

OIL AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CONFLICTS IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The activities that are involved in oil exploration and production in Nigeria have brought about both an increase in wealth to the country and negative environmental consequences to the Niger Delta area. Over the years, the Nigerian state has been struggling to take advantage of the country's huge wealth from petroleum in order to address the challenges of development in the country. Materials for the study are sourced from secondary data and are subjected to textual analysis. Theoretically, Marxist class analysis is adopted. It is the issues of poverty and lack of infrastructures in the oil producing areas that engender the political problem of resource control in Nigeria. The politics of resource allocation basically arose from the issue of how to share the revenue accruing from oil resources. Accordingly, the paper interrogates the interface between revenue sharing formulae in Nigeria, the prevalence of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta and the emergence of agitations by the militant groups often associated with violent attacks on oil companies and their installations. On this basis, the paper underlines the political and economic issues that are involved in the distribution of oil wealth in Nigeria and how it affects the masses in the Niger Delta. To ginger lasting solution to the crisis in the Niger Delta, the paper points to the need for the Nigerian government to ensure that necessary measures are put in place to take care of environmental degradation, and in addition recommends that the fundamental issues of fairness and equity be put into consideration in the distribution of economic resources, not only to the people in the Niger Delta but to all the Nigeria citizens.

Keywords: Conflict, Political economy, Militia, Niger-Delta, Transnational oil companies

Introduction

Nigeria became an oil producing country in 1958 following the discovery of oil in commercial quantity at Oloibiri in part of Niger Delta area. Since that period oil production has been very crucial to the economic development of Nigeria. This is because it has been estimated that oil contributes about 50% of Nigeria's GDP, 95% of foreign exchange earnings and 80% of all budgetary revenues (Ibeanu, 2007). Also, apart from assisting the Nigerian government in meeting its domestic needs, oil has placed the country in a significant position at the international level. Based on this, Nigeria is a member of Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC); and in fact the fifth largest producer of crude oil in OPEC.

However, it needs to be stated that oil exploration and production activities in Nigeria are carried out through joint venture agreements between the Nigerian government as represented by the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC) and the major oil Transnational

Companies (TNCs) such as Shell, Chevron-Texaco, ELF Aquitane, TotalFinaElf, Exxon-Mobil, Eni-Agip etc. Central to the understanding of the basis of the conflict in the Niger Delta area are the issues of oil production, environmental degradation, lack of infrastructures, poverty, unemployment among the youth etc. In addition to this, the political elite in the oil producing communities have considered the revenue allocation arrangement in the country as grossly inadequate to take care of the needs of the Niger Delta area that generates the larger chunk of the revenue for the state.

The demonstrations and protests by Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), under the leadership of human and environmental activist, late Ken Saro Wiwa, gradually led to the proliferation of other ethnic militias groups in the Niger Delta. What started as a form of peaceful protests against the Nigerian state and oil companies over the issue of environmental degradation later escalated to a deep crises situation that pitched the armed ethnic militias against the Nigerian government security forces. The response of government security forces to the attacks on oil installations and pipelines by the militants usually come in the form of total clampdown and sometimes through extra judicial killings (Aghalino, 2006). In recent years, the Niger Delta area has attracted attention both locally and internationally due to incessant conflicts. It is the area that produces the petroleum that generates substantial revenue for both the Nigerian state and transnational oil companies. Following the escalation of ethnic militias insurgency, the government of late President Umar Musa Yar'adua, accorded the issue of security in the Niger Delta a priority position in his Seven Point Agenda. Based on this, President Umaru Musa Yar'adua proclaimed an amnesty package for the militants. The amnesty, however, was based on the conditions that the militants should surrender their arms and be ready to stop fighting in the creeks. The deadline given for the cease-fire was 1st October, 2009.

The paper is divided into six sections. Section one is the introduction, which is followed by section two that discusses framework of analysis. Section three touches on perspectives on the Niger Delta crisis. Section four focuses on implications of the crisis on Nigerian economy. Section five dwells on state response to the demand for resource control in the Niger Delta and section six concludes the work.

Framework of Analysis

In this study, the Marxist class analysis approach is adopted for the purpose of theoretical framework. The starting point is that political economy has an exceptional role in providing the theoretical grounding for the goals, tasks and methods in the revolutionary struggle of the masses. This idea was developed by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels as a profound expression of the important interests of the working class and of all other working people, which coincide with the progressive development of the productive forces (Marx, 1977). Thus, the intricate dialectical pattern of exploitative relationship between the owners of capital and the labour is better understood through the Marxist analysis. According to Gana (1985:77) political economy is based on “the fusion, both analytically and empirically, of the economic, political and social spheres, and of the determination of these spheres by the relations of production in a given society” (in Roberts, 1999:13). This implies that in the Marxist tradition the economy is the sub-structure on which other super structures like political, social, legal, religious etc are built.

