

Review

Oil as a source of political conflict in Niger Delta

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The presence of natural resources in some countries has led to eradication of poverty and development but in other countries the same resources contribute to misery and underdevelopment. This can well be seen in the case of Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The region which is rich in resources particularly oil has been economically deprived. The various ethnic minorities which reside in the area are struggling with impoverishment and underdevelopment; this has generated amongst them a feeling of relative deprivation which had led to frustration. This frustration has been released by the people by resorting to various forms of political conflict. These conflicts which occurred in the past continue to pose a challenge before the Nigerian political system even till the present times.

Key words: Niger Delta, oil, poverty, underdevelopment, relative deprivation, frustration, political conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of oil resources in developing countries presents a huge paradox. In the case of some countries, the discovery of oil and gas has contributed to the eradication of poverty and development of strong economies while in the case of other countries the discovery of these resources have contributed to political and economic marginalisation of the inhabitants. This can well be seen in the case of Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It has been argued that the presence of oil has been more of a curse than a blessing to the people who have been at the receiving end of horrendous government oppression and brutality. Despite so many years of oil production and hundreds of billions of oil revenue, the local people remain in abject poverty without even the most basic amenities such as water and electricity. The underdevelopment of the region coupled with economic deprivation has generated frustration. This frustration has created a fertile ground for the outbreak of various forms of political conflict.

The Niger Delta has a long history of violence; situation has gone from bad to worse to disastrous recently. But before examining how oil as a resource has become a

source of political conflict, it is pertinent to have a brief conceptual understanding of the term political conflict and also to understand the roots of the conflict by incorporating the psychological theories. This will be followed by an insight into the Niger Delta area. This understanding will facilitate the outbreak of various challenges that were posed before the Nigerian Political system. The paper is therefore presented as follows: a conceptual understanding of the term political conflict and the reasons for the outbreak of the political conflict is clearly explained by utilizing the psychological theories. An insight into the Niger Delta and the various forms of political conflict with which the Nigerian political system has been confronted are discussed in this study.

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICAL CONFLICT AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES IN UNDERSTANDING THE OUTBREAK OF POLITICAL CONFLICT

“Political conflict is a contention among collective actors

over the structure, incumbents or policies of a political regime and is a ubiquitous of a political regime feature of political life” (Lichbach and Gurr, 1981: 4). Though scholars like Ted Robert Gurr (Gurr, 1980: 2) have pointed out in his work that there is no exact distinction in the social sciences generally or in conflict research specifically between the political and the non-political forms of conflict, yet there do exist certain distinguishing characteristics which enable one to differentiate between social and political conflicts.

The main components of the society are the individuals, the organisations, the institutions and the structures. In any society, conflict will arise as individuals or groups having their goals interact with one another: many of these conflicts do not become political since some of them may be either unimportant and tend to fade away or they can be solved through the non-political channels. However, only those conflicts which enter the political process are the ones that acquire the form of political conflict (Conn, 1971: 63).

The various forms in which political conflict can occur are riots and clashes, coup d'état, clandestine and armed attacks, civil war and revolutions. Some scholars like Rudolf J. Rummel and Raymond Tanter have on the basis of their empirical studies put forward a typology of civil strife events. The general categories and “sub-categories” are:

- a) Turmoil: This includes unstructured mass strives which are relatively spontaneous events like demonstrations, political strikes, riots, political clashes and localized rebellions.
- b) Conspiracy: This category of civil strife is characterized by high degree of organisation and takes place on a small scale. It includes event like assassinations, coups, mutinies, plots and purges.
- c) Internal war: This form of civil strife is characterized by high degree of organization and by its operation on a large scale. Under this category are included events which are accompanied by extensive violence like large scale revolts (Gurr, 1968: 1107).

The conceptual understanding paves the way towards identifying the root cause for the outbreak of the political conflict which may be social, economic or political in nature. But a very clear understanding of the reasons for the outbreak of political conflict is provided by the psychological theories. The psychological theories which gained significance during the 1960s laid emphasis on “...the explanations of attitudes and behaviour in terms of the mental processes of individuals” (Taylor, 1984: 52). These theories of revolution have borrowed ideas from two different strands of psychology, one which laid emphasis on cognitions and the other which stressed the idea of transformation of frustration into aggression. Of

these two, the second strand of psychological theory which puts forward the idea that aggression is the product of frustration is pertinent in our understanding of the Niger Delta crisis. Scholars like John Dollard et al. (Taylor, 1984: 60-61) have supported the idea of frustration leading to aggression. According to him, low levels of frustration lead to low levels of aggression. In situations, where the level of aggression is low, these men tends to express it through minor ways by attacking the scapegoat groups or by sublimation into socially modified behaviour whereas in situations where the level of frustration is high, the level of aggression will also be high, these men therefore tends to find the cost less compared to the relief that they would get by attacking the primary cause of frustration.

