

**ONE NATION UNDER SIEGE? BOKO HARAM AND THE NIGER DELTA
AVENGERS PHENOMENA IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Violent conflict within multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries is almost as given, although not all multi-ethnic or multi-religious societies are violent. The gamut of those riddled with violent conflict ranges from Yugoslavia and USSR to Northern Ireland and the Basque country, from Rwanda to Darfur, and Indonesia to Fiji. Numerous bitter and deadly conflicts have been fought along ethnic and religious lines. Nigeria is only such country today, fighting for its survival at two fronts or against two incompatible oppositions at the same time. This has heightened the state and nature of insecurity in the country. Using social movements and protracted social conflict as theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to argue along the trajectory that Nigeria is presently experiencing two types of terrorist insurgency – political (Avengers) and religious (Boko Haram). The paper's main argument flows from the fact that people see themselves in many different ways that constitute a form of identity which can be fluid, short-lived and insignificant or more permanent and more significant personally and socially. However, the importance which people ascribe to different aspects of their identity varies according to context and over time, but where violent conflicts are mobilised and organised by identity, such identities must be sufficiently important enough to make people prepared to fight, kill and even die in the name of that identity. The escalation of the politics of identity leading to a somewhat permanent state of insecurity makes the paper to wonder whether the Nigerian state may survive this bombardments and assault on its security and political stability.

Keywords: Multi-ethnic, Avengers, Boko Haram, Violent, Niger Delta

INTRODUCTION

Going by the experience of the happenings and events in the world today, one may aptly conclude that conflict and violence are endemic to human societies. In this regard therefore, Zartman (1991:370) has associated conflict with interactions among people; “an unavoidable concomitant of choices and decisions and an expression of the basic fact of human interdependence.” Much earlier, Coser (1956:121) had stated that conflict occurs when two or more people engage in a struggle over values and claims to status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. Coser (1956:8) further explained that conflict emerges whenever one party perceives those one or more valued goals or means of achieving these valued goals is being threatened or hindered by another party or parties or by their activities. These perceived threats occur especially if both parties are seeking to expand into the same field or physical sphere or the same field of influence or behaviours. The failure of one party to achieve his end may lead to frustration which as Stagner (1995:53) has observed may further lead to the occurrence of aggressive behaviour and which in turn leads to some form of conflict. Thus, violence as an instrument of political power also lends itself to private use for private gains by individuals. In a bid to proffer understanding of this phenomenon, many scholarly and seminal works have been carried out concerning it thereby leading to classifying conflicts according to; (1) the parties involved in the conflict (Chazan et al, 1992:189-210), (2) the issues that generate the conflict (Holsti, 1991:306-34), and (3) the factors that cause the conflict (Furley, 1995:3-4).

The recurring phenomenon of conflicts and violence has also challenged orthodox assumptions about national security by deepening it ‘upwards’ (from national to global security) and ‘downwards’ (from territorial security focused to states and governments to people security, that is, individuals and communities), and ‘widening’ it by arguing that non-military dimensions, such as social wellbeing and environmental integrity, are important prerequisites for ensuring security (Renner, 2006:3). Given these facts therefore, Fucks (2006:12-13) has warned that security should not be defined as exclusively the security of the wealthy world

basically because such definition divides the peoples instead of looking for a common denominator and “in the age of globalisation, there cannot be security only for the prosperous minority of the world’s population.”

Makinda (2006:33) has pointed out that the founding President of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, was one of the earliest people in Africa to define security in terms of people’s freedom. Nkrumah’s attempt to globalise peace, freedom and security was premised on the fact that African’s freedom can only be possible if the whole world enjoys peace and security. He asserted that “indivisibility of peace is staked on the indivisibility of freedom” in the global arena (Nkrumah 1972:106). Makinda (2006:33) is of the opinion that based on Nkrumah’s political thought, as well as writings of other African thinkers such as Edward Blyden, Leopold Senghor, Albert Luthuli, Nelson Mandela, Jomo Kenyatta, Julius Nyerere, Tom Mboya, Sekou Toure, Franz Fanon and Gamal Abdel Nasser (Mutiso and Rohio 1975), African perspective or definition of security should include welfare, emancipation, dignity and protection of the people. As Makinda (2005:285) has stated, “security implies the protection of the people and the preservation of their norms, rules and institutions, in the face of military and non-military threats.”

However, critics of the human agenda of security have argued that it generates false hopes and priorities and proceeds from false causal assumptions. On one hand, Khong (2001:233) has argued that “in making all individuals a priority, none actually benefits,” while Bull (1977 [1995]:79) has opined that “states and nations were originally thought to have rights and duties because individual persons had rights and duties.” The logic of this is that the security of persons is prior to that of states or political communities. This further echoed Nkrumah’s assertion that the conscience of humankind was progressively moving towards a new horizon of knowledge where due respect for human dignity and the idea of international peace were intertwined (Nkrumah 1973:216).

