

Agitations in the North and Niger-Delta of Nigeria up to 2007: Confrontation or Competition?

By

Baba, Abdulkadir Aikoye

Department of History and International Studies

Kogi State University, Anyigba-Nigeria

abdulkadir2010@gmail.com

Abstract

The Niger Delta region has had serious, perhaps, dynamic grievances from the period before independence up to the present. As dynamic as these grievances are, so are their agitations and demands. It is argued that although the bulk of crude oil is derived from their lands, their area remains backward, underdeveloped and politically marginalized in the Nigerian Federation. They accuse the major ethnic groups of using oil wealth to develop their areas at the expense of the areas from which oil is derived. Another accusation is that several years of oil exploration and exploitation and the hazards of spillage and gas flaring which accompany it have degraded their environments. This has left their environment nearly uninhabitable. Their main occupations –farming and fishing –have been crippled; they have continued to lack basic infrastructure and amenities such as electricity, roads, schools, hospitals and potable water. Thus, grievances have been directed against both the Nigerian state and the oil companies, who have been accused of contributing too little in return for the huge profit they get from oil exploration. This paper, therefore, seeks to analyze the Niger Delta agitations based on these grievances and the reactions of the north. It reveals that the north has over time felt threatened in view of the economic and political implications of these agitations. Thus, they have reacted individually and collectively. The net effect of this is intensified search for “Northern Oil”, “competitive militancy” and tension in the body polity. It is the position of this paper that the reaction of the north to Niger Delta agitations, though seems to be a threat to the body polity at present, could produce the true Nigerian federation in the long run. Then, the desired elements of true federalism such as resource control, meaningful competitiveness, economic complementarities, entrepreneurship, would emerge in place of greed, domination, selfishness, tension and conflicts.

Introduction

The history of the Niger Delta since the close of the 20th century has been largely characterised by interventions and subjugation by non-indigenes. This is informed by the fact the Niger Delta is undoubtedly one of the wealthiest regions of Africa, and even globally in terms of vast petroleum oil and gas reserves. But before oil, it was a gateway to some African markets; it was relevant in slave trade and palm oil

trade (Ogbogbo, 2002:102). As from the 1950s, this area assumed a more crucial position in Nigerian economy as a result of oil exploration and exploitation.

Before 1960, it was already producing about 5,100 barrels of crude oil per day. This increased to 20,000 (1960); 46,000 (1961); between 1966 and 1967, it reached 400,000; by 1979, it had reached 1.7 million barrels per day (Attah, 2000:47-48). The rapid growth of output in oil production as shown above is an indication that if not for OPEC's limitation, Nigeria would have struck an unimaginable production output by now. The Niger Delta accounts for over 90% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and over 80% of her GNP (Ogbogbo, 2008:258). Between 1976 and 2000, the region produced oil revenue of US\$300 for Nigeria, representing about 96% of her foreign exchange (Omotola, 2006:3). Current annual earnings, according to Human Rights Watch, stand at over \$45 billion (Omotola, 2010:99). Furthermore, Nigeria earned a total of ~~₦~~5.561trillion from oil and gas in 2011 alone. ~~₦~~4.838 trillion of this amount was left for distribution to the various levels of government, after 13% derivation was deducted (Eme and Anyadike, 2012:54).

It is clear from the foregoing that the Niger Delta region is the economic nerve of Nigeria. Paradoxically, the "goose that lays the golden egg" is treated with utter neglect, deprivation, oppression and exploitation. These are instruments of grievances, agitations or even conflicts targeted at attaining increased allocation, resource control, and self-determination. These agitations have over time stirred reactions from many quarters, especially the majority ethnic groups. The focus of this paper is, however, on the reactions of the north. This shall be approached from individual and collective perspectives. The former refers to reactions and comments of people from the north at personal level, while the later refers to such reactions and comments as a group.

