

**The Fitful Path: Presidential Authoritarianism, Electoral Politics and Democratization Process in Nigeria since 1999**

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**Abstract**

As the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes to a close majority of states in Africa have come under multiparty democracy. While this represents a tremendous achievement, yet the march towards deepening the democratization process on the continent is experiencing reversals. Particularly troubling is the emergent of one party dominant rule and streaks of democratic authoritarianism being exhibits in some of Africa's new democracies a crisis that is better illustrated by the Nigeria experience since 1999. While Nigeria's transition elections of 1999 was significant in that it brought to an end 15 years of military dictatorship yet the pattern of dominance by the Peoples Democratic Party, PDP that emanates from the general elections give an ominous signs. Under the banner of the PDP, President Obasanjo all through his eight years tenure vigorously pursues a dubious one party dominant rule. The ruling party under former President Obasanjo maximally deployed the instrument of patronage, selective use of anti-corruption probes and most importantly the undermining of democratic competition through the classic rigging of the 2003 and 2007 general elections. Nowhere is the stimulating landslide victory of the ruling PDP more glaring than in the Niger Delta, Nigeria's oil bearing region where the PDP has maintain a stifling grip on the political space since 1999. Thus this study seeks to analysis the trend of democratic competition and the management of the democratization process. In particular it x-rays oppositional politics and the perversion of the electoral process by the ruling party. It also discusses how the militarization of electoral competition and perversion of electoral process has contributes to the escalation of violence in Nigeria's oil producing Niger Delta.

**Note**

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## **Introduction**

After two decades, the battle for enthroneing and consolidating democracy and constitutional rule in Africa continues unabated. In places like Botswana, Ghana, Mali and South Africa, the continent has witnessed tremendous gains yet the struggles towards the institutionalization of democratic norms and the consolidation of democratic process in Africa remains fragile (Diamond, 2008: 7-9). Nigeria's political history like many of its peers in sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by turbulence, violent regime changes and a constant flux in the nature, structure and dynamics of power, politics and policies. Nigeria had witnessed not less than ten changes of government via the instrument of coups and military supervised democratic transitions. After sixteen years of harrowing military dictatorship, Nigeria made another return to multiparty democratic rule following the successful conclusion of military supervised transitional elections and the inauguration of a new civilian regime in May 1999.

The inauguration ceremony of May, 29<sup>th</sup> 1999 is highly significant in Nigeria political history. It not just marks the end of military rule and the instituting of elected civilian regime, it in fact signals the beginning of political openness that is expected to facilitate freedom of expression, association, and other civil liberties denied Nigerians during the long years of authoritarian repression under military regimes (Human Rights Watch, 1999a: 1-13; 1999b: 112-142). No doubt the democratization process in Nigeria has made appreciable gains; however, there have been innumerable reversals which have contributed to stalling the process of democratic consolidation. Former president Obasanjo during his turbulent eight years rule did initiate series of economic and social reforms that were meant to re-position Nigeria's ailing economy, attract foreign investment, combat corruption and rescue the nation's battered foreign image. The effects of these reforms programmes and indeed the general economic policy of the former president continued to elicit mixed reactions from Nigerians and remains subject of debates.

No doubt, the drive towards the institutionalization of democratic norms and the consolidation of democratic process in Nigeria is faltering. The most troubling indication of the impending democratic crisis in Nigeria is the stifling dominance of the political space by the ruling People's Democratic Party. Deploying all the trappings of presidential executive powers and the advantage of incumbency, former President Obasanjo in his eight years tenure vigorously pursues the institutionalization of a hegemonic one party dominance of his ruling party. Former President Obasanjo makes maximal use of oil rents and state security agencies to infiltrate and disorganize opposition parties and suppress internal dissent within the ruling party. Relying on the power of incumbency, the ruling party deployed patronage, the selective use of anti-corruption probes and most importantly the undermining of democratic competition through the classic perversion of the electoral process, the result of which is the wanton manipulation of the 2003 and 2007 general elections to the advantage of the ruling party. If it had emerged on the basis of an enviable record of performance in governance the consolidation of ruling party dominance might not have raised much eyebrows. However, given the abysmal governance records of the PDP, the consolidation of one party dominant rule in Nigeria becomes an issue of grave concern.

