
“The ruling party is the state, the regime, and the government melded into a seamless whole, sustained by violence and deploying violence to eviscerate all obstacles to its endless trips to the oil wells.”

Nigeria: Chronicle of a Dying State

IKE OKONTA

To understand Nigeria today it may help to return to a bloody event that took place in early July 2002 in the country's oil-rich Niger Delta. Primary elections for the country's ruling People's Democratic Party were held in the town of Nembe that month. Two PDP factions, led by local politicians with substantial youth followings, supported separate candidates whom they hoped to see nominated local council chairman in the primary. The stakes were high. Whoever emerged victorious would most certainly move easily to victory when the main interparty elections were conducted in a year's time, given the PDP's near-total grip on power and strategic resources in Nigeria's various states and the country's capital. The new leader would in turn oversee the five oil fields in the area surrounding Nembe, from which Shell Petroleum Development Company, the Nigerian subsidiary of Royal Dutch/Shell, produces an estimated 200,000 barrels of oil per day.

By the evening of July 6, when primary elections came to an end in Nembe and the seven other local councils in Bayelsa State, 40 people had been killed in election-related violence, most of them in Nembe and Brass, a satellite community where the local subsidiary of Agip of Italy operates an oil terminal. The two factional leaders and their storm troopers were at the heart of the political violence that engulfed Nembe and forced many of its residents to flee.

Lionel Jonathan, one of the factional leaders, was head of Isongufuro, a cultural organization formed in 1992 that had metamorphosed into one of the most feared youth vigilante groups in Nembe. Jonathan, a former Bayelsa state commissioner for the environment, and his band of vigilantes were the state governor's political enforcers in Nembe. (He would later act as campaign manager for the

governor's bid for reelection in April 2003.) Pitted against Jonathan and Isongufuro was Nimi Barigha-Amange, a former oil executive who nursed the ambition of displacing the governor and saw the local council primary election as his opening move. Barigha-Amange was leader of Isenasawo, a rival vigilante group that emerged in 1998 to counter Isongufuro's excesses in Nembe. Although Isongufuro had the state government's backing and the machinery of "legitimate" violence at its disposal, Isenasawo was the dominant political force in Nembe at the time of the elections.

HOW TO RIG AN ELECTION

The primary elections were a farce, in which men of violence played the starring role. The governor, anxious to ensure that candidates of his choice emerged victorious, had dispatched teams of heavily armed anti-riot police on the evening of July 4 to Nembe, Brass, and other areas where he feared a free and open vote would go against him. Groups like Isongufuro were to provide local backup.

When party members in the region came out to vote on the morning of July 5, they found that voters' cards and other electoral materials had been diverted to the homes of local politicians loyal to the governor and his henchmen. In Nembe, Isongufuro dispersed voters, murdered several people who attempted to put up a fight, and confiscated election materials. In Brass, supporters of the governor, aided by a full complement of anti-riot police, launched a violent attack on politicians and their youth followers, beating them and setting their homes on fire. Officials dispatched by the PDP from the national capital to ensure an impartial vote were kidnapped when they proved "uncooperative."

Officials of Shell and Agip were on hand to lend support to the governor. Ordinarily, nonpartisan party officials would have taken election materials directly to voting centers, since the governor was also a PDP member and had a compelling interest in

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shaping the vote's outcome. Instead, Creek House, the governor's office and official residence in the state capital of Yenogoa, became a clearinghouse and storage center for voter cards. It was from here that helicopters provided by Shell airlifted the materials to Nembe, where Jonathan and Isongufuro then took over proceedings. Agip also airlifted voting material directly to its own terminal in Brass instead of to Twon, the local council headquarters designated by the party's national executive as the voting center. Votes were then allocated to candidates favored by the governor by aides sent from the capital for the purpose. A violent clash ensued between protesting locals and the anti-riot police and local toughs in the pay of the governor.

When the results of the party primaries were announced a week later, all the governor's candidates in the eight local councils, including Nembe and Brass, either were returned unopposed or "won" outright. The governor expressed satisfaction with the outcome and declared that the elections had been conducted in an atmosphere of "peace and tranquility." The state police chief dismissed as "unfounded" press reports that the primary election had been marked by murder, brigandage, and vote rigging. Local nongovernment organizations and journalists who had monitored the elections called for their cancellation and the removal of the head of police. No one paid attention to their pleas. Ordinary Nigerians picked up their disrupted lives and continued to plod on.

