

POLITICS OF THUGGERY AND PATRONAGE IN THE NORTH-EASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The activities of thugs in the north-east geo-political region of Nigeria have become worrisome since the return to democratic rule in 1999. It has become a fashion for politicians to sponsor these thugs financially and morally in order to achieve their personal political interest. Most a times they mobilize these thugs from beginning to the end of electioneering campaign/election period. This has hindered free and fair election and consolidation of democratic governance in Nigeria's political space. To overcome this political malady which shrouded the Nigerian polity as a whole, both the state and political stakeholders must synthesize the electoral system; imbibe dialogue instead of confrontation; canvass for people's mandate instead of patronizing thugs; accept election defeat instead of violence; discourage money politics; adherence to rule of law; massive education and empowerment of these youths among other things. The study seeks to situate the scenario within the perspectives of competitive-authoritarian theorists and Marxian political economy approach. Thuggery though existed long time ago but thrives much more and became prominent in recent years in a competitive-authoritarian regime. The paper relied on content analysis from the secondary sourced data.

Keywords: Thugs, Patron, Democracy and violence

INTRODUCTION

The use of political thugs, *Yan kallare*, *Ecomog*, *Sara-suka*, *Banu-Isra'il* and *Yan shinko* and its attendant consequence in the North-East geo political region have been a source of worry in the recent years. Though, thuggery is not peculiar to North-Eastern geo-political region alone but also Nigeria as a whole. The activities of militia gangs in other parts of the country such as the '*Bakasi Boys*' in Eastern Nigeria, the '*Niger-Delta Defense Force*' in the Niger-Delta region, the *Yan Gumurzu* in Kano, the Odua Youth Movement among others have cumulatively impacted negatively on credible electoral process and development of the country. However, despite guarantees and assurances from the Nigerian Police Force on security, opposition candidates are harassed or arrested; voters were turn away from polling places by gang of young thugs (Bratton, 2008). It is commonly reported that long military rule in Nigeria is responsible for high level of political violence orchestrated by political thugs in the form of election rigging, falsification of electoral register, assassination of political rivals among other things. The inability to conduct free and fair election has continued to undermine smooth transition and good governance, and in the words of Omotosho, (2008) '... has made the country the butt of bad jokes in the international community'.

To clearly understand the activities of these identifiable groups, we ask these questions; first, why do politicians patronize these political thugs? Secondly, what are the implications of thuggery on free and fair electoral process? Thirdly what role do the state and political parties play in these processes? To answer these questions, the paper seeks to offer interpretations within the context of theoretical explanations.

The paper attributes the problem of political thuggery to the institutional failure of the state with its feeble agencies (security and media) and general decay in the electoral process. This situation provided theoretical postulations of competitive authoritarianism and Marxian political economy explanations. The paper is divided into seven sub-topics; introduction, competitive authoritarianism and the Nigerian state, contextualizing political thuggery and electoral process, the menace of political thuggery in the North-East geo-political zone, causes, the way forward and finally conclusion.

Competitive-authoritarianism and the Nigerian state

The paper seeks to explain the activities of thugs in Nigeria's democratic dispensation within a framework of competitive-authoritarianism; Marxian political economy approach and elite power theory. The Nigerian state is a product of imperialism. It was authoritarian by nature and by the character of colonial domination which left power in the hands of indigenous elite in the last part of 19th century. After the collapse of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republic in 1989, African states have been transformed from series of military and authoritarian regimes to the internationalization of liberal democracy. Some hurriedly, others much slowly but must certainly democratize. Nigerian federating states were similarly caught up in this quagmire of authoritarian tendencies put upon it to democratize in the recent years. This scenario was theorized by Steven Levitsky and Lucas A. Way, the proponents of competitive authoritarianism, about the predicament of most African countries in 2002 and 2006. They defined it thus:

