

CONFLICTS AND NATION-BUILDING: THE CASE OF THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA, 1914 – 2010

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Abstract

Nation-Building is a continuous process that have tasked the ability of leaders to handle problems that are crucial to the survival of states. Failure to handle such problems could ultimately lead to disintegration of such states. Conflicts, as part of such problems, are unavoidable in human societies, but there is need to overcome them, or at least, reduce them to the barest minimum regardless of their historical background and political trajectory. The aim of this paper is to arouse the consciousness of leaders in Nigeria and beyond, of the need to address conflict issue adequately and swiftly too, before it plunges states into disintegration. This paper therefore, examines the concept of conflicts as it relate to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Among other things, it discusses the Niger Delta situation and the development of armed struggle and stress that some steps should be taken to solve the problem.

Keywords: Conflict, nation-building, Niger-Delta and Nigeria

Introduction

Nation-Building process involves two dimensions. First, is the vertical dimension by which people not only have the consciousness of having a state, but accept the authority of the state and see the government as symbol of their political community. The other is the horizontal dimension which involves accepting members of the political community as co-equal members of the community (Elaigwu and Mazrui, 1993: 438). Nation-Building is thus a continuous process in which leaders must be prepared to handle complaints or grievances that arise from the people. Where these grievances are not handled at the umpteenth time, and adequately too; violence, paralysis in policy making, reinforcement of old divisions and creation of new ones, overthrow of political leaders and even greater difficulties in making the consolidation of the nation-building effort a reality,

could arise (Oche, 2008: 16). The aftermath of such nonchalance, is the festering of crises which could be those of identity, legitimacy, penetration, participation and distribution (Pye, 1971).

A major problem of nation-building in the political history of Nigeria has been the chequered fortune of conflicts. These conflicts which assumed different dimensions-social, religious, ethnic, armed struggle etc, have continued to play negative functions in determining the nature and direction of government of the Nigeria state. As a result of this, citizens' loyalty and allegiance seem to have become skewed rather to their ethnic groups than to the nation. Reports from different parts of the world today (Nigeria inclusive) shows that the issue of security has been on the increase. Consequently, countries of the world have began to give serious attention to targets like airports, seaports and even boundaries. In the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, unrest of different dimensions like vandalization of oil installations, kidnapping of expatriates and even natives, bomb blasts etc have taken place. It is against this background that this paper will attempt to examine the phenomenon of conflicts in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria.

The irony of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria situation is the claim by some citizens of being responsible for the conflicts that have now taken the shape of armed struggle. In an attempt to bring succour to the Region, the Nigeria government under the leadership of late President Musa Yar'dua introduced the amnesty programme by which the aggrieved actors (militants) were persuaded to surrender their arms. At the death of Yar'dua, the programme was continued by the current President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan. Yet, the spontaneity of kidnapping, robbery, bombing of strategic government establishments have not abated.

The pertinent question that readily comes to mind is: what is the origin of this problem? The history of the struggle for self determination and local autonomy by ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta has been discussed by scholars (Welch, 1995). The amalgamation exercise that was done by Lord Lugard seem to have laid the foundation because it relegated the people of the region to minority status in relation to the numerically superior ethnic groups in Nigeria (Ottuh, 2012: 82). This paper, therefore, by its analysis, is expected to awaken those in the "helm of affairs" of the need to urgently and adequately find solution to issue of conflict in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria albeit doing so objectively. The Niger Delta Region is strategic to the survival of the Nigeria state and except this ugly development is holistically tackled, strides at nation-building would end up in futility.

What is Conflict?

Whether at the group, national or international level, conflicts have always existed in human relations (Uche, 2006: 1). The term "conflict" could

be used in two senses: it connotes incompatibility, in which case, it could be over an issue or multi-issue situation. Second, it also connotes a violent expression of incompatibility or irreconcilability (Zartman, 1991: 300). Whichever of these two interpretations we adopt, an important point that needs to be borne in mind about conflict is that its causes vary from each other. Africa, today, has played host to a myriad of conflicts, but these conflicts, whether at the national and sub-national levels, revolve around four important issues of identity, participation, distribution and legitimacy (Stedman, 1991: 374).

