

DYNAMISM OF CIVIL UNREST AND METHODS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamism of civil unrest in Nigeria and the methods adopted in resolving them. The presence of civil unrest simply indicates that relations among people and government have soured and turned violent. This is usually due to unresolved minor disputes which now escalate into violent conflicts. The causes of social unrest in Nigeria are reasoned to be marginalisation, corruption, unemployment, poverty, hunger and deprivation, inequality, political manipulations, and of course, ethno-religious conflicts. Through the application of analytic method, the work finds that both the government and the subjects have often adopted violence as the commonest method either for suppression or for expression of grievances. The work, therefore, concludes that with the proper conceptualisation of Satyagraha and its complete employment to confront the forces of injustice, an egalitarian society based on the virtue of care, social justice and equality can be attained.

Keywords: Conflict, Resolution, Nigeria, Unrest, Religious, Political, Violence

Introduction

This is an excuse into how Nigerians have indeed conducted social and political struggles in the face of social menace such as injustice, marginalisation, corruption, unemployment, poverty, hunger and deprivation, inequality, political manipulations, and of course, ethno-religious conflicts. Many Nigerians who felt aggrieved have, on several occasions, resorted to self-help. Thus, self-help, jungle justice and repressive methods are fast becoming the expressive culture of grievances. The Nigerian experience of civil unrests, strikes, demonstrations and civil disobedience have largely been conducted with some measure of violence. Again, the government has employed the use of lethal force to repress some of the non-violent political activities. The implication of this is that both the government and the subjects have often adopted violence as the commonest method either for suppression or for expression of grievances.

Nigeria has experienced a lot of civil unrest ranging from the 1967 civil war to other civil disturbances such as Niger Delta agitation, the activities of

Independent People of Biafra, Boko Haram, cattle herdsman and several protests by labour and all the affiliate unions. The presence of civil unrest simply indicates that relations among people and government have soured and turned violent. This is usually due to unresolved minor disputes which now escalate into violent conflicts. In this part of the world, war has become the prevailing social institution and violence the foundational tenet of political culture. War has seeped into the very soul of this society, afflicting all it touches. Civil unrest is a kind of disorder that is caused by certain people who are disenchanted as a result of some perceived injustice and marginalisation. It can also be described as any public disturbance that may result to wanton destruction of lives and properties. In many cases, it is usually carried out as a form of protest against some socio-political ills in the society which consequently leads to the break-down of law and order. Consequently, the commonest forms of unrest which usually occurred in Nigeria are religious unrest, communal/ethnic unrest, labour unrest, political unrest and social unrest.

Though scholars like Gandhi, King Jr. and Rawls have contended that civil unrest and disturbances arise when a supposed peaceful protest turns riot, however, the object of civil disobedience is a deliberate violation of the law while absolutely displaying fidelity to the "law". This is committed in order to draw the attention of the authorities and the general public to perceived injustices in the policies of the state or the law. Rawls argued that "fidelity to law helps to establish to the majority that the act is indeed politically conscientious and sincere, and that it is intended to address the public's sense of justice" (1971, p. 322). However, it is argued that the civility, the morality and the effectiveness of civil disobedience is enveloped not just in obedience to the law but also on its emphasis on non-violence which has served as its philosophical underpinning. This is predominantly why it is being argued that Nigeria has not experienced full-blown civil disobedience because, several acts of what ought to be peaceful protests and demonstrations have often turned violent.

In driving home our point, we shall argue that Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha* gives credence to civil action in a democratic society. *Satyagraha* simply means soul force or truth force. Hence, *Satyagraha* is continuous search for truth and a grim determination to teach truth through the application of nonviolent direct action... (Aigbonoga & Nbeta 268). It adopts nonviolence as its method. Nonviolence, according to Gandhi, is of three levels i.e., nonviolence in thoughts, in words and actions (Gandhi 65). Nonviolence is a foundation of genuine search for truth and justice in human relationship.

