

Oil Wealth and Dialectics of Militant Revolt in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of oil wealth in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria has engendered militant revolts that escalated to the stage whereby militant youths declared the government its enemy and engaged the armed forces in armed battle. Their acceptance of unsolicited amnesty granted them by the government opened a new window for the crisis to be resolved. This paper is intended to examine the factors and context of the crisis with a view to advancing sustainable resolution of the crisis. In doing this, the paper relies on documentary and descriptive method of data collection and analysis and recommends for a truth and reconciliation commission on Niger Delta.

Keywords: oil wealth, inequality, manmade disasters, conflict, militant revolt and amnesty.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the specificities of the Niger Delta and oil production as well as the factors, response and challenge of the militant revolt in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Which specific factors and challenges are at stake in the Niger Delta conflict? Does the recent amnesty posses the capacity for effectual resolution of the conflict in the entire region? Tackling these necessarily entails shedding light on the current situation and how it evolved. It will also be necessary to identify and appraise the factors or challenges that have exacerbated the crisis over the years.

The paper is essentially a case analysis of a concrete situation. It relies largely on documentation and observation methods of data collection and descriptive tools of data analysis. In doing this, relevant data will be gathered from a variety of sources. The main aim here is to increase the quantum of useful insights into the issue of oil wealth and conflict in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. In line with this, the paper is divided into six interrelated parts. The first part, which is essentially a brief introduction of the objects of the study, is followed by a discourse of key conceptual and contextual issues. The third part is on the specificities of the Niger Delta region and oil production in Nigeria. While the fourth part is on the stages and factors of militant revolt. The fifth is on the politics of amnesty. The sixth part contains a brief summary, recommendations and conclusion.

RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

The theory of conflict as formulated by Dahrendorf, Lockwood, Rex, C. Wright Mills, etc. enables us to focus on conflictive relations in society. Conflict theory draws inspiration from Karl Marx (1818-1883) and to some extent from George Simmel (1908-1964), and views the struggles and conflicts between classes or groups as inevitable. Although there are variants of conflict theory with differing permutations and combinations, contemporary conflict writers such as Dahrendorf, Lockwood and C. Wright Mills, have essentially come to see conflict not merely as a class phenomenon but as Schaefer and Lamn (1994: 11-12) point out:

a part of everyday life in all societies...one needs to know who suffers, and who dominates at the expense of others. They are concerned with the conflicts between women and men, parents and children, cities and suburbs, whites and blacks ...interested on how societies institutions – including the family, government, religion, education, and the media may help to maintain the privileges of some groups and keep others in a subservient position.

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Contemporary conflict theory also examines the properties of conflict and their import on the organization of social system. As the accompanying Figure 1 shows, typically, the unequal or unjust distribution of resources in social systems creates pressures leading to conflict among those with varying shares of resources. Such conflicts, Turner and Powers (1981) opine, inevitably lead to change in, and reorganization of the social system.

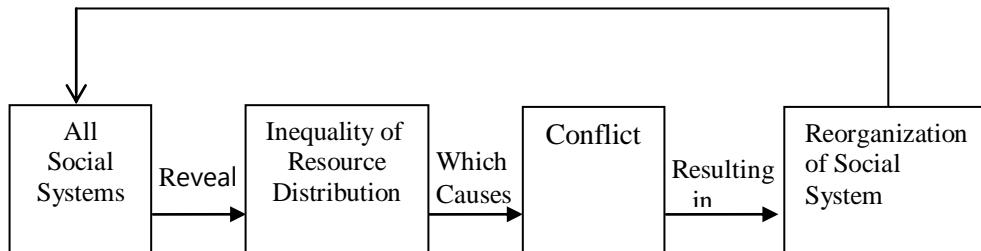


Figure1: Conflict Scheme

Source: Derived from Turner and Power's (1981) General Conflict Model

The import of this scheme is that it underlies the fact that conflicts are processes with identifiable stages. As can be seen, existing inequalities, coupled with structural and cultural conditions, generate conflict and change, resulting in system re-organization. More importantly, the value of conflict perspective in the study of oil wealth and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta rests on the fact that:

- It views the society as being made up of competing groups who seek to secure their own ends.
- Although the level of conflict analysis is the macro-level, that is, state level, it is important to note that it can also be applied to sub-system as well as supra-state levels of analysis. In this way it is helpful in explaining conflictive relationship within and between states, as well as inter-group and intra-group conflicts.
- On social change, conflict perspective ascribes to the fact that change takes place all the time and may have positive consequences.
- On how social order, including political development, is achieved and maintained, the perspective believes that this is done through force and coercion. In this respect it provides explanatory note for understanding and appreciating the position of the militant groups.