In the Marxist postulation, human society can exist only by producing material goods. As they produce these goods, human beings enter into definite relations but these are only a part of the wide range of relations into which they enter in the process of social production. Social production has two aspects; the first is man's interaction with nature, which is the process of labour. This consists in purposeful human activity intended to modify and adapt the objects of the environment for the purpose of satisfying human needs. Secondly, social production is the whole range of economic relations between human beings which take shape in the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of material goods. Essentially, the interaction between the forces of production and the social relations of production determines the level of development in a society (Otite, 2008). In the process of social production, human beings enter into economic relations, known as relations of production. If the means of production are held as private property, the relations of production will reflect the relation of domination and subjugation, which explains the relations of exploitation. In other words, private ownership of the means of production is seen as the economic basis of exploitation of man by man (Khudokomov, 2005).

This foregoing explanation vividly captures the picture of capitalist societies in general. In the case of Nigeria, both the state apparatus and oil resources are being controlled by the capitalists to the detriment of the masses. In any capitalist social formation, the privilege few individuals own and control state resources to the detriment of the majority of the people. How does this apply to the situation in Nigeria? Is the exploitative tendency of the capitalist class in the oil industry in Nigeria affecting or pushing the various militant groups to revolt against the state and the oil Transnational Companies (TNCs)? Is this a foundation for class struggles to ensue?

Perspectives on the Basis of the Conflict in the Niger Delta

The historical accounts of the Niger Delta crisis can be conveniently linked to the economic importance of the region. As it has been mentioned elsewhere, the Niger Delta area has enormous oil and other resources that generate wealth to the Nigerian state and oil transnational companies. However, the people of the Niger Delta region have suffered years of neglect due to environmental degradation and lack of infrastructures. Indeed, the political economy of the Niger Delta area is very central to the understanding of the nature and dimension of the spates of crises that have engulfed the region both in the distant past and in recent years. It is perhaps for this reason that Pike (2006:1) argues that:

Although many observers of the Southsouth think primarily of youths invading oil company properties when they think of conflict there, in fact the roots of Southsouth conflicts lie deeper in history and in the contemporary social circumstances of the area. Contemporary history of the Delta can be summarized as economic decline and broken promises.

Dating back to the pre-colonial period, the Niger Delta had been the source of supply of slaves to the European slave traders who used the coastal location in the area as route to ship their commodities to North America and Europe. Also, the area was known for the supply of palm oil, timber and other resources to the European merchants. It was because of the economic

importance of the area that the British colonialists developed interest and subsequently conquered the region. The establishment of colonialism, which came about as a result of use of force against the natives brought about massive exploitation of the resources in the area (Aghalino, 2006).

In addition, just before Nigeria's independence, the region had to contend with other fears. Against this back drop, it was the fear of continued domination of the minority ethnic groups by the majority ethnic groups that led the people in the Niger Delta as well as minorities in other places in Nigeria to demand from the colonial government some form of political and constitutional arrangements that would safeguard their interests in the post colonial Nigerian state. This led to the setting up of Willink Commission of 1957/1958. It was claimed that the Commission did not adequately address the demands of the minority groups. According to Suberu (1996:19): nevertheless, the minorities Commission's proposals fell short of the demands of the minorities, or of their objective needs as structurally disadvantaged segments of the federation. The Commission would appear to have underestimated the ideological and political potency of the separate state movement.

From the above, it can be stated that the genesis of the problems in the Niger Delta can be traced back to colonial era. This is because the British colonialists bequeathed a political structure that put the minorities in a disadvantaged position, as far as power structure is concerned. This is because like in many Third World countries, the control of political power by people from a particular ethnic group determines their access to economic resources. As such, immediately after independence, the people of the Niger Delta started the demand for control over their resources from the Nigerian state. For instance, in 1966, Isaac Adaka Boro led a rebellion against the federal government when he mobilized some youths and declared for the Niger Delta Republic, with full right to control its resources. This is known as 'Boro twelve day uprising' (Roberts and Oladeji, 2005; Aghalino, 2006). However, the combined forces of the Nigerian army and police were used to quench the crisis and subsequently stopped the secessionist movement.

