



FRIENDS OR FIENDS? : IMAGES OF ETHNIC MILITIA GROUPS IN NIGERIA SINCE 1990s.

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Abstract.

The phenomenon of ethnic militias started in Nigeria in the 1990s, through its roots stretch back to the colonial period. Ethnic militias are youth based groups formed with the purpose of promoting and protecting the parochial interests of their ethnic groups and whose activities sometimes involve the use of violence. Their emergence in Nigeria also signaled some lack of confidence in the federal government's ability to protect its citizens through the police and other security agencies. Ethnic militias have emerged in Nigeria within the three main ethnic groups representing the three geographical zones. They are: Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) representing mainly the Hausa – Fulani ethnic group. Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) representing the Yoruba ethnic group, and the Bakassi and Egbesa boys representing mainly the Igbo ethnic group. Apart from these, other smaller militia groups emerge during conflicts and disappear soon after. The activities of these militia groups who claim to fight for the rights of their ethnic groups, or resist perceived exclusion or political domination have remained controversial. What is the nature and dynamics of these militia groups? Are they freedom fighters or do they seek for political power for their ethnic groups? Are they security agents, friends or enemies of the state? This paper intends to address these issues.

Introduction

This paper examines the formation of ethnic militia movements in Nigeria since the 1990s, their modus operandi and acceptability of the Nigerian populace. Some writers maintain that ethnic militia groups started in Nigeria within this period as a response to military dictatorships.¹ Others maintain

that these groups started in Nigeria immediately after independence as a consequence of the post independent political upheavals that eventually led to the Nigerian Civil War. In Tivland and Yorubaland, these were used by ethnic politicians against the Nigerian Peoples' Congress, NPC controlled government, while the supporters of the NPC also used their militia groups against their opponents.² The Niger Delta Volunteer Force led by Adako Boro may be described as the first organized militia group in post independent Nigeria when he declared the independence of the Niger Delta Republic in 1966. In his revolutionary speech, Boro maintained.

Nigeria is not a natural creation of Almighty God rather it is the artificial making of the British colonial masters with the support of their Nigerian cohorts. Every permutation points to the fact that a particular region of the country is indeed all out to make itself the lord and master over the rest. We have done everything within our limited legal powers, using the unpredictable democratic and constitutional factors to draw the attention of the establishment to the intension of some people from a particular region who are trying to make Nigeria uninhabitable for the rest of us. So far, all our cries have fallen on deaf ears, hence the inevitable and unavoidable liberation crusade.³

We can maintain that though ethnic militia groups started in Nigeria immediately after independence, their activities intensified in the 1990s when the nation was in the throes of a vicious military dictatorship. Cited in this context for the rise of these groups during the Babagida and

Abacha regimes. The Yorubas were the first to set up a contemporary ethnic militia in 1995, ostensibly in response to the annulment of the 1993 presidential elections won by Chief M.K.O Abiola, a Yoruba man.⁴ However, other ethnic groups have since formed their own militias. In our analysis on the formation, operations and acceptability of these groups, this paper is divided in five main sections. Section one is the general introduction giving the background to the formation of militias. Section two examines the conceptual issues associated with the formation and operations of militia groups. Section three examines factors leading to the formation of these groups with specific case studies. Section four deals with their modus operandi, their acceptability or rejection by Nigerians, while the last section is the conclusion.

Conceptual Issues

In examining the above questions therefore, this paper intends to conceptualize the term ethnic militias. A Militia can be considered an organization of trained citizens, enlisted or conscripted, who are mobilized in a period of emergency. The Militia can also be a group of people who are not professional soldiers but who have military training and can act as an army.⁵ Ethnic militias are primarily groups established with the main purpose of promoting the parochial interests of their ethnic groups, and

whose activities sometimes involve the use of violence. They are not rebel movements per se as their aim is not to capture political power. Ethnic militia groups in Nigeria act as social pressure groups that seek to influence the structure of power in the country, and call attention of the government to the deteriorating material condition or political deprivation and perceived marginalization of their groups. These groups sometimes perform functions of providing physical security for their communities and undertake crime prevention.⁶

Members of Militia groups may be expected to provide their own weapons, equipment, or supplies, although they may later be compensated for losses or expenditures. A militia is distinct from a regular army. It can serve to supplement the regular military, or it can oppose it, for example to resist a military coup. In some circumstances the 'enemies' against which a militia is mobilized are domestic political opponents of the government or vice versa.