“Competitive authoritarian regimes are civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis their opponents. Such regimes are competitive, in that opposition parties use democratic institutions to contest seriously for power, but they are not democratic, as the playing field is highly skewed in favor of incumbents. Competition is thus real but unfair” (Levitsky and Way, 2006:2)

The above assertion characterizes Nigeria's democratic processes where some presidential aspirants, governors and local government chairmen (mis) use influences at their disposal or take advantage of their positions against their counterparts competing for same positions. In short, Nigeria is a competitive authoritarian state. As described by Levitsky and Way (2005), in many civilian regimes where formal democratic institutions are widely accepted as the principal means of gaining political power, there are usually fraud, civil liberties violations and the abuse of state and media resources, client-patron relations; and such cannot be said to be democratic. In this manner it is democratic because democratic institutions are sufficiently respected to permit real competition, but authoritarian because the democratic institutions are violated to such a degree that renders competition unfair and opposition parties are seriously handicapped their effort to challenge incumbent in election. This scenario is further expatiated in the words of Levitsky, and Way, (2002b:58-59) thus:

“Authoritarian governments may co-exist independently with meaningful democratic institutions. As long as incumbents avoid egregious (and well publicized) rights abuses and do not cancel or openly steal elections, the contradictions inherent in competitive authoritarianism may be manageable. Using bribery, co-option, and various forms of “legal” persecution, government may limit opposition challenges without provoking protest or international repudiation”

This framework precisely captures the activities of parties and the electorate in the electoral process in Nigeria where free and fair election is mostly emasculated through falsification of election result, attack of opposition party membership or individual during election and after election period through the instrumentality of *Sara-Suka*, *Ecomog*, *Yan-Daba*, *Yan-Kallare* among others. In a competitive authoritarian state according to Dashee, (2008) civil liberties are formally guaranteed but in some instances violated. Accessibility to state resources in this state is uneven where the incumbent use the

state which undermines the opposition's ability to compete favorably. This is typified by many cases of complaints after the 1999 and 2003 general election in the zone; some resorted to court/tribunals while some took the law into their hands by engaging the services of thugs. He further added that this can be done through direct partisan use of state resources or through the systematic use of state infrastructure, such as building, vehicles, communication equipment and personnel for electoral campaigns. In some instances public employees such as permanent secretaries, commissioners are mobilized in large numbers to work for the party usually termed- *deliver your ward, constituency or local government* as the case may be.

Similarly, Collier, P and Vincente, (2008) in the 2007 general elections revealed that the uneven playing ground makes opposition or rival group within a ruling party more likely to use violence during political contest. Election materials are stifled and snatched in some instances where thugs play vital role in that direction.

From the Marxian political economy perspective, thuggery escalates because of the material benefit they derive from such practice i.e the service they render to their patrons, while the political godfathers or big wigs use them to achieve their ascendancy to the corridor of power or political end. Marx sees political economy as the science for understanding society in its entirety. The theory is based on historical materialism as put forward by Karl Marx in Anifowose, and Enemu, (2008:44) that individual's consciousness is determined by the ideas on his mind, and the material existence of an individual that determines his consciousness. It is along this line that hundreds of youths indulge in the nefarious act of thuggery as they would be compensated in cash or kind. For instance, WeeklyTrust, May 10th 2008 reported that a group of militants youth purported to be loyal to the executive governor of Borno state at the time of this study found it enterprising to offer their services as political thugs. It further states that this was because *Ecomog* members loyal to Ali Modu Sheriff have began to ride cars and build houses which they got from political leaders for their militant services.

The Marxian political economist saw economic processes and structure, which are occupied by bourgeoisie as the key material factor in shaping social structure and class relations, and also the state and the distribution of political power. In this perspective taking part in governance of the day at different levels means granting opportunity to the spoils of the economy because politicians believed, that will grant them excess to loot of public fund where accountability and good governance have been jettison in the zone.

