

Cultism And Electoral Violence In Rivers State, Nigeria: A Study Of Fourth Republic

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Abstract: *Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, Fourth republic cult gangs have played an increasingly pivotal role in driving electoral violence in Rivers State Nigeria. These cult gangs are involved in broad spectrum of activities, including intimidation of voters and political opponents, criminal activities assassinations and disruption of political rallies on behalf of political actors. Gangs are remunerated in cash, material gifts and other favours from political actors, including state appointments and protection. Despite the deployment of security forces, election periods in Rivers state have long been characterized by high levels of electoral violence the 2023 elections were no exception*

Keywords: Cultism, Electoral Violence, Rivers State, Nigeria, Fourth Republic

Introduction

Cult violence has been a regular feature in the Rivers State socio-political setting for more than two decades. According to a report by the Fund for Peace in December 2012 titled, 'Nigeria: Beyond Terror and Militants,' confraternities were initially formed in the 1950's at universities for the purposes of promoting relationships and bonds between and among various students for social and economic advocacy and activism. Many of these groups focused on the promotion of social and political principles, including resistance to colonialism and discriminatory, sexist, or unfair university policies (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

From the late 1980's to the mid-1990, a wave of militarization occurred among confraternities against the backdrop of a broader militarization of society, particularly in Rivers and other key Niger Delta states. Contributing to this trend of militarization was a growing perception that peaceful methods of advocacy and mobilization around issues of economic justice and representative governance were yielding limited results. Thus, the use of violence and intimidation as political tools were increasingly embraced and many confraternities began to evolve into what has become the cult group phenomenon of today (THE FUND FOR PEACE, 2015) As noted in the April 2015 book, 'Violence in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends,' by Patricia Taft and Nate Haken, militants saw confraternities as a useful means to confront and threaten opposing groups, and began funnelling money and weapons into their ranks, leading them to become increasingly predatory and violent. Cult-related violence peaked in the mid-1990s, spreading rapidly to the streets as well as the creeks through militarized wings of the confraternities and breakaway factions (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

In the 2007 elections, according to a report by Human Rights Watch from October of that year, wealthy patrons emerged as "Cult Godfathers," who provided money and weapons to groups during election seasons for intimidation and thuggery. Cult groups began being hired by crime syndicates to provide onsite security and administer criminal routes, leading them to become deeply enmeshed in the illegal oil bunkering market, as well as in the drugs and weapons trade. Cult gangs became highly active within neighborhoods and communities, often recruiting youths to their ranks to help defend and expand their territory (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

In Rivers State in particular, cults have served as a gateway to all kinds of criminality and violence, including militancy. These groups and networks of groups have wide geographical penetration in the state and are heavily armed. In Rivers, as well as other states, cult groups overlap with street gangs, criminal syndicates, youth associations, and other militias. From the more notorious Deebam, Deywell, Greenlanders and Icelanders, to the lesser known Doctor's Squad, Italians, Blood Hunters, Junior Vikings, and others, cult groups have proliferated in Rivers State with reach into the communities of Emohua, Ikwerre, Khana, Ogba Egbema Ndoni, Ahoada and the Kalabari and Okrika villages (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

The 2003 elections in Rivers marked the consolidation of cult groups as key actors in political violence and shaping electoral outcomes. The elections that followed in 2007, 2011 and 2015 were characterized by varying levels of violence with cult groups playing a central role in aggressive attacks against political opponents of the ruling PDP, as well as rival cult groups working for the opposition (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Conceptual Clarification of Terms:

The Concept of Cultism- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'cult' as a small group of individuals and are extremist in their beliefs and do not belong to any form of organized religion. Oxford Concise Dictionary of Sociology (1996) defines cult as a small group or religious activities whose beliefs are typically secret, esoteric, and individualistic.

The Concept of Electoral violence- Fischer (2002) defines electoral violence (conflict) as any random or organised act that seeks to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process through threat, verbal intimidation, hate speech, disinformation, physical assault, forced "protection," blackmail, destruction of property, or assassination. In the opinion of (Igbuzor, 2010), electoral violence is any act of violence perpetuated in the course of political activities, including the pre, during and post-election periods, and may include any of the following acts: thuggery, use of force to disrupt political meetings or voting at polling stations, or the use of dangerous weapons to intimidate voters and other electoral process or to cause bodily harm or injury to any person connected with electoral processes. Similarly, Albert (2007) defines electoral violence as a form or forms of organised acts or threats physical, psychological, and structural—aimed at intimidating, harming, or blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process (Albert 2007).

The Concept of Fourth Republic-is the current republican government of Nigeria. Since 1999, it has governed according to fourth republican constitution. Nigeria adopted the constitution of the fourth republic on 29 May 1999 (Punch, 2019).