Background to Civil Unrest in Nigeria

After the Nigeria civil war (1967-1970) that claimed thousands of lives and destruction of unquantifiable properties, the culture of violent destruction and repressive activities remains on the rise. Though Nigeria is not at war but the spate of violent activities going on in the country suggest that Nigeria is indeed a nation at war against itself. The secessionist agitation for the sovereign state of Biafra which arose as a result of feelings of injustice, marginalisation and feelings of insecurity of lives and the property of the Igbos by the government of Nigeria was largely prosecuted through the use of violence. In conceptualising the culture of violence in Nigeria on this attempted secession, Udoidem argues that “since the Civil War, Nigeria had lost its innocence and it was never to be the same again. The seed of eternal hatred had been sown...All that remained was and still is the memory of revenge” (Udoidem, 2000, p. 36).

The secessionist agitation for the “Independent Republic of Biafra” through the activities of IPOB, the mindless and soulless activities of Fulani cattle Herdsmen and the current activities of the NDA has further reduced the nation to the condition of unrest and environmental/social disturbances. Nigeria is at this time experiencing social upheaval, filled with rebellious groups and subversive activities. This simply shows that the expression of frustration through aggression and deliberate acts of violence has greatly suppressed the practise of undiluted civil disobedience in Nigeria. This is so because a call for social action presents an opportunity to vent anger arising from the dehumanising and agonising condition of an average Nigerian. However, the aggression which normally results to physical breakdown and even the death of the protesters is at the root of violent repression arising from the government’s intolerance of opposing voices. This could be seen through the 2012 “Occupy Nigeria” social struggle. The organised labour had called for total strike in rejection of subsidy removal whereby markets, schools, banks, petrol stations and offices were completely shut down. The directives recorded total compliance as protests, demonstrations, picketing and all forms of social actions resulted to consequent paralysis of economic activities. The insistence that the federal government reverts the pump-price through persistent street protests and demonstrations saw not less than 12 activists murdered by men of Nigerian police and military. Also, the Daily Post of May 30th 2016, reports the fiasco between the combined forces of MASSOP/IPOB and federal force which resulted to death and several degree of injuries to some of the protesters. The blame game that ensued between the federal force and the protesters as regards to who drew the first blood

diverted attention away from the fundamental issue that led to the agitation. The issue of equality in political appointments, justice as fairness and the right for self-determination were set aside on the altar of violent protest and demonstration, looting, arson, killings and ultimately the 'blame game'.

More so, the uprising in the Niger Delta assumed a dangerous and ferocious dimension. The violent activities of the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) in protesting the perceived marginalisation, injustice and lack of development of their land have serious implications for the nation's economy. One of the implications is that the violent activities of this group have almost crippled the nation's economy which is largely dependent on oil. Also, the blowing up of pipelines, oil-wells and pumping stations is contributing, in no small measure, to the spoliation of the environment and by extension, the destruction of the ecosystem. Here, again, we see the employment of violent method in protest against perceived social menace. It is also observed that instead of constructively and non-violently addressing the restiveness in this region, the federal government has visited the people of the region with suppression, repression and brutality. This approach, in part, has led to what Paki and Ebienu (2016) describes as:

The untold hardship and sufferings meted out to the entire Ogoni ethnic nationality in the 1990s which culminated in the execution of the amiable minority rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and other eight Ogoni kinsmen, and the invasion and destruction of innocent lives and property in communities such as Odi, Odioma, Ayakoroma, Gbaramatu kingdom, Oporoza just to mention but a few by government forces. Therefore, it is not surprising that the consciousness of exploitation, marginalisation and disempowerment has made the Niger Delta a region of deep rooted frustration, hence the escalating oil agitations in the region wrapped in militancy (p. 2).

Here, it is also noticed that the employment of violence and repression is common and easily adopted by the state and the subjects for the purpose of repression and expression of grievance.