Besides Dollard et al. (Taylor, 1984: 60-61), other scholar who has supported the frustration aggression approach is Ted Robert Gurr (Gurr, 1970:22), Gurr has expressed his ideas in his work *Why Men Rebel*. According to Gurr, there are two different kinds of feeling: one which provides men satisfaction, love and elation and the other kind which generates anxiety, terror, depression and rage. This feeling determine men's views regarding the world and energizes their action (Gurr, 1970: 22).

According to Gurr (1970), a feeling of frustration develops when men's ability to derive satisfaction from the existing situation undergoes a change. This frustration is released in the form of conflict when men try to strike the sources of frustration. By doing so, they are in a position to release the tension that has been built by frustration. This principle, says Gurr, operates to determine a variety of individual behaviour including the action of those who rise in rebellion against the political community. Gurr thus regards aggression as a product of frustration and thus puts forward a viewpoint very different from those who regard aggression either as innate or that it is solely learned.

According to Gurr, the necessary precondition for the occurrence of violent civil conflict is “relative deprivation” which implies “actors” perceptions of discrepancy between their value expectations and their value capabilities” (Gurr, 1970: 24). According to Gurr, value expectations generally stands for the goods and conditions of life to which people believe they are rightfully entitled to whereas value capabilities refer to those goods and conditions of life which they think they are capable of getting and keeping. The discrepancy between expectations and capabilities can emerge in relation to any collectively sought value, which can be economic, psychological or political and thus giving rise to the feeling of frustration.

The ideas discussed above have great deal of utility in understanding the crisis prevailing in the Niger Delta, the details of which is presented as follow.

INSIGHT INTO THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS

The area which is described as the Niger Delta region of Nigeria lies between latitudes 4° and 8° East of the Greenwich and is a home of various ethnic groups like the Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ikwere, Andoni, Fik, Ibibio, Kalabari, Okrika which are together referred as southern minorities. It comprises the states of Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Imo, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Abia and Ondo making it coterminous with all of Nigeria's oil producing states. It embraces one of the world's largest wetlands, over 60% of Africa's largest mangrove forests. Comprising mainly of a distinct aquatic environment which embraces marine, brackish and fresh water ecosystems, it encompasses the most extensive fresh water swamp forest in West and Central Africa (Afinotan and Ojokorotu, 2009: 191). Besides these resources, Niger Delta is the home of the oil and gas reserves and the oil industry. There were 349 drilling sites, 22 flow stations and one terminal in the early 1990 and about 10,000 km of pipelines, 10 gas plants, 3 oil terminals and 1500 oil producing wells by the mid 1990s. In 2007, there were over 600 oil fields, 5284 on and off shore oil wells, 10 export terminals, 275 flow stations and 4 refineries. Crude oil reserves as at 2000 were estimated at over 30 billion barrels (Ojokorotu, 2009: 152). The region with its rich oil resources contributes about 90% of the nation's foreign exchange earnings.

In spite of the rich natural resources, especially oil, the Niger Delta region remains grossly underdeveloped, pauperized, marginalized and largely a poverty zone. The basic facilities and infrastructure of a modern society like potable water, electricity, health care facilities, good roads, cottage industries and employment are lacking in the area. The wealth derived from oil by the Nigerian federation is therefore not reflected in the socio-economic life of the oil producing communities and their standards of living. The Nigerian state does not have coherence; consistent and just formula of recycling some parts of the oil wealth it accumulates back into the communities from which oil is produced. The period during which oil became the mainstay of Nigeria, coincided with its logic of power centralization and economic control. The rise of the military in power after the civil war gave de-emphasis on the principle of derivation as a revenue sharing formula to other factors like population, need and even development. The implications of this is that what oil producing states got from the federation was increasingly not commensurate with their contribution and sacrifices in producing it, since the bulk of the revenue was derived from the exploitation of oil beneath their land. Apart from the increasing marginalization of the oil producing areas in revenue allocation in the federation, there is also the problem of ecological disaster and environmental degradation that oil exploration lead to. Environmental pro-

blems like erosion, flooding, land degradation, destruction of natural ecosystem, fisheries depletion caused by dredging: toxic waste into the rivers is a common phenomenon in the region. The local people can no longer take to farming and fishing which are their major occupations (Ojakortu, 2009: 6-7). The multinationals contributes significantly to the environmental destruction of the Niger Delta through different ways like oil spillage, gas flaring and oil pipe explosions (Ejibunu, 2007: 13-14).

