

Research Article

Elite Corruption and the Niger Delta Crisis: Its implications on the Security of the Nigerian State

Femi Omotoso Ph.D

Department of Political Science, University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

E-mail: femot79@yahoo.co.uk

ABSTRACT

Oil is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, as such, it assumed both political and economic dimensions; this has a lot of implications for the security and stability of the nation. The Nigerian state is confronted by considerable challenges arising principally from the struggle and desire to have access to the nation's oil wealth, a phenomenon which has snowballed into what is now known as the Niger Delta crisis. The crisis is induced and fuelled by the corrupt and acquisitive tendencies of the elite. Against this background, the paper seeks to examine oil politics in Nigeria, with particular focus on the problem of corruption, wealth accumulation by the elite, the role of government officials, oil cartels, ethnic militants and other groups in the crisis. Adopting the political economic approach and historical descriptive method, the paper argues that corruption and wealth accumulation by the elite are the bane of oil politics and by implication, major factors influencing and sustaining the Niger Delta crisis, which is a serious threat to the security, stability and economy of the Nigerian state. The paper concludes that for maintaining economic stability, peace and security in Nigeria, the oil resources must be well and judiciously managed for the benefit of oil producing states in particular and all Nigerians in general. In other words, the stability of the Nigerian state depends mainly on equity, probity, accountability and transparency in the management of the nations' oil wealth.

KEYWORDS: Niger Delta Crisis, Nigerian State, Elite Corruption, Security and Oil Wealth

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta crisis symbolises and represents the root of the Nigerian polity and diabolical machinations of the corrupt and unrepentant elite both in the Niger Delta areas and in the corridors of power at Abuja. Arising principally from the struggle and desire of the people to have access to the resources located within their territory, the crisis is now one of the major challenges confronting the Nigerian state. Ordinarily, the crisis would have not assumed a dangerous dimension, but for the manipulation and machination of the corrupt and acquisitive elite. It is apt to add that the crisis in the Niger Delta simply reflects the nature and character of a national crisis whereby the elite is holding the whole country to ransom. Members of the elite are extremely corrupt, with little or no evidence of productive activities. As such, they use the state as the primary instrument of primitive accumulation. To successfully achieve their goals, the elite must naturally

play one group against the other, promote violence and engage in all sorts of manipulation to further their political and economic dominance. In other words, the crisis is fuelled by the elite. The battle between fractions and factions of the power elite in the Niger Delta region is about capturing and monopolising state power at the expense of other groups with a view to furthering their accumulative tendency. In most cases, majority of the political leaders from the region find it difficult to make a distinction between their personal bank accounts and the public purse. The militant groups and their leaders in most cases are working for different elite groups, thereby rendering the crisis more contentious and deep-rooted.

The paper therefore seeks to illumine our understanding on the major role of the elite in the Niger Delta crisis with a view to identifying the implications for the security of the Nigerian State. The paper is divided into six sections, namely: (a) introduction; (b) theoretical analysis; (c)

the Nigerian state, Oil and Niger Delta crisis; (d) elite corruption and the Niger Delta crisis; (e) implications of the Niger Delta Crisis for national security; and (f) conclusion.

Next is the theoretical background for the study- elite theory/political economy approach. The issues revolving around the Niger Delta Crisis cannot be thoroughly understood without locating them in the realms of elite interests and the political economy of the Nigerian state. According to Richard Harris (1975) the problem of development in Africa, can only be understood using the political economy approach. According to him, the political economy approach provides a thorough understanding of national issues because it situates them within a conceptually global perspective (Ibid). Other scholars, such as Bade Onimode (1988), Julius Ihonvbere (1989), Hamza Alavi (1978) and Eme Ekekwe (1985), have also supported this view.

This work explores the connection between the issues of the Niger Delta crisis and class accumulation. Supposedly, the essence of the crisis is to draw attention to the plight of the Niger Delta people, with a view of sharing the resources produced from their land. To the elite who are fueling the crisis, however, personal aggrandisement and accumulation of wealth are the major motives behind the struggle. The people whom they are using are made to believe that the crisis is about them and their development. In the real sense of it, the crisis provides for the elite an avenue for more opportunities, better prospects and more lucrative contracts, particularly from oil companies and government agencies like the Niger Delta Development Corporation (NDDC), Ministry of Niger Delta, etc.

Geraint Parry (1969), while commenting on the elite, noted that "Because of their power, their organisation, their political skills or their qualities, the members of the elite are always potentially capable of exploiting their positions so as to preserve the elite domination" No doubt, the crisis is fuelled and encouraged by the Niger Delta elite, thereby promoting their private interests. A situation like this, according to Schatz Sayre (1984:45-57) is referred to as "Pirate Capitalism". The agitation for resource control by the sectional elite is solely to promote their own political and economic interests. In other words, the Niger delta crisis is primarily fuelled

by petty bourgeois elements seeking access to the economic resources and political offices of the state. The Niger Delta crisis or struggle is thus nothing to the elite but "instrumentalities of survival" Crawford Young (1982).