After a decade of democratic practices, the euphoria that heralded democratic rule in 1999 has waned given the apparent failure of the ruling party to tackle corruption, the worsening of living standard amid economic growth, escalating social violence, elite political infighting all resulting

in glaring failing governance. The woes of democratization process in Nigeria has further been compounded by the penchant to employ mindless violence against political opponents and the electorates alike mostly by the ruling PDP. The arming of unemployed youth for orchestrating political violence by regional ruling elite has aided the proliferation of small and light weapons. The weapons are now been deployed by political foot soldiers turned miscreants to terrorize the civil populace in many states across the federation. In the Niger Delta, armed militia groups have turned the weapons at their disposals to fight the state-oil alliance in the furtherance of the region's quest for environmental restitution, development and equity in resource distribution.

Given, the background, the objective of this paper is to analysis the convulsive nature of the democratic process in Nigeria since the return to civil rule. In particular this work will assess the impact of the autocratic disposition of former president Obasanjo on political competition and opposition politics. It will also assess the perversion of the electoral process and the undermining of democratic competition by the ruling party. It will look at the reification and use of violence as instrument of political competition notably in the oil producing Niger Delta and its implication on political competition and most importantly political stability and security.

### **Presidential Authoritarianism, Opposition Politics and Democratic Process in Nigeria**

Any attempt at understanding former president Obasanjo push at turning Nigeria's emergent democratic rule to a '*monocratic*' contraption through the subversion of the democratic process and the decimation of opposition front will be incomplete without a better understanding of the questionable democratic credentials of Chief Obasanjo argued Kura (2008: 82). To begin with former president Obasanjo was a die-hard believer in the one party dominant state system. His idea of an African one party system as presented in "*Constitution for National Integration and Development*" was hinged on set of issues relating to the political and economic nature of Africa (Obasanjo, 1989). Arguing for one-party dominance for transcending divisive tendencies, Obasanjo stated that:

"In essence my present suggestion is that we adopt a one-party system..... This appears to be the only procedural mechanism through which we can transcend the divisive and centrifugal forces tearing us apart and diverting our attention from the monumental task of integration and nation building" (Mohammed: 2006: 12).

Such position was the foundation for the emergence of one-party dominance across states in Africa in the immediate period after decolonization.

Justifying the one-party system as the most appropriate for achieving national unity and peaceful structural change of leadership in Africa states, Obasanjo argued that:

"The one-party system like a knife is a technique. I am sure we will all agree that a knife is a knife, whether in the hand of a butcher, carver or farmer. It is technique for achieving a set goal. It is the use to which we put it that matters. Too much opposition...will tear the political system apart. My insistence is that one-party system as our national rallying point would give us continuity and structural change, continuity and stability as regards fundamental policies and objective and dramatic (but peaceful) change of our dramatis personae" (Mohammed, 2006: 13).

This was the belief of former President Obasanjo as espoused in his seminal book. With this view it was no surprise that the first target of former president Obasanjo after assuming the presidency was to silence opposition both within and outside the ruling PDP, curtailed the freedom of the press and civil society movement. With massive oil rents and power of the presidency, the drive to actualize the turning of the ruling PDP into a dominant party and the instituting of authoritarian democracy under the firm control of former president Obasanjo not only become feasible but a realizable endeavour.