Thus, total neglect and deepening poverty characterizes the Niger Delta communities. A broad section of the elite in the Niger Delta believes that the injustices their people suffer are due to the fact that they are minorities in the Nigerian federation. They accuse the major ethnic groups who control political power at the federal level of using oil wealth derived from the oil producing region to develop their areas at the expense of the area from where the oil is gotten. The growing disparity between the wealthy government and impoverished inhabitants of the region has widened over a period of time. This has generated a feeling of relative deprivation which has generated frustration amongst the minority ethnic groups. This has created a ground for the emergence of various challenges before the political system.

VARIOUS FORMS OF POLITICAL CONFLICT IN NIGER DELTA

The frustration experienced by the inhabitants of the Niger Delta which has emerged owing to lack of trickle down of benefits from the exploration of their resources especially oil, has found its outlet in various forms of political conflicts. The details of these are chronologically given as follows:

The Boro led Niger Delta Volunteer Service, 1966

The principle focus of Boro's Niger Delta Volunteer Service which was launched in February, 1966 was to create a state of the Niger Delta people in order to address the human and infrastructural development problems of the area. Boro's struggle was a follow up of several other failed peaceful agitations of the Chiefs and politicians of the area in search of a state. The failure of the Nigerian government after independence in giving the desired attention to the development of the Niger Delta region inspite of its rich resources stimulated Boro's dream for self-determination. The Boro mobilized Niger Delta Volunteer Service against the Nigerian government in a war of liberation and declared a Niger Delta republic on February 23, 1966. The federal government responded by subduing the movement by employing the

federal forces.

Saro-Wiwa-led Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), 1992

After about three decades of the fall of Boroism, another revolutionary movement called MOSOP led by Ken Saro-Wiwa sprang up from the Niger Delta region. Saro-Wiwaism unlike Boroism that was widely described as guerrilla warfare, started on the premise of intellectual warfare through constructive criticism and dialogue by way of demands and protests against the exploitation of the Ogoni land by Shell and the Nigerian Government. Earlier in 1990, the Ogoni people of Rivers state had formally organized themselves in the form of a Bill of Rights. The Bill is made up of twenty points. The Ogoni people in sum demanded amongst others, the political self-determination for themselves, the right to control and use their economic resources to develop Ogoni land, payment of reparations by government of Nigeria and petrol-businesses, compensation for the pollution and destruction of their living environment, as well as the right to protect the area from further degradation. Copies of the Bill were submitted to all appropriate quarters and published in several dailies without violence. After two years of fruitless waiting for the Nigerian Government and multinational companies to come up with policies to address the issues raised in the Bill. The Saro-Wiwa's Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) was formed to reinforce the aims and objectives of the Ogoni Bill of Rights. The MOSOP rolled out its agenda in earnest on November, 1992. Some of its high points include: (i) the passing of a resolution that gave Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria a 30-day quit notice. (ii) that by the first quarter of 1993, the "March" of January 4 and the "vigil" of March 13 have been accomplished. During the "big March", Saro-Wiwa declared thus, "the Ogoni people in Rivers States publicly reassessed the Bill of Rights which they presented to President Babangida and the Nigerian nation. In furtherance of the struggle, Saro-Wiwa's MOSOP took their message beyond the shores of Nigeria to United States in New York. The movement was accorded the much-needed international attention after presenting its case. Thereafter, MOSOP returned to Nigeria with endorsements from international environmental groups such as Green peace and the London Rainforest Action Group. Unfortunately the Nigerian Government ignored all its pleas. Instead, the Nigerian government official resorted to the harassment of the leaders of MOSOP with its security agencies. The government of General Sani Abacha and the oil companies were not comfortable with the activities of Saro-Wiwa and his movement. Saro-Wiwa was accused of inciting members of MOSOP to kill

four Ogoni leaders. He and eight other compatriots were arranged for a trial in a military tribunal and were convicted and hanged in November 1995. It was at this point that MOSOP felt it had exhausted all peaceful means to achieve their set objectives and resorted to a confrontational approach.

Other movements of lesser aggressive disposition in the Niger Delta existed side by side MOSOP. These movements were ostensibly formed by younger generation of elite who wanted to renegotiate the existing social contract within the context of the present political economy of the Delta area. The targets of the struggle are the multinationals, especially shell and the state.