The 2003 Elections and the Rise of Gang Violence in Rivers State

During the 2003 election cycle, state government officials working with then-Rivers State Governor Peter Odili and then-Federal Minister of Transportation Abiye Sekibo armed and hired criminal gangs to ensure the successful rigging of Rivers' polls in favor of the People's Democratic Party.¹¹ The two most prominent gangs armed by PDP politicians during the 2003 campaigns were the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), led by Asari Dukobo, and the Icelanders or Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), led by Ateke Tom (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Electoral violence in Rivers was so widespread in 2003 that one local observer group compared the campaign period to a "low-intensity armed struggle." Not long after the polls, Asari of the NDPVF fell out with his sponsors in the Rivers State government. State government officials responded by encouraging Ateke Tom's Icelanders to break Asari's group by force. By late 2003, Asari's and Ateke's gangs were openly at war with one another. The conflict between Asari and Ateke had a devastating effect on the residents of Port Harcourt and surrounding communities. In the fighting between their gangs, dozens of local people were killed and tens of thousands fled their homes. Hundreds of gang members were also killed (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

By August 2004 this violence had shown such a crescendo that the federal government ordered the military to intervene and stop it. In September 2004 then-President Olusegun Obasanjo invited both Asari and Ateke to the national capital Abuja for peace negotiations, which resulted in a truce between the two gangs. But the underlying causes of the violence that their clashes represented were never meaningfully addressed. Neither gang made any good-faith effort to disarm, and none of the politicians implicated in arming the gangs and sponsoring the violence was held to account in any way (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Protection for politicians

Cult Gangs assumed the role of guards at political rallies, campaign offices and the residences of politicians, effectively serving as security personnel for many political aspirants. Some gang members were given vehicles as part of politicians' convoys. Protection services often led to violent clashes with rival gangs, with members of the public sometimes becoming unintended victims. In Rivers, gang members interviewed highlighted that their primary responsibility was to safeguard the politicians, with one noting: 'Anytime they need our help, we go for it, we protect them.' Illustratively, one gang member in Rivers said that he had worked with politicians for the past eight years. Ironically, increasing reliance on gang protection also results in growing clashes, further fuelling the need for additional protection in a vicious cycle of escalating violence (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

Cult gangs and electoral violence in Rivers State: Interrogating the Fourth Republic

In Rivers state Nigeria, covert violence also increased during the 2023 elections, with cult gangs ‘armed with guns, axes, machetes and knives for the job of perpetrating violence to scare away voters perceived to be opposition supporters’. The cult gang said that if you are not going to vote for the PDP, don’t come out.’ The phrase ‘don’t come out’ was a key message of the 2023 elections. The message was widely circulated by chiefs in many Local Government Areas, that people should not come out unless they were willing to vote for a particular party, namely the PDP. A former agitator explained that this scared people so that they could not walk freely and would not come out to vote. The message was clearly effective, with Rivers becoming the state with the lowest voter turnout in the 2023 elections. Cumulatively (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023)

For example, the APC campaign coordinator for Ahoada-West Local Government Area (LGA) Chisom Lennard, was shot dead during the governorship and state assembly elections held on 18 March 2023. Abiye Sekibo, the director general of the PDP Presidential Campaign Council in Rivers, accused the state governor of an assassination attempt an allegation that the government denied. The incident nevertheless reflects the atmosphere of violence that preceded the 2023 elections in Rivers. According to media reports, thugs stormed the residence of Lee Maeba, a former Rivers national senator and state chairperson of the PDP Presidential Campaign Council in an apparent assassination attempt. Although the assassination attempt did not succeed, the incident left some members of his household with gunshot wounds after the thugs fired shots indiscriminately (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

An eyes witness explains instances where politicians directly instructed gang members to kill opponents, offering monetary rewards for doing so. Assassinations have become a livelihood for some cult group members, with one stating: ‘For me, killing is what I do. Just call me if you want any assassination carried out, and I will do it for you. It is through this that I earn a living to survive. Indicating different categories of assassins, including ‘a group we call suicide men. They don’t mind if they are going to die; they are ready to die with you.’ Similarly, another Rivers respondent described how the Rivers State government also used political appointments strategically: ‘The 200 000 unit advisors that were appointed by Nyesom Wike, most of them are thugs, cultists, and he used them to stop other candidates from campaigning.’ Lower-ranking gang members are largely rewarded with cash and post-election jobs at bunkering sites, while higher-level appointments, such as special advisers and large amounts of money, are reserved for gang leaders (Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, 2023).