BORN AND RAISED IN VIOLENCE

Clearly, the political order in Nembe is founded on and sustained by violence. The British colonial project inaugurated this order in 1895 with unprecedented violence. Local Nigerian political elites reproduced and institutionalized it following formal independence in 1960. Yet, today, this malformed political order is in its last throes—with Nembe and the Niger Delta's other oil-bearing communities at the epicenter of a death dance.

Central to the order is a regime of rapine despotism and the poverty and powerlessness that are born of this condition. Producing political repression and material scarcity instead of the freedom and prosperity that are the legitimate goals of citizens globally, this order has not been able to find legitimacy in the eyes of the local people whom it has reduced to subjects these past 100 years. Thus, it is unable to find fertile soil in which to root and flourish. This malformed political order is dying because new social forces, forged in a cauldron of violence

and the unremitting serfdom and scarcity that are its legacy, are now pressing against the barricades.

The prominent symptoms of the order's precariousness can be seen in the political and social crisis in which Nembe, the wider Niger Delta, and Nigeria are currently engulfed. The three components of this crisis are an accelerating loss of state sovereignty and concomitant decay of state institutions, locally and nationally; the government's failure to promote economic development, including for the people of Nigeria's oil communities; and worsening communal violence and youth anomie that are reshaping social relations into malignant forms in a region already awash in weapons and riven by ethnic conflict. Tensions that increasingly cut across local (Nembe), national (Nigeria), and global (Shell in Nembe oil fields) arenas suggest that the current regime of institutionalized despotism is collapsing under the weight of past violence and present inequities.

WHEN POLITICS FAILS

Rory Carrol, the Africa correspondent of the *Guardian* of London, has written about a central feature of Nigerian economic life today. "What Nigerians call bunkering and oil executives call rustling has hit the big time," he wrote. "Criminal gangs are siphoning so much crude oil from pipelines in the Niger Delta that they have started using tankers to spirit it away. . . . Siphoning off such quantities amid a landscape of jungle and marsh, with thousands of creeks, requires sophisticated equipment and organization. To the dismay of the government and oil companies, the thieves have proved that they have this in abundance."

Nigeria is the world's seventh-largest exporter of oil, and Africa's largest. The country's daily output of 2.2 million barrels accounts for 80 percent of state revenues and 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings. (The government owns all oil rights in Nigeria and has a majority interest in every oil company operating there, including the joint venture with Royal Dutch/Shell Group.) Oil, clearly, is a strategic resource, at least viewed from the perspective of the country's governing elites.

Yet government power and the administrative structures vital to securing the all-important oil fields are dramatically shrinking in the Niger Delta and elsewhere in the country. What the *Guardian* neglected to point out was why the oil "bunkers" are able to so flagrantly ply their illegal trade with impunity: the thieves too are members of the governing elite—invariably senior political figures and military officers deployed to the delta to

police the oil fields and ensure that production is not disrupted by “restless” youth protesting the oil industry’s adverse effects on their farmlands and water sources.

As social and economic conditions worsen in Nigeria, politics is no longer the instrument through which contending interests are conciliated in a structured framework. Politics is itself a struggle for control of the country’s oil largesse, which, once secured in the form of loot, is used to further and consolidate political ends. In this struggle, the state and the means of violence at its disposal are the ultimate spoils. For whoever dominates the state necessarily controls the means to displace rival contenders for a disproportionate share of the oil bonanza. The adept, the unscrupulous, and sometimes the lucky emerge triumphant in this bruising contest. The losers, smarting from defeat and humiliation, turn their sights to lesser prizes. Some steal oil from pipelines.

Terry Lynn Karl argues in *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States* that “the revenues a state collects, how it collects them, and the uses to which it puts them define its nature.” Oil revenues and the array of political and economic arrangements thrown up to perpetuate this predatory enclave economy powerfully shape the nature of the Nigerian state, preoccupied as it is with a vicious, bare-knuckled struggle between dominant and rising elites to control this revenue.

