

**IMPLICATIONS AND THREAT OF POLITICAL THUGGERY TO SUSTAINABLE
DEMOCRACY: A PERSPECTIVE ON BAYELSA STATE, NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper deliberates on the ugly occurrence of political thuggery in the politics of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. It censoriously examines the causes for the prevalent incidences of political thuggery before, during and after general elections and even re-run elections in most cases. The paper recognized unemployment, seat tight syndrome, weak internal democracy, poor political education and socialization, godfatherism, and money politics, as major causes of political thuggery, and the fact that they pose negative implications to democratic sustainability in Bayelsa State. These reasons have mainly reinvigorated authoritarianism amongst political leaders at different heights. This has resulted in the imposition of candidates for several elective offices by powerful cabals within political parties, using thugs to force and instill fear in the majority of party members. Political thuggery is a serious threat to development of democracy in Bayelsa State in particular and Nigeria in general; as it frightens credible candidates from active participation in democratic process leading to the breeding of unqualified and thugs to occupy positions they don't deserve or qualified for. This has also increase militarization of the political space with the consequent proliferation of small and sophisticated arms, ammunition and other dangerous weapons purposely for acts of thuggery. This has also resulted into many unresolved politically motivated assassinations across the state and nation at large, which diminishes the country's evolving democratic culture.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Godfatherism, Political, Sustainability, Thuggery

INTRODUCTION

Political thuggery in Nigeria politics is a devastating phenomenon (Kristine, Keith, Jose and Simrin, 2014). It has brought about the loss of lives and properties with socio-political and economic consequences. This phenomenon is characterized by crisis, conflict, dispute, rebellion, violence and even war which affect political developments especially democratic sustainability (Mbaya, 2013; Okpako and Okolo, 2020; Okolo and Etekepe, 2014). The phenomenon has become detrimental to democratic sustainability in Nigeria Bayelsa State inclusive. These thugs move mostly in organized groups victimizing, terrorizing, intimidating, and injuring not only politicians but also innocent individuals (Njoku, 2012; Allen and Okolo, 2018). The menace is responsible for poor political culture as it results to death or poses deadly threats by deterring individuals from actively per-taking in political processes and routine socio-economic activities within the country (Egwu, 2011).

Political thuggery and election violence has been defined differently by different scholars. As observed by Abubakar (2015), political thuggery refers to the activities of thugs connected with stealing, killing, kidnapping, rudeness, victimization, intimidation, and harassment. These manners affect peace, harmony and mutual co-existence among groups in their respective communities (Chemers, 2002; Okolo, 2021). If politics is criminalized through thuggery, right people who are the observers of good values tend to be scared and keep away from political processes. This suggests that political thuggery and election violence is a violent behaviour affecting political culture and other political processes in Bayelsa and Nigerian politics.

Similarly, Mbaya (2003) maintains that thuggery is a process of using extra-judicial means in the course of the contest for or in exercising political power including intimidation, harassment, assassination, blackmail, and arson; for Mbaya (2003) physical and psychological attacks could not help to ensure sustainable peace and security within any democratic system like Nigeria. He further believed that attributes of sponsoring thugs are due to the fact that the Nigerian politics is characterized by rigging, and violence under the manipulation of the few

leaders to get and continue holding political powers by all means which could not assure sustainable democracy in the State and the country at large (Okpako and Okolo, 2020). Hence, this work sees political thuggery as the act of intimidating, victimizing, terrorizing, kidnapping and robbing the targeted or innocent individuals on the streets, at homes and in the shops by thugs on political grounds during political, social and economic activities in their various communities.

The secondary source of data collection was adopted in this work. Official reports, online publications, magazines, journal, books, newspapers, articles and publications were consulted from various online libraries and centres of documentation and archives; these included the Department of Political Science; Niger Delta University; Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, National Open University of Nigeria. The literature review is basically relevant to political thuggery its implication and threat to democracy in Bayelsa State in particular and Nigeria at large.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the Ted Gurr's relative deprivation theory. It is preferred over other theories because it tries to combine the element of frustration-aggression thesis and the social learning thesis (Gurr, 1971). It is both economic and psychological in its approach. The central argument of relative deprivation emanates from the elementary psychology that if individuals perceive a gap between what they get and what they ought to get or deserve, they will become frustrated (Brown, 2001). Given the opportunity, such individuals are likely to become aggressive and therefore rebel.