Elite theory of power on the other hand can be traced back to the 19th century and was popularized by Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, and Roberto Michels. The elite theory accepts a broad division of society into dominant and dependant groups. To this school the people are necessarily divided into two groups; the rulers and the ruled. The ruling class controls most of the wealth, power and prestige in society and exercises all power, whatever form of government might be adopted. Michels for instance insisted that majority of human beings are apathetic, indolent and slavish and they are permanently incapable of self-government. Leaders take advantage of these qualities to perpetuate themselves in power. They employ all kinds of methods- oratory, persuasions, playing upon sentiment in order to fool them, (Gaubu, 2006:440; Varma, 2004:149) It is impossible to discuss the democratic project in Nigeria without considering the role of the Nigerian political elite. For in the final analysis it is from the political elite that the recruitment of the political leadership – the operators of democratic institutions is made. One may ask this question-What is the nature of these elite, is it coherent and driven by a national vision? The Nigerian political elite are a product of Nigeria's turbulent politics. It has its roots in the colonial educational and socio-political system. As such it is a child of history. The elite have been described as a hybrid of sorts reflecting Western values against a Nigerian background. When it became clear that independence was imminent this elite mobilized ethnicity to canvass for support for its ascension to power. This laid the foundation for the politicization of ethnicity and religion, and the intense rivalry (and division) between ethnic groups and geo-political regions (later states) in Nigeria. In the early days, these elites had some education. Its leaders had travelled and seen the world, and were inspired by the ideals of democracy and

freedom, Pan Africanism, the ideas of Mahatma Ghandi and the debates within the Students' movement in addition to dictates of the western powers, (Obi, 2004:8).

But at first they lacked a political and material base; politically it became more expedient for them to have their ethnic groups as a base, and access to business and government as source of material resources. They therefore presented themselves as the representatives of Nigerians and the future leaders of the country. This influenced the nature of the elite and its politics. It was elite that defined itself in, and through access to state power and resources. The opportunism of the political elite and the ways it has often manipulated political structures through the use of thugs and processes to promote selfish and narrow ends is well known. Two issues are however fundamental, the deep divisions within the elite along personal, ethnic, religious, and factional lines, and the lack of a clear vision or common ideology for a broad social project. The first suggests an incoherence of the elite leading it to engage in acrimonious internal rivalry and conflict, and the second promotes political opportunism, lack of principles and poor leadership. These explain why certain elements and forces within the political elite colluded with the military faction to subvert the democratic ethos for selfish gain, and why the political class cannot reach a consensus on how it will define a national basis for Nigeria's democratic project along party ideology but rather personality of powerful figures.

Many African countries such as Nigeria are ruled by small, personalized oligarchies which control the state and most of its resources. In Nigeria most of the oil revenue accruing to the country is squandered by the ruling class (elite). In the recent democratic regime's aspirations for material wealth replaces the military as characterized by elite competition through a multi-party electoral system mediated by rotation of offices, ethno-regional balancing among others. Holding the levers of power, elite rule over very poor populations with few tools at their disposal with which to hold leaders account- other than voting with their feet, (Fritz, and Menocal, 2006). The common features of conflicts in some parts of the country can be attributed to ruling elite continued grab of nation's resources and affairs against the ruled. This has made the state ineffective in the recent years even though with liberal democracy put in place. Ineffective state means that people have to rely on clientelistic social structure in order to find an income and to ensure themselves against adverse events. These structure tend to reinforce poor leadership pattern weaken the state legitimacy.

Contextualizing Political Thuggery and Electoral Process: The Nexus

The word thug refers to a person inclined or hired to treat another person roughly, brutally or murderously (beaten or robbed) (The Merriam Webster Thesaurus 1995). In this sense a thug is a person or group of persons employed to perpetrate violence on another person or group of persons. Similarly, Encarta Microsoft 2008, Dictionary referred to it as "*brutal person or somebody especially a criminal who is brutal or violent*". Example of thug is a former secret organization of robbers in India, worshipers of the goddess Kali who strangle their victims. Howell, R. (2004) on the other hand observed that political thug can be seen as the tireless repetition of misleading 'facts' designed to depict an opponent as personally despicable and with regard to governance and it is dangerous to the physical and political life of the nation.

