

THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME: MILITANTS AND PIRACY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA IN NIGERIA'S POST NIGER DELTA ERA

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Introduction

Until lately, discourse on piracy in Africa revolved around the criminal activities by the hijackers in the East African waters, and symbolized mainly by their illicit activities around the Gulf of Eden and Somali Basin. The recently-released “Captain Phillips” a Hollywood portrayal of the 2009 hijacking of the MV Maersk Alabama by Somali pirates off the coast of Somalia perhaps illustrates rather poignantly this type of criminality in the region.

The face of piracy in Africa has however assumed a new dimension. A 2013 report by the South African-based Institute for Security Studies (ISS), notes that just as large scale piracy around the Somali Basin appears on the wane, there has been an increase in piracy incidents off the West African coast, particularly, the Gulf of Guinea. Unlike the Gulf of Eden -Somali Basin piracy which revolves around commercial fishing activities and ransom, the new face of piracy in Africa around the Gulf of Guinea is about oil. It entails hijacking oil tankers, and draining off the oil, which is taken onshore either for sale or refining. Although attacks in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Togo, among others (UNODC, 2013), suggest that the “problem is not geographically limited to the Gulf of Guinea,” (ISS, 2013), those in the Gulf of Guinea however occur mainly in Nigeria’s Niger Delta. Indeed Cardiff University researcher, Christian Beuger has listed corruption, weak law enforcement and poverty as drivers of piracy (see UNODC 2013), and the piracy in the Gulf of Guinea is linked to the corruption in the Nigeria’s oil sector, where according to the British research group, the Chatham House, “corruption and fraud are rampant in the country’s oil sector,” and “lines between legal and illegal supplies of Nigerian oil can be blurry,” (ibid).

This paper argues that to view the new face of piracy in Africa with the lens of corruption in Nigeria’s oil industry alone is oversimplification of the problem, which conveniently ignores the nexus between the illegal bunkering in the Niger Delta region and the militancy in the region in the pre-amnesty period. It overlooks the questions of how the Niger Delta violence arose in history, its strategic value for the region within the framework of competitive group interaction

in Nigeria, and the implications of the new face of piracy both for post-Jonathan Nigeria and the Gulf of Guinea oil economy. It contends that while the current incidents around the Gulf of Guinea linked to the Niger Delta region could be more criminal than piratical, post-Jonathan era in Nigeria is more likely to witness incidents that combine ‘prospects of plunder and the desire for bigger stakes in the social, political, and economic order.’

The Explanatory Framework

According to Colonel Peter Underwood (ret), a former U.S. marine, armed groups not directly springing from the government authority, such as military and police forces fall into three basic categories along a spectrum ranging from one extreme of criminals, motivated by the simple prospect of plunder and at the other end, ideologues, driven by strong motives and seeking to change political and social conditions. In the middle of the spectrum are those though motivated by greed, however, at some point ‘mature’, and desire bigger stake in the political, social and economic order (Underwood, 2009:17).

On the one hand, the Somali piracy started out as in the first category and could by virtue of the liaison with the Somali Islamists graduate into the middle group and ultimately the ideologically-driven extreme. On the other hand, although elements driven by urge for plunder featured in the Niger Delta militancy even in its apogee, the Niger Delta cause was however essentially driven by the desire for ‘bigger stake in the political, social and economic order.’ Plunder from oil-related criminalities within the context of the Niger Delta struggle beyond serving the pecuniary interest of the major actors, also helped to fund the militancy.

Towards Understanding the New Face of African Coastal Piracy

A brief introduction may be necessary in our understanding of the subject under consideration. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society comprising more than 250 ethnic/social groups. Politics in this most populous African nation, even prior to independence in 1960 has been characterized by intense rivalry among the competing social forces, out of which three, namely, the Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba are the largest. The first military coup in January 1966, which ousted the government headed by an Hausa-Fulani Northerner, and aborted the country’s of parliamentary democracy, was perceived as an attempt by the Igbo military-politico elite for political ascendancy at the expense of its Hausa-Fulani counter-part. In a putsch that has aptly been captured as a ‘return match’ by Billy Dudley, the North Hausa-Fulani military-politico forces staged a revenge coup later in July, and murdered then military Head of State, General Thomas Agu-iyi Ironsi, an Igbo, who had taken over the reins of government following the liquidation of the civilian government and failure of the January coup. The revenge coup also targeted and decimated the corps of Igbo military elite. The Hausa-Fulani military-politico elite took over power afterwards. A civil war soon followed which, from the federal perspective was ostensibly fought to stop the Igbos from seceding from the country, but in reality was motivated by the prospect of oil in the East- the Igbo area and the Southern-most tip of the country, the Niger Delta. Nigeria slipped into a serial of coups in the post-civil war era which had military officers from the North ousting one another in the attempt to control the oil economy. While the North effectively ruled the country throughout this period until the return of democracy in 1999, the

Yoruba South-West however controlled the bureaucracy. The Igbos and other ethnic groups remained marginal both in political leadership of the country and its bureaucracy during that period.