Socio economic conditions of individuals and the society deteriorated because of economic policies of government such as the SAP. As a result, the welfare of youths became difficult leaving them in abject poverty and misery. Gradually the youths felt relatively deprived as citizens and this creates a gap between the deprived group and the state. Hence, Gurr suggests that 'the greater the intensity of deprivation, the greater the magnitude of violence' (Gurr, 1994). This perceived gap made the youths frustrated. In order to demonstrate

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their discontent to the community and the authorities, some youths align with thugs to participate in protests, riots, crimes, etc Gurr, (1994).

It argues that human beings justify their actions by calculating means and ends. In other words, humans freely choose their behaviour-whether conforming or deviant based on their sensible calculation but choice is directed towards the maximization of usefulness and gain. Also, this theory implies that the state is responsible for maintaining order and preserving lives and the common good through a system of laws. Thus, the states' rapidity, strictness or hesitation of punishment influences the choice or behaviour of the individual(s). Youths choose to involve in thuggery after considering personal factors such as joblessness, financial, poverty and material gains as well as situational factors such as influence and protection, power and authority (which includes protection from the arms of the law) of godfathers. The repercussion of this is that there is an increase in political thuggery because the gain of engaging in political thuggery is high and the cost is low and the youths are increasingly getting involved. The politicians' main target is the goal of winning elections and remaining in office, power and affluence simply for the sake of money and status and they do all it will take even with the use of thugs. The youths on their part, deliberately get involved in political thuggery so as to obtain the needs of life such as money, food and shelter, as well as other needs like status and excitement.

Thus, the candidates, the political office holders and political contenders, through the help of their godfathers are able cruise to political victory while the thugs use participation in political thuggery to gain money and their personal desires which were previously lacking or eluded them. Nigeria environment with increasing rate of poverty, hardship and unemployment this connection of usefulness and gain has developed into a lucrative business for the godfathers and eye-catching to the youths of this state and the nation at large. The Ted Gurr's relative deprivation theory, lays much emphasis on individual's involvement in criminal activities basically based on deprivation therefore, become frustrated and take to

political thuggery for expression of anger or goal-oriented purposes. They consider the price (risk) and profit (financial) gains and act accordingly.

Causes, Implications and Threat of Political Thuggery to Sustainable Democracy in Bayelsa State

This section addresses the causes alongside with implications and threat of political thuggery to democratic sustainability in Bayelsa state. Some of which include the followings:

Weak internal democracy

Weak internal democratic structures and processes within major political parties in the state results into the imposition of an unpopular candidate. This in most cases leads to decamping from one party to another in order to compete with the other perceived inferior aspirant. In addition, the masses rejection of the unpopular candidates often culminates into a “do-or-die” politics (Falana, 2009; Okolo and Inokoba, 2014).

Fabowale (2011) accurately observed that: In Nigeria, politics is not a game. It is war. The blood-stained pages of the nation’s political records, its do-or-die character demonstrated by thuggery, violence, and blackmail describes political behaviour of stakeholders (Fabowale, 2011). The do-or-die politics of the country is mainly responsible for the series of politically motivated assassinations across the nation of which many of them could not be effectively investigated and resolved.

The activities of thugs which are born out of weak internal democracy have not left state without a number of consequences. These include the following:

a) Breach of peace with attendant loss of lives and properties. Just recently, the nullification of the candidate of APC in the state lead to loss of lives and destruction of properties by the thugs, causing panic in the streets of the state, only for the intervention of the Nigerian Police Force that imposes curfew, the outcome would have been disastrous. Although it is on records that other miscreants’ sometime highjacks so called peace demonstrations, yet their activities in the state had claimed many lives and properties worth millions. This instilled a general fear and insecurity in the society.

- b) Emergence of unpopular and incompetent leaders. Weak internal democracy has been instrumental in disrupting the processes of free and fair election in so many parts of the country, Bayelsa State in particular; this at several occasions has led to the emergence of unpopular and incompetent candidates who could use thugs to his/her advantage. Political thuggery activities contributed immensely towards the weakening the democratic process of the state and the nation, as they lead to weak and incompetent candidates to attain or maintain their power in order to rule and govern the affairs of the state (Falana, 2009).
- c) Another implication of weak internal democracy is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons such as machetes, cutlass, pistols, etc. In this regard, Wunti (2012) observed that, “increasing level of poverty led to the formation of armed groups in the name of thuggery in order to actualize the interest of the ruling class. It is against this background that use of small arms proliferated in conflicts and violent acts perpetrated by political thugs, which really undermine peace and security in the state”.