A major setback of conflict theory is that it fails to categorize conflict. If every conflict is inevitable whether, violent or non-violent, there is no need to make an issue out of conflict resolution and its advocacy. This underlines the fact that conceptualizing oil and conflict in the Niger Delta region and the Nigerian state is a complex activity.

For one it involves frames for exploring and tracing the rise, dynamics and texture of conflicts in the Niger Delta region. Although the crisis in the region does not appear to excuse many groups and segments of ruling class – whether civilian, military or even multinational corporations; for obvious reasons however, it makes sense to posit that Nigeria's status as a comprador or rentier state anchored on the alliance between international capital and local civilian and the military elite culpability is both clear and instructive. Curiously, whether rulership has been dominated by the military or elected civilians, the trend is that the state and its power have increasingly become a wealth mine and thus an instrument for cheap and primitive accumulation. Understanding the theoretical implications of this is important for any meaningful attempt to establish and examine the interface between social environment and conflicts particularly in Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

Taking cognizance of the above views, our central argument in this paper is that there is a relationship between the phenomenon of oil wealth and inequality and the escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta region. In other words, increasing inequality and the escalation of militancy in the Niger Delta region are products of decades of rentier exploitation and primitive accumulation.

SPECIFICITIES OF THE NIGER DELTA REGION AND OIL PRODUCTION IN NIGERIA

What is now generally known as the Niger Delta region refers to nine states in Southern part of Nigeria most of which border or share some geographical and historical affinity with human and

natural endowments in the broad mouth of 4,200km long River Niger. The region has a population of 21 million (1991) and land area of about 70,000 sq kilometers and covers the states of Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Abia, Rivers, Imo, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo and Ondo states. The major cities in the region are Port Harcourt, Benin city, Calabar, Aba, Warri, Owerri, Yenagoa, Uyo, and Akure. Besides these and some medium sized cities, there are according to Oweme and Obaebor (2009) over 3,000 small and often remote communities/villages in swamp mangroves and lowland rain forests. Despite dwindling fortunes, farming and fishing continues to constitute the main economic activities particularly in the rural areas. Reflecting further on the character of Niger Delta region Oweme and Obaebor (2009: 1) point out that

The terrain is extremely difficult and a substantial portion of the region fall under the ‘wild fragile ecosystem’ and many communities live along creeks and are accessible only by boats. [Partly on account of this,] The riverine communities are particularly vulnerable to climatic changes and man-made disasters such as floods, sea encroachment, oil pollution, piracy, hostage taking, communal conflicts, etc

The Niger Delta region, particularly the core areas which boarder the mouth of River Niger consist of mangrove, swampy and lowland rainforests. It has over 3,000 small and often remote and scattered communities or villages. The settlements usually take advantage of higher grounds and creeks while boats are used for transportation. As pointed out by Ojameruave (2004: 4):

Farming and fishing are the main economic activities in the communities while commerce and oil-industry related activities dominate the urban areas. The terrain is extremely difficult and a substantial portion of the region fall under the “world’s fragile eco-system”. Many communities live along creeks and are accessible only by boats. The riverine communities are particularly vulnerable to climatic changes and man-made disasters (floods, sea encroachment, oil pollution, piracy, hostage taking, communal conflicts, etc.). The region is faced with a lot of developmental and environmental challenges including high level of poverty, decline in agricultural production, low level of industrial activities, environmental degradation and social conflicts.

