

**ETHNIC MILITIAS IN NIGERIA:
IMPLICATION ON NATIONAL SECURITY**

Chukwu, C. James

Department of History and International Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka,
Anambra State, Nigeria.
jimco4real@gmail.com,

ABSTRACT

Ethnic Militias in Nigeria have become a reoccurring decimal in Nigeria's political history. The activities of these ethnic militia groups have transformed from mere ethnic activities to violence of the Nigerian state, the struggles against deprivation and marginalization to criminal acts. These criminal acts range from kidnapping indigenes and expatriates for ransom. The dimension and magnitude of criminal activities caused by the activities of ethnic militia groups have adverse security implications for the region and the nation at large. It is on this background that this paper examined the historical evolution of ethnic militias in Nigeria. The paper also unveils the instances/incidences of ethnic militias' activities in Nigeria. The study also examined the implications of ethnic militias on Nigeria's national security. Finally, the paper gave recommendations to the menace of ethnic militias. The work used diverse secondary sources (such as books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, internet sources and unpublished works) and thematic approach in its analysis. Reports obtained from these sources formed the bulk of this research's tool of assessment.

Key words: Ethnic, Militia, Nigeria, Implication, Nation Security.



INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian state is a product of colonialism. Even after independence, it retains the character and structure of the colonial state, which was repressive and meant to extract domestic surpluses for the overriding purpose of servicing metropolitan needs. Ihonvbere is of the opinion that even the indigenous ruling elite that took over governance of the state lacked the vision to form a united entity out of the Mosaic of nationalities wielded together by British colonialism¹. Instead of protecting national interest, the elite concentrated on sectional interest of representing their people's interest. This is so because Nigeria as a federal state composed of 36 states and a capital territory, which is ethnically diverse, and consists of more than 250 groups, many of which speak distinct primary languages, and are concentrated geographically.

It is pertinent to say at this juncture, that the different ethnic groups in Nigeria must of necessity compete for the available resources of the land and water as well as struggle to grasp the available economic opportunities and political positions. The issues involved relate to: "how groups struggle to defend their disadvantages and opportunities, and how the oppressed and dominated struggle to redress their disadvantages and deprivations" thus, conflicts are bound to occur.

Ethnic militias are thus constituted from the various ethnic movements in Nigeria in the attempt at realizing the above objectives. These militias are often able-bodied young men who sometimes use violence in pursuing the aims and objectives of the various ethnic movements.

Nigeria people generally relate to the Nigerian state as an uncaring and illegitimate institution. Their loyalties are easily shifted to ethnic unions and even militias. The militarization of the Nigeria state since 1966 and the return to ethnic politics in May 1999 have led to the exclusion of several groups and individuals from the decision making process. Hence Tunde Babawale opined



that: The formation of ethnic militias represents a form of reaction to the failure of the Nigerian state, the lack of equity in its distribution of power, resources and the absence of social justice in its relationship with its constituents. The formation of ethnic militias constitutes a vote of no confidence on the Nigeria state². In this paper, effort is made to examine ethnic militias in Nigeria and its implications on national security. Consequently, Nigeria's historical evolution was examined, followed by violent instances/incidences involving ethnic militias in Nigeria. The implications of these ethnic altercations on national security were also highlighted. Finally, the writers make their conclusion and recommendations.

Historical Evolution Of Ethnic Militias In Nigeria

According to Agbaje, the phenomenon of ethnic militias has become such a defining characteristic of the Nigerian scene since the mid-1990s that is not realized or acknowledged that its roots stretch back, at least, to the colonial period³. Babawale in support of the above assertion opined that, the colonial origin of the Nigerian state and its subsequent takeover by the military largely accounted for its repressive character⁴. The argument being made here is that the militarization of the society and politics in Nigeria was the background and precursor to the militarization of some civil society organisation now called ethnic militia groups.

As the populace got more repressed, the absence of equity and justice in government's relationship with a large segment of the population became noticeable and generally unacceptable to the people. Some resisted the repression by organizing mass protests, spontaneous uprising and open confrontation with agents of the Nigerian state. Others, especially ethnic nationalities, resorted to organizing themselves into militia groups.

The context for the rise of those groups was the Babangida and Abacha regimes. The character of those regimes deepened the contradictions and crises of the Nigerian state, which resulted in the rise of ethnic militia groups as one of the consequences of that



process. There are three salient features of those regimes that reinforced militarism and promoted primordial loyalties in the country.

The first is the phenomenon of personal, rule and the high concentration of power perpetuated by those regimes. According to Adejumobi,

“Evidently, the concentration of power in the hands of an individual entity, whether in military or civil regime, has a strong potential of promoting ethnic tension in the society as such individuals usually construct an ethnic state access map through which they distribute social goods and scarce resources and create polarization and division amongst ethnic groups in order to perpetuate their rule”⁵.