Former president Obasanjo first move was to urge prominent opposition leaders to join his regime in forming an inclusive government. As part of this deal, Chief Bola Ige leader of opposition Alliance for Democracy, AD joined the cabinet and was given a ministerial portfolio<sup>1</sup>. The joining of the cabinet by the late Chief Bola Ige was significant giving his position as leader of the opposition party in Southwestern, Nigeria and his prominence in the Afenifere group the leading Yoruba pan socio-cultural organization<sup>2</sup>. With Ige participation Obasanjo sought to court the southwest and began laying the foundation to capture the region in his bid to ensure his political survival. In like manner the national chairman of the main opposition All Peoples Party APP Alhaji Mahmud Waziri was appointed as a special adviser to president Obasanjo. His appointment and refusal to relinquish the position of the party national chairman marked the beginning of internal crisis within the APP (Adedaja: 2004). The ruling party under Obasanjo maximally took advantage of its control of federal bureaucracy and presidential executive power as tool for dispensing patronage directed at poaching influential members of opposition parties in its bid to whittle down their potency and enhance its hegemonic position within the political space (Osumah and Ikelegbe, 2009: 193; Epia, 2003: 11).

The ruling party also deployed targeted elimination of vocal opposition politicians as a political weapon for decimating opposition parties. The first port of call in the dramatization of the ruling party agenda was the southwest. In a cynical circumstance, the Attorney General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, Chief Bola Ige was murder in cold blood at his country home in Ibadan the Oyo state capital on the 23rd of December 2001 (Shariff, 2002; This Day, 2001: 1). Many observers traced the death of Chief Ige to a political attempt at decimating the opposition in the Southwest by president Obasanjo and the ruling PDP sequel to the 2003 general elections. In a similar manner the national vice-chairman, south-south of the opposition ANPP, Chief Marshall Harry was assassinated at his Abuja residence on the March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2002. Harry was a former national vice-chairman for the south-south geo-political zone of the PDP before he fell out with the party and decamped to the opposition All Nigeria Peoples Party. Marshall Harry as a leading opposition figure has vowed to stop the blaze of PDP victories in the south-south zone in particular Rivers state where Obasanjo anointed political son Peter Odili preside over the affairs of the state as governor. Through the use of violence, intimidation, harassment and electoral

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<sup>1</sup> The late Chief Bola Ige was first deployed to the Ministry of Power but later re-deployed to the Ministry of Justice where he combined the position of the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of the Federation. He remained the Justice Minister and AGF till his assassination in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> The Alliance for Democracy, AD was an off-shoot of the late Chief Awolowo second republic party, the Unity Party of Nigeria, UPN. Most stalwarts of the AD were disciples of the late Chief Obafemi Awolowo and were leading pro-democracy activists during the dark years of late General Sani Abacha rule. The party won all the six governorships slot in the Southwestern Nigeria in the 1999 transition elections, control all the six state houses of assembly and won all the federal constituencies slots in the six southwest states of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo.

perversion the ruling party was able to secure a crushing defeat of opposition parties in the controversial and discredited 2003 general elections.

Having secured the presidency for another four year term, president Obasanjo commence the task of routing opposition to his power consolidation within the ruling party. In doing this, president Obasanjo embarked on a systematic dismantling of the power structure of vice president Atiku through the removal of the vice-president loyalists from key positions within the party and government and harassment of those seen as loyal to the vice-president. All through 2004 the president was at loggerhead with the party national chairman Chief Audu Ogbeh. Things were no longer at ease such that by 2005 the presidency was successful in masterminding the forced resignation of the party national chairman. His resignation and the enthronement of Colonel Ahmadu Ali rtd<sup>3</sup> without been duly elected in a national convention marked the final take-over of the party machinery by Obasanjo foot soldiers (Alia, 2005: 8). Earlier on the president had relieved the vice-president of his chairmanship position in the National Council on Privatization and commences series of economic war against the business associates and interests of vice-president Atiku. The face-off within the two most important figures in the presidency was one of the major highlight in the battle for supremacy both in the ruling party and the national political space. The former president authoritarian disposition also work to encourage recklessness in the disposition of ruling party governors, godfathers and power brokers that are closer to the presidency across many states.