Although documentation of the occurrence of oil was reported in 1903, exploration did not begin until 1908. The search for oil in the region was interrupted by the two world wars but after some decades, oil was eventually found in commercial quantity in 1956 in Oloibiri, an Ijaw village in present day Bayelsa state. Oil production increased steadily from the on-set, from a mere 5,000 barrels per day (b/d) in 1957 to 17,000 b/d as at independence in 1960 and ‘leap frogged’ to 450,000 b/d by 1966. Although this upward trend was lowered by the civil war (1967-1970), by 1970 daily production had reached 1 million barrels (Otoghagu, 2007).The continual production of oil from the Niger Delta region is having unimaginable consequences on Nigeria. For instance, while in 1962 oil revenue accounted for about 9.9 percent (₦34.4m) ten years later 1972 it climbed to 82.2 percent (₦1, 176.2m). Today, nearly sixty years after the discovery of oil, Nigeria is not only the sixth largest oil producing country in the world, but has also become dependent on the product for over 90% of her income.

Despite increasing or sustained huge revenue accruing to the Nigerian governments (Federal, State and LGA) there are indications that the Niger Delta is increasingly becoming poor, restive and crises prone. With the increasing number and quantum ‘menace’ by militant groups, evidence abound that the phenomenon of oil wealth is increasingly creating inequality and militant revolt in the region.

STAGES AND FACTORS OF MILITANT REVOLT

Confrontation between individuals and groups in the Niger Delta region and ‘modern’ or capitalist state dates back to the hey-days of merchant capitalists of the nineteenth century particularly following the signing of the 1884 Treaty of Berlin. Much like the imposition of formal or direct colonial rule in 1900, and the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria that followed fourteen years later, the consent or opinion of the people were not sought. Taking cognizance of this, it is possible to identify five stages or phases in quest for basic rights by individuals and group in the region.

The first stage is the crises of identity stage. Once cowed into colonial domination, the eventual preoccupation of many members of the emerging elite in the region were how to carve out a group identity that could be harnessed or put to play in their quest for effective participation in the spaces created by colonial governmental structures. Following what is often considered an unfair expulsion

of Professor Eyo Ita from office in 1953 by Igbo dominated regional House of Assembly, the demand for a new regional structure ensued. The demand for the creation of Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers, COR state was one of the demands put to the Willinck's Commission on the eve of Nigeria's independence. As a matter of fact, the struggle for the creation of COR state was a major issue on the status of minorities in Nigeria during debates in Britain for Nigerian independence.

The second phase is what we have called the self assertion phase. This is a phase in which the struggle witnessed the declaration of Niger Delta Republic in 1966. The quest to assert self through an independent was led by Isaac Adaka Boro. Although the declaration was considered a revolt by the federal government and accordingly quickly crushed, it no doubt brought to bear or foreshadowed the heightening of awareness of inherent contradictions. On the part of individuals and groups in the Niger Delta, it was an eye opener. It created a level of consciousness on the extent of entrenchment and the dimension of the issues at stake in the Niger Delta region.

The third phase is the stage of advocacy and struggle for justice. This stage is marked by the evolution of articulate response by individuals and groups in the Niger Delta region. It is associated with the quest to use of the power of pen to demand for justice and end of marginalization of the Niger Delta region by the government of Nigeria. The most prominent figure in this phase, indeed the arrow-head was Ken Saro-Wiwa, a renowned writer. Ken Saro-Wiwa used the platform of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) to point to the unholy alliance between oil multinationals and the Nigerian government in the process of underdevelopment in the Niger Delta, especially in his Ogoni homeland. As it turned out, for complaining about the destruction of their land and rivers through pollution and environmental degradation, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others were killed by Gen. Sani Abacha-led Federal Military Government in Nigeria.

The fourth stage is the agitation for resource control phase. The furore generated by Abacha's action created the awareness and need for greater agitation by even more individuals and groups within and outside the Niger Delta region for resource control. The agitation for resource control phase was epitomized by the combined stand of the representatives of the South-south zone in the 2006 Constitutional Conference. The representatives staged a work out when it became obvious that their quest for getting a progressively fair share of the revenue generated from oil in Nigeria. Despite the unity of purpose exhibited by many individuals and groups who are committed to resource control not much was, in concrete terms, achieved.

