

## MILITIAS, VIGILANTES AND VIOLENCE IN SOUTH EAST AND SOUTH SOUTH NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR STABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

Nwachukwu Sunny Nnabuihe

and

Udumaga, C. C.

Department of Political Science,  
Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri,  
[sunnynwachukwunna@yahoo.com](mailto:sunnynwachukwunna@yahoo.com), +2348060626448

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.10379.82727

### Abstract

*South East and South South Nigeria have been associated with kidnapping, theft and violence since the last decade. The rate of insecurity and violence state repression has been enhanced and engendered an ever-tightening cycle of impunity. These geo-political zones have been characterized with rapacious violence, robbery and underground movement. The result showed that kidnapers and militias are members of the various vigilante groups. Most youth movement, gangsters, vigilantes among other vices transform into this clandestine activity group. The correlation between the social status of the kidnapers and militias from the response is evident that illiterate stouts predominate the membership of the kidnapers and militia. The findings showed that their modus operandi include impersonation in different forms; they often appear in disguise as military personal, market security operatives, and at time job seekers. The kidnapers result in self-help and self-governing, money and status driven culprit who venture into kidnapping. In conclusion, the nature of security network, the growing economic decline and the re-defined values in traditional institutions among others have devoid the values of the people in South East and South South Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Militias, Vigilantes, Kidnapping, Security, South East and South South, Nigeria

### Introduction

Nigeria is in the throes of a chronic security crisis. It is indicated by case of kidnapping, hostage taking, neighbourhood robbery and national frauds. It is also shown by records of rising crime, criminal violence, rising lawlessness in Nigeria. Alongside rising crime, kidnapping and violence has been the proliferation of small, large, and sophisticated weapons. There are armed groups, militia, roving groups and vigilantes that indulge in clandestine and nefarious activities in

Nigeria. These groups are purveyors of violence, atrocities, devastation and generations of crimes, lawlessness and securities. Though there have been numerous impulsion of violence in Nigeria, but the more frequent incidences and those with more fable fallacies have had the involvement of militias and vigilantes. They have taken their activities to Oscars. These groups have numerical strength in the South East and the South South. They are ubiquitous. They operated in families, communities, markets, banks, and churches. The militias and vigilantes were trust reflection of state weaknesses and in some cases state collapse. These groups substitute law enforcement agencies in crime detention and prevention. Though never skilled nor trained and often with criminal records, the vigilantes and militias assisted the police to fish out criminals that become a scourge to the citizenry. In most cases, they are empowered by state governments. They range from Bakassi, Massob, Egbesu, MOSSOP, MEND, Town Union security vigilantes, etc.

The existence of the vigilantes and militias are manifestations of weak, bad and declining institutional framework of good governance in the South East and South South Nigeria. They represent crisis of the state and governance as the militias and vigilantes are in some ways born out of a challenge to past and existing insecurity, robbery, executions, marginalization, inequalities and injustice that were perpetrated either by individual stakeholder or state apparatus. Hence, the existence of these groups is triggered by the persisting struggle for space reforms, youth liberation, gender equality and revolutionary change. In some ways they represent a challenge, opposition and counter valuing force to crimes in some or to the state and in some other ways a form of counter hegemonic struggle. And by implication, the militias and vigilantes are also in a way a struggle for self governance and empowerment in the context of weak, incompetent, corrupt and failed state (Abdallah, I. 1998).

The phenomenon may also be indicative of “bottom” or base pressure and grievances by those that were indiscriminately suppressed and repressed, subjugated and therefore not hitherto ventilated and have now become volatile or explosive. It indicates that the space for participation, deliberations, claims and contestation has been too limiting and stunted, conducted in a state of intrusive and totalizing agenda. With a limited public space, there has been an exit into the informal sphere, characterized with lack of social control, lawlessness, solitary and absence of rule of law. They are therefore an indication of the non

institutionalization or break down of the framework of rules, norms, ethos, ethics and morality.