### **Election Management Institution, Electoral Administration and Nigeria's Democratization Process since 1999**

While free, fair and competitive elections is central to liberal democracy, in the same way a non-partisan election management body that will serves as impartial mediator and unbiased rule enforcer among contending political forces is highly critical to the success of elections and democratization process in its entirety. The story of electoral commission in Nigeria's political history have shown that the inability of the nation's past and present electoral commissions to act in ways in which they will be seen and taken to be an unbiased umpire have seriously impacted on the commissions integrity, the legitimacy of the electoral process and ultimately the outcomes of elections (Alabi, 2008: 54-55). The operations of electoral commissions in Nigeria have been highly dependent on the executive arms of government thus opening the commissions to much executive meddling and interference. The lack of independence, the prevailing political environment, administrative and logistics lapses have work to undermine the ability of the present electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission to conduct free, fair and credible elections since 1999 (Saliu, 385-386). And no instance has better shown the extent of administrative challenges that face the electoral commission since 1999 than it's conducted and management of voter's registration exercise and the administration and conduct of free, fair and credible elections. The problems of producing a credible voter's list and organizing free and fair elections facing Nigeria's democratization process all began in 1999 but get worse with each consecutive electoral circle.

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<sup>3</sup> Colonel Ahmadu Ali rtd is a core and loyal follower of former president Obasanjo. He was Obasanjo junior in the Nigerian Army. He serves as the Federal Commissioner for Education during General Obasanjo rule as military head of state. As federal commissioner for education he implemented the removal of subsidies and the stoppage of feeding in Nigerian Universities. He is vividly remembered for his role in the student-government crisis that rocked Obasanjo tenure as military head of state.

Commenting on the 1998/1999 voter registration exercise, the Carter Centre and National Democratic Institute in their assessments of the pre-elections processes reports that shortages of materials, delays in the opening of registration centres, lack of skill manpower, and attempts by parties' agents to manipulate the voter's registration process seriously marred the exercise. The report noted that the 57,369,560 people officially registered to vote exceeded reliable estimates of the total number of eligible voters possible in Nigeria as at 1999. The report use the case of Kaduna State where more than 97% of the total 3.9 million population from the last national census conducted in 1991, supposedly register to highlight the glaring manipulation and compromise of the exercise (Carter Centre and NDI, 1999: 16). Much as individuals and political parties are responsible for the perversion, INEC given it mandated functions is officially to be held responsible for its inability to ensure a credible voter registration exercise sequel to the conduct of the 1999 transitional elections. The bungled voter's registration exercise lay at the root of many subsequent problems encountered during the transition process and it did created a veritable opportunities for perversion and fraud in the series of elections that comes afterward.

It was with these glaring shortcomings noted in the pre-election assessment reports that Nigerians went to the polls for nationwide local governments, state and national elections between December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1998 and February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1999. The elections results released by INEC show that the Peoples Democratic Party was the most successful among the three registered parties that contested the elections. The Presidential candidate of the PDP General Olusegun Obasanjo rtd led the polls with 18,738,154 constituting 62.78% of total valid votes cast while the candidate of Alliance for Democracy/All Peoples Party coalition pulled 11,110,287 amounting to 37.22% of total valid votes cast. With this result the candidate of the PDP was returned as the elected president. Though the pattern of dominance was replicated in other elections, yet the shoddy preparation and conduct of the elections by INEC might have significantly contributed in a significant way to the edge the PDP has over the remaining two parties in the founding elections.

In their first post elections statement, the Carter Centre/NDI notes that voting for the February 20th National Assembly elections adhered to electoral regulations in many places however the report states that, the mission's delegates and observers from other organizations reported low voter turnout and serious irregularities nationwide. The report stated that abuses of the electoral process – including ballot stuffing, inflation of results, and voter intimidation-were widespread enough to question the elections' outcome in certain electoral districts (Carter Centre and NDI, 1999: 11). The delegation's second statement was more comprehensive and focused on irregularities in greater detail, including inflated vote returns, ballot box stuffing, altered results, and the disenfranchisement of voters. On the basis of the observed irregularities, perversion and compromise of the elections and the electoral process, President Carter in his post elections observation and monitoring official letter address to INEC underlies the credibility deficit of the elections when he wrote that:

“There was a wide disparity between the number of voters observed at the polling stations and the final results that have been reported from several states. Regrettably, therefore it is not possible for us to make an accurate judgment about the outcome of the presidential election (Carter Centre and NDI, 1999: 12)”.