In 1993, an attempt to return the country to democratic government failed after the election, believed to have been won by Yoruba business mogul, Moshood Abiola, was annulled by the military regime headed by a Northerner, General Ibrahim Babangida. Abiola's death later in federal custody further incensed the Yoruba sense of marginalization. As Professor Richard Joseph has noted, "the individual Nigerian, especially in a context of competitive group interaction, enters into a system of sectional opposition from which it is usually impossible to opt out," (Joseph, 1991: 50). Although the de-annulment campaign mounted by the Yoruba ethnic nationality of Nigeria's South-West region failed, the group nevertheless succeeded in having the country's presidency ceded to it via the Olusegun Obasanjo presidency (1999-2007). Violence was instrumental in extracting this concession from Nigeria's power elites.

Although the Niger Delta/Ijaw agitation dates back to the 1960's, elsewhere, I have however argued that the current Ijaw presidency in Nigeria owes to the Niger Delta militancy that resonated in the late 1990s and acquired a more virulent tenor in 2004. The thesis is foregrounded on the theory that the Nigerian social groups, 'in the context of competitive group interaction', resort to violence as a means for political ascendancy (Alozieuwa, 2013). The Niger Delta violent campaign aimed at disrupting Nigeria's oil economy by targeting the petroleum infrastructure.

Prior to the Ijaw ascendancy however, the Nigerian State attempted to buy off the Niger Deltans with a DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-habilitation) - focused amnesty programme. Although some of the combatants in the Niger Delta militancy embraced the amnesty deal, some elements remained outside of the programme. Many did not show up even after the State bent backwards to accommodate those who initially were skeptical of its intentions or merely failed to meet the deadline for accepting the offer. These elements have shifted from attacking Nigeria's oil and gas installations and personnel and constitute the current horde of pirates operating around the Gulf Guinea and the West African maritime environs.

The Analysis

On the one hand, the Somali piracy, which first targeted commercial fishing vessels and later preyed on oil tankers might fall into Underwood's poorly organized, disjointed group motivated by greed. A liaison has long been established between the pirates and the ideologically-driven al-Shabaab Islamists, whereby the Islamists received a portion of the pirates' booty in return for allowing the brigands to pursue their illicit trade undisturbed (Sullivan, www.smallwarsjournal.com). The Somali piracy narrative has transformed from the initial small-scale robberies to one, which the ransom payments became the main venture of real-life Somali pirates. While the pirates' capture of a Ukrainian transport ship carrying Russian-made tanks, rocket-propelled grenades, and anti-aircraft guns en route to Mombasa, Kenya could also be a "function of the booty at stake", (ibid), it nevertheless prompted the Islamists to demand access to the weapons on board (ibid). Thus despite the reported rift between the two groups over the

pirates' capture of the Muslim-owned Saudi super tanker, Sirius Star, (ibid), the increasing liaison between the two groups could gradually transform the pirates from a poorly organized and disjointed group motivated by mere greed to either the middle group or the one at the most-extreme end of the spectrum- the ideologically-driven genre. While analysts may have noted that "it is not uncommon for terrorist groups to ally with more conventional criminal networks as a means of funding their ideological enterprises," (ibid), in "Captain Phillips", the narrative is that of common fishermen who got their start combating overfishing and polluting in their waters. They originally worked as the unofficial "Somali Coast Guard," and demanded fines, from exploitative foreign commercial fishing vessels. They later transformed into the Somali pirates. The pirates are also roused from their village by men with guns who work for a kingpin and a sleepy eyed Muse, the captain of the pirates who board the Maersk Alabama, is forced at gun point to assemble his pirate crew. In another instance, when asked by the titular Captain Phillips, the pirates respond rather sarcastically that of course they are all just fishermen (<http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/africa-in-focus/posts/2013/10/18-captain-phillips-east-africa-somalia-sy>). The liaison could prove a dangerous convergence- piracy and Islamism.

Rohan Gunaratna, has argued that lack of maritime capabilities may reduce the threat to the maritime domain. Translating (maritime) intentions into capabilities, he contends, requires significant human expertise (experience and training) and resources and the lack of large boats or ships that can operate outside territorial waters reduces the threat posed to the maritime environment, (Gunaratna, 2009:89). Although many lack maritime capabilities, the al Qaeda is among the prominent terrorist groups identified to have over time, developed maritime attack capabilities. Indeed, an extensive enterprise has been noted between the Somali pirates and Somali Islamists, involving weapons smuggling and joint training efforts (Sullivan, www.smallwarsjournal.com). The Somali Islamists are linked to al Qaeda.