The state as a result cannot act as the impartial arbiter of last resort between competing interests, embedded in social, economic, and political society but sitting above them. As a political instrument hijacked by the temporarily successful faction in the struggle for the oil prize, the Nigerian state is resented by unsuccessful rival factions. It may still be able to project power, but it is power lacking in real authority because its motives are suspect. It is also power without legitimacy, because rival factions and ordinary people on whom it is exercised see only commandments backed up by the threat of violence. And the commandments appear designed to make them part with their property on the pain of death.

ENTER THE MILITARY

Those able to challenge this illegitimate power, such as the oil rustlers, do. Ordinary citizens, such as the people of Nembe and the other oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta, resort to civil dis-

obedience, angry that their traditional sources of livelihood—their farmlands and fishing waters—have been devastated by half a century of uncontrolled oil exploitation. In the case of youth, this involves direct confrontation with Nigerian troops and riot police—the immediate, direct face of the oil rentiers who have visited so much grief and ruin on their communities.

The victorious faction responds by dispatching to the “volatile” region special forces equipped with rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns, tear gas, stun grenades, attack helicopters, fast-attack naval patrol boats, and the other paraphernalia of modern warfare, including experts in psychological terror. Entire hamlets and villages are razed and some of the inhabitants murdered or mutilated.

Even peaceful demonstrations provoke harsh reaction. On November 20, 2004, seven men were killed and many more injured when they attempted to mount a demonstration at an oil rig operated by Shell. More than 100 protesters had gathered on a barge near the rig and sent leaders to demand a

meeting with oil officials to discuss languishing development projects. Instead, army troops appeared in boats and opened fire on the barge.

When faced with well-organized and determined opposition with popular grassroots support—as they have been with the 500,000 Ogoni people in the eastern Niger Delta fringes—government forces may decide to “sanitize” troublesome sites and root out the “subversive elements” disturbing the “public peace.” An entire area may be secured in a lightning military maneuver. Death squads are sent in. When a squad suffers fatalities, as happened in Odi, a central Niger Delta town, in December 1999, remaining squad members may shoot everything in sight—including goats, chickens, and an 85-year-old woman too frail to leave her hut. The houses are torched and the experts in psychological warfare scrawl graffiti on the charred walls insulting the dead town and its gods.

It is all very impressive, all very military. This must be a powerful state, with its arm reaching out to smite its enemies even in the furthest uncharted parts of the empire! In fact, all this display of disproportionate violence, obscene in its extravagance, this spectacle—it is all a show.

The rentiers and the men of violence in their employ may be deadly serious in their determination

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to maintain their grip on the oil fields; this is demonstrated clearly enough by the shootings of unarmed youths and the raping of young girls. The piling of corpses and the young innocents traumatized for life testify to their earnestness. But the soldiers have no heart in the fight. They pile back into their trucks and beat a hasty retreat as soon as the latest round of killing is done. They do not hold conquered territory. There are no proconsuls to discipline and punish the new subjects. A few soldiers are left to guard the oil wells and the oil company workers, and the rest scamper off. The survivors crawl out of the bush, bury their dead, and resume their calls for justice.

THE HOLLOW STATE

In the capital, spokesmen for the rentiers deny that massacres are taking place in the delta oil fields. They speak only of rival ethnic militias hacking each other to death with blunt machetes. They are killing each other because . . . well, they hate each other. It is a "tribal" thing; ancient, not at all amenable to rational political solutions. They speak also of the bunkerers, loudly, threatening them with the full weight of the law.

The oil companies join the charade. Indeed, they amplify it by flying in obliging journalists from London and Paris and Houston to witness "first-hand" what these tribesmen are doing to each other. "This has nothing to do with us," they note. "We don't understand the thinking of these people. They are not like 'us.' Frankly, we don't know why they are fighting and killing each other." Then they bring up the subject of oil bunkerers. "They are ruining our business! We don't know what to do about them. And the guns. Where did they get such sophisticated weapons? The government must step in. We need more security or else this place will go up in flames!"

It all rings hollow. Everybody, the rentiers and oil executives included, knows who the oil bunkerers are. They cannot move against them because they are all partners in the same dirty crime: plunder. They also all know the source of the guns that have flooded the delta: poorly paid soldiers selling their weapons to anyone, including "enemy" youth, for hard cash; the oil companies, stocking up their private caches and arming company police who subsequently pass them on to third parties; youth vigilantes recruited by the oil companies to protect their facilities and who use the money so obtained

to buy rifles and machine guns to secure yet more "protection" work.