It is important to state too, that the origin of conflict is as old as man. Conflict started when man disobeyed His creator (Genesis 4:1-26). Over the years, conflicts have come to encompass all segments of human life—political, economic and even social, but its ramifications appear to be more in the social angle. It is thus, a product of the interaction among groups in which interest/goals overlap and encroach on each other, leading to competition. For African states, factors outside identity, participation, distribution and legitimacy like the nature of politics associated with a receding or declining economy and the turbulent processes of political transition to democracy have been argued to be some of the causes of conflict (Oche, 2006: 7-8). In the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria which is the focus of this paper, such conflicts have graduated from ethnic issues to armed struggle, which if not quickly checked, has the potency of dwarfing attempts at nation-building.

Very crucial also, is the fact that in a plural society such as Nigeria, conflicts are bound to occur. When they do occur, it signals fault lines and areas that need urgent attention. To attain national unity, justice is vital and until that sense of justice is seen to be manifestly done, internal wrangling may not abate. Against this background, there is need to respect the sensibilities of the federating units of the Nigeria state. The idea of nation-building and indeed, integration, cannot be toiled with because we cannot gloss over facts and expect problems to state themselves. Nation-building and integration is determined by the extent to which members and groups, especially in a plural society like Nigeria, adapt to the demands of national existence while co-existing harmoniously. The ability of the state to resolve crises will ultimately help to create an enabling environment where people's respect and concern for the nation affect the pace of nation-building positively.

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: An Overview

There appears to be controversy over what constitutes the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria from recent literatures that describe the region. Some scholars have described the region to consist of the nine oil-producing states that are under the umbrella of the Niger Delta Development Commission.

These states are Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers (Umejesi, 2006). Quite recently too, a new definition has been proffered. The latter concept of the definition sees the region in terms of the coastal states thereby excluding Abia and Imo States, but includes, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers (Ottuh, 2012: 82).

The aforesaid contradiction notwithstanding, the fact remains that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is of strategic importance to the economic life of the Nigeria state. This is because the region is the main oil and gas producing area of Nigeria covering about 70,000 square kilometres stretching from Ondo in the West to Obon massif flank in the East and the Benin flank towards the Northern part of Nigeria (Ottuh, 2012: 81). The Niger Delta is part of the Niger River system that has two main rivers – Rivers Forcados and Nun, with other rivers like Benin, Brass, Bonny, Cross River and other streams linked to it by a labyrinth of creeks and lagoons (Dime, 2003). Presently, the Niger Delta could be said to be part of the Niger River system that lies between the Forcados River on the west and River Brass to the east. The point of distribution is the Nun-Forcados bifurcation close to the villages of Onya and Samabiri (Ottuh, 2012: 81). For the purpose of this paper, the Niger Delta is taken as the area where crude oil is located and exploitation is on-going in Nigeria (Akpan, 2006). In this regard, the Niger Delta region include the states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo and Ondo.

Historicising Conflict in the Niger Delta Region: The Colonia Era

As earlier stated in the beginning of this paper, the amalgamation exercise that was done by Lord Frederick Lugard in 1914 could be argued to have caused litany of conflicts in the Nigeria state. While it is true that irrespective of the exercise, conflicts would still have existed, but not certainly in the proportion it assumed in the Nigeria state in the period under focus. The amalgamation was a marriage of “strange bed fellows”. The exercise relegated the people of some areas like the Niger Delta region to the status of minorities in relation to the numerically superior ethnic groups in the country. The colonial policy of nation-state building used the racial and tribal, religions and cultural values to establish a colonial social order as a means of social stratification, differentiation and recruitment into colonial service. The falsified scaling of African linguistic groups into “inferior” and “superior” implanted a mentality on Nigerians that some groups were worthy of respect than others, and some more progressive and possessed high intelligence than others (Ezonbi, 2009: 163). For instance, in the Northern Protectorate of Nigeria, statements credited to Lord Lugard not only had

effect on the peoples there, but also affected even those in the Southern Protectorate. Lugard had stated that:

“I believe myself that the future of the virile races of the protectorate lies largely in the regeneration of the Fulani. Their ceremonial, their coloured skin, their mould of life and habits of thought, appeal to the native populations... This, then, is the policy... to regenerate this capable race and mold them to ideas of justice and mercy so that... they may become worthy instruments of rule, my desire to utilize the Fulani as rulers has been described in the former report...” (Yesufu, 1993: 7).