Notwithstanding the noted deficits emanating from the poor management of the electoral process Nigerians across works of life accept with calmness the outcome of the elections patiently awaiting the next general elections.

Peoples expectations that the second elections of 2003 will afford them the opportunities to correct the anomalies observed in the 1999 transitional elections end up been a misplaced hope given the nature of events that characterized the preparations and management of the 2003 elections. The period between 1999 and 2003 was characterized by rancor and battles for supremacy between the National Assembly in particular the Senate and the presidency. The relationships between these important arms of constitutional regime were so much fraught with crisis such that Oyovbaire has characterized it as that of “*creative confusion rather than of development*” (Oyovbaire, 2007: 14). The prevailing socio-economic and political environment was not also encouraging and gave little optimism about the likelihood of hitch free general elections as the nation’s moves towards 2003. The palpable crisis of insecurity was not help by the emergence and activities of ethnic militias, vigilante groups and armed youth gangs across many states of federation. These crises were compounded by the general economic crisis facing the nation and the increasing perception by majority of Nigerians that the expected dividend of democracy is not forthcoming as anticipated. It was in the midst of these throes that Nigeria prepared for the 2003 general elections (Abdullahi and Saka, 2007: 25-27; Oyovbaire, 2007: 21-24).

The main lapse in the preparation for the 2003 general elections was in respect of the voters’ registration exercise and the updating of the voters’ register list as mandate by the electoral acts and the constitution. First, there was unnecessary delays in the commencement of the voters’ registration exercise by INEC. The second voters’ registration exercise of January 2003, which was necessitates by the numerous complaints that accompanied the first exercise was also marred by serious irregularities resulting in the voiding of over one million names and subsequent disenfranchisement. Attesting to the poor management of the exercise, then Information Minister, Professor Jerry Gana, was quoted to have admitted that the voter registration process was plagued by ‘serious malpractices’ (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2006: 34; Carl, Pitso and Adebo, 2004: 33). Thus for INEC to later claimed it had register 61 million voters and crowning a bungled process with 100 success rate was nothing but strange asserts Lewis (2004: 141).

Commenting on INEC conduct of the electoral process sequel to the 2003 general elections the International Republican Institute states that the commission started late and poorly executed its most important task –establishing a computerized national register of Nigeria’s estimated 65 million eligible voters before the election. The organization notes that allegations of manipulation and poor organization marred the registry used for the 2003 elections. Carpeting INEC, the IRI states that:

“though insufficiently funded until late in the process, nonetheless INEC did not make adequate use of the four years since the last elections to improve voting proceedings. The commission was forced to make up for lost time in early 2003, which by then was too late” (International Republican Institute, 2003: 13).

The organization also faulted INEC ballot design, the procedure for balloting, the staffing and training of ad-hoc staffs' use for the polls among other administration lapses. The organization also notes high incidence of violence that characterized the campaign process and the progressive breakdown of law and order months prior to the elections all of which undermine the outcome of the elections (International Republican Institute, 2003: 13-17). Other observer missions also alluded to these irregularities and perversion of the electoral process in their reports on the conduct and administration of the 2003 general elections.

Buoyed by controversies and shoddy preparations Nigeria went to the poll to elect those that will steer the ship of government at the states and national between April 12<sup>th</sup> and May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2003. At the close of polling the result shows the ruling PDP not only maintained its continued presence in the states under its control but it also made in-road into stronghold of opposition parties. This was particularly the case in southwestern Nigeria where the ruling party using a combination of deceptions, fraud, manipulation and security intimidation capture five out of the six states previously control by the Alliance for Democracy. The opposition All Nigeria Peoples Party also loses governorship position in two states reducing the states under the party control to seven. The loss of the opposition parties amounted to a gain of seven governorship slots for the ruling party.