Political violence on the other hand refers to act of the processes of execution of the activities of political thugs enticed by politicians. In other word Banwo, (2003:100) posits that:

It is the processes of the use of extra-judicial means in the course of the contest for or in exercising political power. These include intimidation, harassment, assassination, blackmail, arson, looting, physical and psychological attack.....among others.

To Mehler, (2007:209) political violence has become a prominent part of the culture of Africa. Indeed he emphasized that governance and violence have become common mode of political competition in African societies more than consensus or co-operation. Political violence is usually part of the machinery employed by the political class in most underdeveloped economies to attain and sustain power or protest its deprivation. Reno, (2002) made a remark in his analysis of politics in failed states

he cited Bazenguissa-Ganga, (1999) who observed that, ‘... faction leaders in collapsed or collapsing states are often politicians or officers who jockeyed for position in an elite hierarchy and benefited from ‘official’ political violence, the goals of violence turn toward battling local rivals and appropriating as much of the wealth of this political network for themselves’ Therefore political thuggery and political violence are intertwined. This had in many ways truncated political process in Nigeria.

Electoral process consist of more than methods of counting votes cast by the voters but embraces within all institutional procedures, arrangement and actions involved in elections. It include the suffrage, the registration of voters, delimitation of constituencies, the right to contest election, electoral competition between rival parties, body charged with the conduct and supervision of election, the method of selection of candidates, method of voting, conduct of election, determination of results, election disputes, electoral malpractice, (Jega, and Ibeanu, 2007; Ball, 1979:92; Harris, 1982:157; Appadorai, 1978:523)

There are two types of electoral process-constitutional and non-constitutional. The constitutional aspect includes issues prescribed in the constitution such as the body responsible for the electoral process and independence of such body. The non-constitutional aspects such as voters’ register, procedure of election, election offences that are covered by the Acts of the National Assembly are Electoral Law. However, electoral processes have been suffocated by the activities of political thugs in many parts of Nigeria in the form of consensus candidates among others.

In theory, power resides with the people and in ideal situation it is transferred to the leaders by the process of election which means leaders exercise power in the interest of the state. It is on the premises of this transfer that thugs subvert and distort smooth transfer of power in electoral process. According to Ejituwu, (1997:37) each ballot paper represent an individual sovereignty and the totality of the votes signifies the popular sovereignty and can vote an unpopular government out of office. This is hardly attained in the North-Eastern zone arising from fraudulent acts, ignorance of people’s rights and with the increasing menace of political thugs which makes it difficult for electoral process to flourish. What happen is that politicians, conscious of the values of the spoils of office, adopt various means to capture power by any means, they buy votes, rig elections, and commit other infelicities designed to subvert people’s will to choose leaders capable of leading the state toward growth and development.

Electoral malpractice and violence have been burning issues in both the developed and developing societies; it involves riots, thuggery, looting, kidnapping, arson and political association. These occur before, during and after election with the view of altering, influencing or changing by force the voting pattern or manipulating the electoral decision in favour of a particular individual or political party, (Ejitiwu, 1997:38; Ugoh, 2004:164; Dinneya, 2007:59) Election rigging is the worst form of electoral fraud since it leads directly to the falsification of the will of the people and empowerment of the wrong leaders. Election rigging through the activities of thugs or otherwise is a function of some weaknesses in the electoral system as well as its successful exploitation of such by leaders/politicians; hence the mutual relation between thuggery and electoral processes.

The Menace of Political Thuggery on Electoral Processes in the North-Eastern Region

The popularity of political thugs in the region could be traced to the politics of the first republic when youth were mobilized to refute the claims of the leading party NPC by NEPU as it were in Kano and other minorities in the then middle belt and other regions. Thugs were referred to as *Yan-daba*, or tout; resurfaced in the second and third republics but became eminent and unhealthy for democratic process in the fourth republics.

