

*Full Length Research Paper*

## Implications of ethnic nationalism: The Niger delta region of Nigeria as a case study

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**This paper examines the implications of ethnic nationalism within the context of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. It employs the methods of analysis and evaluation in investigating the concepts of national question and nationalism, implications of the two concepts as well as advantages and disadvantages of nationalism. Its aim is to identify the factors responsible for disunity and consequently suggest means of promoting unity in diversity. Nationalism relates to the wish of a large group of human beings belonging to the same origin and language, to mention a few links, to establish an independent nation. This is also what is meant by ethnic nationalism. The paper also considers the merits and demerits as well as solutions to ethnic nationalism. The paper found out that the main cause of ethnic nationalism is injustice. This injustice is mainly expressed in exploitation or discrimination in the distribution of resources, rights and power. It was discovered that ethnic nationalism has been an attempt to redress the injustice favourably. The paper recommends that in order to attain unity in diversity and good governance, justice should be promoted (183 words).**

**Key words:** Implications, nationalism, Niger, Nigeria, region, self-determination.

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of the national question is synonymous with the concept of ethnic nationalism. The two notions will be used interchangeably. The concept of the national question relates to the grouping of people who share a race, ethnic origin, and language, among other connections. Such group clamours for independence. With a view to ameliorating, different forms of injustice which it allegedly suffered, or is still suffering, from those who exercise political power and/or, authority. The concept of ethnic nationalism implies the following terms, for instance: "self-determination", "national question", "national autonomy", and "independence". Some of the

vehicles of ethnic nationalism are ideological movements, separatist movements, liberation movements, freedom fighters, civil society groups, and human rights groups. The issues involved in the subject matter of this paper will be considered with reference to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This paper is divided into six parts: Introduction represents the first part; the second part deals with the definitions and implications of the national question and nationalism; the third part discusses the positions of Marx and Engels on the national question; the fourth part considers the catalysts and consequences of ethnic nationalism in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria; the fifth

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part focuses on the solutions to ethnic nationalism; the sixth part covers the conclusion.

### **The national question and nationalism: Definitions and implications**

"Nationalism" can be used to refer to the desire by a large group of people (with the same race, origin, language, etc.) to form an independent State or country" (Longman Dictionary, 1980: 725). The idea of nationalism is synonymous with the notion of the national question and both are often used interchangeably. The national question is a "concentrated" socio-economic-political question concerning the association or co-existence of ethnic groups or nations in a country (Fashina, 1998: 93 and 87). The national question arises when, among other things, ethnic nationalities feel "disadvantaged, exploited or discriminated against in the distribution of resources, rights and power merely by virtue of their ancestry and their numerical disadvantage" (Fashina, 1998: 106). The question persists if nothing is done to redress the situation or if efforts made to solve the problems are considered to be below expectation.

Usually, the ethnic groups concerned form ideological movements through which they try to realize their goals. These goals include elimination of exploitation and injustice and consequently, acknowledgement and promotion of equitable distribution of resources, equal rights, and equal or equitable access to power, self-determination, national autonomy and/or independence. Nationalism is a step further from the national question. It represents a movement from mere expression of feelings against or opposition to perceived forms of exploitation and injustice to the formulation and adoption of strategies for the attainment of the above-mentioned and related ends. One of these strategies is the establishment of an ideological movement. According to Fashina (1998: 88), by ethno-nationalism is meant an ideological movement that claims, on behalf of a group that:

- (a) Its members, all of them share a culture, by virtue of their common ancestry, such that this culture is regarded as distinct from that of every other group. (It is also claimed that the most important fact about the life of any individual belonging to that group is his or her membership in that group.
- (b) Their common ancestry and culture, qualify the group for equal political and economic well-being as other groups (polycentric nationalism) or for superior political economic position among ethnic groups (ethnocentric nationalism)". Examples of such movement in Nigeria are Movement for the survival of Ogoni people (M. O. S. O. P.), Ijaw National Congress (I. N. C.), Ijaw Youth Council (I. Y. C.) Movement for the actualization of the State of Biafra (M. A. S. S. O. B.), Odua People's Congress (O. P. C.), and Arewa Consultative Forum (A. C. F.). These movements

emerged in an attempt to address the national question. As a prelude to dealing with nationalism in a particular region in Nigeria, let us discuss the views of Marx and Engels on the national question.