Conceptual Clarifications

The North

According to Sir Ahmadu Bello, the North comprises three major cultures; Sokoto, Borno and the Middle Belt (Kagoma, 2002). Yima Sen, in his own contribution identifies the following ethnic composition of the north; Kanuri, Tiv, Nupe, Birom, Gwari, Yoruba (Ilorin), Jukun, Idoma, Igala, Doma, Alago, Magunzawa (Kano), and Mumuye in Taraba (Yima, 2002:120-123). A critical look at this list shows that the North covers the present nineteen states of the present Nigeria. In addition, it covers two-thirds of Nigerian landmass, largely made of Muslims. They were once politically united under the Northern Region until the states creation exercise in 1967.

Niger Delta

While "Niger" refers to River Niger, "delta", according to World Bank, refers to "an area crisscrossed by rivers, rivulets and creeks, which empty themselves into the sea" (Paki and Ebiefa, 2011:40). Niger Delta, therefore, refers to the Delta of River Niger, which is formed by accumulation of sedimentary deposits transported by Rivers Niger and Benue. Other major deltas in the world include Amazon (Brazil), Orinoco (Venezuela), Mississippi (USA), Mahakarn (Indonesia), Indus (Pakistan), Ganges (Bangladesh), and Mekong in Vietnam (Paki and Ebiefa, 2011:140). Among these, Niger Delta is the third largest and richest. It ranks first in Africa.

For a proper understanding of the ethnic and other composition of this area, it is pertinent to examine the views of some scholars on Niger Delta. Alagoa sees the Niger Delta as the area where the waters of Rivers Niger and Benue are discharged into the Atlantic Ocean through the tributaries of Forcados and Brass, and Rivers Bonny and Benin. To him, all the traditional states located around these areas (excluding the Efik State of Calabar) constituted the Niger Delta (Alagoa, 1971:331). According to Ogbogbo, the Niger Delta is the area down the confluence of Rivers Niger and Benue, consisting of series of water channels that crisscross a triangular area of about 70,000 km², out of which 20,000 km consists of wetland. It comprises the prominent states of Aboh, Bonny, Elem, Kalabari, Nembe, Okrika, Opobo etc; and peoples such as Ijo, Ikwere, Itsekiri, Isoko, Ogoni, Ukwuani and Urhobo (Ogbogbo, 2008:259-260). However, Etekpe points out the dynamism in the definition of Niger Delta from the 1950s to the present era. In the 1957/58 London Conference it was seen as Western Ijaw Division (Western and Eastern Nigeria) of the Rivers Province, excluding Ahoada and Port Harcourt. As from 1993 to 2000, the definition moved beyond geographical/historical, to political consideration. The establishment of Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1993 and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000 re-defined the Niger Delta to include oil-producing states of Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Abia, Imo and Ondo (Etekpe, 2009:27; Olusegun, 2012). It is needless to go into the controversies surrounding the definition of Niger Delta because, even if their grievances are not the same, their agitations and demands have been significantly harmonised.

A Synopsis of Niger Delta Agitations

It is important to note that although the conflict in the Niger Delta in its most recent phase is oil-related, its background lies deeper in the nature of the Nigerian federation and the alleged insensitivity of the ruling political elite. This is linked to various government policies and actions relating to this area as far back as 1886 up to the 21st century. External interventions first obliterated their role as middlemen; during the colonial period, it was marginalisation and oppression in a skewed

regional government; at independence and oil era, other dimensions such as environmental degradation and resource control were added to their grievances. This was as a consequence of gas flaring and oil spillage, as well as skewed centralisation of oil proceeds in favour of non-oil producing states. In other words, the people of the Niger Delta lost ownership and control of their natural endowments.

The people of the Niger Delta were not docile in the above circumstances. They were engaged in protest, struggle or agitation. For example, the Opobo-led agitations were in response to British exploitation of their people in their legitimate trade and business (Egwemi, 2009:12). At the close of the 1950s, their agitation (along with other minority groups) against the domination, marginalisation and exploitation in a Yoruba dominated Western Region and Igbo dominated Eastern Region, led to the setting up of the Willink's Commission (1957). The creation of Niger Delta Board and Mid-Western State were consequences of their agitations (Robert, 2011:5 and Minorities Report, 1958:13-94). These agitations seem to have laid the foundation for future ones in the independent Nigeria. In 1966, it was Isaac Adaka Boro-led agitation; in 1994, it was Kenule Saro-Wiwa and so on and so forth. This period is very significant in this study because it marked the climax of all agitations. It also marked the period of harmonisation and proper articulation of Niger Delta agitations and demands. These agitations and protests in the Niger Delta were targeted at achieving certain economic, and later, political ends including resource allocation and control, compensation for environmental degradation, as well as outright secession or self-determination. However their reactions are largely centred on agitation and demand for increased allocation or resource allocation.

