crises: Since the inception of democratic governance on May 29, 1999 Nigeria has witnessed not less than fifty ethno-religious cum communal clashes in various cities and states. Wherever and whenever they occur, both lives and property worth billions of naira are lost. The wanton destruction of the last Boko Haram uprising is still fresh on our minds, According to Jega (2002), ethno-religious crises can be described as

‘a situation in which the relationship between members of one ethnic group and another (*who possibly are adherents of different religions*) or generally amongst ethnic groups in a multicultural polity such as Nigeria, is characterized by lack of cordiality, by heightened mutual suspicion and fears, by quarrelsomeness and by a tendency towards violent confrontations (p. 35).

It is almost the norm that in most states today, the issue of indigenes status in job placement is becoming a major setback which threatens the unity of this country. Today we hear of numerous inter-ethnic clashes between the Aguleri and Umumeri in Anambra States, between the Okrika and Ogoni in Rivers State, between the Jukun – Clamba and Tiv in Benue and Taraba States respectively etc. The Tivs and non-Tivs in Nassarawa State are not blending in the area of mutual co-existence and same could be said of the Ife and Modakeke of Osun States. The political economy of ethno-religious

clashes posits that among other reasons, economic underpinnings hold sway. Jega (2002, p. 37) rightly concludes that poverty is at the threshold of most of the ethnic clashes as most of the willing tools in the hands of manipulators are jobless youths who are easily captivated by the looting sprees the exercise offers. Major cities like Lagos, Kaduna, Kano, Ibadan, Jos, Bauchi, Bornu and Umuahia have had their ugly experiences of ethno-religious debacle. The traumatic experiences of victims and the unquantifiable economic cost of flexing ethno-religious muscle point to the fact that these imbroglios are harbingers of potential revolutionary pressures. The last ethno-religious crisis in Jos paralyzed all socio-economic activities and brought the city to a standstill.

These revolutionary pressures by their very nature elicit reactions from the disenfranchised citizenry who feel marginalized and alienated. These revolutionary pressures are characteristic of 'failed states'. The main features of failed states comprise their inability to meet the socio-economic needs of the citizenry amidst security challenges. In this regard, we now turn to the emergence of social movements.

The Emergence of Social Movements

From the outset, it will be appropriate to make some clarifications on the definition and character of social movements. In his work, Olesen (2005) defines social movements as

extra-parliamentary and organized attempts to obtain social and political change with the use of non-institutional repertoires such as public protests, information distribution and lobbying (p. 436).

While working on the peculiar case of study of India, Harindranath (2002:63) observes that for both ethnic nationalism and the new social movements what is crucial is the presence of enormous labour reserve which remains excluded from the main working force. It therefore suggests that those who participate in social movements feel alienated from the scheme of things in terms of socio-economic opportunities. Yet Lemure (2002, p. 310) sees social movements as being a particular type of action by which a category of players enter into conflict with an adversary for the management of the society's principal means of action on it and this notion includes labour conflicts, students protests, the fight for civil rights, feminist and environmental demands. Tilly (2004, p.3) defines big social movements as series of contentious performances, displays and campaigns by which

ordinary people with common purpose and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities.

Based on these definitions, we shall consider whether the Niger Delta struggle can be classified as a veritable social movement.

The Niger Delta Struggle as A Social Movement?

The Niger Delta struggle has undergone some metamorphoses right from the representative delegation of eminent Niger Delta elders to the Willink's Commission of 1958 under the auspices of the Calabar- Ogoja – Rivers State Movement to the recent armed struggles, kidnapping and hostage taking of the recent past. Akobo (2008:51) observes that in 1966, a young but militant revolutionary of distinction and varied experience with a handful of aides and assistants, Isaac Adaka Boro raised and sacked a series of police facilities and declared a ' Republic of Niger Delta. Though arrested and condemned to death, Boro was later granted clemency with members of his vanguard, Niger Delta Volunteer Force. Nwanjiaku-Dahou (2008) is of the opinion that

Boro's revolutionary credentials, military prowess and stance on the question of local ownership of petroleum resources make him a useful heroic figure for contemporary Ijaw nationalists for whom resource control is a central pre-occupation (p. 317).