The struggle for resource control in the Niger Delta area received wider attention and publicity in the 1990s, when Ken Saro Wiwa formed the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). The major target of the organisation was to fight against environmental degradation occasioned by oil exploration and exploitation activities in the Ogoni land. It also sought for both political and economic (resource) control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people (Roberts, 1998; Aghalino, 2006). However, in 1995 the Nigerian government executed Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other environmental activists for an alleged role in the killing of some Ogoni Chiefs. The action of the military government of General Abacha, in these killings was condemned by local and international media and organizations.

In the recent past, there were activities of many militant groups in the Niger Delta. These include Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Coalition for Militant Action (COMA), Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality in the Niger Delta (MOSIEND), the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), the Ijaw National Congress (INC), the Itsekiri General Assembly (IGA), the Urobo Union (UU), the Chikoko Movement (CM) etc (International Crisis Group, 2006). These groups as well as others have been championing the agitation for resource control in the Niger Delta region. To this extent, it has been stated that the recent 'Nigerian oil crisis' that culminated into

serious uprisings in the Niger Delta began in 2004. This was the period when NDPVF group threatened attacks on oil companies and their facilities. Subsequently, Shell company responded by evacuating 235 personnel from its oil fields (Pike, 2006).

The unfolding development led to series of attacks on oil facilities by other militant groups. However, following the implementation of Amnesty programme there was cessation of activities of militant groups in the Niger Delta. But with the inauguration of the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari, there were renewed attacks on oil pipelines and companies in the Niger Delta. In most cases, the attacks were carried out by the newly emerged militant groups like Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), Niger Delta Greenland Justice Mandate (NDGJM) etc. For instance, it was reported that NDA carried out attacks on two oil companies, namely, Nigerian Agip Oil Company (NAOC) and Aiteo Group in Bayelsa state (*ThisDay*, 29 May, 2016: 8). Additionally, the group carried out attacks on oil pipelines belonging to Shell multinational oil company in Delta state (*ThisDay*, 02 August, 2016: 1). There no doubt that the conflict in the Niger Delta has bearing on lack of development in the area. Based on this, Ighodalo (2006:317) posits that “the crisis and conflict in the Niger Delta has got to a boiling point as a result of years of neglect of environmental safety measures by oil multinationals.” This signifies that the more the masses in the Niger Delta feel a sense of marginalisation in the scheme of things in their area, the more they engage in violence so as to call to attention the plight of the suffering people. It is the consisted and unabated attacks on oil companies’ facilities by the militants in the Niger Delta that led the Nigerian government to initiate dialogue with the various groups in the region.

Implications of the Conflict on Nigerian Economy

Basically, the Niger Delta crisis has serious consequences on social, economic, environmental/ecological and political matters in Nigeria. To this extent, the crisis has succeeded in altering the level of oil production in the country and other business activities were negatively affected. The various activities of militant groups that engaged in attacks on oil pipelines and other facilities, kidnapping of oil workers as well as some influential individuals for ransom have serious implications on the overall political economy of the Nigerian state.

In the first place, the crisis in the Niger Delta has brought about many socio-economic consequences both to the people in the area and the Nigerian government. For example, a number of people have been displaced from both their homes and working places as a result of the conflict. Also the act of kidnapping of foreign workers as well as government officials portends a situation of insecurity in the country. In addition, due to the crisis in the Niger Delta, illegal transactions of oil have been on the increase. According to reports by International Crisis Groups (2006: 7):

Oil theft is also rampant in the Delta. This practice, known locally as “bunkering,” takes its name from the technical terms for loading crude oil into a tanker. Illegal bunkering ranges from the artisanal, in which ordinary citizens cut holes in pipelines to siphon off some of the oil through the illicit of entire tankers, with profits accruing to influential individuals, including local politicians and community chiefs, leaders of militant groups and youth gangs, oil company staff and senior military officers.

From the above, it can be discerned that a number of individuals have been benefiting from the crisis by making cheap money. The politics that is involved in this circumstance is that some individual beneficiaries of oil bunkering may not want the Niger Delta crisis to end. It is perhaps for this reason that it was alleged that some elites in the country were responsible for supplying small and light weapons or arms to the militants so as to engage in violent attacks. The consequence of this was to introduce some elements of criminal activities in the area all in the name of fighting against environmental degradation.

The economic consequences of the Niger Delta crisis have also been recorded. At the height of the crisis, the various oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region had recorded low productivity or stopped operations due to the crisis. For example, according to reports from the *Daily Trust* (9th August, 2007: 4):

In the years 2007, Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC), estimated that it was unable to produce 477,000 barrels of oil per day adding up to 100,179,000 barrels of oil from January to July of the same year. According to reports the amount of barrels when computed into currency is equivalent to \$7.4billion (N 95 trillion) by SPDC alone.