These are guns for hire, as in the American West during the gold rush. Only here crude oil is the new gold. The government's presence is only felt in the form of machine guns and jackboots. But that presence has an eerie evanescent quality: here now and gone the next instant, leaving bullet-perforated bodies to bear mute witness.

The decay of state institutions continues apace. The April 2003 presidential and governorship elections were openly and blatantly rigged by the PDP, in some areas returning more votes than there were actual people in the electoral register. The US-based Carter Center, which had sent a team to monitor the exercise, declared it a fraud.

The inspector general of police, the nation's chief law enforcement officer, was accused of soliciting and accepting financial rewards from state governors in return for "cooperation" during election time—that is, turning a blind eye when thugs hijacked ballot

boxes from polling stations to enable them to inflate the vote in the governors' favor. A former deputy governor, under investigation for aiding and abetting the murder of the country's minister of justice, was

released from detention and elected a senator on the ruling party's platform. High court judges assigned the case dropped it when they began receiving threatening phone calls in the night.

Elsewhere in that election year, in one of Nigeria's eastern states, a political contractor whose only claim to fame was that his brother was President Olusegun Obasanjo's chief of staff, organized the abduction of the governor whose election he had bankrolled only the previous month, sequestered him in a hotel room, and obtained his resignation at gun point. But not before readying a more pliable candidate to take over. In so doing he offered clear proof, if indeed any more were needed, that the ruling party is the state, the regime, and the government melded into a seamless whole, sustained by violence and deploying violence to eviscerate all obstacles to its endless trips to the oil wells.

THE LION WITHOUT CLAWS

The Maxim machine gun brooked no opposition in colonial times when Her Majesty's proconsuls embarked on the hazardous but very profitable

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project of taking the fat of the land, and in the process reduced its owners from citizens to subjects. A hundred years later their local clones continue dutifully on this path. The state sits on society; it does not emanate from it the better to secure it and make it more prosperous. Lacking a *raison d'être*, the Nigerian state looks more and more like a beached whale thrashing on the sand before its inevitable demise.

Meanwhile, the violent unrest spreads. In September 2004, Moujahid Dokubo-Asari, the head of a militia group called the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, declared war on the region's oil companies, interrupting production for several days and sending world oil prices above \$50 a barrel. He succeeded in drawing senior government officials into negotiations, which resulted in a tentative peace deal. But Dokubo-Asari, who says he is fighting on behalf of more than 8 million Ijaws—the dominant ethnic group in the southern delta region—warns he could shut off oil flows at any time. In the past he has called for secession of the Niger Delta as the only means for residents to gain control of its oil wealth. Violent conflict between his militia and a rival group, Niger Delta Vigilante, has resulted in numerous deaths of innocents.

The US government has sent warships to President Obasanjo under a security cooperation program ostensibly to check unrest and crude oil theft in the delta. But the youth insurgents there are not impressed. Poverty, state violence, and the bald fact of a dying ecosystem have combined to drive them to stand firm. The soldiers do not like what they hear. Entire swathes of the delta are now virtually no-go for them. Nor are they particularly unhappy about this. It is not really their fight. The petrodollars, after all, are shared in the presidential fortress in the capital.

Slowly, relentlessly, the sharp edge of the all-important instrument of violence is being blunted. It may not be immediately apparent, but the Nigerian state is dying. A lion without his claws may as well be dead.

BREAKDOWN IN NEMBE

How do these symptoms of a dying political order play out in Nembe? The signs of morbidity apparent in the wider Nigerian system are very much evident in the present political, economic, and social life of Nembe. The political order has broken down. The two rival militias are locked in a deadly duel for power. The traditional king of Nembe lives in Port Harcourt, some 100 nautical miles away, and rarely

visits his people. He steers clear of the political turbulence generated by the militias. The majority of his council of chiefs also live in Port Harcourt, and the handful in Nembe do not participate in public affairs. Youth and vigilantes alike hold king and council partly responsible for the social and economic crisis that has taken over their lives.