The import of Declaration of the Ogoni Bill of Rights in 1990 under the leadership of Ken Saro-Wiwa as well as the Kaiama Declaration of 1998 angling for resources control is well appreciated.

The Niger Delta region shares a similar fate with the Cabinda region of Angola. The Cabinda region is endowed with rich crude oil deposits and yet they are marginalized. To vent their anger, they ambushed and killed three Togolese football crew members who were on a mission to Angola for African Cup competition in February, 2010.

Government Response

The Willink's Commission of the Colonial British administration recommended that the Niger Delta should be designated a Special Area and consequently a Niger Delta Development Board was to be created to address some of the perceived socio-economic im-balances in the area. In post-independence Nigeria, some of the major efforts of the Federal Government in addressing the perceived injustice meted against the Niger Delta people include the creation of the Oil Minerals Producing Development Commission

(OMPADEC) in 1992, the setting up of the Niger Delta Development Commission in 2000 as well as the establishment of the Federal Ministry of the Niger Delta in 2009. Currently the Federal Government sets aside 13% as deviation revenue for stakeholder states in the oil industry and most of these states are in the Niger Delta where oil was discovered in commercial quantities for the first time in Oloibiri in 1956.

The Federal Government claims it has invested several billions of naira in refocusing the Niger Delta Region through various allocations to the states as well as Local governments, the NDDC and Ministry of Niger delta. A trip to the Niger Delta region will reveal a yawning gap between the claims of Government and the physical development of the area. The Senate, during their retreat in Port Harcourt in 2007 took a trip to different parts of the Niger Delta and were shocked to observe the level of wanton marginalization of the area. The road network is terrible and most rural dwellers live in ram shackle, dilapidated buildings with majority living below poverty line. Just to demonstrate an example of ambiguity in Government genuine commitment to the Niger Delta struggle: in the 2009 annual budget, the Federal Government had earmarked about N72 billion for the Niger Delta Development Commission while about N71 billion naira was budgeted to the newly created Ministry of Niger Delta. In the same budget, it bugs the imagination, how the same Government could allocate the colossal sum of about 420 billion naira as security vote. If that same amount was invested in the infrastructural development and capacity building in the area, a lot would have changed in the physiognomy of the region.

The Era of Militancy and Armed Struggle

Virtually all the revolutionary pressures earlier highlighted in the Nigerian polity are duplicated in the Niger delta; these are the national question, resource control, corruption and ethnic conflicts. Apart from the aborted armed struggle of the late Isaac Adoka Boro, the genesis of militancy, hostage taking, kidnapping and violent crimes could be traced to the political economy of electioneering campaigns and the perceived alienation from the entire share of the national cake. As a social movement, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people has risen to challenge the unbridled exploitation of its natural resources: crude oil and gas. We also have the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta Vigilante Force and a host of other militant groups. Some of these militant groups brand themselves civil liberties' fighters Ofume (2009). The Niger Delta struggle is predicated on the obvious fact that the people want a fair

deal in their naturally endowed resources. This position agrees with one of the reasons for the formation of social movements. Kendall: (2005 Wikipedia) emphasizes the significance of the deprivation theory. He states that

Deprivation theory argues that social movements have their foundations among people who feel deprived of some goals or resources. Individuals who are lacking some goods, service or comfort are more likely to organize a social movement to improve or defend their conditions

Based on this insight, it is safe to say that the Niger Delta struggle qualifies as a social movement. Other variants provided and voiced by Kendall include the collective behaviour, mass society resource mobilization, frame analysis and new social movement theories.

An Assessment of the Struggle So Far

As is the case with most social movements, the Niger Delta struggle, in all its ramifications, is positioned to bring about major socio economic changes in the area. They also hope to attract Government presence which had been marginal. Harindranath (2002:63) submits that the genesis, historical development and political expediency of social movements need to be balanced with their potential for facilitating genuine change.