They bear different names such as *Ecomog* in Borno and Yobe state, *Sara-Suka* in Gombe state, *Yan-Kallare* in Bauchi state, *Banu-Isra’il* in Taraba state and *Yan-Shinko* in Adamawa state. There activities commences from the early stage of politicking and becomes intense at election periods.

Most of these groups of unemployed youths are sponsored by desperate politicians who lure them with extravagant promises of employment and other government patronage. Since 1999 to date, some of these youthful thugs have been sponsored by desperate politicians to protect their political interest. After elections, these boys trained to maim and kill political opponents are left helpless without any tangible means of sustenance (WeeklyTrust, May 10th 2008). Dashee, (2008) asserts that in other instances, even their sponsors are not spared from their acts of violence as they equally attack them in public functions like wedding, political rallies and so on, when they fail to meet their expectations or demand. Two major reasons why politicians employ violence could be attributed to their quest for power and drive toward primitive accumulation of wealth and competitive authoritarian nature of the Nigerian state. This gave rise to the high level and sophistication of political thuggery in the region. For instance, WeeklyTrust reported worrisome atrocities of *Sara-Suka* titled “*How Sara-Suka held Bauchi state hostage*” revealed that hooligans tagged *Sara-Suka* from both opposing parties ANPP and PDP and others fought, left some dead and many casualties with injuries. Similar incidents abound in Borno state when Ali Modu Sheriff won the 2003 election. Many youths across Borno state found it enterprising to engage in political thuggery. As a result other groups emerged with seeming divisions amongst them and persistent clashes between the different camps mostly associated with sharing of largesse. On 26th April 2008, there were intra group clashes between political thugs loyal to the ruling ANPP and inter group with PDP an opposition party. The scenario is not different from *Banu-Isra'il* and *Yan-shinko* in Taraba and Adamawa states respectively. These activities however do not occur without the input of the two players the politicians and the youths (thugs) themselves and the youths depend on the politicians to perpetrate their nefarious activities without impunity.

Politicians

Politicians from different parties play a vital role in the rise of political thuggery in the North-East geo-political zone. In the words of Umar, (2003:210):

“Politicians in the North-East as in the other parts of the country are the critical elements that orchestrate and employ violence in the pursuit of personal interest. The most worrisome behavior of our politicians is the manner they have employed, the use of thugs to perpetrate violence. They are not only ready to recruit and work with political thugs but have come to accept thugs and violence as a legitimate part of political process”

He asserts that there is hardly any political party in the zone that does not have thugs at least one person who has ties to attack, maim or assassinate a political rival or destroys political offices in furtherance of political interest. To further justify this claim, Albert,(2005) while analyzing the political feud between Governor Mala Kachalla and Senator Ali Sheriff all of Borno state, reported that, ‘...supporters of Governor Kachalla had to fight back using political thugs known as ‘Ecomog’ ... turning Borno into a violent state’.

Youths (thugs)

There has been alarming rate of burst in number of youth’s participation in thuggery in the zone. This is not unconnected with weaknesses in the state apparatus and unfair processes of the electoral process in Nigeria matched with the material benefits they drive from such exercise. Politicians recruit them to serve as body guards and militias for the parties. They bear names such as Ecomog, *Sara-Suka*, *Yan-Daba*, *Yan-Kallare*, *Banu-Isra'il*, *Yan-Shinko*, *Egbetsu Boys*, *Area Boys*, *Bakkassi Boys* among others. They are mainly constituted by petrol hawkers, motor park touts and to some extent as Umar (ibid) will put liberated *almajirai*.

The case of thuggery in North Eastern region can best be equated with the case in Jamaica where the gun and the gangs were harness by politicians since 1960s to date, continually perpetrate violence in order to enforce Jamaican political turfs at election times. Clarke, (2006) reported that: ‘Nine competitive elections have been held in Jamaica since 1962 ... But violence and fraud have accompanied most campaigns. Politicians have also use their patronage to buy votes in key constituencies, and have formed links to gangs to terrorize opposition electors at constituency level or to combat other gangs engaged by their political opponents’.