The importance of this is that ethnic boundary and consciousness became more profound with ferment of ethnic nationalism in ascendance.

The second salient feature of those regimes is the contrivance of the public sphere for social expression and political action. Both Babangida and Abacha regimes are generally conceived to have been extremely repressive, and sought to annihilate any group and individual that opposed them. Many critical civil society groups fell victim in this regard. These include the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), the Academic Staff Union of University (ASUU), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), and Human Rights and Pro – democracy movements. The implication was that many people reclined into their ethnic cocoons to seek refuge from the onslaught unleashed on Pan-Nigerian civil society groups, while some others went underground to conduct their activities. It was through the latter process that the Oodua People’s Congress emerged.

The final dimension to the use of ethnic militia groups under the Babangida and Abacha regimes was the issue of marginalization and social deprivation that became rife in the



country especially for the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta region. The politics of oil, which constitutes the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, is sourced from the Niger Delta, the communities live in squalor and object poverty, lacking basic amenities like feeder roads, electricity, pipe-borne water, and cottage industries⁶, the general perception in the area is that their marginalization is related to their minority status in the Nigerian federation: that the dominant ethnic groups use the resources gained from the oil producing areas to develop their own places. The fact that oil producing communities suffer serious ecological and environmental damages in the form of water and air pollution, the destruction of aquatic life and degeneration, suggest that the people of the area are confronted with enormous dangers.

The restoration of democratic rule in Nigeria on May 29, 1999 also signaled the emergence of and continued proliferation of ethnic militias. Prominent among these are Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and Arewa People's Congress (APC) which appeared to have been formed to serve as a check on OPC's incessant attacks on the Hausa/fulani population in the western parts of Nigeria⁷. The Oodua People's Congress (OPC) was formed in 1994 as a militant arm of Afenifere, a pan Yoruba group that was in the forefront of protesting the annulment of the June 12, 1993, presidential elections. Other ethnic militias include the Igbo Peoples' Congress (IPC) formed in 1999, the Egbesu Boys formed in 1989 and the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) which emerged in 2000 under the leadership of Chief Ralph Uwazurike.

According to Ray Chikwem, the recent emergence of some of these new groups was a direct result of deprivations, marginalization, high unemployment, widespread corruption, poor relationship between the police and the public, and mainly the lack of trust and confidence in the police and other law enforcement agencies⁸. Onimajesin noted that, the dissatisfaction with the structure, operation and power configuration under the Nigerian federation is responsible for the unprecedented



emergence of these groups. Most times, their founders cite increase in crime rate and the helpless attitude of law enforcement agencies as the ground for their legitimacy⁹.

It has been argued by Oimajesin that ethnic militia groups and their activities are more pronounced under President Muhammadu Buhari's democratic rule. This is connected with the relation environment created by democracy and its degree of tolerance. Democracy entails hearing different shades of views and making the best out of these views. Since the inception of the fourth republic, there have been reported cases of violent clashes between the Hausa and Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, between ethnic militia groups and government forces and in some cases intra-ethnic clashes.

Instances/Incidences of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria

The practice of ethnic politics in Nigeria tends to sustain the belief that each ethnic group must struggle for its own share of national resources. Such struggle often manifests in the form of recruitment to top positions in government and the distribution of government institutions and social services. According to Osuntokun, the birth of OPC in 1994 is connected with a feeling of alienation which the Yoruba group had been experiencing since 1954 when they were sidelined from the mainstream of Nigerian politics. This feeling was further validated with the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential elections believed to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola a Yoruba. The need to forestall further marginalization inspired Fredrick Fasheun a medical doctor to form the OPC. The activities of General Sani Abacha and the eventual death of Chief Abiola, further strengthened this resolve. By March, 1999, the OPC had opened over 2,000 branches in different parts of Yoruba land¹⁰.

Membership was open to everybody who is a Yoruba by origin although all would-be members had to obtain a membership application form for one hundred and fifty naira (N150.00) only. Therefore, members were given identification



cards and also taught how to identify one another through sign language¹¹. Members were made to swear to an oath that enjoined them to work for the progress of Yoruba land at all times and to keep the secrets of the congress. The effigy of Oduduwa: the progenitor of the Yoruba people, is their symbol while their slogan is “*Ooduani mi/tokantokan Ooduani mi tokantura*”, meaning “I am the personification of Oduduwa, body and soul”¹². Although the OPC was formed primarily to champion and defend the right of every Yoruba person, it however plays a dual role. Apart from its goal of self – determination, it acts and exists as a vigilante group¹³.