Though we are yet to witness major breakthroughs in term of development projects that will impact positively on the lives of the people, it is hoped that the NDDC and the newly created Ministry of Niger Delta affairs will expedite action in transforming the geographical landscape of the area.

When the armed struggle reached fever pitch with rampant kidnapping and hostage-taking, the Nigeria economy wobbled. Most expatriate companies like Julius Berger, Michelin, and Stemco etc relocated. Even the giant multi-national company, Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC) threatened to abandon their investment in the Niger Delta. Billions of dollars were lost including many that were rendered jobless.

After series of consultations, the Federal Government of Nigeria granted amnesty to the repentant militants. The deadline of the amnesty was October 4, 2009. The Government promised to rehabilitate as many as would respond positively to this offer. The repentant militants would be lodged in various camps for training in skill acquisition while a monthly allowance of N65, 000

would be paid to them. This ‘carrot’ worked as most freedom fighters abandoned their cause, surrendered their weapons and settled down for the training. Rehabilitation centres were established in Rivers and Bayelsa States. There is much to suggest that the Niger Delta struggle is hinged on economic factors. In fact, while in the rehabilitation camps, the Federal Government has not lived up to expectation as these ex-militants are hardly paid their monthly allowances as at when due. In December 2009, the ex-militants at the Man – O – War, Aluu village, behind the University of Port Harcourt, Choba went on rampage to protest the Federal Government’s inability to pay their monthly allowances as promised. In the process, they looted shops and in broad day light raped unsuspecting University students. The fact that the Government vacillated their commitment leaves much to be desired. On the part of the Niger Delta freedom fighters and civil liberty organization, there is no sustainability in the struggle.

We can only talk of sustainability in the social movement of the MOSOP. Since the Declaration of the Ogoni Bill Rights in 1990, they have been consistent. Even the death of their leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa did not dampen their spirit as a worthy successor was found in Barrister Leedum Mitee. MOSOP has brought SPDC to its knees. They have equally given a quit notice to SPDC. MOSOP wants to be involved in any negotiation with any multi-national company that may wish to do business on their soil whether for the exploitation of crude oil or otherwise.

A political economy of their ideological orientation reveals that they (i.e the militants) can hardly champion their cause to a logical conclusion because most of them are jobless youth and poverty stricken. Nevertheless, their doggedness has attracted international attention and the Federal Government under the leadership of Alhaji Umaru Yar’dua has enshrined it in its “Seven Point Agenda”. The President (2007) avows:

The crisis in the Niger Delta commands our urgent attention. Ending it is a matter of strategic importance to me. With your help, we shall address this crisis in the spirit of fairness, justice and co-operation! Otoghagua (p. 388).

Other programmes of Seven Point Agenda include transformation of the electoral process, the restructuring of the economy, security, the anti-corruption war, the energy state and food security. How far the government can go in actualizing the dream for a better Niger delta is a matter of time.

Conclusion

Some revolutionary pressures like the National Question and the quest of a Sovereign National Conference, the distortions of the electoral process characterized by riggings and all kinds of manipulation, the scourge of corruption and the vicissitudes of ethno-religious crisis have been identified in the Nigerian polity. The political economy approach adopted in this study reveals that these revolutionary pressures by their character have concrete economic underpinnings. The Niger Delta struggle qualifies as a social movement against the background of deprivation theory and the desire for lasting changes in the socio-economic milieu.

Drawing from the principle of perceived marginalization, the people of Niger Delta feel shortchanged as stakeholders in the Nigerian economy. It is no longer a secret that about 85% of our foreign exchange earnings come from the exploration and sale of crude oil and allied products. The Niger Delta struggle fits into the frame work of a social movement in its bid to address the perceived injustices of the past and reposition the region for meaningful and lasting socio-economic development. It is hoped that the Government would demonstrate a greater sense of commitment in the Seven Point Agenda on the future of the Niger Delta people.

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