This paper is divided into 6 main sections. Its main argument flows from the fact that people see themselves in many different ways that constitute a form of identity which can be

fluid, short-lived and insignificant or more permanent and more significant personally and socially. However, the importance which people ascribe to different aspects of their identity varies according to context and over time, but where violent conflicts are mobilised and organised by identity, such identities must be sufficiently important enough to make people prepared to fight, kill and even die in the name of that identity. The escalation of the politics of identity leading to a somewhat permanent state of insecurity makes the paper to wonder whether the Nigerian state may survive these bombardments and assault on its security and political stability.

Given the various tactics which are available for the insurgents to choose from, the final choice is dependent on a number of factors such as the anticipated goal of the insurgents, opportunity available to them and the level of their fear of retribution.

Theoretical Basis/Framework

This paper is anchored on two theoretical groundings – Social Movement and Protracted Social Conflicts (PSC). Tarrow (1999: 2) has defined the term “social movement” as “those sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents”. As Tarrow (1999: 3) has argued, collective action can take many forms, from brief to sustained struggle or revolt, from institutionalized to disruptive and from humdrum to dramatic, it however become contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to official means of airing their grievances, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge the state’s authority or elites. Contentious collective action therefore forms the basis of social movements basically because it is the only means by which the oppressed can draw an unresponsive state’s elites’ attention to their plight, or better articulate their grievances and confront the better-equipped opponents or the state. Contentious collective action brings ordinary people together under the same umbrella, for the same purpose and to confront opponents, elites or authorities.

Social movement therefore mounts contentious challenges through disruptive actions aimed and directed at the state. Disruption is always public in nature and can take the form of resistance, collective affirmation of new values or outright violence leading to a revolution (Melucci, 1996). Collective challenges are aimed at disrupting, interrupting, obstructing or rendering uncertain the activities of others; maybe states. However, collective contentious behaviour is linked to a functional view of society in which societal dysfunctions have produced different form of collective challenge and movements some of which can take the form of political or interest groups (Smelser, 1962, Turner and Killian, 1972). These societal dysfunctions can be likened to Durkheim's "anomie" in which individuals come together to form collective identities and be identify as belonging to specific group or movement (Durkheim, 1951; Hoffer, 1951). Scholars have been interested in identifying how such societal dysfunctions assume such a dimension that they become transform into concrete grievances and emotional-laden "packages" (Gamson, 1992a) or put in 'frames' that are capable of convincing ordinary citizens that their cause is just and important that they are willing to risk everything for (Snow et al, 1986). Shared or common grievance therefore provides collective incentive to mobilization and a challenge to opponents. The form which the struggle takes is a function of history. As Tarrow (1999: 21) puts it, "particular groups have a particular history – and memory – of contentious forms. Workers know how to strike because generations of workers struck before them". Hill and Rothchild (1992: 192) have earlier expressed this opinion also that "based on past periods of conflict with a particular group(s) or the government, individuals construct a prototype of a protest or riot that describes what to do in particular circumstances as well as explaining a rationale for this action".

However, it is very instructive to note that the adoption of repressive actions by the state actors to contain all contention is a function of the fact that political elites who have been successful in employing violence to quell revolts and defend their claims to power eventually become habituated to the political uses of violence. Their acceptance of violence as a means of resolving disputes or repressing people becomes part of the elite political culture. In this

respect this culture has been borrowed from the period of military dictatorship which had spawned President Obasanjo. Gurr (1988:49) had equally noted that "...elites who have secured state power and maintained their position by violent means are disposed to respond violently to future challenges". Thus, violent activism in democracies requires a climate of acceptance of unconventional means of political action among groups and the state (Gurr, 1990:87). State violence will lead to employing similar repertoire by contending social movements. Violence will always beget violence and hence conflicts become protracted, drawn-out and unending.

This situation is what Edward Azar (1991:93), has referred to as protracted social conflict (PSC). It results from "the prolonged and often violent struggle by communal groups for such basic needs as security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation." PSC deals with relationship between intra-state actors such as communities, tribes and ethnics. The traditional preoccupation with inter-states relations is seen as obscuring the more realistic domestic relations among ethnic groups. Thus, the distinction between domestic and international politics is rejected as being rather "artificial" because "there is really only one social environment and its domestic face is the more compelling" (Azar & Burton, 1986:33). Thus, the role of the state in the domestic relationship among intra-state ethnic actors is to satisfy or frustrate basic communal needs and by so doing prevent or promote conflict (Azar, 1990:10-12).