The reasons why People Join Cults are:

- **Peer group influence:** Peer group influence has been identified as one of the reasons why undergraduates join cult groups in the university; Omege and Akanle (2007: Alikor, Orlunba, 2023).), stated that a student who is an active member of a secret cult can motivate, convince and propel his/her peer to join in such cult. This means that once a student is initiated as a cult member, it is now incumbent on him to persuade his friends to see reasons why being a campus big boy is tied to being a cult member so rather than feeling inferior to his friends who are now big boys in school as cult member such a student would want to join cult.
- **Parental Background:** Parents have divine and social responsibilities to bring up and train the child to be an acceptable, responsible, promoting and successful human. Olajugbe (2001), noted that parental background, lack of moral instruction at home and the manner in which the child is brought up is a determinant factor when it comes to the child “s enrolment into a cult group. Most parents who come from a well-structured background with an outlined moral principle fully stated and strictly followed end up raising their children to follow suit in the their everyday life as it has been stated in over 500B.C in the Holy Bible in the book of Proverbs 22:6 (NIV), which say that “train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old, he will not depart from it” This is not a promise to parents who raise their children properly but a warning to those who allow their adolescents to grow up without guidance, who raise them to go their own way. However, it is a clear note that children who are allowed to go their own way are likely to change to the wrong way. It is on this background that most children end up joining cult in school as a result of parent failure.
- **Power:** is seen as another factor responsible for cultism in Nigeria. Frederick (1963:201-202), saw power as the capacity of an individual or groups of individual to modify the conduct of others in the manner, which he desires. In other words, power is bilateral as well as relational, for someone to have power; there must be another person over whom power is exercised. Hoffman and Graham (2009:5), „positive power is seen as the ability to do things by the discovery of our own strength as opposed to negative power which is seen as a power over a domination. Hence, the negative power of dominance is what most students seeks or have in mind before joining secret cult in school. Egwu (2004), revealed that some students join cult groups for the purpose of power and security. According to Egwu, (2004), he said that these cult groups guarantee them power to influence decision making process in school, respect, recognition and financial assistance

- **Juvenile delinquency:** is usually the outcome of a combination of diverse social and economic factors, especially weak family ties, single parent households and poverty. Poor social values, lack of education or training that could provide an income and the frequent change of residence are also contributing factors (Emmanuel, 2022).

Typologies of Cult in Rivers state are:

The Vikings

The Supreme Vikings Confraternity also called the Norsemen Klub of Nigeria, was formed at the University of Port Harcourt in Rivers State in 1982 with the mission to promote unity and brotherhood on campus and the betterment of society overall. Even today, the group maintains that its objectives are peaceful. During an interview conducted by Roy Chikwem for Nigeria world in October 2008, a high ranking leader in the confraternity said that their mission was to, “Fight for and defend the oppressed and the weak. Our organization adopts corrective and protective measures for the defense of the masses against social injustice, victimization, and deprivation. The fundamental mission is to assemble men in the course of re-enactment of the Vikings, develop leadership, promote brotherhood, and provide service to humanity.”

However, when a wave of militarization swept through confraternities across Nigeria in the 1990s, three splinter groups emerged from the Vikings. (Bestman, 2007). These splinter groups were the ‘Junior Vikings’, also known as the Deewell, the Deebam, and the Icelanders. Unlike the original Vikings, these groups were not bound by university code or a formal power structure. Thus, they were able to expand their influence outside of campus and into surrounding communities (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

Vikings members have been implicated in numerous acts of violence, both politically sponsored and purely criminal, in Rivers State and beyond. In Rivers State, Vikings members have reportedly won seats in the State House of Assembly in such numbers that some Port Harcourt residents jokingly refer to the Assembly as “Viking House.” (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Deebam

Deebam is the street wing of the campus-based Klansmen Konfraternity and is one of the most effectively organized and most violent cult gangs in Rivers State. Deebam has been responsible for numerous kidnappings of expatriate oil workers and wealthy Nigerians and engaged in several bloody turf wars with rival groups in different parts of Rivers State. Deebam differs from the street wings of other cult groups, in that it is largely autonomous from its parent Klansmen cult. Its members have often been hired by sponsors who are not themselves members of the Klansmen. For example, Deebam has been at the front lines of a long-running turf war in Rivers State town of Bodo as the proxy militia of former state Commissioner of Finance Kenneth Kobani. Kobani himself is reportedly not a member of the Klansmen or any other cult, but has trouble of securing the services of Deebam in a largely successful effort to drive his political rival’s Deewell fighters from Bodo (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

The late leader of the Deebam group, Prince Igodo, was killed in a May 2007 shootout with members of Soboma George’s Outlaws gang. Igodo was reportedly killed because he was believed responsible for the kidnapping for ransom of the mother of former governor Celestine Omehia, and had threatened to violently disrupt Omehia’s inauguration as governor (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Organized crime and racketeering have become typical activities for Deebam to offset expensive membership dues, according (Wellington, 2007). Wellington also asserts that the group’s influence in Emuoha local Government Area (LGA) of Rivers is so profound that it has extended into the political sphere. Before his death in 2007, a prominent Deebam member was known to work for the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), with the group also tied to election rigging in exchange for money. Wellington notes that violence involving the Deebam usually occurs when individuals fail to pay bribes, or when clashes with rival cult groups, such as the Deewell (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