### **Marx and Engels on the national question**

Marx and Engels consider the national question to be important in one respect and not crucial in another regard. To them, national question is important in the sense in which it will facilitate the creation of a superstructure that will hasten capitalist economic development and therefore conditions for proletariat revolution. On the other hand, they regard the national question as not crucial if economic development is eroding the national identity of workers. In the opinion of Marx and Engels, a nation so involved should be taken to be 'non-historic'. They hold further that the nation would eventually be economically and culturally assimilated by the 'great' nations (Townshend, 1996:36). However, Marx and Engels "supported the national independence movements of Ireland or Poland ...on the grounds that such movements would foster international proletarian unity and/or help to dislodge the ruling class of the oppressor nation (England or Russia) (Townshend, 1996:36 to 37).

The attachment of insignificance to the national question by Marx and Engels is based on the "highly economic and optimistic view that nationalism would disappear" as workers place class loyalties before national loyalties (Townshend, 1996:34). Marx and Engels suppose that (1) capitalism will 'denationalise' workers; (2) workers of different nations will be able to unite as they have a common interest in the overthrow of international capital; (3) antagonisms between 'peoples' are being reduced by modern capitalist development. By the late nineteenth century, these suppositions did not hold especially within the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. Then, "there were struggles between 'peoples' and workers who often put national loyalties before those of class in their desire for an independent state" (Townshend, 1996:34). Furthermore, Marx and Engels regard the national question a non-problem because they ignore the psychological causes of nationalism. They ought to have realized that "in relation to the ethnic underpinnings of nationalism, group or community feelings have often transcended those of class" (Townshend, 1996: 34 to 35).

Three conflicting factors influence the judgement of Marx and Engels about whether to support national movements. The first is whether a nation has the capacity for statehood whether it will facilitate capitalist development and consequently produce a working class required for its overthrow. On this ground, Marx and Engels did not back the following nationalities (or ethnic groups), among others, during the 1848 revolutions: Romanians, Slovaks, Slovenes, Czechs,

Croats, Ukrainians (that is, the 'Southern Slavs' generally). Marx and Engels thought these nationalities were non-historic and would consequently be assimilated by more 'historic' peoples such as Russians and Germans (Townshend, 1996: 35). It is important to state that today (that is, in the twenty-first century), not all these nationalities have been so absorbed. In fact, this puts a question mark on the judgement of Marx and Engels on the capacity of the liberated nationalities for statehood (Romanians, for example).

The second factor is the usefulness of nationalism in terms of undermining the chauvinism of workers in oppressing nations and therefore fostering the international working class unity. For instance, Marx and Engels support the nationalism of oppressed nations such as Ireland. They consider "Irish independence as a precondition for proletarian revolution in England" (Townshend, 1996: 35). This precondition is yet to materialize. In addition, the judgement of Marx and Engels is questionable. The third factor is the effectiveness of national struggles in preventing certain powers from implementing reactionary foreign policies that oppose historically progressive national-democratic movements. For example, Marx and Engels "backed Polish self-determination because it would weaken Russia whose foreign policy retarded movements in Central Europe for modern democratic statehood and therefore the development of capitalism in Europe" (Townshend, 1996: 36). The backing was successful as Poland indeed gained its independence.