Besides the employment of violence as a method of conflict resolution in Nigeria, we have also witnessed in part Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR). Akinbuwa (2010) has stated that:

Alternative Dispute Resolution refers to a range of mechanisms designed to assist disputing parties in resolving their disputes without the need for formal judicial proceedings. They are those mechanisms that are used to resolve disputes faster, fairer, and without destroying on- going relationships (p. 327).

The methods of ADR are dialogue, negotiation, mediation, conciliation, compromise and arbitration. ADR comprises a variety of processes and procedures, which are usually fashioned to meet the peculiar needs of disputants in resolving disputes; each process is considered an alternative to violent repression. These processes can be employed singly or in combination, but the basic characteristic is that they focus on bringing disputing parties together and focuses on 'diffusing adversarial negotiations' through an impartial or a neutral and unbiased third party and on mutually agreed terms of settlement. Establishment of truth is central to and the fundamental objective of conflict resolution. The mediator or the arbitrator must be willing and ready to be guided by the virtue of truth in administering justice to the disputants. This also implies that for there to be trust in the reconciliation process the mediator or arbitrator and both parties in the dispute must be committed to truthfulness; the disputants must be truthful, and must be willing to conciliate and compromise for peace, truth and justice to be reached. Another implication of ADR is that the mediator or arbitrator must convince the disputants (either by words or actions) that the outcome of the reconciliation is going to be fully implemented because, failure to implement the result of the reconciliation could or have always led to reoccurrence of violent conflict. It is imperative at this point to pose the question to ourselves that after much negotiation and intervening forces of mediation in the Niger Delta, what has been the result?

From the foregoing, it is obvious that violence as a method of conflict resolution is at the heart of social contest and at the disposal of both the organised forces and the resisters in Nigeria.

Quest for Social Justice in Nigeria

To what extent can it be said that the Nigerian federal government has lived up to its legitimate responsibility of ensuring social justice to its citizenry? This question becomes necessary at this stage of our national life because, the prevalence of social injustice in Nigeria has resulted to the deep-rooted grievances sweeping across the social stratum of the country with its expressive culture of violence. Nigeria has witnessed diverse conflicts over the years because of apparent feelings of injustice on one hand or the other, because of the various unsustainable methods or approaches that have been adopted in addressing these feelings which have left the country in the middle of nowhere. The existence of social justice explains the quality and the social healthiness of any human society. Rawls has explained social justice as “fairness”. This means arranging the social system to guarantee fair and reasonable opportunities for all citizens. It also means that inequalities in wealth and social positions are to be arranged maximally to benefit the least advantaged in the society. In this regard, Otto has defined social justice as “rendering to each what is his or her own or due by right” (Otto, 1967, p. 10). Unfortunately, the average Nigerian today is economically disempowered hence, the quest for social justice is at the centre of agitations in Nigeria especially in the Niger Delta region.

But to what extent has this struggle for social justice been conducted and how effective are the methods employed so far to prosecute it? In the heat of this struggle, we have seen the formation and operations of Boko Haram and Cattle Herdsmen in the North, the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND) and Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) in the South, Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOP) and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the East, Oduduwa People’s Congress (OPC) in the West and other ethnic militia groups all over the country. The political aberration noticed here is that whereas MOSOP which adopts non-violent method for its struggle was suppressed by the combined forces of Shell Petroleum and the Federal Government of Nigeria, the other movements which are violent in their approach were invited for dialogue by the government and amnesty granted to their members in return for their willingness to lay down their arms. This implication is of threefold:

a) The first implication is the apparent futility of non-violent struggle in Nigeria: The character of intolerance of the Nigerian state is clearly manifested in