Another school of thought sees militia, vigilantes and neighborhood crimes as a crisis of youth or an indication of huge youth problematic peculiarity. There is a growing pervasiveness of militias and violent culture, a negative youth culture and a general pervasion of youth autism. The vigilantes' youths are a huge representation of semi literate and unemployed youths, dismissed members of military or police force hence it is huge manifestation of negative youth culture of rebellion, exuberance, excesses, hedonism, unruliness, pervasion, criminal behavior and indiscipline. The operations of these groups which include kidnapping, hostage-taking and neighborhood operations have assumed alarming dimensions in the South East and South South Nigeria. These massacres and so-called scourge earth operations as planned by these vigilantes resulted in the complete extermination of many youths within these geographical zones. Serious cruelties were committed by these agents in their operations. The counter-insurgency strategy not only led to violation of basic human right but also these shaded crimes were suspected to be committed with intent and misery either for rituals purposes, cannibalism, sanitization of communities or money-driven. In the majority of killings by these agencies like vigilantes, Bakassi, Massob or the Niger Delta youth militants, there are evidences of multi acts of savagery which preceded, accompanied or occurred after the cold-blood deaths of the suspected victims. Dastardly acts surrounding these killings such as slamming the victims with machetes, throwing them alive into pits where already disposed corpses of suspected victims were undergoing processes; the amputation of limbs (either short or long sleeve); impaling of victims; killing of persons by covering them in petrol and burning them alive; the extraction and lynching of the victims in the sight seeing celebration of the public; the confinement of people who were far tortured in agony for days and other atrocious acts of these agencies prove their awry culture attitude and tendency to subsequently cause havoc. Unfortunately, irrespective of their counted evils, the perpetrators were applauded, inspire and tolerated by the public force.

The emergent disappearance, kidnapping, and neighbourhood robbery is a systematic practice and organized programs initiated as a secondment by these members after proscribing their institutions. The objective is to generate tension and insecurity perhaps to justify the need to recall these agencies who claimed to have come to sanitize the communities. Therefore, kidnapping and

neighbourhood robbery is a strategy to re-examine and re-think the usefulness of vigilantes and youth groups in the South East and South South Nigeria and possibly re-instate them. Unfortunately, this perpetrator of terrorism who were to provide security and succor to villages and communities graduate from kidnapping of peasants, social leaders, rich traders, members of religious communities and priests to politicians, their aged parents and expatriates that work with multi-national oil companies. If these agencies were not legally constituted, financed, recognized or tolerated at embryo, some nefarious and clandestine activities extended to the public perhaps would have been curbed or nipped in the bud. Instead, these common practices aimed at destroying individual dignity were tolerated by the public and sponsored by some state governments in the South East and South South for instance, Anambra and Abia states where these incidents are highly presently.

The people and government of these states were impressed and happy to associate with these unlawful groups. It became a source of employment, pride and honours to the youths. Their ladies who are materials and power-driven exchanged pleasantries with these boys. In fact, human right violations were enhanced formally by covert operations by the vigilantes in connivance and corroborations with the police and military. Most times, government supplies arms or approved use of arms to vigilante groups and at other times, these groups are assigned with official functions which include escort and bank guards. With these duties, it is obvious that government recognizes these bodies and often invites them for a *tete-a-tete*. The death squads, height of neighbourhood robbery and kidnapping that are presently in their alarming stages are feedbacks of activities of these groups.

These groups as I initially said were private individuals who by omission or commission enjoyed the tolerance and complicity of a state government for instance 'Bakassi'; Abia state government sponsored this body between 1996 - 2003. The same body exchanged pleasantries with the Anambra state government between 2000 - 2002. It is also recorded that crimes committed by these groups were consequent upon decisions by the respective state governments where these groups domiciled to proscribe them. There was a well-informed presumption that these groups were state agents. There was also a well-informed presumption that these groups were used by political officials to fight their political opponents. Hence, it was given legal teeth or a perceived but neglected action.

The gravity of this conclusion is accentuated by the facts that some of these violations such as arbitrary executions, forced disappearances and kidnapping, hostage-taking were freely and at will carried out without state intervention. It is rather absurd that some state governors in these evils axes ask for amnesty for these youths. The courts were incapable of investigating, trying, judging and punishing even a small number of those responsible for the most serious human right crimes or providing protection for the victims (Ainfowose, R. 1982).