Deewell

Deewell were not university-affiliated when they splintered from the Vikings. As Wellington describes, many of the Deewell members were already involved in petty crime and were known for their participation in territorial street brawls using broken bottles, machetes and locally-manufactured guns. According to an interview conducted by Wellington in April 2005 with a former cult commander, the Deewell lacked the resources of other cult groups, and as a result were ineffective against their rival the Deebam. Thus, another splinter group, the Icelanders was formed, and in the process helped to consolidate the power of the Deebam. This is consistent with other local media accounts such as nairaland.com (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

The Icelanders

The Icelanders have represented one of the most violent groups in the Niger Delta region, as described in a 2008 Human Rights Watch report on Rivers State titled ‘Politics as War’. The report suggested in the 2003 election won by the PDP, the Icelanders’ leader Akele Tom exerted political influence. The report also suggested political racketeering was one of the ways for the Icelanders to generate revenue. The Icelanders are also known for attacks on energy infrastructure which have occurred regularly since the early 2000s. In 2014 clashes with the Greenlanders, a number of fatalities were reported in local media such as the Naijagists.com blog on September 17, 2014 (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

The Icelanders was formed as a “street wing” of the Vikings group—essentially a vehicle to enhance that group’s armed strength by recruiting member’s off-campus (membership in the Vikings and many other cult groups is only open to students on campuses where the groups operate). Former gang members and civil society activists allege that the group was formed at the initiative of former Federal Minister of Transportation Abiye Sekibo, a powerful member of the PDP and a native of Rivers State (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

In the run-up to the 2003 elections in Rivers, the Icelanders were used to ensure a PDP victory in Okrika local government. Okrika had been controlled by the opposition All Nigeria People’s Party (ANPP) since 1999. The Icelanders, led by Ateke Tom, successfully drove the ANPP-affiliated Bush Boys out of Okrika and ensured a PDP victory in the local government. Ateke’s group grew in numbers and prominence over the coming years and took on the name Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) in 2003 (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

The Icelanders are one of Rivers state’s most powerful and violent gangs and have been implicated in numerous assaults, murders and, other crimes. The Icelanders are also involved in oil bunkering and providing “security” to oil bunkering operations run by local politicians. Two of the individuals most responsible for the violence described in this report are affiliated with different factions of the Icelanders: Ateke Tom was one of the founders of the group, and Soboma George also began his criminal career as a member of the group (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

The Greenlanders

In 2013, a member of the Icelanders Mr. Nengi Ikiba split from the group to form the Greenlanders, due to “irreconcilable differences” as reported in local news sources such as pointblank news.com on July 1st, 2013. The Greenlanders have since expanded their territory into areas in both Rivers and Bayelsa states. The group’s political influence in Bayelsa is also strong as Mr. Ikiba ran for the Bayelsa House of Assembly in 2011 and for the Ijaw Youth Council in 2013. However, in 2013, he was arrested and subsequently confessed to charges of cultism according to news source saharareporters.com on July 4th, 2013. Clashes over disputed territory in Rivers State with the Icelanders have been numerous and violent. In September 2014, clashes between the two groups killed ten people according to news source Naijagists.com, and consistent with incident reports on the P4P Peace map (The Fund for Peace, 2015).

Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF)

During the run-up to the 2003 elections, Asari Dukobo was recruited by PDP officials to organize electoral violence and ensure the successful rigging of the polls. Shortly after the elections, Asari broke with his former sponsors and organized his fighters under the NDPVF banner. The NDPVF fundamentally transformed the dynamics of conflict in the Niger Delta with its adoption of overtly political rhetoric, identifying itself in opposition to the perceived marginalization and neglect of the Niger Delta and framing its activities in terms of strident political demands. In this it was the precursor to the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). The NDPVF was badly weakened following Asari’s arrest on charges of treason in 2005 but is still in existence and strong in some parts of Rivers State. Many NDPVF members are also cult members but in some communities, such as Ogbogoro, NDPVF members have tried to combat the violence carried out by cult groups through vigilante activities (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

Conclusion

Electoral violence is a countrywide concern in Nigeria, in Rivers state in is repeatedly among the states hit hardest by electoral violence. In 2023 it became flashpoints for election violence. The state is highly politically competitive and has a strong presence of Cult gangs with links to politicians, which play a vital role in electoral violence. The long history of election violence, coupled with the incidents of attacks and clashes during the 2023 elections, had a major impact on voter turnout, the voting process and, consequently, the outcome of the elections in the state

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