her attitude towards non-violent demonstrators and protesters. The example of MOSOP struggle comes to mind first. MOSOP is a Nigerian based peaceful and non-violent movement spearheaded by Kenule Beesom Saro-Wiwa widely known as Ken Saro-Wiwa. Ikerionwu (2016) has observed that “MOSOP was the first organised and the most strident non-violent critic of the Nigerian government’s neglect of the oil-producing Niger Delta region, particularly the long-suffering Ogoni people whose interests it represents” (p. 1). He further stressed that MOSOP’s “mandate of non-violent campaign are to: promote democratic awareness; protect the environment of the Ogoni people; seek social, economic and physical development for the region; protect the cultural rights and practices of the Ogoni people; and seek their appropriate rights of self-determination” (Ikerionwu, 2016, p. 6). Cox has described the activities of MOSOP as “determinedly democratic and non-violent; a truly popular mass movement aiming to secure popular control of its wealth” (Cox, 2014, p. 3). Ken and his men carried on with this struggle by drawing the attention of the international community to the pitiable condition of the people of Ogoni land. He was audaciously committed to the philosophy of non-violence and told his people that the only and the most viable instrument of defeating the oppressors is through peaceful demonstrations and consistent protests.

However, the government never wanted to hear the truth (the neglect, underdevelopment, spoliation of the environment and the destruction of the ecosystem) Ken Saro-Wiwa was saying as this will amount to or affect the spoils they shared from the proceeds of oil exploration, hence, state practice of brutality and violence was visited on peaceful and non-violent demonstrators. Severally, demonstrators and protesters were harassed, arrested, brutalised and even killed in the process of social struggle in Nigeria. The then military dictator thought that by killing the leaders of MOSOP the movement will die a natural death. Consequently, Ken Saro-Wiwa and his fellow comrades in the struggle were hanged. However, the gruesome and extra-judicial execution of the Ogoni nine, points to the fact that, state violence and stick approach to non-violent resistance does not always win. Here again, the philosophy of *Satyagraha* is lacking both in principle and in practice. Gandhi rightly observed that violence multiplies violence in a descending spiral of destruction. Lamenting the violent approach of the state against civil resisters, Olusola (2016) observes that:

As the Nigerian Government unleashed its state terror through its violent repression, the social

movement which has become violent at this stage became more violent in its approach as the number of militant groups increased, making it very difficult to explore and exploit oil in the region (p. 6).

Regrettably, little did the government know that the killing of these martyrs would be the birth of renewed but vicious and ferocious struggle that will bring the nation to a halt? Consequently, violence is being applied in the quest for social and economic justice. The continued expression of opinion of truth with violence on how the resources of the region should be controlled and shared with violence, has continued to multiply violence and subversive activities in the region. The prevailing situation in the Niger Delta region has re-enforced the conviction that the means employed to bring about an end have direct connection with the end sought.

b) The second implication is the viability of armed struggle in Nigeria: It is most plausible to state that the only language the oppressors (Nigeria government in this case) understand is the language of violence. Therefore, one could understand the continued willingness of the government in applying carrot approach to the subversive activities of armed groups. The several failed attempts to negotiate and possibly grant amnesty to the members of Boko Haram, and the existing amnesty to Niger Delta armed youths is an indication that the authority respects and fears those that bear arms against the state. This is not in condemnation of or to water down the effect of alternative dispute resolution, but to state that its aberration lies in its subtle employment of pacifying the arms bearers is to say the least. The logic is that payment to people who take up arms against the state is counter-productive as it will always spur other jobless youths to take up arms and also seek for their own share of the oil money.

The subservient attitude towards peaceful protesters by the government, the repression often meted out on them by the state forces and the lack of constructive engagement with them on the issue under contention could or may have encouraged the mass of people to always take up arms against the state, believing that there lies a quick response from the government. Ikerionwu (2016) has thus quarreled that:

It is widely believed that Nigerian Government adopts the carrot method for violent groups but

the nonviolent ones confronted with the stick approach. The activities of these loosely militias nearly brought oil production to near zero, this might have caused the government to consider the carrot method. The criminalities by these militias persist, government amnesty program notwithstanding (p. 252).