In 1998, the Oodua Peoples’ Congress called for a boycott of the Local Government Elections scheduled for December. This call generated much concern as it showed that the OPC had no faith in the transition programme of the government headed by General Abdusalami Abubakar. His contention was that the return of democracy should be preceded by a restructuring of the federation. This stance brought their members into direct confrontation with law enforcement agencies especially the police. The hostility claimed the lives of over 200 policemen and many more members of the congress¹⁴.

The OPC was again involved in the ethnic clash that occurred in Sagamu on 17th July, 1999. The fighting which broke out there was said to have been precipitated by the death of an Hausa woman who was alleged to have flouted the order restricting women from coming out of their homes at night during the Oro festival. The fight resulted in the death of over 40 people. Five days later (July 22); there were reprisal attacks in Kano which claimed over 100 lives¹⁴. It took the concerted intervention of the Governors of Ogun and Kano states before peace was restored.

Another main event was the clash of rival factions of dock workers at the Apapa Port. Records indicate that the OPC intervened in support of the Yoruba faction to prevent the “annexation” of the Lagos Port by the Ijaw faction, which had previously won a trade union election in Port Harcourt. About 16



people lost their lives when the violence spilled into neighbouring Ajegunle. A dusk to dawn curfew was imposed on the settlement for over three weeks before a truce was established, after several meetings between the community leaders and the Governor of Lagos state¹⁶. Just as the dust was settling, another riot broke out in Ketu on November 26, 1999, over the control of the popular Mile 12 market. The fight was between the Yoruba and Hausa. While an official statement put the death toll at 30, it was widely believed that the actual figure was over 100¹⁷. Government reaction was to order the police to shoot members of the OPC on sight.

Similarly, the OPC was accused of the abduction and murder of one Mr. Sunday Afolabi, the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) for Bariga, on January 9, 2000. This incident prompted President Obasanjo to impose a blanket ban on all ethnic militias in the country. He also threatened to impose a state of emergency on Lagos state if the Governor was unable to flush out OPC from the state. Furthermore, the then Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Musiliu Smith placed a cash reward of one hundred thousand naira (N100,000) only on the head of Gani Adams, the leader of the militant wing of the OPC. The Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) raised the ransom to three hundred thousand (N300,000), while the Northern Senators Forum (NSF) called for the removal of David Jemibewon (a Yoruba man) as the minister in charge of Police Affairs¹⁸.

The Egbesu Boys

The Egbesu Boys have tribal marks and other symbols incised on their bodies during initiation. They tie red or white bands on their heads during militant operations and in encounters with security forces. Egbesu militants are usually armed with guns and ammunition. It is difficult to assign any specific actions or encounters to Egbesu Boys because their members in different militant organization undertakes most of the militant actions of the Ijaws towards the state, oil companies and other ethnic group.



Thus, the Egbesu Boys have been in the forefront of armed conflicts involving Ijaw youths in the South-South region of the country¹⁹.

They stormed Bayelsa Government House on July 20, 1998 to free Timi Ogoruba President of the Movement for the Survival of Izon Nationality in the Niger Delta (MOSIEND) who was held by the military government between December 31, 1998 and early 1999, under “Operation Climate Change” of the IYC: they engaged the Nigerian Army in bloody clashes in Mbiama, Yenegoa, Kaima and other towns in Bayelsa state, precipitating the declaration of a state of emergency in the state. The state of emergency was lifted on January 4, 1999²⁰. The Egbesu were also the fighters in the Itsekiri and Ijaw conflicts in Delta state in 1997 – 1999, the Ijaw-Ilaye conflicts in Ondo state (1998 – 2000) and intermittently since 2002, particularly the Ijaw Youth Council and Oodua Peoples’ Congress (OPC) conflict in Ajegunle in 2002. Most of the seizures and takeovers, occupation of oil installations, kidnapping of oil workers, hijacking of oil facilities, as well as bloody encounters with state security agencies in many parts of the Niger Delta have been traced to the Egbesu Boys in different militant movements in Ijaw land.

Implications of Ethnic Militias on Nigeria National Security

Ethnic militias’ activities had been witnessed in various parts of the country, leading to the death of hundreds of people as a result of the clashes and reprisal attacks. Sagamu, Kano, Kaduna, Keffi, Jos and Lagos, among other notable towns and cities, had recorded some of these clashes²¹.

There is hardly any Nigerian that is unconcerned with the security situation in the country, unless of course the person in question is among those few who profit from and therefore have a stake in contributing to the breaches to public order and security in the communities.