The implication of this is that Shell Petroleum Company and others in the industry, as well as the Nigerian state were losing large amount of revenue due to the crisis. In addition to this, it was reported by the International Crisis Group (2009:2) that in 2008, about 92 attacks were carried out on oil companies in Niger Delta region. This has negatively affected both the production and exports of oil in Nigeria. Accordingly, the reports further state that:

Crude oil exports have fallen to 1.6 million barrels per day (bpd) in March 2009, down from 2.6 million in 2006. The giant Shell Petroleum Development (SDPC) was most affected by the militants' attacks on oil installations and confrontations with the military: by March 2009, production from its onshore business had plunged to 300,000bpd, down from nearly one million before the crisis in the region escalated in 2004. The country lost at least \$23.7 billion to oil theft, sabotage and shut-in the first nine months of 2008, and about 1,000 people were killed within the period.

On a general note, the Niger Delta crisis has adverse effect on the image of Nigerian state. To this extent, as a result of the Niger Delta crisis the image of Nigeria was put at a stake (Saliu, 2010). Fundamentally, the image of a country affects how others in the comity of nations relate and transact business with it. Due to the insecurity in the Niger Delta many would be foreign investors were scared away from coming to the area to invest their capital resources. It is well known that business activities thrive in an atmosphere of peace and as such no reasonable person will invest in an environment that is crisis prone.

State Response to the Demand for Resource Control

The Nigerian state like other capitalist states normally adopts palliative measures to socio-economic problems affecting the people. This was particularly the case with the Niger Delta issue, in which successive governments since the decade of 1990s have approached the

challenge of demand for resource control and the attendant crisis in the region by setting up different commissions.

The first initiative put forward to address the growing agitation for resource control was the establishment of Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) by the regime of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida. With the creation of OMPADEC the federal government earmarked 1.5% revenue allocation from the Federation Accounts to take care of development of oil producing areas. After the take-off, the commission was faced with some problems. Apart from the complaint of inadequacy of funds for the commission by the stakeholders, the body was also confronted with administrative and political challenges over the composition of board members, which hampered its operations. As such, much could not be achieved by OMPADEC.

When the civilian administration of President Obasanjo came to power, it created the Niger Delta Development Commission (NNDC) to replace the OMPADEC. The NNDC was also charged with the responsibility of development of oil producing areas through the provision of essential services such as construction of roads, schools, hospitals etc for the oil producing communities. In addition, the federal government has enjoined the various oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region to complement government's effort through the provision of corporate social responsibilities. The contributions of some of the oil companies towards ameliorating the problem of lack of infrastructure in the area still remain very insignificant.

Furthermore, the Niger Delta crisis has political impact on the Nigerian state. Both in the past and in recent times the issue of control of oil revenue has been contentious in Nigerian politics. To this extent, the debate has always been what percentage should be given to derivation principle in the revenue allocation formula in the country. The proponents of sharing revenue on the basis of derivation hinged their position on what obtained in the 1960s when agriculture was the mainstay of the Nigerian economy and derivation was given 50% (Arowosegbe, 2005). It is on account of this reason that the people of oil producing states consider derivation principle as an important tool that could enable them to get more revenue from the Nigerian state. Based on this Dunmoye (2002:49) points out that:

The controversy over resource control between the Federal Government of Nigeria and the oil producing states, particularly the South-South states, has become a veritable litmus test for the Federation. The demand, which is spearheaded by the Governors of Akwa-Ibom, Obang Victor Attah and Delta James Ibori, respectively has virtually become a major subject of debate on the future of the Nigerian polity.

It was part of the protest against environmental degradation in the Niger Delta that the state governors in the region also supported the call for resource control by the oil producing states. The struggle over the control of oil revenue located in the offshore between the federal government and the state governors in the littoral states led to litigation in the Supreme Court. The aim was to determine which level of government has the right to oil resources located therein (Dunmoye, 2002). At the end, the Supreme Court verdict maintained that the federal government has the power to control oil resources located within the Nigerian territory, whether in the onshore or offshore. Therefore through the Supreme Court judgment at that time, the matter was laid to rest.

The 1999 constitution provides 13 percent for derivation in revenue allocation in the country. Even with this development, the people of the Niger Delta viewed the amount as inadequate and demanded for more from the federal government. This was demonstrated during the 2005 National Political Reform Conference (NPRC), where the representatives from the Niger Delta area demanded for 25 percent derivation from the federal revenue. For them, this should be gradually increased until when it reaches 50 percent. After series of debates it was agreed by the majority of participants in the Conference that 17 percent should be given to derivation. This therefore led the delegates from the Niger Delta area to stage a walk out from the Conference (Mimiko and Adeyemi, 2005). This was in protest of what they perceived as conspiracy from the rest of Nigerian people to deny them their demand.