### **Catalysts and consequences of ethnic nationalism in the Niger delta region of Nigeria**

In this section, we will discuss the catalysts and consequences of ethnic nationalism in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. In doing so, we will show the relevance or irrelevance of the above-stated views of Marx and Engels on the national question. The optimism of Marx and Engels, that nationalism would disappear and consequently the attachment of insignificance to the national question did not anticipate the events in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria; especially in Ogoni land. By implication, the optimistic view of Marx and Engels is irrelevant here. Let us now state the events one after the other. The first event is the issue of oil spillage which has assumed monumental proportion to the extent that it has attracted the attention of the United Nations' Environmental Protection Agency (U. N. E. P.). The Agency wrote a report on the need for the clean-up of the area. Though the Federal Government of Nigeria adopted the report some years ago, it took practical step to start the oil spill clean-up on Thursday, 2nd June, 2016 (Olaniyi, 2016:6). The second event is the seeming neglect of the area by succeeding governments in Nigeria. The third is the disenchantment

of the Niger Delta people culminating in some of them forming armed groups such as the Niger Delta militants, Niger Delta Avengers, among others. These and other groups have been calling for self-determination, a call that has been registered at the United Nations' Organization (U. N. O.). Some of the above-mentioned groups have been violently attacking oil pipelines, kidnapping oil workers (especially, expatriates), disrupting the operations of oil companies in the area and thereby causing reduction in crude oil production. As against the optimism of Marx and Engels, the national question in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria will remain significant as long as the Federal Government of Nigeria fails to address the issue meaningfully. Some of the ways of addressing the issue are:

- (1) Restructuring Nigeria as a country to reflect true federalism.
- (2) Giving more powers to federating units.
- (3) Redistributing the national wealth; especially, by reviewing the revenue formula such that more revenue will go to the states and local governments.
- (4) Re-establishing regionalism and adopting derivation formula.
- (5) Acknowledging and respecting the principle of self-determination.

If it is difficult or impracticable to adopt the third and fourth measures together, the Federal Government may choose either of the two, whichever is convenient and practicable in the short run. With respect to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, as Townshend observed, and we agree with him in opposition to Marx and Engels ethnic underpinnings of nationalism, group or community feelings have indeed overridden those of class. What the above mentioned militant groups are fighting for transcends the issue of class or capitalism. It is mainly about self-determination. It is pertinent to state that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is a nation which has capacity for statehood. It has capacity to facilitate capitalist development and can produce a working class that is required for its overthrow. The clamour for self-determination suggests the capacity of the region for statehood. Our observation here agrees with that of Marx and Engels on requirements for statehood. The earlier stated events which influence the emergence of the different groups in the Niger Delta region warrant the need to support the groups unless meaningful measures are implemented to diffuse the tension. The nationalism in the Niger Delta is useful in terms of facilitating the development of the region for the benefit of workers in particular and the people in general. By doing so, it can foster international working class unity. The struggle of the militant groups in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria appears to be effective in some senses. One, operations of the oil companies in the area have drastically reduced. Two, there has been a reduction in oil output in Nigeria as a whole. Three,

Nigeria's income from the sale of crude oil has depreciated. Four, the threat by the Niger Delta Avengers that it has twelve missiles which it aims to launch against Abuja (the nation's capital) among other targets, has implication for national security. Five, the Federal Government is now trying to address some of the grievances of the militant groups. The foregoing observations imply that ethnic nationalism has advantages and disadvantages. We will now deal with the merits and demerits of ethnic nationalism.

### **Merits and demerits of ethnic nationalism**

Generally, the merit of ethnic nationalism partly consists in its promotion of resistance to oppression and injustice separately in special groups. In respect of ethnic nationalism in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, its merits can be seen from the ways it has drawn attention both locally and internationally to the plight of the region and its people as well as the need to salvage them from oil spillage, oppression, exploitation and injustice, among others. The merits of ethnic nationalism in the Niger Delta also consist in the various forms of attention the region and its people have received and are still receiving from the Federal Government of Nigeria. The first is the creation of Niger Delta Development Commission (N.D.D.C.) by late President Yar Adua's administration. The second is the establishment of the Amnesty Programme by the same administration. The third is the creation of Niger Delta Ministry, also by late President Yar Adua's administration. The N.D.D.C., the Amnesty Programme and the Ministry still exist. The fourth merit is the cleaning-up of oil spill in the region which the current administration of President Mohammed Buhari started on Thursday, 2nd June, 2016. Fifthly, as reported in the Nation Newspaper on Tuesday, 7th June, 2016 (p.16), President "Mohammed Buhari has appointed National Security Adviser, General Babagana Mongunu to head the team that will dialogue with the warring Niger Delta militants" (Ofikhenua, 2016:6).