From the argument posted, it is rather obvious that kidnapping, hostage-taking and neighbourhood robbery is the second dimension of clandestine activities perpetrated by erstwhile groups – vigilantes, militias and youth groups; that is to say with evidence that kidnapping, hostage-taking and neighbourhood armed robbery are secondment, alternately participated by the youth altruists, vigilantes, gangs and cultists who had enjoyed government tolerance. The neighbourhood stealing and kidnapping has become very extensive and large scale since the abrogation of vigilantes and youth movements. There is a strong linkage between the present militia, kidnapping, cultists, and vigilantes and youth movements. The boundaries between them may be fluid as one group could easily merge into the other. The cause of their foundation is either greed or privileges. The sources of their arms acquisition is traced to state apparatus who either engage them in edging their political opponents or assuage with maximum security which after the exercise they become beneficiaries of those weaponry.

It is therefore not an ideal surprise, the security crisis and phenomenon of militias and vigilantes have been accentuated since democratization process in the country. Rising crime, violence and the phenomenon of militias and vigilantes have associated with transformations into democratic rule. In essence therefore, the phenomenon represents major contradictions in Nigeria's political life. For example, democracy was expected to resolve the state, government and development crisis, owing to its institutional behavior and value disarticulation, it has actually accentuated in some ways conflicts and violence even if it merely by their greater generation and expression (Robert, N, F. 2000).

### **Comparative Research Questions**

The incidence of activities of militias and vigilantes in the South East and South South Nigeria and the numerous crises that they have thrown up raises numerous comparative questions.

1. What situations, contexts, structures and processes such as governance system, democratization and transitional patterns, economic conditions and the configuration of power and hegemony undergird the emergence of the vigilantes and militias in the South East and South South Nigeria?
2. What are the pattern and trends of the vigilantes and militias in their formation, structures, operations, roles, activities and social based confrontation in Nigeria?
3. Are there commonalities and divergence in the manifestations, activities, social bases, operations and consequences of the vigilantes and militias?
4. What patterns and trends, commonalities and divergences exist in the relations to and management of the phenomenon by political and civil society, the state, traditional power structures, the popular classes, the security agencies and the business elites?
5. What emerges and can be constructed as the casual factors undergirding crime and violence, the phenomenon of vigilantes and militias and their tendencies, operational modalities roles and relational patterns?
6. What insights, perspectives, lessons, ideas and knowledge can be comparatively derived and drawn for the management, strategizing direction and re-engineering of the phenomenon in Nigeria?

### **Research Objectives**

The objectives of the research are to;

1. Examine the phenomenon of vigilantes and militants grouping in South East and South South Nigeria; the reason for their emergence, their social base of support, the nature of their armament, training, organization, leadership, and objectivities.
2. Identify how the character, nature and practice of the Nigerian states; the configuration of identity power or hegemony, democratization, economic crisis and other factors impinge on or underlie the phenomenon of vigilantes and militias.
3. Examine the political, social and security roles of the vigilantes and militias groupings particularly as it related to crime control, identity based claims, threats and contentions.

4. Examine the nature of state and state agency responses to the vigilantes and militias and the consequences for democratic credibility security and stability.
5. Identify the problems and consequences of vigilantes and militias operations on intergroup relations, national stability, security, internal refugee crisis, development of identity enclaves in urban centers, democratic governance, accountability elections and the national question.
6. Prescribe policy recommendation and prospects for the management of the vigilantes and militias and particularly the re-engineering of a demilitarized, non-violent, ordered rule based claims, contentions, operations and roles for vigilantes and militias.

### **Hypotheses**

1. The nature, character, practices and policies of the post colonial state officials in Nigerian underpin the phenomenon of vigilantes and militias
2. Vigilantes and militias are manifestation of state and democratic weakness in Nigeria.
3. The support base of the vigilantes and militias in Nigeria is abroad and cut across the elites and popular classes.
4. Current state policies, management and responses to vigilantes and militias activities intensify the phenomenon.

### **Research Methodology**

**Method Of Investigation:** A theoretical framework would be developed after a more comprehensive review of different theoretical perspectives and literature on violence, identify conflicts, vigilantes and militias; how they are spawned, the linkages with the nature and behavior of the state and particularly state weakness and crisis, economic crisis, democracy and how they are or can be managed. The conceptual and theoretical frameworks will feed into the development of the method of investigation (Yakubu, S. A. 1999).

There approaches would underline our analysis. The institutional approach relates to the analysis of the internal organization, objective, linkage and performance of

the militia groups while the transactional method would enable a focus on the relations between militias groups and civil groups, political society and state institutions. The case study method would enable an in-depth focus and analysis of the phenomenon and their encounters with the state and other groupings.