CAUSES

Several factors abound to explain the cause of political thugs as well as political violence. Prominent amongst these are two principal factors these are - competitive authoritarian nature of the Nigerian state and economic factor. The rest can be tied to either two of the above. These include illiteracy and poverty, weaknesses in the institutions, checks and balance.

Nature of Nigerian state: - The competitive authoritarian nature of the Nigerian state after long punctuations of military regimes accepted civilian government in 1999 that permits democratic competition but bedeviled by fraud and abuse of state apparatus which enables those with machinery of the state to suppress opposition group or party. This groupings result more often than not into clashes of interest between different groups which end up in violence or skirmishes.

Illiteracy: - This is another cause of political violence. Some studies revealed that most of those that engage or used by politicians in their shoddy deal are either illiterate or received low level of education as such they become prey to overzealous politicians as they are vulnerable to resort to violence.

Poverty: - High level of unemployment have accounted for high level of poverty in the zone. As most of youths come from humble families which cannot fulfill their obligation. It goes with the common saying "a hungry man is an angry man" hence need little effort to join any group of militia/thugs.

Weaknesses in the political system: - There are prevalent weaknesses in the institutions responsible for carrying out electoral processes in Nigeria. The inability of institutions of government such as Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the police, judiciary and the executive resulting from abuse of office and fraud often emasculate electoral process. This includes undue favor to some group or individuals and power of incumbency.

Checks and balances: - Lack of checks and balances on part of the three arms of government to ensure smooth electoral process often leads to fraudulent acts and behaviors, rigging, cheating among others.

THE WAY FORWARD

Political thuggery and violence are means to an end and not the means to an end. It is an illegitimate manipulation to have access to control of resources by politicians. This infelicitous method is inimical to democratic tenets and it is unhealthy to democracy in Nigeria hence the need to get rid of these malaise.

The youth should be economically empowered. Engaging the youth in gainful employment would reduce their activities or participation in thuggery.

The executive arm of government should do much better by putting security measures by ensuring insurgent group do not endanger the safety of lives and properties in the society, (Nganji,2003:238) In light of the above the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) should be empowered to cover electoral related offences and be given absolute power to dispense its activities.

Advocacy by both government and private organizations should be pursued vigorously. Government should involve Community Based Organizations (CBOs), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and traditional rulers in dealing with activities of thugs. This can be done through deemphasizing the relevance of political thuggery in the electoral processes. Overzealous politicians who engage in such activities should not go unpunished so as to serve as deterrent to others. The institutions involved in the electoral process should be checked and strengthened through provision of adequate fund and resources for such exercise and personnel trained and made available when called upon. There should be sustained public enlightenment against the evils of political thuggery and violence. Both print and electronic media should engage in massive campaign against the effects of political thuggery and violence. Education should be given paramount attention in the zone. Scholarship fund should be made available for less privileged so as to minimize the cases of political thuggery by, local, state, federal and private organizations and individuals.

CONCLUSION

The wanton destruction of lives and properties in the zone resulting from the activities of political thuggery have had far reaching effects for the practice and sustenance of democracy in the zone and Nigeria as a whole. Democracy is synonymous with development as such should not be mistaken for instrument of underdevelopment by few unpatriotic politicians (elites) and unlucky youth in the area.

The seemingly inability of the Nigerian state to shift from competitive authoritarianism to democratic state where irregularities have no place is not attained yet. Hence fairness, equity and justice should be the guiding principle at public, individual and political levels. The Nigerian state has fallen short of true democracy; a play ground where frivolous factors such as poverty, greed and inequality continue to linger in our societies. The paper seeks to assert that unless and until the aforementioned factors are taken care of so will the sustenance of democratic processes unattainable and the people in the zone continue to suffer in the hands of these miscreants.

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