The term ethnic militia is all embracing, consisting of not only the five major militia groups in the country namely the Oodua Peoples' Congress, Bakassi Boys, The Egbesu Boys of Africa, Arewa Peoples' Congress and Massob, but also the other ethnic militia groups since independence, although some have become extinct. Based on the subject of

our discussion the general paradigm of militia as referred in the Nigerian context refer to an irregular or paramilitary group, made up of civilians or even retired law enforcement agents who might have received some form of non formalized or unofficial military training and are armed with small arms and light weapons. They are not members of a regular professional army but can operate in the same manner as the military due to their training.

In the 1980s the term militia was used in the United States to refer to scattered groups, which were primarily anti-government. These groups were opposed to gun control and resisted attempts by the government that threatened their rights to bear arms. According to Femi Falana:

An ethnic militia, in the Nigerian context can be said to be a militant organization set up to protect the interests of a particular nationality within the Nigerian federation. The ethnic militias that make the liberation of their ethnic nationalities their main pre-occupation may sometimes be described as guerrilla movements.⁷

The rise of militias in the country is one of the most serious problems confronting any regime, be it democratic or military. As noted earlier most of these militia groups are out to protect the interests of their ethnic groups, and in most cases members do not even know themselves except the fact that they are united by one religion or race. This category is often made up of the unemployed, criminals and sometimes social miscreants who are quick to take the advantage of situations of disorder.

Their private arms are sticks, cutlasses, knives and sometimes guns, while others are sponsored militia groups who are out to protect the interest of politicians, first ladies and retired army generals.

Emergence of Ethnic Militias

Although ethnic militia movements started in Nigeria after independence, their activities were intensified in the 1990s. This was as a result of the rise of military dictatorships especially during the reigns of late General Sani Abacha, and General Babangida, whose annulment of the 1993 presidential election won by the late Chief M.K.O Abiola led to the formation of the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), the first contemporary ethnic militia in Nigeria.⁸

As from the mid 1990s, several factors arose which led to the formation of new types of vigilante groups in the country. These included the impact of military dictatorships, the rising tide of violent crimes in the country and the seeming inability of the police to control the situation, coupled with the frustration of citizens and widespread corruption of the police and the judiciary. In response to the widespread increase of crime in different parts of the country, both local communities and state governments supported the formation of vigilante groups, to compliment or support the operations of the regular police forces. The police it should be noted had

become so ineffective in the prevention of crime as a result of several factors. These range from corruption, poor conditions of service, poor handing of firearms, collection of ‘tolls’ from motorists, the use of violence on citizens and neglect by subsequent military governments .⁹ This made many people to lose confidence in the ability of the police force to effectively protect them against criminals. In some cases, very senior police officers serve as informants to criminals or partake in robbery. In 1987,a celebrated armed robber Lawrence Anini confessed during his trial in Benin City that his gang was given arms and supported by Deputy Superintendent of Police Iyamu,who was also the head of the Bendel State anti robbery squad.¹⁰ There are many ‘Iyamus’ in the Police Force today. The seeming failure of the Nigeria Police Force to ensure the security of lives and property led the former governor of Enugu State, Chimaroke Nnamani, to attribute the emergence of vigilate groups as state security outfits as a result of this failure. In his welcome address to the second summit of Southern Governors, held in Enugu on 10th January, 2001, the governor maintained that:

The explosion in the number of militant organizations across the country –Oodua Peoples Congress, Bakassi Boys, Arewa Peoples Congress, and Egbesu Boys among so many others, is a clear manifestation of overbearing pressure on the

resources of the federal police and a big question mark on its ability to effectively police the entire country in the face of its limited resources and apparent shortage of manpower.¹¹

Consequently, all the governors adopted his address and his views. General surveys of happenings in other states show that the story was not different. As a result of the menace of sea pirates, a member of the Bayelsa State House of Assembly, Peremobewi Ebebi, called on the state government to authorize the formation of vigilante or neighborhood watch units that are familiar with the terrain to fight criminals rather than conventional security outfits of the state.¹² In October 2000, Abubakar Kure the then Governor of Niger state lamented on the increase of crime in the state despite the fact that he was spending large sums of money sponsoring the Nigeria Police Force to fight crime. He subsequently threatened to establish a state security outfit known as the Niger Peoples Congress. The governor of Akwa Ibom state Victor Attah, worried by the increase in crime rate in the country called on Local Government councils to establish security committees that would compliment the efforts of the Police in fighting crime. In July 2001, Lucky Igbinedon, the then governor of Edo State sent a bill to the state house of assembly seeking authorization for the establishment of an Edo vigilante

service. In October 2001, the Adamawa State house of assembly passed a bill establishing the state Neighborhood Watch Organization. (NWO)¹³