What could have been more fissiparous or divisive than the above comment coming from an administrator whose duty as it were, was to forge a sense of unity for a diverse entity which he had brought together by virtue of his amalgamation exercise. Such comment meant that right from the beginning, opportunities would be denied certain groups in the country and little wonder in the decades that followed, the foundation for conflicts in the different part of the country seemed long sowed.

By 1951, the core Niger Delta was part of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria and later one of the four regions with the creation of Midwest in 1963. The region included people from colonial Calabar and Ogoja Divisions, the Igbos and Ijaw peoples with Igbos as the majority and Professor Eyo-Ita of Calabar as the Premier of the region under the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroon (NCNC) as the ruling party. The NCNC later became National Convention of Nigerian Citizens when western Cameroon broke away from Nigeria to become part of Cameroon (Ogoloma, 2013: 121). By 1953, a major upheaval took place because of the expulsion of Eyo-Ita from office by the Igbos who were the majority in the region. This infuriated the minorities in the region and under the Ibibio Union, the people of Calabar, the Ijaw and the Ogoja wanted their own region to be known as COR (Calabar-Ogoja-Rivers) state excised out of the Eastern region. It is important to bear in mind that the constitutional conference that were held for Nigeria’s independence had the issue of the creation of COR state as one major headache on the fate or status of minorities that needed to be addressed.

In 1956, a commission was set up to inquire into the fears of the minorities and the means of allaying them. The commission headed by Sir Henry Willink found evidence of discrimination and other problems alleged by the minorities and acknowledged the genuineness of their fears and anxieties. It recommended among other things, the constitutional entrenchment of a bill of rights and the creation of a special commission to address the peculiar problems of the Niger Delta minorities (Osaghae, 2011: 10). Decades after, no serious effort seemed to have been done except for

unnecessary “politicking” with the life of the Niger Deltans by successive governments.

Conflicts in the Post Colonial Niger Delta Region

One of the earliest manifestation of post colonial conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria was the protest movement led by the late Isaac Adaka Boro in 1965. Adaka Boro and his group then, proclaimed Delta People Republic and took up arms to fight for a separate entity for the Niger Delta areas (Dime, 2003). Unfortunately, nothing concrete was done by the Federal government before the secessionist attempt by the Igbos culminated to the civil war of 1967 – 70. The post war years then, were as could be understood, devoted to the 3Rs – Reconstruction, Reconciliation and Rehabilitation, before the coup that brought the late Murtala Mohammed to power was hatched. The death of the latter in 1976 led to a hurried transition to civil rule that began on October 1, 1979. As it were, the country after four years experimentation, (1979 – 1983) still had to bear with military rulership until the death of Sani Abacha on June 8, 1996. By May 29, 1999, the country once again returned to civil rule.

However, before 1999, the situation in the Niger Delta in terms of restiveness had already brought out signals. In 1990, Ken Saro Wiwa, acting supposedly for the interest of the Ogoni people in the Niger Delta produced a revolutionary document he called Ogoni Bill of Right to the federal government of Nigeria. For reasons which may not be discussed in this paper, he and eight other Ogoni freedom fighters were hanged in 1995 under the reign of late Sanni Abacha (Isiramen, 2003). But by May 29, 1997, a more terrifying clash occurred between three ethnic groups that make up Warri, namely: the Ijaw and Urhobo on one hand and the Itsekiri, on the other (Gaye, 1999). In the Bayelsa State capital town of Yenagoa, along with Kaima, an organised demonstration took place against the oil refineries in that area such that on October 14, 2000 soldiers who were protecting AGIP (an Italian multinational oil company) were reported to have shot and killed ten young men from Oloigbobri community in Bayelsa State (Irin News, 2003). On August 8, 2002 Niger Delta women from Ilaje, Itsekiri and Ijaws invaded the Shell Petroleum Development Company such that six days later they had even occupied Chevron/Texaco’s Ewan oil field. The worrisome aspect of the Niger Delta Conflict Situation was not only characterised by the involvement of women in the struggle, but the quality of arms that were used. The weapons used ranged from mere bows and arrows, machetes, to sophisticated riffles like AK 47. Basically, with the use of these arms, it will take extreme tact and care to avoid total hostilities erupting in the Niger Delta one day.