Concerning the demerits of ethnic nationalism, we will state them generally first and then mention them within the context of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. One, it ignores the socio-political significance of common human suffering. Two, its promotion of special fraternal relationship between people of the same ethnic group (that is, co-ethnics) under-plays the possibility of exploitative relationship between them. Three, ethnic nationalism promotes the indifference of a member or members of one ethnic group to the issues of exploitation and oppression in another ethnic group. Four, it encourages the separation of a group's humanity from others. Five, it covers prevailing exploitative processes in all ethnic groups. Six, ethnic nationalism tries to deny the class question or the role of actors in the social production process. Seven, it promotes the use of the oppressed in each ethnic group

by their oppressors against the oppressed in other ethnic groups (Fashina, 1998: 92 to 93 and 103). Let us now discuss the demerits of ethnic nationalism within the context of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Nationalism in the Niger Delta region ignores the fact that the suffering being experienced by the people in the region is not peculiar to them; that majority of Nigerians are also affected. The fraternal relationship between the people of the Niger Delta tends to underplay the possibility of exploitative relationship between them. The militants in the region appear to be less concerned with the issues of oppression and exploitation in other ethnic groups. Consequently, they tend to encourage the alienation of their humanity from others. Nationalism in the Niger Delta region is oblivious of the fact that exploitative processes prevail in other ethnic groups. It tries to deny the role of actors in the social production process. Furthermore, it tries to promote the use of the oppressed in that region by their oppressors against the oppressed in other ethnic groups. For example, the agitations of the militants affect not only the oppressed in the Niger Delta but also the oppressed in other ethnic groups or regions in Nigeria.

### **Solutions to ethnic nationalism especially in the Niger delta region of Nigeria**

Generally, resolution of the national question requires a strong productive base, a strong commitment to social welfare, equitable allocation of produced resources and rights, a redress of past injustices to some communities, doing compensatory justice to aggrieved communities, the acknowledgement and promotion of individual and collective rights (Fashina, 1998: 103, 107 and 118). The following solutions suggested by Ogundowole (1994: 63) are also noteworthy: (Equality of nationalities (or ethnic groups) should be recognized). There should be no privileges for any one nationality, for any one language. The question of political self-determination of nationalities, that is, their right to secession, in an absolutely free and democratic way (should be settled). The authorities concerned should pass a law covering the whole country and proclaiming unlawful, null and void every measure adopted by any segment (state and local governments). Such law will prohibit any privileges granted to any one nationality and/or negate anything that violates the equality of nationalities or the rights of individuals

The adoption and utilization of the suggestions inherent in the above stated quotation imply the commitment of those in authority, especially political authority, to the principles of fairness, and justice. These two important principles represent some of the essentials of good governance. This observation agrees with the position of Ogundowole (2006:211) that "developing the moral sense of justice is a sine qua non of good governance". Specifically, the first immediate

solution is dialogue. All parties concerned except the Niger Delta Avengers appear to recognize this. The Federal Government of Nigeria has taken the first step by setting up a team mentioned earlier, led by Babagana Mongunu to enter into dialogue with the militants. Some of the interested parties; especially, pressure groups in the area have been expressing concerns on the development in the region and have been calling for dialogue, among other things. For instance, the Ijaw National Congress World Wide (I. N.C.) through its President, Barrister Boma Obuoforibo, published an Advertorial in The Nation Newspaper on 7th June, 2016 (P.31). It is titled "The State of the Niger Delta: "The Stand of the Ijaw Nation". The Advertorial reads: The Ijaw National Congress (I. N .C.) in conjunction with the Traditional Rulers, Elders, and Opinion Leaders of the Ijaw ethnic group, has after a thorough and careful deliberation on some issues currently of concern in the region resolved as follows:

1. The Ijaw Ethnic Nationality pledges its support to the Federal Government of Nigeria led by President Mohammed Buhari. This support has been made in various fora. We are non- partisan and apolitical and we will support any popularly elected government.
2. We condemn the present resurgence of bombing of pipelines and oil installations in the Niger Delta as this ultimately, is counter-productive to the Niger Delta and the Nigerian Nation.
3. We appeal to the Federal Government to show restraint in its pronouncements and actions to crush the Niger Delta militants. We believe that this will not bring any lasting solution to this complex problem. The options of dialoguing and negotiating are worthwhile and, therefore, should be pursued.
4. While we urge the perpetrators to immediately stop these unwholesome actions, we appeal to the Federal Government to restructure the amnesty programme for better impact on the people and the community to assuage the plight of the people of the region and remove, from focus some of the issues that have been responsible for these behaviors.
5. We appeal to the Federal Government to urgently enter into dialogue with stakeholders in the region in a bid to safeguard the interest of the Nation.

The issuance of/or, the publication of the above-mentioned Advertorial by the Ijaw National Congress, is timely and welcome. Certain matters arise from it and these should be addressed. Firstly, the pledge of support by the I. N. C. is good. But what is required to solve the problem is more than a pledge. The organization has to use its powerful influence to call all the militants to order soonest as what they are doing is not in their best interest either in the short or long run. As a result, the organization will demonstrate its sincerity in pledging its support and condemning the negative activities of the militants. The I. N. C. has to be more explicit by clearly stating the issues involved in the

agitations of the militants and offer suggestions on modalities for restructuring the Amnesty Programme. The Federal Government of Nigeria led by Muhammed Buhari appears to be demonstrating its resolve to address the problem by, among others, commencing the clean-up of the Ogoni Land and establishing a team to enter into dialogue with the militants. We believe that the Federal Government can do more than this. This belief is demonstrated in the earlier-stated measures canvassed as lasting solutions to the problem measures which will likely address the grievances of the Niger Delta people and promote the unity of Nigeria as a country.

A group of militants in the Akwa-Cross region of Nigeria, the Bakassi Strike Force, has also called for dialogue. In its report titled "Tension as Bakassi militants sends Strong Message to Avengers" and accessed on Friday, 10th June, 2016, Naij.com (an on-line medium) states that: The Bakassi Strike Force has condemned the activities of the Niger Delta Avengers. The Bakassi militant group said the incessant bombings of oil pipelines in the oil rich regions have a retrogressive effect on Nigeria's economy. The group called on the government to embrace dialogue as war alone cannot solve their problems in tackling the issue. The Bakassi Strike Force is not alone in its call for dialogue. Ex-militant leaders in the Niger Delta region have also made similar call. Ex-militant leaders have come together under the group called Leadership, Peace and cultural Development Initiative L.P.C.D.I.), to tell the Avengers to desist from their nefarious and negative activities. The L. P.C. D.I. consists of former commanders of the Movement for Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) (Odiegwu, 2016:41). The international community is also interested in the amicable resolution of the problem. The support of the international community concerning the efforts of the Federal Government in resolving the Niger Delta problem is noted and commendable. For instance, the United States of America (U.S.A.) has expressed concern over the Niger Delta violence and has called for promotion of dialogue and provision of economic opportunity and needed services for residents of the Niger Delta (Ogundele, 2016a). Like the U.S.A., the United Kingdom has also expressed its view about what is happening in Nigeria. At a meeting between David Cameron, the British Prime Minister, former Presidents Obasanjo, Goodluck Jonathan and current President of Nigeria, Mohammed Buhari on Wednesday, 8th June, 2016 in London, Mr. Cameron appealed to Nigeria to allow Niger Delta to secede after he confirmed that the Niger Delta Avengers are determined to launch twelve (12) missiles at certain targets in the country in order to achieve their goals (afrivibes.net, 2016). While the dispute rages on, efforts are being made locally to solve it.