The implication of the above statement is that arms are usually exchanged for money with no genuine intent to address the issue under contention from the root cause. Here also, the philosophy of *Satyagraha* as regards to the direct object of civil disobedience (establishment of truth and social justice) is not given any considerable place. This necessarily leads us to the third aberration.

c) The third aberration is that reconciliation in Nigeria only means the postponement of evil days: There appears to be no serious commitment to truth in Nigeria especially during disputes. The resisters always lose sight or insistence on truth whenever the social struggle gets to dialogue. This has further intensified the lack of trust in the genuineness of the outcomes of social struggles in Nigeria because there can be no trust without serious commitment to truth. The nature of compromise during dialogue is quite worrisome as the government wants to continue to maintain the existing advantages to monopolise the benefits of the wealth of the nation. This implies that dialogue and reconciliation do not usually follow the natural cause in resolving disputes in Nigeria.

Outcomes of resolutions usually produce victors (usually the government) and vanquished (the masses) which, instead of healing the divides, further deepen the feelings of injustices. The example of this claim is the amnesty granted to the Niger Delta militants by the government of Nigeria. In the events leading to this amnesty, government had given 60 days (6th August 2009 to 4th October 2009) to the arms bearers to lay down their arms in order to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into the society. As different militants handed in their weapons, the major movement 'MEND' refused to key into the programme because, according to them, the policy gave no room for dialogue and as such cannot address the root and fundamental issues which gave rise to the agitation. Olusola has noted that the reason why the amnesty programme is doomed to fail is that "the adopted solutions are at best not sincere and at worst, constructed to maintain the status quo" (Olusola, 2016, p. 6). One could understand why the amnesty programme

did not properly solve the problem of militancy and acts of vandals in the region on one hand, and address the fundamental problems of the region on the other hand. Insincerity of purpose, lack of proper understanding of the root cause of the issues or unwillingness to address them, inappropriate paradigms and ineffective methods to seek redress have always left the patched holes in explosive and disastrous end.

Concluding Comments

Based on the foregoing exposition, application of *Satyagraha* to address the problem of social injustice in Nigeria becomes imperative. *Satyagraha* is a philosophy of action that is based on the force of love; it means in the process of trying to establish truth through social struggle, our action must be guided by the principle of sincerity and love for one another. This would imply the absence of injury to the perceived oppressor(s). The idea is to defeat a particular policy and not to defeat the policy maker. The starting point is the collection of facts to determine whether social injustice exist, thereafter negotiations and constructive dialogue follows with the determination to get justice for all. Non-violent civil disobedience becomes inevitable after all attempts to get all views heard fails. Insistence on truth and fairness, formulation and implementation of right policies to provide social justice for all can be affected through the employment of non-violent civil disobedience. Erik (1970) has observed that at the end of social struggle, “only a development which transforms both parties in such an encounter is truth in action; and such transformation is possible only where man learns to be non-violent toward himself as well as toward others” (p. 412). This is the thrust of philosophy of *Satyagraha*.

With a proper conceptualisation of *Satyagraha* and its complete employment to confront the forces of evil, an egalitarian society based on the virtue of care, social justice and equality can be attained. Domesticating the philosophy of *Satyagraha* would provide a framework to evolve a national ideology based on Africa communal ontology which necessarily entrench the culture of distributive, retributive and corrective justice. Distributive justice implies a ‘socially-just’, and equitable allocation of goods, wealth, opportunities and privileges in the society. A just distribution of societal goods will inhibit the occurrence and reoccurrence of accidental and diverse inequalities. Therefore, distributive justice takes into account the exact goods to be distributed, what procedure and method to be employed. Philosophy of *Satyagraha* adopts the principle of corrective justice to draw government attention to the disproportionate distribution of societal goods

and benefits. Non-violent civil disobedience is employed to engage the government on the need and imperativeness of accurate, just, equal and fair distribution of common good.

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