Since the early 1990s, the nation's urban centers have witnessed the phenomenal proliferation of street urchins, mostly comprising of children and young adults, products of collapsed families, neighborhood hoodlums and street corner gangs who are easily recruited for these conflicts. Whenever incidents of ethnic sectarian violence broke out the youths would spontaneously amplify the scope of the conflict exploiting the atmosphere of mayhem where they loot, rape and settle political scores. Most of these youths were recruited and used as political thugs during elections, and were discarded soon after the elections, won or lost. Such thugs must find relevance somewhere in order to face the harsh realities of life. Ethnic militias thus become a handy tool for the recruitment of such miscreants.

Ethnic militia groups are spread across the four geographical zones of Nigeria. The militia groups had emerged at different times and operate in different parts of the country, and are linked by some common trends. One is that their modus operandi which in most cases is the creation of disorder and the lack of respect for law and order. All the groups were set up to protect the parochial interests to certain sections or ethnic groups in the country, which are perceived as being threatened and ignored by the central

government. Some of the most notable of the militia groups are Odudua Peoples Congress (OPC) in the southwest, the Bakassi Boys in the southwest, Egbesu boys of Africa in the south, south the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign state of Biafra (Massob), The Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people (Mosop) the Hisbah groups and finally the Arewa Peoples Congress APC in the North.¹⁴ The O.P.C was formed on June 12 1993, after the annulations (by then military head of state), Ibrahim Babangida of elections believed to have been won by Chief MKO Abiola, a Yoruba man. Not only was the election cancelled, Chief Abiola was latter detained. This meant the Yoruba had been unjustly prevented from mounting leadership throne. According to Frederick Fashehun,

The Yoruba people were just fed up, the only reason Babangida had cancelled the elections, he argued, was that the Northern Hausa- Fulani Muslims who wielded the real power simply refused to accept Yoruba as the President, nor was this the first time the Yoruba had been denied the Presidency. The Yoruba most famous son the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo was also denied the fulfillment of his burning presidential ambition simply because he is a Yoruba man.¹⁵

The high handedness of Abacha regime also gave impetus to the O.P.C cause. After the detention of Chief Abiola, notable critics like Pa Alfred Rewane and Mrs Kudirat Abiola were assassinated while Pa Adesaya narrowly escaped death and many others including Chief Bola Ige and

Alhaji Lam Adesina were then put in detention.¹⁶ This created a favorable environment for the O.P.C to prosper. According to Ogundamisi, it was only the O.P.C that could confront the military:

Abacha was becoming a monster, every other organization was going underground, and people were going on exile, so there was the need to have an organization that can confront the military in the field.¹⁷

The Egbesu Boys of Africa is the militia group of the dominant Ijaw ethnic group in the Niger Delta spanning across six states – Bayelsa, Rivers, Edo, Delta, Ondo and Akwa Ibiom. While most of the groups are well established and complimented with militant arms or wings, the APC Congress in the North is the only group that is yet to set up an armed wing.

¹⁸ The Arewa Peoples Congress is a coalition of disaffected Northern elites who were cashiered from the military and security forces in the wake of the inauguration of civil rule in 1999. It claims to represent the whole North a geographical region of Nigeria that is as large as it is ethnically heterogeneous. The APC does not have large membership of armed cadres in the same manner as the OPC, Bakasi or Egbesu, and therefore cannot be classified strictly as an ethnic militia. However it is believed it can raise an armed wing at very short notice, especially from the ever-swelling pool of jobless youths who roam the streets of major northern towns. It also has the

financial muscle to purchase arms and ammunition if it wants to. The congress claims to represent the whole North and to defend northerners especially against the rampaging OPC in the southwest. It issues occasional public statements that threaten retaliation against the OPC but its real activities are not well known even among well informed Northern elites.

Friends or Villains?

A lot of attention has recently been drawn to the operations and functions of ethnic militia groups in Nigeria. Some people view their activities with disdain and call for their disbandment, while others look at them as ‘security agents’, ‘liberators and friends’. Are they security agents, friends or enemies of the people and state? The impression one may hold on a militia group may be nasty or good depending on the circumstances in question. A man who has his stolen car recovered by a militia group certainly applauds them and brands them as heroes while an Oluchi Hill who has her daughter Margaret Hill kidnapped or a man who loses his new bride in a street brawl between the OPC and Hausa traders on the outskirts of Oshodi sees them as villains.