### **Data Source And Method**

The data for the research would be sourced from both primary and secondary sources. Because of the nature of the research objects (militias groupings) as it pertains to security, there would be less emphasis on direct contacts. Therefore, the main source of data would be secondary. The secondary source would be reports, documents, newspapers and magazines. Content analysis would be utilized to objectively and systematically sift relevant data from the secondary.

The primary source is the questioner with officials of the state, civil groups and political society, opinions leaders, members and those who have had experiences or contacts with the militias. The in-depth interviews would be divided into three categories; (1) members and those with experiences with the militias; (2) officials/leaders of relevant state agencies, civic society and business groups and (3) relevant opinions leaders and leaders of political society. Different in-depth interview schedules would be designed for three categories.

The case and the entire data search would be directed at the nature and character of the vigilantes' militia groups, their actions and responses to claims and contentions and the underlying causes of militia formation and the objectives, organization, activities, roles, operations, methods and civil groups and state institution and recent violent conflicts conducted by vigilantes and militias against the state and other ethnic groups would be provided (Sambo and Bayero, 2002).

Data analysis would be quantitative and qualitative. The later would pertain to the identification and discrete categorization of the views and key statements to provide arguments, insights, and comparisons. Data gathered from the interviews would be ranked and quantitatively analyzed on the basis of insight and indicators which would be developed in the conceptual and theoretical analysis.

### **Significances**

Kidnapping and violence in South East and South South are manifestation of weak democracies and development. At the same time, they constitute the greatest threat and undermining factor to democratic consolidation and development

given the status of legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, the conduct and performance of new leaders and the economic performances of the new democracies (Diamond, 1988). Furthermore, the phenomenon also great challenge in terms of how they can be managed democratically without dissipating democratic credentials. As a matter of facts, the task of maintaining civil order, public safety and security have become quite huge.

Kidnapping and insecurity are alienating the citizenry, eroding democratic credentials, credibility and legitimacy, destroying civil order and paralyzing governance (Magission, 2001).

1. Who are the kidnapers and militias, what are their social bases, how are they recruited, armed, trained and maintained and what are the dynamics of their formation, operations, interventions interactions and confrontations?
2. Who or what are the forces behind the formation, funding and organization of the militia groups?
3. How do some civil groups get transformed into kidnapping and militias groups and what activated vigilantes and militia groups to transform into active agents of kidnapers and other warfare?
4. Are militia self help, self governing and popular responses to crime? What perverts vigilantes group into agents of crime, lawlessness, violence and insecurity?
5. What roles do the political elites, retired military and paramilitary officers, the traditional power-structures, identify based associations and the popular classes play in the formation, operations, sustenance and activities of militia groups?
6. What is the attitude and reactions of the state, civil and political society, multinational, western national and the ordinary citizens to the militias?
7. How do militias relate to and impact on governance, accountability, democratic institutional, the behavior of state official, electioneering politics, elections, security, intergroup relations, state collapse or state weakness, democratic stability and democratic prospects?

**SAMPLE CHARACTERISATION**

S/N	Sample distribution	Male	Female	Total
1	Members of militias and vigilantes	50	50	100

2	Officials/leaders of state agencies	50	50	100
3	Opinion leaders of civil society	50	50	100
4	Business class	50	50	100
5	Civil servant	50	50	100
	Total	250	250	500
	Frequency distribution	50%	50%	100%

S/ N		NO	%
1	Who are the kidnappers and militia? a) Vigilantes b) Innate youths c) Discussed officers d) Party things	54 21 17 08	54 21 17 08
2	What is their social base? a) Graduate b) Illiterate/stouts c) Business men d) officers	20 46 21 03	20 46 21 03
3	How are they recruited? a) Vigilantes b) Body guard c) Cultism d) individual	42 25 30 03	42 25 30 03
4	What is their modus operandi? a) Operate in military uniform b) Market security operations c) Operate as armed robbers d) Job seeker	52 20 22 06	52 20 22 06
5	Who and what are the forces behind? a) Neighbourhood informant b) Police informant c) Traders d) Statement and title holders in the community	40 20 15 25	40 20 15 25