Part of such efforts is the meeting between the Acting President of Nigeria, the Vice President, Professor Yemi Osinbajo, Service Chiefs and States from the Niger Delta region. At the meeting, it was resolved that

the Federal Government and Delta States have joined “forces to stop the bombings of oil and power installations in the region” (Ehikioya, 2016:6). While various interested parties, both locally and internationally, are interested in dialogue and pursuing it, the Niger Delta Avengers, think otherwise. In fact, they have given the Federal Government conditions to satisfy before they can cease fire and enter into dialogue. As stated by Awala (www.informationnigeria.com, 2016), the Avengers are demanding:

1. Immediate release of Sambo Dasuki, former National Security Adviser (N.S.A.).
2. Reversal of the order to freeze the bank accounts of Government Ekpemupolo better known as Tompolo.
3. Establishment of maritime University in Okerenko, Delta State.
4. Negotiation with government on the basis of developing the Niger Delta region rather than giving out monetary compensation.
5. The implementation of the report of the 2014 national conference.
6. Removal of Paul Boroh, the Coordinator of the Presidential Amnesty Programme, with immediate effect.
7. Replacement of Boroh with Dr. Felix Tuodolo.
8. Cleaning up oil polluted lands in the Niger Delta and paying compensations to all producing communities.
9. Release of Nnamdi Kanu, the I.P.O.B. (Indigenous People of Biafra) frontier.

It is yet to be seen whether and how the Federal Government will respond to these demands. Several matters appear deducible from the foregoing observations. These issues can be put in the form of questions. The questions will likely reveal the dimensions of the struggle of the Niger Delta Avengers and other militants as well as possible consequences. The questions are, but not limited to, the following:

1. How did the Avengers get money to acquire twelve (12) missiles?
2. Who or which country sold the missiles to them?
3. Are the Niger Delta Avengers not mistaken?
4. Are they not succumbing to the diabolical intention(s) of some members of the international community who are only interested in the crude oil produced in that region?
5. Have the Niger Delta Avengers forgotten what prompted the concerned members of the international community to attack Iraq and Libya on the pretext of destroying weapons of destruction and maintaining world peace which turned out to be false?
6. Are the Niger Delta Avengers mindful of what Iraq and Libya have now turned into and the emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (I.S.I.S.)?
7. Seven, are they mindful of the fact that the disintegration of Iraq and Libya implies the

destabilization of the areas and the failure of the concerned foreign countries; especially, U.S.A. and Britain to contain the associated problems including the refuge problem?

8. Like it has happened in Iraq and Syria, are the Niger Delta Avengers aware that since there are divisions in the ranks of the militants, the Niger Delta region may become unstable after secession? 9. Are they aware that there may be a humanitarian crisis (that is, refuge problem) and failure to attain their dream(s)?

10. As a consequence, will it not be too late for them to realize that they have played into the hands of the enemies of Nigeria (including the Niger Delta region) who predicted that Nigeria would disintegrate in 2015?

It is hoped that the Niger Delta Avengers and other militants in the region will allow reason to prevail and accept the dialogue option. The dialogue option is just one of the options that are open to the Federal Government of Nigeria to pursue. One of the other options being pursued by the government is the legal option. This option is already yielding some results. One of these is the arrest by the Navy of some suspects linked to multiple attacks on oil and gas facilities in the Niger Delta (Ogundele, 2016b:1, 6 and 12). It is important to observe, that whatever option adopted and implemented, must proceed from the principles of fairness and justice, among others.

## CONCLUSION

The ideas of the national question and nationalism essentially derive from the notion of self-preservation. The concept of self-preservation is multi-dimensional. At the level of human beings, it operates as an instinct to drive them to look for work, food, housing and clothing, among other necessities. Similar endeavors also take place in the animal kingdom, for instance. At societal level, it influences the maintenance of law and order internally, and the prevention of external aggression. A society or country that cherishes peace, stability and progress must give adequate attention to the idea of self-preservation in all its ramifications. Failure to do this is largely responsible for many conflicts. The right of others to self-preservation, including the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, should be recognized and respected. The principles of fairness, justice and federalism, among others, demand that the agitations of the people of the region should be favorably considered. Other measures canvassed in this paper, among other meaningful ones, should be implemented in order to promote unity in diversity.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors has not declared any conflict of interests.

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