The Aleibiri Demonstration of 1997

It was a demonstration of over ten thousand youths from across the oil-rich Niger Delta. The main objective of the demonstration was to stop Shell and other oil companies to stop their operation in the Niger Delta.

The Egbesu Wars

This took centre stage in the region between 1998 and 1999 through the amorphous tactics sustained from the Aleibiri Declaration in a modified form by bearing an identity called "Egbesu Boys of Africa". In this era, core oil bearing states were in perpetual unrest as the Niger Delta youths became more aggressive in attacking oil installations and oil workers as they were more emboldened and courageous due to their consciousness of being impervious to the bullets of the Nigerian State Security Force.

The Asari-Dokubo's Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF)

Asari-Dokubo's struggle which came up with the aims and objectives on November, 2004, was predicated on the fundamentals of justice and equality, truth conscience, logic and facts, love for humanity and sanctity of life (NDVF Handbill, 2004). His main objective was to challenge injustice and inequality prevalent in the Nigerian State. Asari-Dokubo's NDPVF came up gallantly and protested against what he perceived as the Nigerian government did not care about the area in spite of the more than 80% revenues derived from the area and the concomitant adverse effects on the livelihood of the people due to large scale petroleum production activities. Asari concluded that if the people of the Niger Delta do not take up arms and fight the Federal Government, they would remain poor and become poorer in future. Alhaji

Mujahid Asari-Dokubo was however arrested in November, 2005 and released in June, 2007.

Ijaw protest of 1998

This was a fallout of the success of the Egbesu Boys encounter with the then Military government of Bayelsa State and as such, a more elaborate protest and agitation for resource control within the Niger Delta region ensued through the support of more enlightened youths. The federal government countered the protest by massacring youth in Yenagoa capital of Bayelsa State in December, 1998. A few months later, the government sent troops to Kaiama in Bayelsa State where a convention of Ijaw youth was called to reassess the position of the Ijaw ethnic nationality in the Nigerian Federal State. At the end of the meeting, an open letter was addressed to the government of Nigeria and multinational companies operating in the area, requesting for more local control of oil revenues and better environmental practices. This document was known as "Kaiama Declaration" which gave the Government of Nigeria up to 31 December, 1998 to respond positively to their demands. However, the Federal Government responded negatively to the demands of the Ijaw youths.

The Jomo Gbomo-led Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)

Amongst other faceless militant groups is one of the groups that have claimed responsibility for cases of kidnapping and hostage taking. In a statement issued by Gbomo, he owned up an attack and destruction of Agip installations in Brass, Bayelsa State. Some of the major demands put forward by MEND were-

- i. That Asari-Dokubo be released unconditionally,
- ii. Payment of compensation by shell to communities affected by its spillages.
- iii. That the Niger Delta people be allowed to control their resources.
- iv. That all prisoners of the Niger Delta origin hold by the Nigerian government on account of fighting for justice in the Niger Delta be released. (Ojatorotu, 2009: 151-156).

The study of various political conflict clearly reflect that the frustration that is experienced by the minority ethnic groups is the product of their economic deprivation. They are very well conscious of the fact that their resources particularly oil is contributing to the enrichment of the government officials and the revenues earned are diverted to the development of areas dominated by the majority ethnic groups like the Yorubas. This feeling of

relative deprivation that was experienced by the people in the past therefore continues to exist till date. The outcome of which is that the Niger Delta crisis which has been simmering for years has assumed a serious dimension over a period of time. The crisis has created a weird booming business of hostage taking for money and storming of banks. The government though has taken certain measures to respond to the problem like setting up of a oil minerals producing areas development commission under the Babangida regime in 1992, replaced by the Niger Delta Development Commission in 2000 and Technical Committee by President Yar'Adua in 2007. But these commissions have failed to provide solutions to the crisis scenario. To the Niger Delta people, the federal government is like a one armed bandit which makes laws seizing their lands and waters, oil and other natural resources and sends in armed men to kill them (Ransome-Kuti, http://www.humanrights.de/doc_en/countries/nigeria/background/niger_delta_crisis.html).

The Niger Delta region therefore is in dire need of a government that can be responsive to their demands and needs. The revenues earned by the government from oil, should also be ploughed back into the region so that along with the prosperity of ethnic minorities, there also take place the development of the region. This will not only contribute to the development and improvement in the economic conditions of the people of the region but will also create a sense of satisfaction. The people inhabiting the region should get a feeling that their resources are contributing to their improvement and also contributing to the development of their region. This will provide a long lasting solution to the problem which has been going for decades and has led to immense loss of material and human resources.

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