Poor political education and socialization

Poor political education and socialization is one of the most important causes of political thuggery. It is a desideratum for enhanced political skills, knowledge and participation in a democratic setting. Political education and socialization are used in mobilizing the cognitive capacity and efficacy of individuals to process complex political event or information and engage actively in political activities. It is obvious that the absence of proper enlightenment of citizen on the tenets of the electioneering process and the need to avoid political thuggery (Groth and Monteiro, 2010).

Notably, educating potential voters, is however not INEC’s responsibility alone; political parties, civil societies, religious and traditional institutions, as well as the National Orientation Agency should also collaborate with the electoral body in this regard. The government should be willing to fund such organizations in the voter education campaign, from the grassroots level upwards. Jennings (2007) noted that the process of complaints where one’s name is omitted, the dangers of violence and rigging, how to protect their votes and how

to make votes count generally will be avoided. All information related to the elections should be made known in advance for the betterment of the exercise. The implications of poor political socialization and education thus is multidimensional, as it is not limited and/or restricted to political thuggery but also causes political violence and other political vices in the state (Groth and Monteiro, 2010; Mbaya, 2003).

Godfatherism

Godfatherism is another phenomenon that has given rise to political thuggery in Bayelsa State. The scope of this phenomenon is fairly high in Nigeria. Godfather politics has manifested in Kwara, Borno, Oyo, Anambra and Bayelsa states and even at the federal level. At the state's level, godfathers have installed their godsons into political offices and have literally held these states hostage. The import of these godfathers installing their godsons into political offices is that those the people want to represent them may not have a chance in electoral contests. A few of the self-importance of these godfathers will bear this position out. For example, self-acclaimed godfather of Anambra politics once postured "I am the greatest godfather in Nigeria because this is the first time an individual single handedly put in position every politician in the state" (Olarinmoye, 2008).

Similarly, the late strong man of Ibadan politics once delightedly postured; "Predominantly, I dominate the political affairs of this state. All the governors that have won never did so without my contribution and influence, it is a known fact and it has always been so before now that if you pass through me, you would get anything you want in politics. So, if I say I dominate politics, I do" (Adedibu, 2007). As argued elsewhere in any polity where godfathers hold sway, the first casualty is free choice (Egwemi, 2007b; 2009a). This is to the level that the masses are not in a place to determine who represent them since this is at the impulses of the godfather. For the avoidance of any uncertainty, the godfather has a lot of resources which he can use to impose his will on the masses (Efebeh and Okolo, 2016). These include, according to Ayoade, political connections, security, antisocial behavior and money or access to money (Agbaje, 2006). As we have stated, these resources give the godfathers the

feeling that they are above the law and so they become daring and unrestrained (Egwemi, 2007).

It is to be noted that, corrupt politicians, in most cases sponsored by mafia-like “godfathers”, openly mobilized gangs of thugs to terrorize ordinary citizens and political opponents and to stuff or steal ballot boxes. The police were most at times present during such instances but frequently turned a blind eye or, at times, participated in abuses. In other places elections basically did not take place, yet the electoral commission reported ruling party victories with high voters’ turnout.

Money Politics

The love of money in Nigeria’s politics is one of the major causes of political thuggery in the state and the country. A lot of money is been invested to secure political offices, the purchase of forms, the hiring of crowds, transportation of hired crowd to and fro the party secretariat, hotel bill, feeding and other untold expenses, they also employ the services of thugs to guarantee the realization of their political desires either by fair or crook means. A veteran politician once said “what is bad within the political system that we operate today is the criminal use of money; people are paid these days for coming to a party convention”. This, according to him, is a sad development (Ogunkua, 2011).