The ruling party simulating landslide victory was achieved through a combination of massive electoral fraud, outright falsification of elections result, intimidation, harassment and violence directed at keeping voters' at home across many states of the federation (Ibeanu, 2007: 49-63; Human Rights Watch, 2004: 5-7). The Human Rights Watch specifically notes that in April and May 2003, at least one hundred people were killed and many more injured during federal and state elections in Nigeria. The report notes that:

“The majority of serious abuses were perpetrated by members or supporters of the ruling party, the People’s Democratic Party. In a number of locations, elections simply did not take place as groups of armed thugs linked to political parties and candidates intimidated and threatened voters in order to falsify results. The violence and climate of intimidation facilitated widespread fraud, invalidating the results of the elections in many areas (Human Right Watch, 2004: 1)”.

The reports of elections observers' missions both local and international also confirmed the general believed that the ruling party over-rigged the elections compared to opposition parties. For instance in its post-election observation report titled, *“Do the Votes Count?”* the Transition Monitoring Group reports that there were scores of cases of alleged electoral fraud in many states across the country, often with the collusion of election officials and security a personnel. The EU, EOM in its report also notes that the Presidential and a number of Gubernatorial Elections were marred by serious irregularities and fraud-in certain number of states, such that minimum standards of democratic elections were not met (EU Election Observer Mission, 2003: 1).

Despite the noted shortcomings the decisions of opposition parties to toe the line of peace and takes their challenge on the results before election petition tribunals in their bids to seek redress was a welcome relieve. The saga at the election tribunals and the acceptance of the verdicts by the opposition parties represent a shift in Nigeria political culture as it marked a resolved to give peace the chance to rein (Ajayi, 2006: 63-64). As Nigeria gradually inched towards 2007,



Nigerians apprehension gripped the nation given the over-heating of the political space and the implication of a bungled general election for the political future of the nation. To say the least, the 2007 general election is of great significance for Nigeria's march towards democratic consolidation. If successful and peaceful conducted, the elections would have marked number of firsts in the anal of Nigeria's near five decades of independent political history.

Prior to the commencement of it preparation for the elections INEC undertook extensive reviews of it past activities. However, the reports from these were reviews were not mapped into policies actions in ways as to remedies the shortcomings observed. One important indication of INEC plan to bungle the elections exercise was in the area of voters' registration, an issue mentioned as needing urgent attention in the agreement with stakeholders. INEC failed to commence early the registration and compilation of voters' register. The process was delay for one reason or another till October 2006 few months to the elections. By then it was too late for the commission to conduct the exercise in a proper and credible manner, thus leading to the disorderly and chaotic situation that characterized the registration exercise and the non-registration of many eligible voters (Adejumobi, 2007: 16; Human Rights Watch, 2007: 3-6). The whole process of preparation point to the fact that the 2007 elections might have been deliberately "*programmed to fail*" as asserted by Ibrahim (2007a; 2007b). The combative posture and actions of the presidency also generated an unnecessarily heighten political tension. President Obasanjo arm twisting tactics was such that choke opposition within and outside the ruling party, thus resulting in the maximally "garrison" of the electoral process.

In a seemingly unguarded manner President Obasanjo was reported to have stated that the coming presidential elections will be "*a do or die affair*" for the ruling party of which he is the most influential figure (Tenuche, 2009: 50; Omotola, 2007: 143). In a manner that can also be interpreted as playing the scripts of the presidency, the electoral commission embark on controversial steps all of which painted the commission as playing the scripts of the ruling party<sup>4</sup>. Many of the commission's actions were such that create confusion within the oppositions camps, while it routinely flouted court orders concerning some of it controversial actions and make unsolicited pronouncement on party bickering (Ijim-Agbor, 2007: 89-92). The contrived and highly contentious political environment did not in any way aid the peaceful conduct of the 2007 elections. The actions and utterance of key partisan parties, the obvious partisan position of INEC, the Nigerian Police Force and the EFCC all undermine the credibility of the elections and challenge the legitimacy of its outcomes.