The eruption of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria had its main impetus from economic deprivations. The question of derivation as a revenue allocation formula has been at the front-burner. For the Niger Deltans, a significant part of the oil revenue should be returned to their areas on the basis of derivation principle. This issue, played and will continue to play significant role in Nigeria's fiscal federalism (Aghalino, 2004 and 2007). All forms of groups like the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of Nigeria Delta (MEND) emerged and have used the crisis in the region to illegally tap oil from pipelines which are sold for billions of Naira. The frequency of illegal oil refineries in the region became so alarming that in a month alone, the Joint Task Force (JTF) apart from clamping down on militants' camp have closed as many as 59 illegal refineries (*The Punch*, 2013: 25). The situation was poignantly stated by the "fourth estate of the realm", when about a decade ago, it said:

A distinguished characteristic of the political and sundry violence that has banished safety from the Niger Delta is its sheer persistence, the facelessness and prominence of groups and individuals fuelling the violence and tactics displayed by the purveyors of this violence" (*Daily Independence*, 2004).

No doubt, the above comment provides some food for thought. But can we blame it on the so-called "group and individuals" when the basics of life are not available albeit being the "hen" that lays the golden "egg"? The tragedy of the Nigeria nation need urgent attention and adequately too. Crucial therefore, is the saying: "the oppression of the oppressed is also the bondage of the oppressor and the freedom of the oppressed is also the freedom of the oppressor" (Ottuh, 2012: 84).

By 2010, what initially looked as one of the usual ethnic complaints in Nigeria, even before independence, blossomed into what some commentators now see as the "emergence of militia groups" in the Niger Delta Region. The problem owed its origin to the "unholy alliance" of 1914 by Lord Lugard and subsequent treatment of the issue with unseriousness, has today, blossomed into what is now. Ogoloma contends, quoting Asari-Dokubo, one of the leaders of the Niger Delta militants that:

... for years, they broke open pipeline, filling canisters with crude oil and refining some of it through time worn techniques used by locals to boil palm-tree sap into wine. This crippled enough oil infrastructures to bring Nigeria's production on some days to a near-halt..." (Ogoloma, 2013: 124).

Government had no choice than to offer these restive group amnesty in 2009. The question is: how adequate has this helped to assuage the conflicts in the Niger Delta Region?. Certainly, not much has been achieved. Scores of people are still being reported kidnapped and many cases of

heinous crimes are still reported almost on daily basis. Should government accept the fact that the problem is beyond their ability? Certainly, not.

The Way Forward

So far, attempts have been made in this paper to briefly capture the picture of conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. What then are the avenues for peaceful co-existence?

- (i) Our search for a legitimate and viable political system where conflicts can be managed, accommodated and moderated must first look at the definition of the Nigerian state. The present move by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan for a conference where the differences of the various components of the country can be amicably discussed is laudable, but it must go beyond mere rhetorics.
- (ii) There is the need to adapt the historical experience of socio-political transformation of the country and nation-building as a guide for the search for free conflict environment.
- (iii) The practice whereby the state have been used as an instrument for promoting the well-being of certain class by virtue of their closeness to power must cease; rather, the state should be a veritable channel of political and economic development.
- (iv) The time has come for the issue of accountability to be handled seriously, painstakingly and transparently. The practice of looking for technicalities to transfer blame on others (as was the case recently in the Oduah saga involving ₦255million used for buying bullet-proof vehicles) should stop. All political leaders (inclusive of the Niger Delta Region) should render account of their stewardship before vacating office.
- (v) Traditional rulers, as custodians of culture should have their roles well-defined and must not allow themselves to be used cheaply by political manipulators not to talk of helping to procure arms illegally for youths within their domains.
- (vi) All of the aforementioned (i – v) can only make impact if the “mosaic” is treated and that is, the issue of full resource control. Reliance of a country on a monocultural economy such as Nigeria’s present reliance on crude oil alone, could be risky. There are untapped resources in other parts of Nigeria which can contribute significantly to the Gross Domestic Product of the country apart from oil.

Conclusion

This paper has made attempt to examine the course of conflicts in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. An attempt has also been made to identify some of the root causes and instances right from 1914 to the first decade of

the twenty-first century. Colonialism was the genesis but was subsequently fuelled by the factor of neglect and inequitable resource distribution by political leaders. However, the situation cannot be left to truncate the efforts at nation building. The recommendations made above, which is in *fours* with the idea of Thomas Kilman (1976) could be compacted into issues of accommodation, avoidance, collaboration and comprise. These are important issues that must continue to be in the hearts of leaders if meaningful results are to be expected out of our efforts at nation building.

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