The second is that Azar identified deprivation of human needs as the underlying source of PSC. He argues that "grievances resulting from need deprivation are usually expressed collectively. The failure to redress these grievances by the authority cultivates a niche for a protracted social conflict" (Azar, 1990:9). Azar further affirms that needs are unlike interests because they are ontological and non-negotiable and so if they result in conflict, such conflict is likely to be intense, vicious, and from a traditional Clausewitzian perspective, irrational. Azar identified these needs as security needs, development needs, political access

needs, and identity needs. Arguing that security is at the root of development and political access, Azar (1990:155) opined that,

reducing overt conflict requires reduction in levels of underdevelopment. Groups which seek to satisfy their identity and security needs through conflict are in effect seeking change in the structure of their society. Conflict resolution can only occur and last if satisfactory amelioration of underdevelopment occurs as well. Studying protracted conflict leads one to conclude that peace is development in the broadest sense of the term.

Analysing Nigeria's State of Insecurity

The Nigerian state has been under siege since the colonial amalgamation of 1914 which led to the forceful inclusion of hitherto different ethnic and tribal units into the colonial project later renamed Nigeria. From that time till now, the siege against the Nigerian state has taken various forms, from religious 'riots' to ethnic uprisings, to civil war and the various struggles for ethnic dominance spearheaded by the various ethnic militias that have championed their ethnic roots. Formal siege has also been mounted against the Nigerian state starting from the promulgation of various constitutions ranging from unitary to federal government, the various constitutional meetings and amendments that attempted to offer political accommodation to the various ethnic agitations for inclusion and recognition by the Nigerian state. This includes the many states creation projects, attempts at arriving at a credible and acceptable fiscal relationship between central, state and local governments, and the many military incursions into politics. In one way or the other, all these have laid siege against the Nigerian state. Today, the most prominent are the Boko Haram whose desire is to declare an Islamic state of Nigeria and the Niger-Delta Avengers with its many unnamed affiliates whose grouse against the Nigerian state has progressed from agitations for political inclusion to resource nationalism and now separatist call for exclusion from the Nigerian state.

The second distinction is between instrumental and expressive movements. Instrumental movements seek to change the structure of society whereas expressive movements address problems and needs of individuals or seek to change the character of individuals and individual behaviour. Certainly, both Boko Haram and Avengers qualify as

expressive movements but for different reasons. Boko Haram as a religious movement seeks to effect a change in the behaviour of the people albeit through their belief systems. This result in the activist attribute of proselytising associated with Islam and which is reinforced by the commandment to convert infidels everywhere and at any time. The injunction to convert does not discriminate whether it be through peaceful or violent means. According to Islamic laws, it is lawful and legitimate for Muslim faithful to wage war anywhere and everywhere against four types of enemies; infidels, apostates, rebels and bandits. Of these four only the first two counts as a religious obligation for all Muslims, hence a jihad. An infidel is an unbeliever in the Islamic faith which can be converted either through peaceful means or through war and conquest. Thus, a fundamental of Islamic faith is that proselytising is accompanied by or could be achieved through wars. However, in reality, fundamentalist groups cannot really be said to be practitioners of the religion they espoused to defend or uphold because they selectively adopt and adapt certain teachings, texts and practices of their religion that are deemed as useful and necessary in their fight against modernity and the modern state system (Almond et al, 2003:94-95).

The Avengers will also qualify as an expressive social movement, but this is to the extent that members (or the leadership) think that they are addressing the problems and the need of the people. This raises certain fundamental issues as to how the group affirm that they are giving expression to the will of the people. Every political movement fighting for separation often do so in the name of nationalism, in this case, a particular ethnic nationalism. The idea of nationalism, however, presupposes some form of cultural distinctiveness on the part of the inhabitants of a particular region. This, the movement cannot claim as the south-eastern region of Nigeria is made up of many ethnic groups; many of which may become minorities even if granted the permission to secede. For instance, the Akwa Ibom, Calabar and Ogoni are already denying their inclusion in the call for secession. Among the ethnic militias social movement group that is clamouring for resource nationalism is dissents as some are already showing their willingness to negotiate with the government while the spokesperson

for the people of the region is already disassociating themselves from the group bent on vandalising oil pipelines and disrupting oil exploration.