The convergence of INEC's partisanship, operational incompetence and self inflicted eleventh-hour crisis contributed to turning elections logistics into a nightmare for the commission (ICG, 2007: 2). The situation was further worsened by serious security lapses resulting in numerous incidents of intimidation and violence all of which aided extensive falsification and inflation of elections results. The chaotic situations that characterized the elections many of which arise from INEC's administrative shortcomings provided the opening for the rigging of the elections by the ruling party on an epidemic and unimaginable scale (ICG, 2007: 1-6). Patterns of manipulations and electoral fraud that characterized the conduct of the elections across many states of the federation includes: intimidation of voters; under-age voting; hoarding of election material;

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<sup>4</sup> The screening and subsequent disqualification on the basis of a controversial list of corrupt politician prepared by the nation's anti-graft agency EFCC was successfully challenged in court by Vice-President Atiku and other affected candidates

ballot box stuffing with the connivance of INEC staffs and security personnel. Theft of ballot box and other materials; announcement of result where no voting has take place particularly in the south-east and south-south zones; diversion of ballots and materials to aid election results falsification; numerous acts of partisanship by INEC and security personnel (Adejumobi, 2007: 14-15). Though these fraudulent practices were not restricted to the ruling party alone, however, given the state resource at its disposal, it pocketing of the electoral commission, the appropriation of the state media outlets and it control of the police and military personnel it was easier for the PDP to outdone and out rigged opposition parties in a grand scale.

Reports of elections monitoring missions both international and local from the field attest to the wanton fraud and malfeasance that characterized the conduct and administration of the 2007 general elections. The European Union EU, Election Observation Mission EOM in its final report on the States and National elections of 2007 provide extensive details about the widespread nature of electoral fraud, intimidation and violence that characterized the conduct and administration of the elections. The EOM states that:

“The 2007 State and Federal elections fell short of basic international and regional standards for democratic elections. They were marred by very poor organization, lack of essential transparency, widespread procedural irregularities, substantial evidence of fraud, widespread voter disenfranchisement at different stages of the process, lack of equal conditions for political parties and candidates and numerous incidents of violence. As a result, the process cannot be considered to have been credible. Given the lack of transparency and evidence of fraud particularly in the result collation process, there can be no confidence in the results of these elections” (EU EOM, 2007: 1).

In its own report, the International Republican Institute notes that:

“The April 21 elections were undermined by the combination of an inept electoral commission and the ability of political interests to interfere throughout the process. The elections, where they were even able to take place, cannot be said to be credible or representative of the will of the Nigerian people; they did not meet international, regional or Nigeria’s own past standards for electoral competence. A combination of errors, some made long before Election Day, turned the entire elections process into nothing more than a hollow exercise in futility” (International Republican Institute, 2007: 26).

Local elections observer groups were even more critical of INEC open partisan posture and the commission conduct and administration of the elections which majority of the groups seen as flawed and massively compromised in favour of the ruling party. In its post elections report titled, ‘Programme to fail’, the Transition Monitoring Group provide extensive details on the fraud, stealing, violence, intimidation and charade that characterized the elections. After evaluating the reports of thousands of its monitors and observers deployed during the gubernatorial and state legislature elections the organization reached the conclusion that:

“It is clear that the elections on April 14 were marred by serious irregularities and malpractices that the results announced in many states such as Anambra, Adamawa, Delta, Edo, Enugu, Kogi, Nasarawa, Ogun, Ondo and Rivers States cannot be said to

have reflected the will of the people of the states and we therefore reject them” (Transition Monitoring Group, 2007: 91-92).

With regard to the presidential and national assembly elections of April 21, the TMG in its report states that:

“Our monitors throughout the country noted and documented numerous lapses, massive irregularities and electoral malpractices that characterized the elections in many states. Based on the widespread and far-reaching nature of these lapses, irregularities and electoral malpractices, we have come to the conclusion that on the whole, the election was a charade and did not meet the minimum standards required for democratic elections. The federal government and the Independent National electoral commission (INEC) have failed woefully in their responsibility to conduct free, fair and credible elections. We do not believe that any outcome of that election can represent the will of the people. A democratic arrangement founded on such fraud can have no legitimacy” (Transition Monitoring Group, 2007: 92).