The crisis, in itself is a kind of ethnic political-economic strategy for drawing attention to the plight of the people in Niger Delta and for attracting development to the area. The stock in trade of the Niger Delta elite in ensuring benefits for themselves and the area is using communal solidarity and mass mobilisation to set the people against other groups that seem to make their wealth accumulation impossible. According to Crawford Young (1976), the elite is in, this sense, referred to as "ethnic missionaries". They are "concerned lest (their) ethnic group falls behind others in the struggle for wealth, status and power" Crawford Young (1976).

NIGERIAN STATE, OIL AND THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS

There is no doubt that crude oil is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. As such, the resource has generated a lot of interest among various groups in the country, particularly as oil wealth has not been wisely invested to provide sustainable development. In 1956, oil was first discovered in Oloibiri in the Niger Delta. Since then, several oil fields have dotted the entire region. As earlier noted, the discovery of oil has been more or less a curse rather than a blessing in Nigeria, as the ruling elite is only interested in the accumulation of personal wealth without corresponding improvement in the living standard of the people. Thus, the huge amount of money Nigeria has made from the sale of crude oil has not brought prosperity, better living conditions, governmental attention and development to the people in the Niger Delta in particular and the nation in general. In this connection, a former Attorney General of Nigeria, Bola Ige, noted that "all Nigerians are thieves stealing the property of the Niger Delta. Nigerians have stolen the treasure of the Niger Delta people and if care is not taken, we will face the wrath of God because it is a sin to continue to plunder the resources of the people" (Ige, 1999:18)

While the above statement has provided the background to the Niger Delta crisis, it is necessary to say that not all

Nigerians, but the ruling class, are guilty of exploitation of Niger Delta people. Okowa (2008: 82) observes with regard to Nigerian oil wealth that the nation is feudalistic in fundamental values, social orientation and social propensities. He put this in perspective by noting that in a feudal system, the feudal lords own “everything”. The oil wealth of course belongs to the feudal lords. This is why our leaders have temerity to loot our resources for their private use. The looting starts at the national level and percolates to the state, local governments and communities. In a political system impregnated with a feudal orientation... power is personalised. Societal resources are personalised.

Those who criticise the personalisation of the commonwealth must be criminals and deviants (ibid 82 – 83). The above captures the nature and character of the condition that bred the Niger Delta crisis. Ikelegbe (2008:110) supports this view when he observed that the Nigerian state is controlled by a comprador ruling class which is accumulative, parasitic, violent, exploitative, clientelist, corrupt, profligate and unproductive. Ikelegbe (2008) further noted that the orientation, mentality and activities of the ruling class determined the predatory relations to oil and the crass and amoral plunder that has occurred in Nigeria.

Nigeria has realised considered revenue from the oil wealth but the nation cannot really show what it has spent the money on, as a lot of the revenues has ended in private pockets. To make the matter worse, the development of the Niger Delta where this resource is coming from has not been a subject of high priority to the ruling class. The frustration, outright neglect, marginalisation and oppression of the Niger Delta people by the ruling class triggered off the crisis in the region. The people felt there was a conspiracy against them to deliberately neglect the area and retard its development. This drove the elite to mobilise the youths and breed them into violent conflict in the Niger Delta against the Nigerian state.

The ruling class reacted with a belligerent and bellicose attitude towards the militants and deployed the instruments of coercive force to repress their insurrection. The response of the Nigerian state was to deal with the troublemakers and to treat them as economic saboteurs. Isaac Adaka Boro, Ken Saro Wiwa and a host of other people, who challenged the authority of the state by

violently protesting the total neglect of the region, were sent to their early graves. The entire region is highly militarised. The federal government at a time declared almost a full scale war against the protesting people in a bid to suppress them. The federal government under the leadership of late Alhaji Musa Yar’adua declared amnesty for repentant militants. In the amnesty deal, the militants are to embrace peace, drop their weapons, leave the creeks and live a decent life. So many of the militants have surrendered their weapons, but nearly all of them have accused the federal government of insincerity, as it has failed to keep up to the terms of agreement with regard to the rehabilitation of the repentant militants. The militants have accused those in charge of the amnesty of not fulfilling the terms of the agreement. The question remains: Will the amnesty work? Will it bring the much needed development to the Niger Delta region?