The fifth stage is the resort to militancy phase. Although resort to militant approach by several groups in the Niger Delta region could be traced to a widespread feeling of unjust treatment of the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta region that dates back to several decades, persistent lukewarm attention and outright failure to adequately address the issues constitute "critical factors". Other factors which helped to exacerbate the matter include rising unemployment, affluence on the part of oil workers and the political elite. Whereas several militant groups have emerged in the Niger Delta region and claiming to advance the interest of the region, Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta, MEND, appears to be the most articulate, vocal and sustained. The most often used weapons of the militant groups are hostage taking, sabotage and open confrontation of the regular Nigerian armed forces.

The fact that President Yar'adua government decided to declare amnesty to all militant groups after almost 2½ years in power is an indication that militant approach has at least created an impact. The October 2010 bomb blast in Abuja which is claimed by MEND while the amnesty was on course is an indication that the amnesty project is far from achieving its aims.

NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA AND POLITICS OF AMNESTY

It is now necessary for us to explore the issue of militant revolt.

In his *Seven Point Agenda* President Umaru Yar'adua while bemoaning the conflict outlined the resolution of the crises in the Niger Delta region as one of his major preoccupations. Accordingly, he declared in his inaugural speech on May 29, 2007 that "the crises in the Niger Delta command our urgent attention. Ending it is a matter of strategic importance to our country. I will use every resource available to me, with your help, to address the crises in a spirit of fairness, justice and cooperation." Despite these sentiments, there appears to be little or no action beside the unilateral presidential proclamation granting amnesty to the Niger Delta militants. Whereas many segments of the militant

groups have accepted the proclamation, at least in principle, the initiative still appear to be stuck in murky waters.

The high point of President Jonathan's presidency and the Niger Delta is the creation of Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs and the appointment of Professor Kuku as Special Adviser on Delta Affairs and Chairman of the Presidential Amnesty Programme. Within the period also about thirty thousand militants are known to have benefitted from the amnesty programme. The dark side however is that as at July 2015 former militants who are undergoing undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes within and outside Nigeria are being owed about two months tuition fees and accruedallowance.

The thrust of the new regime of President Muhammadu Buhari on the Niger Delta region is not yet clear, suffice it to say that he has appointed a retired Brigadier-General of the Nigerian Army, Paul Boro as the new Coordinator of the Presidential Amnesty Programme. This notwithstanding the Ijaw Youth Council has alerted Nigerians and international community that there is rising tension in Niger Delta region, and that tension which is as a result of the nonpayment of allowances to the beneficiaries of the Presidential Amnesty Programme will soon result in security breach in the region. It is not now clear whether the December 2015 termination of the amnesty credited to the President will still stand particularly now that the ex-militants have threatened to resist the 2015 termination date (<http://www.informationng.com/2015/06/amnesty-ex-militants>).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have raised a number of issues revolving around oil wealth, prevalence of inequality and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta region. In particular, we have among others argued that:

- The theory of conflict is useful in the understanding and explanation of conflictual relations in Nigeria's Niger Delta region
- Given the unique characteristics of the Niger Delta region, development in the region though difficult and expensive, deserves every attention.
- Amnesty programme or in deed any serious attention to the challenge of underdevelopment and militancy must be anchored on openness to succeed.

Our recommendation is that the government and other stake holders should listen to individuals and groups in the Niger Delta. The approach should be bottom-up rather than up-down that has characterized government approach to Niger Delta challenge in Nigeria. This too must be anchored on a profound sense of fairness and commitment to real justice. Since in the past there has been so much talk with little action there is urgent need for the Federal Government to immediately embark on massive human and infrastructural development in the region.

All said and done, oil wealth has the capacity to turn things around for Nigerians. In the Niger Delta region, the challenge is how to tackle underdevelopment and militancy and make the people have a sense of belonging. Doing this necessarily means or requires an open attention to the issues that are anchored on bottom-up solution. For long the people have been alienated, this is the time to give their voice a space. A truth and reconciliation commission on Niger Delta offers a viable option to permanent solution.

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