6	How do some groups get transformed into militia and kidnapping a) Club sponsors b) Irate village youths c) God fatherism d) Gangsterism	38 32 26 04	38 32 26 04
7	Are militia self-help, self-governing and popular to crime? a) Yes b) No c) Neutral	68 22 10	68 22 10
8	What lured vigilante groups into agents of crime, lawlessness and violence? a) Money b) Status c) State weakness d) Financial insecurity	58 21 20 01	58 21 20 01
9	What roles do political elites, retired military officers, and police officers, traditional rulers play? a) Supportive role b) Sponsored role c) Nonchalant d) Neutral	42 30 21 07	42 30 21 07
10	What is the attitude and reaction of the state, multi-national, and citizens? a) Very weak b) Moderately weak c) Inadequate d) Active	46 31 12 11	46 31 12 11

## Result

**Question 1:** Present the correlation between the identities of the tentative variables. It is evident from the result table that kidnappers and militias are members of the various vigilante groups. The other three variables are also positively but not significantly related with the identity of the variable.

**Question 2:** Present the correlation between the social status of the kidnappers and militias from the response it is evident that illiterate stouts predominate the membership of the kidnappers and militia. The other three options are positively but not significantly related to the variable.

**Question 3:** Exhibit that kidnappers are recruited through vigilantism through other variables are positively but not significantly related.

**Question 4:** Present and exhibit the role conflict in the modus operandi of the kidnappers. It is evident from the table that their modus operandi include impersonation in different forms; they often appear in disguise as military personal, market security operatives, and at time job seekers.

**Question 5:** Findings though not above the proportion which is 50% posit that neighbourhood informant intensify the wave crime of keeping and hostage taking in South East/South South Nigeria other items are positively but not significantly related to the variable.

**Question 6:** From the result table, some groups get transformed into militia and kidnapping through the club sponsors and village youths. However the transformation is less than 40% within the study area.

**Question 7:** The Militia self-help, self-governing and popular results to crime in the study area. The rate of crime from the self-help and self-governance of the Militia is above 68% from the statistics.

**Question 8:** Money is what lures vigilante groups into agents of crime, lawlessness and violence as indicated in the result table. The result shows that money is their motivational factor for crime in the study area.

**Question 9:** The political elites, retired military officers, and police officers, traditional rulers play supportive (42%) and sponsored (30%) role in the militias, vigilantes and violence in South East and South South Nigeria as presented on the result.

**Question 10:** The attitude and reaction of the state, multi-national, and citizens towards militias, vigilantes and violence in South East and South South Nigeria is very or moderately weak.

In the respective analysis, it is evident that youth movement, gangsters, vigilantes among other vices transform into this clandestine activity group. From the questionnaire, the kidnapers are self-help and self-governing, money and status driven culprit who venture into kidnapping and see it as richly endowed with milk and honey.

### **Discussion**

South East and South South Nigeria have generally been associated with kidnapping, theft and violence for the past 10 years, the rate of insecurity, violence state repression have been enhanced and engendered an ever tightening cycle of impunity. These geo-political zones have been characterized with rapacious violence, robbery and underground movement.

The character, nature, behavior, practices and performances of the citizens are with conflict, insecurity, hostility. This attitude has transformed the culture of the people into negativism, solitary and scavenging.

The state weakness has caused the rising wave of resistance from the outlaws, the use of non state apparatuses have equally undefined modus operandi of the suspects. At times one finds it difficult to identify or differentiate a kidnapper and other state security apparatuses. The nature of security network, the growing economic decline and the re-defined values in traditional institutions among others have devoid the values of the people.

### **References**

- Abdallah, I. (1998). Bush path to direction: the origin and character of the revolutionary united front in Sierra Leone. *Journal of modern African studies*.
- Ainfowose, R. (1982). *Violence and politics in Nigeria*. New York: Nok Publishers.

IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities. Vol. 7. No. 3. (2021)  
ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)  
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Tansian University, Umunya

Robert Nyemutu, F. (2000). *The state, accumulation and violence. The politics of environmental security in Nigeria's oil producing areas*, Ibadan: Nigeria Institute of social and economic research (NISER) monograph series 17.

Yakubu, S. A. (1999). *Managing ethnic pluralism through the constitution in Nigeria*. PEFS monographs new series, No. 7. University of Ibadan.

Zakariyau, S. Sambo and Abdullahi, A. Bayero (2002). *Can violent conflicts end in the force of poverty?: Some indicative evidence from Ilorin and kano*.