Ethnic militia groups are known to perpetuate a lot of violence. Some of their violent activities have spill- over effects to other areas rather than the places of action.¹⁹ This is carried out under the guise of youth wings, body

guards, security men, thugs or intelligence officers. The faction of the OPC led by Ganiyu Adams is violent and confrontational. One notable feature of the OPC as in most militia movements were the violent clashes between the factions and the bloody clashes with other militia groups in Lagos and Ogun States as well as clashes with the police. Fasheun describes the phenomenon of violence linked to the group as the consequence of the take over of his congress while he was in detention by “highway men, hooligans and miscreants”, including a ‘bespectacled raw-boned youth’, Gani Adams.²⁰ Fasheun also maintained that Adams formation of ‘youth wing’ of the OPC laid the foundation for misguided militancy within the movement.

The OPC became much more daring and confrontational engaging in bloody clashes that often left people dead. Six months after Adams was made president of the OPC, the OPC sacked the Apapa and Tin can island ports, both in Lagos in support of their Yoruba brethren who lost out in the union elections and this led to the loss of eight lives. A month later, the OPC clashed with Ijaw youths at Ajegunle leaving 23 persons dead. The next clash was with the Hausa traders in mile 12 with 114 lives lost, and property worth millions of naira destroyed. In December 1999 they shot at the convoy of the Lagos State governor and shortly after clashed with Hausa traders in Bariga Lagos which led to the loss of lives of some policemen. The DPO,

Afolabi Amao was captured by the OPC and murdered. His body was dumped in the lagoon. As a result the police declared Adams wanted a ransom of ₦100, 000 was placed on his head.²¹No wonder Fasehun speaks of Adams:

a 29 years old Okada rider who failed to make head way from being a carpenter and one with very modest and humble background, lacking educational acumen and political enlightenment. he is a man of no substance.²²

The Bakassi boys were initially formed to protect and defend the interest of Igbo traders in the East but soon went violent and are noted as “young men armed with weapons of violence and traditional charms, who search for and execute brutally their victims through extra judicial killings”²³The Bakassi boys soon began to arrest suspected criminals arbitrarily, with little or no evidence, torturing and summarily executing them in public. The activities of the Bakassi boys began to discredit, some of the state governments that had earlier given them legal backing. Their excess led to the arrest of 27 youths in Abia State. These youths were arrested and detained in the cells of the Bakassi boys where they suffocated to death.²⁴ Innocent people who were reported missing were soon found to be dead at the groups cells across the State.

The Egbesu Boys of Africa is the militia group of the dominant Ijaw ethnic group in the Niger Delta spanning across six states – Bayelsa, Rivers,

Edo, Delta, Ondo and Akwa Ibom. There exists in the Niger Delta a Joint Revolutionary Council (JRC) a coalition of militant groups that perpetuate violence, kidnapping and attacking foreigners. Some of these militia groups in the Niger Delta ambushed and murdered 13 soldiers escorting two oil vessels along the Cowthorn Channel in Akuku Toru/Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State.²⁵ After the attack, the J.R.C. sent a warning signal of possible consequences if the government was contemplating possible reprisal attacks. The JRC stated that the killing of the 13 soldiers was meant to “prove to the armed forces of Nigeria state that we can take on them anywhere any time and any how”. The militants stated that “the mere fact that their men retreated and dispersed into the creeks after the killing of the soldiers did not mean they have declared a ceasefire. Rather, they were watching and waiting for any semblance of reprisal attacks”²⁶.

Ethnic militia groups are also noted as superstitious organizations that operate with the use of charms. According to Fasheun, while he was in detention, Adams introduced practices, oaths to himself, brigandage and training in militancy. In order to become a member of the OPC “You had to pay an oath-taking fee, you had to comply with various superstitious practices, and you had to submit to black magic orgies.”²⁷ While Adams’ faction trusts the efficacy of charms and mixes traditional religion with

Christianity and Islam, Fasheun denounces this as “darkness and spiritism.”²⁸The Gani Adams faction has a long ritual for memberships which involves swearing to an oath. New members are usually armed with occultist “insurance cover” by making incisions on their bodies with charms. With their belief in the power of charms, they soon involved in social services like vigilante groups and performing police services especially in Lagos and Ibadan.