Of equal importance in this regard is that nationalism in the context of colonialism may be a relatively straight forward concept, but among minorities, it indicates a form of homogeneity that is often strengthened by cultural identity and uniqueness, and linguistic distinctiveness. Crucial to this also is a sense of identity and the demand for autonomy to which it can be inferred that the group once enjoyed self-government. Although a sense of nationhood may be based on any or combinations of any of the factors above, it should not be assumed that each type of identity will have the same effect on political behaviour (Connor, 1978:396; 1988:201-2; Clay, 1989:224-6; Kellas, 1991:2-3). As Smith (1971:181-6) had equally averred, none is sufficient in itself to define a nation, not even language. Smith (1971) has gone further to give a list of 7 features of a nation in the following order – cultural differentiae, territorial contiguity with internal mobility, a relatively large population, external political relations, considerable group sentiment and loyalty, direct membership with equal citizenship rights, and vertical economic integration around a common system of labour. Of these, Smith (1971:186-90; 2001) has argued that tribes have only the first two features, ethnic the first five, whereas nations have all the seven characteristics. It is worthy to bring to notice here that most post-colonial states which are, in essence, collections of tribes and/or ethnic lack at least two of these seven features - cultural differentiae and group sentiment – due to the arbitrary nature of colonial boundaries. If this is likely of Nigeria, it is doubtful whether the so-called state of Biafra can even boast of one of these features. As Emerson (1960:102) and Eriksen (1993:11-12) have further stated, the simplest statement that can be made about a nation is that it is a body who feel that they are a nation. That feeling is not equally shared by all within the region that would make up the Biafran state.

The third distinction is between progressive (or left wing) movements and conservative (or right wing) movements. Progressive movements have been described as future-oriented or utopian, seeking to bring about historically unprecedented conditions and

often seek to improve the conditions of submerged groups. Of course, by any stint of imagination, the Boko Haram religious fundamentalist movement cannot be deemed to be a progressive one. ter Haar (2004:6) has summarised the basic content of what constitutes fundamentalism as including; (1) a return to traditional values and an accompanying sense of restoration which may stimulate and contribute to the building of alternative structures; (2) the search for a new identity, often at the expense of minority groups; (3) a preoccupation with moral concerns that tends to have an adverse effect on the position of women; and (4) a spirit of militancy with which these objectives are pursued.

Conservative movements, by contrast, seek to prevent further change or perhaps resurrect the past. So, if progressive movements are utopian (to the extent to which both Boko Haram and Avengers could be termed progressive), conservative movements are usually oriented around vision of some partly mythical golden age of the past. Conservative social movements (or expressive) always almost appeal to people with lower social and economic statuses. To this extent, both Boko Haram and Avengers aptly qualified as conservative social movements. Scholars have even questioned the extent to which social movements should be described as “a collective.” To this extent, Diani (1992) has argued that rather than think of social movements as a unified entity, it may be better to characterised them as constituted by a loose connection between “a plurality of groups, individuals and organisation.” This is basically because there are private incentives that might induce an individual to participate in a movement, incentives that cannot be obtained more cheaply by other means (Olson, 1965, Barnes, 1995). Therefore, to the extent that prominent participants may use the utility of social movements to rise to positions of power, influence and high remuneration should the movement eventually come to enjoy a measure of success, notoriety and recognition, it is conservative and there is nothing collective about it.

CONCLUSION

The paper is a theoretical construct. It has used the concept of social movement to explain the nature of siege – political and religious – that Nigeria has been placed. The paper has just

barely restrained itself from placing a value judgement on whether the siege is justified or not, but what had interest us was the utility of social movement concept to assess and analyse the two militant groups that have put untold pressure on the Nigerian state. The paper has seen these two as terrorist groups but has attempted to bring out the differences between these two terrorist organisations that has placed Nigeria under siege.

The way out? I agree totally with the tenets of the countries involved in the global war against terrorism that you cannot negotiate. With the religious terrorist groups like the Boko Haram, the battle line and divide are drawn between good and bad, evil and good and religious obligations of adherents which they hold as sacrosanct. The sharp demarcation and the value placed on both sides of the divide automatically rule out a basis for discussion and negotiation. The Islamic religious terrorist group is guided by the fact that the entire world is divided into two houses – *dar al harb* (the house of war) and *dar al Islam* (the house of peace). The injunction to either convert or destroy members of the house of war with any means available has added a cosmic dimension to the struggle and hence, negates any basis for negotiation except they are ready to convert. A great error has been done by the former administration in negotiating with the Niger-Delta militants.

In every federal arrangement, there are bound to be groups who believe that the socio-political and economic system or arrangement has not been fair to them. This is just human and natural. However, negotiating with leaders of such groups as a collectively is one of the ways of enhancing and ensuring that peace reigns. However, where the path of war has been trodden, and where it is not a collective but some few identifiable individuals, negotiating with such will only pave way for more shadow militant groups to emerge from the woodwork, all claiming to represent a marginalised group whose consents have not been sought or given. Negotiation implies some form of compromise and concession that grant the leaders some form of incentives which they may not have been able to access any other way. This is the situation with the many ethnic militant groups emerging almost daily from the Niger-Delta. The more the government is willing to negotiate, the more groups the government will have

to negotiate with, an unending circle of opportunists. This only leave one way out – force and greater force until the motivation and inducements to join such groups is made unviable and unattractive to future would-be members. This has played off tremendously with the Boko Haram insurgents and will play off with others be they political or religious insurgent groups.

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