Elite Corruption and The Niger Delta Crisis

The Niger Delta crisis can be traced to the pre-independence era. The struggle for the development of the area led the colonial officials to set up the Henry Willink Commission (Eson, 2000: 47). From that period till the Saro-Wiwa-led agitation for a better deal in the Niger Delta was peaceful. The enthronement of a democratic government after so many years of military rule seems to have opened the floodgates of pent-up anger across the country. Various ethnic groups rose, after the inauguration of the democratic government in 1999, to challenge the state for what they termed as oppressive and unjust policy, marginalisation and lack of consideration for their sections of the country in its development agenda.

The Niger Delta is one of such areas where there have been agitations. The agitation in the region centres has been brewing on lack of development in the area, despite its enormous contribution to the economic survival of the nation. The renewed agitation in the region became violent as youths (earlier hired for political thuggery during general elections and later dumped by politicians) hijacked the struggle. Madukar Orji (2008) noted that during the 1999 general elections, so many youths in the area were engaged and armed as electoral hijackers and thugs by politicians to intimidate and terrorise their opponents. After the elections, the youths were abandoned by their sponsors and godfathers. In order to

make ends meet, they seized upon the lethal weapons in their hands to engage in ethnic militancy. This was the beginning of violent struggle in Niger Delta. The International Crisis Group Report (2006) lent credence to the above statement with its opinion that, in 2003, politicians in the area engaged the services of the youths for electoral success. According to the report the 2003 vote provided ammunition for Ijaw militant leaders who forged temporary alliances of convenience with local and state politicians.

Alhaji Mujahid Dokubo-Asari and Ateke Tom were among the militant leaders alleged by local activists to have provided muscle to politicians in return for arms and financial compensation. Militants vied for politicians' attention by carrying out vicious attacks. "The stronger the boys are the more they think they will be used" by politicians. The report linked the former Governor of Rivers State, Sir Peter Odili, with providing support for Asari Dokubo (2006). This supports our earlier proposition that the elite have fuelled the crisis in the region.

The elite, who earlier abandoned the youths after the election, soon found out the importance of these boys in furthering their economic fortunes. Thus, the elite quickly embraced the youth and gave them all necessary support in their militancy. The logic of the sudden change of heart was simple; militants are used for the business of illegal oil bunkering, a major source of fund for militant groups and their godfathers alike. Asari Dokubo, one of the leaders of the militants, once boasted that bunkering is good and a matter of "the people taking back what is ours" (Dokubo cited in Crisis Group Africa Report 2006). He also claimed his militant group had a makeshift refinery that was able to process crude oil for local consumption. The question is, how can these militants go about the oil bunkering business without the support of the elite? This seems very impossible.

(The Crisis Group Africa Report, 2008:8), supported view expressed above by making a further statement. In 2002, a report by Nigerian security forces, government officials and multinational oil company executives, spoke of a "cartel or mafia" of "highly placed and powerful individuals" who "run a network of agents to steal crude oil and finished products from pipelines in the Niger Delta region. They operate in a fashion similar to drug barons

and their activities are purely criminal, with financial benefits as their motive. It is estimated that Nigeria loses between 70,000 to 300,000 barrels per day to illegal bunkering (The Crisis Group Africa Report, 2008:8). In 2009, it was reported that the country lost about 68,000 barrels per day to oil theft (Vanguard March 27, 2009). This illegal but lucrative business simply explains why the crisis appears intractable and very contentious. Commenting on oil bunkering and its implication for stability in the Niger Delta, Ledum Mitee (2009) noted that: "The huge amount of money accruing from bunkering and pay-offs by governments and operating companies act as a disincentive to genuine employment in some cases. "These make for ready availability of an army of youths for potential recruitment into militia groups or as political thugs. The illegal bunkering business thrives because of the collusion of and participation of Nigerian law enforcement agencies. Two Nigerian naval officers were once convicted because of their involvement in the disappearance of an oil bunkering tanker and its crew from military custody (This Day December 2, 2004) . The then Chief of Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Afolayan, alleged that a Nigerian cartel with "foreign collaborators" are behind oil bunkering in Nigeria (Ibid). The cartel in question cannot be just any group of militants, it must be made up of high ranking officials of the Nigerian state or personalities strongly connected to the powers that be i.e. those in governmental positions that wield enormous power and influence. Corruption is one of the factors that are fueling the crisis in Nigeria. The rent - seeking behaviour associated with oil revenue promotes corruption. The crisis, in a way, provides a fertile ground for corruption to thrive. Nearly all the governors of oil- producing states at one time or the other have been accused of corrupt practices. A view contrary to this may sound spurious as the development in these states does not justify the huge amount of revenues accruing to the region. Alamiyeseiga's corruption saga is a pointer to what might have been responsible for the wide revenue – development gap in the region. In September 2005, the former governor of Bayelsa, DSP Alamiyeseigha, was arrested in London and accused of money laundering by British authorities. However, instead of condemning this action in strong terms, his people explained his role in terms of the resource control argument. It was said that Obasanjo intentionally humiliated him because of

his support for resource control. It is sufficient to note here that this kind of condonement of son- of -the- soil malfeasance is one factor that may continue to breed, nurture and protect corruption in high places everywhere in Nigeria.