The Bakassi group is said to have a mentor in an Ogoni man crippled in the leg. Bakassi is said to thrive on some mysterious charms which can detect robbers and murderers. Thus the Ogoni man allegedly sold the idea to the traders at Ariara who mobilized and started chasing robbers, instead of the robbers chasing them which used to be the case, It was the seeming initial success of this group that made the Abia State House of Assembly to pass a law legalizing their operations in the State. The then Anambra State Governor chinwoke Mbadinnugu, also invited them and legalized their operations in Anambra.²⁹

Ethnic militia groups are also identified with the free flow of small arms and light weapons (SALW) thus encouraging criminal activities and armed robbery in different parts of the country. Former President Olusegun Obasanjo got an insight into this dimension of militia activities

during an official visit to Bayelsa State. During an interaction session at Government House Conference Hall, Yanegoa Nengi James, an Ijaw youth activist told the president that “there is a big man sponsoring every group of militias”. He explained that ordinarily the youths involved in the hostage taking saga could not afford the amount of money needed to acquire the sophisticated weapons they use for the operations if not for the notable personalities behind them. According to him there are two types of militias namely those fighting the true course to take control of their God given resources and those used by people he described as “big men and politicians for the hatchet job.”³⁰ The presence of SALW has witnessed high level of criminal activities with armed robbery attacks becoming the order of the day. Sophisticated SALW are used in ethnic conflict and there are instances when the police had to watch helplessly, as the bandits operated without any challenge because of the crude weaponries at their disposal.

Apart from the negative attributes which tag the ethnic militia groups as villains, there are also positive aspects which have endeared them toward the people. Ethnic militia groups have been known to act as security outfits to compliment the efforts of the Nigeria Police Force.

In response to the widespread increase of crime in different parts of the country, both local communities and state governments supported the

formation of vigilante groups, to compliment or support the operations of the regular police forces. The police, it should be noted, had become so ineffective in the prevention of crime as a result of several factors. These range from corruption, poor conditions of service, poor handling of firearms, collection of 'tolls' from motorists, the use of violence on citizens and neglect by subsequent military governments .³² This made many people to lose confidence in the ability of the police force to effectively protect them against criminals. The seeming failure of the Nigeria Police Force to ensure the security of lives and property has led the former governor of Enugu State, Chimaroke Nnamani to attribute the emergence of vigilante groups as state security outfits as a result of this failure.

According to Gani Adams:

We have been persecuted, humiliated and prosecuted unjustly. But that will not deter us from stamping out crime from Yoruba land. Surely, we are going to fish out the criminals, so we are not afraid of any attack .³³

The value of ethnic militia in acting as security outfits was glaringly visible when on 21st January 2002 when junior police offices went on strike for 48 hours. As a result of the strike, many people stayed indoors as hoodlums, social miscreants, thugs and criminals took over the control of streets and direction of traffic. The period was characterized by the closure

of banks markets and general uncertainly. Some militia groups such as the O.P.C and Bakassi boys took over as security operatives as wealthy Nigerians and banks resorted to their use for personal safety. In the same way, Dele Alake, the then Lagos state commissioner of information saw the O.P.C as an antidote to crime in the state.³⁴ The Bakassi boys were also set up in response to the menaces of armed robbers at the Ariara International Market in Aba.³⁵

Ethnic militia groups also serve as serious pressure groups for their ethnic groups and communities. For example, the Niger Delta militant groups have been able to draw the attention of the international community to their plight. Their argument is based on the fact that despite much of the crude oil found in their area, they have nor been able to benefit from it. The government as a result of this pressure has been carrying out a lot of developmental activities in the Niger Delta for instance, the recent creation of the ministry of the Niger Delta.

Ethnic militia groups also posed a serious challenge to the multinational companies operating in their areas. They have been able to call for a comprehensive development programme and a memorandum of understanding (MOU) from the multinational oil companies such as Shell, Chevron, Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) Niger Delta

Development Cooperative (NDDC) and Texaco. They demand that these foreign companies must hold peace meetings with the local populace for peace to reign and production to continue.³⁶ The oil workers in the Niger Delta recently went on strike because of the persistent wave of conflicts, abductions and kidnappings in the areas.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has contended that despite the negative attributes of ethnic militia groups such as the perpetuation of violence, their spread of SALW which tend to encourage conflicts and crime, the ethnic militia groups also have some positive attributes. Some of these include their occasional control of crime and their services as pressure groups for their communities. They also call for a comprehensive development programme and MOU from the multinational oil companies operating in their areas. Their issue of being friends or foes depends, on the circumstances in question and who is involved in particular incident.

Endnotes

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19. In June 1999, in Shagamu, Lagos, the O.P.C. clashed with Hausa traders and this led to reprisal attacks on the Yoruba in Kano in July, 1999.
20. Frederick Fasheun, *Frederick Fasehum: the son of Oodua*, p.229.
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