Although this study does not intend to go into details of Niger Delta agitations, it is pertinent to highlight them. This will help us understand the basis and character of the present agitations and the position or reactions of the North. The current agitation in the Niger Delta has its origin in the pre-colonial era. These people are known for resistance to external subjugation and exploitation. For example, King William Dappa Pebble of Bonny in 1854, Jaja of Opobo (1886), King Koko of Nembe (1895), Nana Olomu (1895), all proved to be strong resistance forces to subjugation and control of their resources by foreign elements (Ogbogbo, 2005:103; Egwemi, 2009: 12-13). In the colonial era, their agitations were largely against marginalisation and neglect in the provision of basic infrastructural facilities. For example, in 1946, Mukoro Mowoe of the Western Regional Assembly strove hard to drive government's attention to the neglect and underdevelopment in Warri Province. His agitations were centred on equitable distribution of resources, provision of basic amenities and self-determination. (Fagbadebo, 2010:95). It is pertinent to note that this and other agitations at this period were largely aimed at arresting the attention of government to the social needs of their area.

The 1956 discovery of oil at Oloibiri and the subsequent independence signaled a tendency that the Niger Delta would assume the social and economic status desired by its people for decades. Just a decade after the commencement of oil exploitation the Nigerian government recorded over £91, 942,000 per annum from oil sales. In 1971, this had reached ₦567, 560,000. By the 1990s, oil was contributing to between 80% and 90% of the country's GNP (Ogbogbo, 2005:105). Several oil companies are noted in this area. They include Chevron, Shell Petroleum and Development Company (SPDC), Texaco, Exxon-Mobil, Total, Agip, ELF and the NNPC. At present, there are over 600 oil fields, 5,284 on-shore/off-shore oil wells, 10 export terminals, 275 flow stations, 4 refineries and a liquefied natural gas project (Paki and Ebienu, 2011:140).

It is discernible from the above that the Niger Delta became the economic nerve of the Nigerian federation. This is a direct consequence of intense oil exploration and exploitation. It is against this backdrop that Ogbogbo posits that this area once again became "the treasure base" of the nation and "bounced back" as the richest in Nigeria (Ogbogbo, 2005:106). Regrettably, this did not translate into development as envisaged. According to Osaghae, "although the bulk of crude oil, Nigeria's main source of revenue is derived from the Niger Delta, the region belongs to the ranks of the most backward and politically marginalised groups in the country" (Egwemi, 2009:12). The irony of this case that the very important incident and role that make the Niger Delta, Nigeria's economic nerve also make it one of the poorest and underdeveloped as a result of infrastructural neglect and environmental degradation. For example, oil spills and gas flaring have damaged their farmlands and rivers. A direct consequence of this is destruction of their sources of livelihood – farming and fishing, and carbon-related sicknesses such as headaches, heart problems, dizziness, just to mention a few (Omotola, 2010:102-103). Thus, there is a paradox of environmental degradation, obliteration of local economy and general underdevelopment in the face of enormous oil wealth. Consequently, most of the problems and agitations in the post-independent Niger Delta are linked to oil activities.