According to Imobighe²², even though defence planners do not often realize it, internal security forms the baseline of a country's defence. No country can comfortably boast of a credible defence policy until it has put its home-base in proper order. Among the well-known implication of these ethnic militias are the obvious threats to internal security which among others include: subversion, sabotage, mutiny, civil discontent, and unrest which could possibly escalate into riots and revolutionary insurgency. It is based on this fact that President Olusegun on Tuesday April 9, 2000 presented to the National Assembly a bill seeking to prohibit ethnic militia groups in the country.

The activities of ethnic militias in Nigeria have brought the fear of insecurity among several non-natives. The belief is that hoodlums who were still nursing the losses they suffered in the last violent clashes in the state might take advantage of the situation to embark on a revenge mission. In most quarters, it is the impression that ethnic militias were out to frustrate other ethnic nationalities out of their state.

It is very important to say that, despite the fact that ethnic militias are unconstitutional; the imposition of a blanket ban on all ethnic militias in Nigeria can never remedy the menace of these groups. The best approach should be to encourage the different groups to form an umbrella organization under which they can articulate their demands. This can also bring about a harmonious relationship that would certainly reduce violent clashes and criminal activities.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of ethnic militias is a logical derivative of the process of defederalisation, which Nigeria has experienced since 1966. The consequences have been an explosion in the negative use of ethnicity across the broad spectrum of society. If the recommendations are taken to re-federalise Nigeria, ethnic militias will lose their appeal and become redundant.



More importantly, the government should respond positively to the nationwide clamour for a national dialogue, by convening a sovereign national conference that would provide the forum for frank exchanges among the nation's diverse ethnic groups on the strategies to enhance the stability and sustenance of a plural Nigeria.

Until this is done, the various ethnic militia organizations membership and operation will be subjected to strict state security and sometimes political persecution which will more often than not, require international protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The consequences of the activities of ethnic militias on Nigeria have become so grave on the negative side that the usual justification of speedy and substantive results cannot remain justifiable in terms of their continued existence. While some achievements can be arguably attributed to the ethnic militias, the generalized crime, violence, insecurity and conflicts in the state now far outweigh such achievements.

What therefore, are the possible solutions to the growing ethnic militia in Nigeria? How can the water of fury be calmed? Analysts are of the opinion that the government has not shown enough empathy with ethnic militias. What is needed according to most commentators on the crisis, are the following:

- The Government should engage armed groups in a constructive dialogue on the way forward. According to Mohammed²³, dialogue is the course to pursue in the interest of the country. But he said that such a credible dialogue must be backed by force and a sense of justice. He said force was needed to make each of the parties to the resolution of the crisis comply with its undertakings. However, he urged the fighters to understand that the resolution of their problems lies in a Nigeria that is equitable and well governed, not in any secessionist utopia.



- The Government should not see armed groups as terrorists, but as people with a genuine case. Any resort to treating the militants as criminals or terrorists would not resolve the current ethnic militias' question. It is far more thoughtful and helpful to characterize the militants in political terms and seek solutions in the realm of politics.
- The government should explore a political solution in view of ethnic militia solutions in the country. The government, as a matter of necessity, should support military action with political dialogue in order to halt the drift of succession by militia groups.
- What are also required now are: a re-orientation and re-focusing, more stringent control and the de-arming and demobilisation of the militants. Rather than killings, hijack, piracy, crimes, human rights abuses, the youth and youth militants and militias need to be re-oriented towards more peaceful agitation. In other words, militancy need to be tackled frontally, and comprehensively through the economic empowerment and micro-credit schemes.
- Federalism no doubt allows for the plurality of viewpoints. But when groups take arms against each other or the state, the unifying essence of federal state is subverted and even defeated. The militias were formed in response to specific injustices on their communities by the Nigerian state. To restore stability to the nation and guarantee its survival, a new power sharing arrangement that would open up opportunities to disadvantaged communities ought to be devised.
- A genuine democratic system must be enthroned in order to create an inclusive government. The Nigerian state must benefit from the democratization in a way that will make it shed the toga of a violent and uncaring institution.
- The legitimacy of the Nigerian state can only be restored when it begins to care more about the welfare of the people by attending to their essential needs. To achieve these objectives, the present democratic government should intensify its anti-



corruption crusade in order to stop the mindless looting of public funds, mismanagement of public services and the inefficiency of the bureaucracy. With greater accountability, more resources will be available to attend to the development needs of disadvantaged communities. A reconstructed and more humane Nigerian state will command greater loyalty and earn the support of the people.

- The police are therefore central to all security calculations that are made for the enhancement of security, but outside the police force there can be supplementary, although, they can never successfully serve to supplant the security machinery of the police. The public and the government should combine to play their parts well by providing the force with necessary tools; the burden will shift to the police to perform to acceptable standards.



END NOTES

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