The little semblance of authority that does exist is the armed anti-riot police dispatched by federal authorities. An uneasy truce holds between the police and the warring factions. Each watches the other carefully. All are armed and patrol the streets ostentatiously, brandishing machine guns. The vigilantes say the police are partisan—they support their rivals and also give protection to oil company officials whose activities have laid waste to their farmlands and fishing waters. The police say the two vigilante groups are criminal elements that have been terrorizing the city and extorting money from law-abiding oil workers. The ordinary people distrust all three groups, but keep their heads down in the face of the guns. Violence, not public virtue, is the basis of authority in Nembe.

The economic life of the people once turned on fishing. This was before the incessant oil spills, some of them caused by sabotage and theft, began to take their toll on fish life in Nembe creek and the surrounding lakes, ponds, and rivers. Now Nembe fishermen and women spend hours in the open sea and sometimes go home with no catch at all. The gas flaring in the vicinity of the oil fields has also substantially damaged plant life. Tidal waves spread spilled oil through the mangroves and onto farmlands, rendering them infertile. There is no manufacturing; indeed, there is little economic life in Nembe. The bulk of the city's food is brought from Port Harcourt. The oil fields are all that is left, yet an estimated 200,000 barrels are piped out of Nembe daily and the inhabitants receive neither rent nor royalties. The anti-riot police are there to ensure that the arrangement remains in place.

Nembe is a city under permanent curfew. The streets are deserted. Social capital is a scarce commodity. All are at war with each other: king against his council; youth vigilantes against both and against themselves. The youths accuse the king and his council of "eating" the oil money and giving none to the ordinary people. Youth accuse youth of accepting money from Shell and refusing to share it. The quarrel usually ends in violence. Elders and women have been elbowed out of the public arena; they raise their voices on the pain of death and physical punishment, administered with relish by the vigilantes.

The factions of Nembe fight each other intermittently. They quarrel about whose leaders are supreme and which have the right to represent the city at the state level. Fierce arguments erupt over where local council buildings and other social facilities should be placed. Gunshots are exchanged. Young men die. Clashes with Okrika, a neighboring community, also are frequent, chalking up more bodies. Ownership of oil-bearing land is the perennial source of conflict. Neither thoughtful government policies nor mediating civil society agencies exist to deliver permanent peace.

TWILIGHT OF A MALFORMED ORDER

The political order in Nembe, based on rapine despotism, has not embedded itself in local society because its project runs against the deep desire of ordinary Nigerians for democracy and its material fruits. Power, social theorists have told us, is the ability to make someone do what you desire of them. During the colonial period violence, not capital, was used to extract wealth from the colonized. The state did not deliver development; it was the very repository of the violence necessary to reduce the inhabitants into subjects and coerce them to give up their wealth, in labor and raw material.

This predatory framework, since taken over by indigenous Nigerian elites, could not be permanently

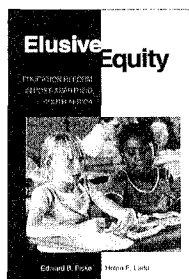
institutionalized. It has encountered sustained and determined resistance since the early years of the twentieth century from those to whom it has given only poverty and arbitrary rule. To maintain this illegitimate regime, constantly at risk of collapse, violence has to be applied and re-applied.

But herein lies the paradox of violence as the structuring basis of a political order. The more violence is deployed to prop up and sustain unjust economic and social arrangements, the more it undermines the very goal it seeks to achieve: a degree of social order within which the dominant elite can continue its business of seizing loot. People forcefully deprived of the right to represent their own interests in the crucial arenas of political and economic life are by definition discontented and impoverished subjects.

The discontented represent a real threat to the existing order, and that order is also deprived of vital contributions to the project of creating prosperity for the commonweal. Scarcity is the soil in which revolt is nurtured. Political violence deployed to maintain control over the dollars generated by oil wealth may work in the short term, but ultimately it defeats its own purpose. This process is clearly evident in Nembe and throughout Nigeria today. And that is why the malformed political order is dying. ■

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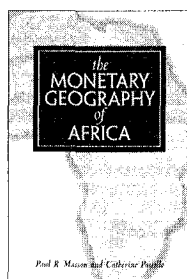


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