All the post-independence agitations –from Isaac Adaka Boro to Kenule Saro Wiwa, up to the crop of present activists may be collapsed into the following; equal political space or self-determination; resource control and allocation; environmental degradation and compensation. According to Ayokhai and Talla, as from the 1980s, there was expansion of scope of demands in the Niger Delta from the initial agitation against subjugation to other areas such as, underdevelopment and official neglect of their area, full implementation of the derivation principle, decentralisation of ownership and control of mineral rights and the need for environmental justice (Ayokhai and Talla, 2011:53-54). The implication of the foregoing is that the oil producing states are short-changed and disadvantaged through environmental

degradation and economic exploitation, where the proverbial golden goose does not benefit from proceeds of its golden egg, perhaps, even being sacrificed for the survival of other geese. Put differently, the Niger Delta that produces the bulk of the nation's oil wealth suffers from destruction of their agricultural land, rivers and air pollution, as well as marginalisation and exploitation in resource allocation. Thus the agitators have, in recent time, harmonised their grievances and demands along these lines. This is evident in the character of the present agitation where their agitations are expressed in a common voice such as the South-South Peoples Assembly and the South-South governors (Ogbogbo, 2005:130-148). The force of Niger Delta agitations in this form has, in recent times, stirred avalanche of official and unofficial, as well as individual and collective responses and actions in northern Nigeria.

The North and Niger Delta Agitations

Agitations in the Niger Delta have generally been of concern to the non-oil producing areas in the Nigerian federation. However, our focus here is the reactions or responses of the North. The history of these two regions since the 1950s has been largely antithetical. The key word in the nexus between these regions is 'resource control/derivation'. The Niger Delta has never despaired in her history of agitations up the present time. During the era of agricultural boom –groundnut pyramid and cocoa, the response to Niger Delta agitation against neglect and marginalisation was that "they were not productive". Now with oil, they find it difficult to accept any excuse of neglect and marginalisation. On the other hand, the north has always been seen to have maintained (overtly or covertly), a position of dictating and manoeuvring the terms and conditions in the Nigerian federalism, perhaps, in their favour. Various official and unofficial machineries have been employed by the North in their effort to thwart the course of Niger Delta agitations. The major machineries used so far include the use of state power, delegates at the 2005 Constitutional Conference, Northern Governors Forum (NGF), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), and northern personalities. The net effects of their responses and reactions are, rising ethnic consciousness or tension, intensified search for oil in the north, and to some extent, intensified *Boko Haram* insurgency.

The north has often been accused of using the federal power to pervert the course of Niger Delta agitations. This has been linked to their numerical advantage and political influence in the federation. For example, of the fifteen leaders that have emerged in Nigerian history, nine were from the north alone, while the Niger Delta has just produced one, perhaps, by sheer luck. Although majority-minority issue goes beyond this in Nigerian federation, the structure of state power is in such a way that it has been largely dominated by the majority ethnic groups, especially the north. The implication of this is that state power is often used to achieve political and economic ends, which is always to the detriment of the minority, especially in the Niger Delta. This is evident in the promulgation of various laws and decrees that

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have dragged ownership and control of oil and other resources from the hands of states and individuals, perverted revenue allocation formula and political marginalisation. For example, the 1969 Petroleum Decree No. 9 of 1971, The Sea Fisheries Decree (1971), Offshore Oil Revenue Decree (1971), and a host of others were promulgated under a northern-led leader (Ogbogbo, 2003:41-49). The basic import of these laws is that ownership and control of all petroleum, petroleum proceeds and territorial waters, were snatched by the northern-dominated central government.

The use of state power in this respect also reflects in the form of fiscal federalism that operates in Nigeria. The contention here is that when the north and other majority groups were at the economic base of the federation, revenue formula was 50%. However, when the Niger Delta “took over” this position, a lot of intrigues came in. The table below shows the trend of revenue allocation formula in Nigeria since 1953.

Table 1: Systematic patterns of Reduction in the Principles of Revenue Allocation

Source of Revenue	Year	Allocation	Ethnic Group/State
Palm Products	1953-1960	100%, 50%	Igbo
Groundnut and Cotton	1953-1960	100%, 50%	Hausa
Cocoa	1953-1960	100%, 50%	Yoruba
Rubber	1953-1960	100%, 50%	Mid-West
Crude Oil	1970	45%	Niger Delta
Crude Oil	1975-1982	20%	Niger Delta
Crude Oil	1982-1984	2%	Niger Delta
Crude Oil	1984-1992	1.5%	Niger Delta
Crude Oil	1992-1995	3%	Niger Delta
Crude Oil	1999	13%	Niger Delta