IMPLICATION OF THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS ON THE NATIONAL SECURITY, STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT

The crisis in the Niger Delta has major implications for the whole country in several ways. Its implication affects the economic, political, social, military and other fields as well. The federal government might have realised this lately, and this must have been the reason behind the provision of the amnesty option after several failed military exercises. Peace is incomparable to anything else, to engender development and progress. Without peace, a nation cannot move forward.

It is in the light of this argument that this paper argues for a secure Niger Delta for national stability and development. The question that readily comes to mind at this juncture is, how can the Niger Delta be made secure? The crisis in the Niger Delta is induced by the elite and support groups in order to further their propensity for wealth accumulation. Therefore there is a need for the elite to change their orientation about the oil resource in general and the Niger Delta region in particular. The tendency towards primitive accumulation should be geared towards productive venture so as to create employment and generate wealth for the development of the area. The priority of all and sundry should be the rapid and massive development of the area, to make good the locust years.

Apart from this, the security of the Niger Delta region cannot be guaranteed without enthroning dynamic and accountable leadership in the states within the area. Ordinarily, what accrues to the entire region is enough to make a meaningful impact in the area, but the resources are, more often than not, diverted to private pockets. Without an accountable leadership, even if more money is pumped into the region, nothing will come out of it. The leadership must be development conscious, people friendly and God- fearing. For such leaders to emerge, the godfathers of Nigerian politics should allow the people to choose their leaders in free and fair election.

An imposed leader will end up becoming a stooge, but a popularly elected leader draws support from people and is not easily intimidated.

For a secure Niger Delta and stable Nigeria, there is a need for massive investment in the area. All relevant stakeholders must, as a matter of urgency, come together and put in place a “Marshal plan” towards the massive development of the region. The federal government’s recent decision to retain 10% of revenue from oil- producing communities for their development is commendable, but there is a need for political will to pull the policy through.

Apart from this, the various governments and other stakeholders need to tackle the major problem of corruption. . Most of the officials to be trusted with the money appropriated for the development of the region are corrupt. Then, how can they judiciously administer the money? It is necessary to involve the people in the development planning of their area. The community, as a matter of fact, should always be represented in all the stages of the development process, from planning till execution. Such representatives of the people or community will serve as the eyes and ears of their people. Also, where possible, indigenes of various communities should be encouraged to bid for development project contracts within their communities. This will bring about emotional attachment to such projects and a sense of ownership.

In order to have peace in the Niger Delta, the involvement of the restive youths, into the decision making process is very crucial at this period. The era of having meetings with the elite alone seems to be over. Late President Musa Yar’Adua demonstrated this when he had audience with the likes of Government Ekpomukpolo, Farah Dagogo, Tom Ateke e.t.c. at Aso Rock, Abuja (These people were the leaders of various militant groups in Niger Delta that confronted Nigerian state. The President met with them to secure their understanding for peace to reign in the country. The feeling of these people was assuaged by the assurance given to them by the President as such, they laid down their arms and embraced the amnesty offered by federal government.) For now, the peace in the Niger Delta is very fragile; it should be well managed and sustained if the stability of the country is to be guaranteed.

CONCLUSION

Therefore to conclude this paper observes that peace is desirable for national stability and development of Nigeria. Peace will remain elusive without fairness and justice. In other words, peace cannot be dictated; it must be mutually agreed to and earned based on a just and humane society. There can be no peace and security in Nigeria if the Niger Delta people still feel cheated, used and abused.

The argument here is that there is a need for sincerity of purpose on the part of all concerned: the government at all levels, the oil companies, the oil-producing communities, the elite, the masses, government agencies and development partners. All must determine to consciously look into the problem of the region and massively develop the area. There must be social, political and economic righteousness in the country, so as to give a sense of belonging to the people.

The development plans for the region should be well packaged and clearly spelt out with a time frame for execution attached to each activity. This must be jointly agreed to by the Niger Delta people and government officials. No doubt, this will restore hope and engender peace. The strategic importance of the Niger Delta to the development of Nigerian economy cannot be over-emphasised. As such, sustained violence in the region has far reaching implications for Nigeria. Therefore, it is necessary for all hands to be on decks, so as to find a lasting solution to the problem of the region, with a view to ensuring national stability and development.

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