On the other hand, the Nigeria Delta militants from the outset belong to the middle category of armed groups driven by the desire for 'bigger stake in the political, social and economic order.' While the agenda of the remnant of the group outside of the amnesty deal and indeed other emergent elements which now combine to constitute the criminal elements operating in the Gulf of Guinea may have no connection with the original agenda of the Niger Delta struggle, a resurgent Niger Delta struggle is likely post-Jonathan and could join forces with the current hordes operating in the Gulf of Guinea. There grounds for such assumptions.

Currently, sectional tensions have mounted between Jonathan's ethnic Ijaw group in the Nigeria's Niger Delta region and some Northerners over the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, which revolves around the prospects or otherwise of Jonathan not presiding over Nigeria beyond 2015. Former militant and leader of one of the Niger Delta militant groups, Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Mujahid Asari-Dokubo, who earlier noted that "the Niger Delta region was only peaceful because Goodluck Jonathan was President" (Nigerian Bulletin, February 21, 2014), has also threatened that "2015 is already a settled matter [and that] Goodluck Jonathan would be President in 2015... . According to him, [W]hether they contest or they don't..." and "[T]here would be blood in the streets (of Nigeria) if Mr. Jonathan is not reelected president in the 2015 election, the militant leader threatened," (Premium Times, September 9, 2013).

Post-Jonathan era in Nigeria, whether by 2015 or 2019 needs be of great concern to Nigerians and the international community alike. So far the Jonathan presidency appears to have bred so much sectarianism in Nigeria, pitting it against some powerful Northern political interests. The political feud explanation of the current violence by the Boko Haram insurgents in the country, for instance, has been attributed to North's rejection of Jonathan's presidency from 2011 (see Alozieuwa, 2012). In the post-Jonathan era and should political power return to the North, there is need for a national consensus to resist the tendency to assume that the Ijaw/Jonathan presidency has completely satisfied the region's desire for 'bigger stake in the political, social and economic order.' In 2010, *A Rapid Assessment of the Niger Delta Post-Amnesty Programme* was prompted by the "growing concern that the programme was failing to meet the central objective of the amnesty programme was to create a solid basis for sustainable peace and development in the region." The report indicates that none of the programme's three phases (DDR) has been successfully completed. Indeed, none of the several interventions for the Niger Delta region such as the Niger Delta Development Commission, (NDDC), the newly-created ministry of Niger Delta, amnesty programme, including the Jonathan presidency has successfully addressed the developmental challenges in the region. Crisis of confidence brews between the Nigerian State and some Niger Delta environmental activists over the implementation of the recommendations of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) report 'Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland.' The report was aimed at effecting true reconciliation with the Ogoniland, a constituent part of the region. In other words, the developmental issues that led to the Niger Delta militancy remain largely unresolved.

Conclusion

In post-Jonathan Nigeria, attempt to treat the Niger Delta question with levity may lead to a return to militancy. However unlike the old militancy, which focused mainly on-shore oil installations, a more sophisticated Niger Delta militancy that can target off-shore oil infrastructure is likely. The Niger Delta militants possess the understanding and knowledge of the maritime environment. In June 2010, seven Nigerians believed to be members of the Niger Delta militants were sentenced on terrorism charges in Equatorial Guinea following the attack the previous year via motor boats on that country's presidential palace. While this may be unconnected to oil economy of the Gulf of Guinea, it proves the possibility that the militants could also operate on international waters and may not be confined within the sovereign borders of Nigeria. While the successful attack on Shell's \$3.6 billion "Bonga" Floating Production, Storage, and Offloading vessel (FPSO), 120km from shore in 1000m deep water, in 2008, by the militant group, Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, (MEND) had no bearing with piracy, it nevertheless proves the group's maritime capabilities for pirate activities, and challenges the theory that except to steal cargo or kidnap personnel and passengers, armed groups prefer to attack targets not far away from shore and that as they seek publicity, would prefer attacking targets near the waterfront or in port (Gunaratna, 2009:89). In the near future, the patronage currently being extended to former Niger Delta militants by the State in the form of multi-million naira contracts as well as the current piracy could provide resources to acquire large boats or ships that operate outside territorial waters. The urge to focus international attention on the Niger Delta cause can also be an incentive to play on the strategic Gulf of

Guinea maritime domain. How impactful a Niger Delta piracy could be in that foreseeable future however remains a function of the ability of the militants to develop their maritime capabilities. Fortunately, the Niger Delta militancy did not share any Islamist ideology that could encourage a convergence between it and al Qaeda or their affiliates. Such a liaison remains most unlikely in the foreseeable future.

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