Source: Madubuike S.C., “Ethnic Conflicts: Social Identity and Resource Control Agitation in the Niger Delta”. Retrieved from [http://www.infranigeria.org/IMG in October 2012](http://www.infranigeria.org/IMG_in_October_2012)

The above trend shows what the Niger Delta sees as an inconsistent and unfair fiscal policy in Nigerian federalism. It should be noted that these policies were largely carried out by northern-led administrations. Before 1960, it was between 100 and 50%, but now, it is just 13%. This informs the grievances of the Niger Delta against

the major ethnic groups, especially the northern Hausa-Fulani. It is clear from the foregoing that revenue allocation formula provided for 50% derivation at a time when the three dominant ethnic groups provided the major cash crops in the country. The major ethnic groups resisted any attempt to alter the revenue formula at this time because it was in their favour. However, when oil became a significant factor in the economy this was altered in their favour. For example, the north launched a campaign against the derivation principle and this at different times led to the setting up of the Chick Commission (1953) and the Raisman Commission of Enquiry (1957) (Ihediwa, 2010:60-61). The consequence of this was a downward review of the principle of derivation formula. The oil producing states saw this drastic reduction as an exercise carried out for no clear-cut reason.

Another reference point in the response of the north to Niger Delta agitations was the event at the 2005 Constitutional Conference. Here, what was supposed to bring almost all ethnic nationalities together to discuss burning national issues was eventually overshadowed by the issue of resource control. As Eme and Anyadike rightly put, the impending stand-off between the north and Niger Delta is largely rooted in the 2005 National Political Reform Conference. At the conference northern delegates ganged up to block every move by the south-south delegates to push for 50% derivation formula. In addition, Gambo maintains that the Niger Delta delegates initially demanded for 100%, which was later scaled down to 50 and 25%. The northern delegates, however, maintained that it must not be more than 17% (Gambo, 2012). The tension generated in this process stalled the entire process, as the Niger Delta delegates felt insulted and left the conference. This sowed a seed of discord between both parties, especially in relation to the issue of resource allocation and control.

Even after the Niger Delta states managed to secure an increase of the derivation quota of allocation to 13% in 1999, state power (Supreme Court) was still used to secure an onshore-offshore dichotomy bill, which sought to restrict derivable revenue to onshore oil. This is however, contrary to the provision of the 1963 constitution, which states that, the continental shelf of a state is deemed to be part of that state. Although the country's Supreme Court abrogated the dichotomy in a landmark judgment in 2000, it still restricted the littoral states' portion of the continental shelf to 24 seaward miles. In a subsequent Act, the federal government modified this to read 200 m isobaths, that is, a line joining all points off the coast of Nigeria (from Lagos to the boundary with Cameroon) where the sea is 200 m deep (Osaghae, 2008). The implication of the whole process is that any part of the Nigerian Continental Shelf, deeper than 200 m, is outside the derivation zone, and proceeds from this area of the sea belongs to the Federal Government rather than the states concerned. The north is accused of spearheading this process, especially in arm-twisting the President (Olusegun Obasanjo), to sign the offshore bill. According to Oluwajuyitan, this was in exchange for northern support to his re-election bid in 2003 (Jide, 2011).

Another reference point in the nexus between the north and Niger Delta agitation is the role of northern governors under the Northern Governors Forum (NGF). The NGF has often refused to join issues with their south-south counterparts on their quest for resource control and allocation. The NGF has recently called for a review of

revenue sharing formula. Its chairman, Babangida Aliyu who made this representation on behalf of the Forum, decried what he called “a skewed revenue formula” that favours the south at the expense of the north. Their position is that the formula must be based on population rather than equality of states so as to reflect the “current realities”. Worse still, they even called for scrapping of the existing 13% derivation so that northern states would get more money for development, attributing this to the inadequate development and insecurity in the north (Eme and Anyadike, 2012:64-65; Emma *et al*, 2012).