Anifowose cited in Salarni (1984) has stated that violence has been used by groups seeking power, by groups holding power, and by groups in the process of losing power. Indeed, politics appears to be the most lucrative business in contemporary Nigerian society. In view of this, some persons who occupy political offices make extensive use of thugs to sustain their power irrespective of the wishes of the majority of the people. The political godfathers as well sustain their influence and demands on their sponsored candidates through the use of thugs. In Anambra state during the era of Governor Chris Ngige, his disagreement with his political godfather, Chris Uba resulted in unprecedented destruction of government properties by thugs allegedly sponsored by Chris Uba. Achife, Maduforo and Mumeh (2004) reported that as a result of bad blood between the two men, and the failure of Abuja to reconcile them, thugs

laid siege to the state for more than a week and continued their mission of terror and destruction unhindered, and eventually taking the mayhem to the country areas. They noted that the governor's office, the seat of power was not spared in the orgy of violence unleashed by the rampaging thugs.

Nigerian political figures employ socio-economically susceptible youths as thugs to disseminate the anti-social, undemocratic, criminal and illegitimate culture of violence, killing, kidnapping and ballot snatching. The political fathers or godfathers supply the thugs with guns, illicit drugs, political backing in most cases presence of conventional law enforcement agencies and failure of a thug to carry out their command or disloyalty by a thug, can earn him or his family members a very serious trouble, pain or even death. During the recruitment and training process, drugs and rituals are often involved (Ali, 2014). The political thugs are often offered/given financial and material gratifications with protection which includes protection from punishment by the law. These gratifications can be life-time promises which are sometimes extended to thugs' family members. On the basis of these fulfillment which the thugs have weighed above the risk of being caught and punished by the law, they then engage in thuggery. The political elites play the role of political godfathers who control power, wealth and influence, most of whom are state elites.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Political thuggery has been a part of the Nigerian political process especially before, during and after elections. This is because of the self-centeredness, greediness for money and power, and materialism of the political elites who have constituted themselves into godfathers. As a result, there is usually a breakdown of law and order, loss of lives and destruction of properties before, during and after elections. Also, election results especially that of governorship elections have been seen not to be free and fair even when declared to be so. The presumed criminal activities of this politicians, majorly through the use of thugs has yielded success for

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them, therefore, many Nigerians have come to believe that it is only the use of political thugs or criminalized form of politics that can bring about access to economic power and political positions/offices. On the other hand, the youths become willing tools in other grab the opportunity through they being used by the politicians or godfathers irrespective of the risks and changes involved because of indissoluble situation of unemployment, poverty and hardship.

The Nigerian Bureau of Statistic recently revealed that unemployment moved from 1.9 million to 9.9% in the third quarter of last year 2019. The Nigerian youths have lost sureness in the state and are taking to violence and political thuggery as means of livelihood better still as a career. They longer have no trust in the state and so cannot leave their future in its hands. As a consequence, political thuggery which ought to be an unlawful success opportunity construction is seen and increasingly accessed as a legitimate means or structure. The desperate political godfathers who initiated this phenomenon in their voracious selfishness, greed and covetousness for political positions and offices, power and wealth, continue to encourage and tolerate the illegitimate culture of thuggery as an institutional goal to success. The ever-increasing culture of political violence in Nigeria's democratic political process is partially credited to lack of enforcement of the electoral law which forbids people from engaging in electoral malpractice or disruption of the electoral process through application of unlawful force or any other criminal act. To further buttress the conclusion of this paper, Iriekpen observed that most of the Election Petition Tribunals set up to consider cases arising from General Elections most times wind down their sittings, yet most tribunals did not exercise the power conferred on them to order for the trial of electoral offenders in elections.

In view of the above, most electoral offenders, including thugs were not prosecuted. This may encourage such offenders and inspire them to engage in such acts more boldly in future elections. Also, given the preceding, this paper recommends a more crucial, frantic and aggressive work to mitigate youth unemployment that will go beyond youth empowerment

and skill acquisition. The government and private sectors should concentrate more on job creation, political education and socialization. Finally, we recommend that the political offices be given less relevancy, the immunity clause and other priority shielding them from public scrutiny be further reviewed. Salaries, take home allowances of this political office holders is one of the major cause of the problem in our society today, if political offices are given the same salaries and allowances given to the civil servants and independent institutions are put in place to checkmate and prosecute corrupt office holders political thuggery will become the thing of the pass, less take home allowances and salaries will discourage hiring of thugs, godfatherism, sit tight syndrome and politics for political gains.

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