The crisis situation in the Niger Delta was at its height when the Yar'adua administration was inaugurated in 2007. At the initial stage, President Yar'adua opted for the use of military force just like his predecessor did in order to deal with the increasing insecurity occasioned by the activities of militant groups. Right from inception, the Yar'adua administration showed a clear indication of interest in resolving the Niger Delta crisis. As such, the administration included the issue of security in the Niger Delta as one of the programmes to be pursued in the Seven Point Agenda (Ujo, 2009). As the government puts in place some initiatives that could bring about lasting peace to the region, the level of attacks by militant groups in 2008 spread to different locations, thereby making the whole of the Niger Delta to witness serious instability. The Nigerian government responded by using the military Joint Task Force (TJF) to quench the crisis. Based on this, International Crisis Groups (2009:3) states that:

The second half of 2008 witnessed an escalation of direct confrontations on land between the military joint task force (JTF) and the militants. The bloodiest fighting since the outset of the insurgency was sparked by a government raid on 13 September on three Rivers, State Villages – Soku, Kula and Tambia – in search of Furah Dogogo a Commander of a MEND affiliate groups. In response, MEND declared an oil war” the next day, pledging and flow stations and warning companies to withdraw staff from the region.

To many observers of events in the Niger Delta, the confrontation between the militants and Joint Task Force was unhealthy for mutual co-existence in a federal set up. This is because the crisis tended to take the form of warfare, which was capable of leading to ethnic annihilation since in the long run the federal military power might overpower the militants. It was part of the concern of Yar'adua's administration for respect for human rights and peaceful co-existence that the President sought for political solution rather than military solution to the crisis.

Therefore, in June 2008, the federal government announced the appointment of Professor Ibrahim Gambari, special adviser to UN Secretary General as the chairman of the proposed Niger Delta Summit. The Summit according to the government was aimed at bringing together stakeholders in the Niger Delta to discuss and proffer solutions to the lingering crisis in the area. This was rejected by some opinion leaders in the Niger Delta. Instead, the Federal Government set up a Technical Committee, comprising 45 members on 4th September, 2008. The mandate of the Committee was to recommend to the government how to resolve the crisis.

Part of the recommendation of the Committee was an amnesty package for the militant groups (International Crisis Group, 2009). This development was welcomed by the government and proclaimed amnesty to the militants.

By the terms of the amnesty, the militant groups were expected to stop fighting, surrender their weapons in exchange for monetary gratification. Based on this, each member of ex-militant groups would be paid monthly allowances of N 65,000 (sixty five thousand naira) as part of post amnesty programme (*Daily Trust*, 20th November, 2009:2). Given the nature of Nigerian state, it was claimed in some certain circles that the amnesty programme was being implemented in haphazard manner, particularly in delaying the payment of amnesty packages. This, especially in recent time has led to renewed threat of attack on oil installations by some militant groups like MEND, NDA, NDGJM etc. Since the assumption of office by President Buhari in May 2015, his administration has been making concerted efforts to meet and negotiate with the stakeholders in the Niger Delta so as to return the region to normalcy. As a demonstration of willingness to address environmental challenges, President Buhari flagged off the Clean-up of Ogoniland programme (*The Nation*, 09/10/2016:57). The Nigerian government embarked on the programme with the conviction that such an initiative will address the problem of militancy in the Niger Delta area.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper has been concerned with the issue of political economy of oil exploration/ production and crisis in the Niger Delta. Based on the foregoing discussion, it can be stated that the Niger Delta crisis represents class struggle between the oppressed masses in the region and the oppressive ruling class as represented by the state and oil multi-national companies. The situation of poverty, diseases and unemployment that the majority of the people in the Niger Delta were subjected to was responsible for the spate of violent protests.

However, in order to bring about a lasting solution to the crisis in the Niger Delta, there is the need for the Nigerian government to ensure that necessary measures are put in place to take care of environmental degradation that is occasioned by oil production activities. In addition, the fundamental issues of fairness and equity should be put into consideration in the distribution of economic resources not only to the people in the Niger Delta but to all the citizens in Nigeria. Furthermore, it is important that the Nigerian government should always compel oil companies that pollute the environment through oil spillage to bear the cost of cleansing the environment and pay compensation to the host communities whose farmlands are affected.

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