Thus, there was a direct effort to thwart the agitation, which is seen as moral, political and economic rights of the people of Niger Delta. The counter-reactions to these from the people of Niger Delta are not favourable to nationhood as well. They often incite further, perhaps, more radical agitations. For example, reacting to this development, Asari Dokubo remarked that “the northern governors should go and look for their own resources because we want 100%” (National Mirror, 2012). This strikes another issue, which seems positive in this discussion. The north has in recent time made intense efforts to search for their own oil. For example, there was intense search for and discovery of oil in places such as Lake Chad and Sokoto Basins, Taraba and parts of Kogi State. (Ireports, African Spotlight & Punch online)

There are yet other issues. Arewa Consultative Forum, a socio-cultural organisation in northern Nigeria, and individuals in the north are not left out in this issue. They, like the FNG, have also demanded for a review of the current revenue formula because they see it in the present form as unfavourable to them. In February 2012, a northern-born CBN governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi lent credence to this view, when he decried what he called “a slim allocation” to the northern states from the Federation Account. He further linked this to violence in the north, and condemned a situation where northern states have insufficient money to meet basic needs when some states have “too much money” (Peter, 2012). The implication of this is that militancy seems to have assumed a competitive status. The north now looks unto the federal government to treat the insecurity in the north, especially the rise of *Boko Haram* and militancy in the Niger Delta, equally. This is in terms of dialogue, negotiation and amnesty. However, this has not been practicable in view of the fact that both groups are different in terms of ideology, mission, and mode of operation.

In addition to the above, Bala Usman (a prominent scholar from the north) argues against resource control, basing his argument on history and geography. According to him, the British conquest of Niger Delta automatically stripped them of their rights. These rights were further transferred to Nigeria by Britain (Aghalino, 2006:300). He further argues that the oil in the Niger Delta is a consequence of geographical process that took place in the upper parts of Rivers Niger and Benue. Hence, it is the people up there that should lay claim to the oil. Even if Bala’s argument is based on the geographical information that the Niger Delta is formed by accumulation of sedimentary deposits transported by Rivers Niger and Benue, it can still be deflated by the simple fact that natural and man-made laws attach importance to ownership of land. So, whoever owns the land is automatically the adjudged owner of all the appurtenances. This is amply demonstrated by Ogbogbo in the meaning and application of the legal maxim *quicquid plantatur solo solo cedit*

(Ogbogbo, 2003:84). It is therefore, unimaginable for someone in Maiduguri to come to Rivers State and claim ownership of resources in this way.

Another erudite scholar of northern origin, Sa'ad Abubakar appears more liberal in his own posture. Yet, he does not support fiscal federalism. Although he starts by lending support to Niger Delta agitation, he further argues that contrary to the agitation by the Niger Delta, all states are qualified to benefit from the resources of Nigerian federation (Abubakar, 2008:47-50). His argument is based on the fact that not all communities in the Niger Delta have oil wells. To him, therefore, what qualifies those who do not have oil wells to benefit from oil wealth should also qualify non-oil producing states to benefit from the wealth. This is a core issue in a forming a federation. There must be terms of cohabitation; who brings what, and what are the common resources of the federating states? This is an issue for a national conference.

Conclusion

Niger Delta agitation is undoubtedly one of the most sensitive issues in Nigerian federalism. This is particularly because of its political and economic effects on the polity. Nigerian history has not shown a period of remarkable and robust interaction between these regions. The people of the Niger Delta often see determination of their own position in a federation through different forms of agitation, as a right. On the other hand, the north has been using its position as a major actor in a federation where the Niger Delta is a minor actor, to thwart these efforts. In this direction, various machineries have been employed. A domineering position, especially in politics and the military, has given an edge to the north to achieve their objectives. The forum of northern governors, individuals and other bodies are also involved in the task of "containing" the Niger Delta agitations.

The ripple effects have often been tension in the polity, competitive militancy and, on a positive note, intense search for oil in the north. Finally, the crucial thing seems to be a call to all regions or states to evolve effective economic development pattern, revenue generation, competitiveness, capacity utilization and a spirit of hard work these qualities are essential in a true and effective federalism. In a true federalism, the federal government should not drag the natural recourses with the states or units.

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