Without doubts the cumulative effect of the widespread problems witnessed by international and domestic observers made it uncertain whether the April 2007 elections reflected the will of the Nigerian people. The tone of the TMG report show the depth of the disappointment that the elections constitutes for millions of Nigerian voters that had expected a properly managed free, fair and credible elections and the emergency of a new regime founded on genuine will of Nigerians as reflected in their votes. The 2007 general elections were a failure both of will from the country’s political leadership and of logistical preparation by INEC. The former preordained the outcome of the elections before voters went to the polls, while the latter’s decisions prevented many Nigerians from voting. Low voter turnout witnessed throughout both elections days, but especially on April 21, indicates that Nigerians are growing increasingly disillusioned with their nascent democracy and have little faith that their votes actually count (International Republican Institute, 2007: 4).

While growing public disillusion did not bode well for democratic participation, the most troubling challenge that emanates from the scandalous 2007 general elections was the stifling suffocation of the political space and the restricting of avenue for peaceful participation in the political process by the ruling party. Utilizing the power of incumbency and its control of the key institution notably the electoral commission and the security agencies the ruling PDP under Obasanjo was afforded the opportunity to masterminded a classic election rigging of the 2003 and 2007 general elections and thus maintained the party dominance of the political space (ICG, 2007: 8). Nowhere is the ruling party hegemonic order better consolidated than the oil bearing Niger Delta where the PDP candidates all won all available electoral posts. The feat is made possible through massive rigging facilitated by violence, intimidation and harassment of oppositions and voters alike. The commodification of electoral violence in the region was achieved through the organizing, arming, financing, and deploying of youth militia, cults and gangs by regional PDP politicians. The macabre use of violence as instrument of electoral competition was such that resulted in the worsening of the tenuous security situation in the region.

## **The “Carry-Go” Syndrome: Politics, Gangs and Violence in the Niger Delta under Democratic Rule**

I was stopped by a local political supporter of the governor. He told me, “... Governor Odili has said the present council chairman should be supported. Why are you disobeying?”... He said he would teach me a lesson.... He opened the boot of his car, took out a machet, and aimed it at my head. About twenty people were there. They attacked me; they cut the tendons on both of my feet. Eventually they left me for dead (Human Rights Watch, 2003: 1).

The use of violence as an instrument in political competition that continue to underpins the logic of politics in a rentier state like Nigeria was clearly depicted in the above caption. The use of intimidation, harassment and orchestrated violence directed at real or perceive political enemies and their support base remains an indelible blight on Nigeria politics and political competition since the return to democratic rule in 1999. Though all parties are involved in the use of violence as instrument of political contestation, the ruling People Democratic Party is however, the major culprit. Given it control of Federal Government, the PDP has been so ruthless in its deployment of mindless violence to retains its control of political power at all level of governments. The instrument of the mindless violence unleashed by contending Niger Delta regional power elite against one another and in the process the people were the region army of unemployed youth.

Prior to the commencement of the present democratic experiment the Niger Delta has been witnessing simmering conflicts. The region’s armies of unemployed and angry youth that spearhead the confrontation against the state towards the end of the 1990s and participated in communal and inter ethnic conflicts have become willing pool of recruits for regional political elite in the battle for political supremacy and the capture of political offices since 1999. The political elite in the region organize and generously fund private armies, provide them with sophisticated weapons, shed them from the wrought of the law and reward them with patronage as they see fit. These armies of youth were deployed as instrument to intimidate, terrorize and harass political opponents and ordinary citizens in the bids to gain the upper hand in the battle for political power (Courson, 2009: 16; Naneen, 2004: 69).

While the brazen use of youth gang as instrument for orchestrating political violence cut across the States in the region, the extent at which, youth gangs were deployed as instrument of political terror in Rivers State was unprecedented in Nigeria political history. Rivers State occupies a unique position in the logic of Nigeria’s rentier political landscape. The state is the capital of Nigeria’s booming oil industry and its government is the wealthiest in Nigeria, posting a budget of \$1.4 billion in 2007 and around \$2.51 billion in 2008. The vast oil rent accruable to the coffer of the state government is what informed the high-stake competition and the use of violence that characterized the struggle for power in Rivers state. Using intimidation, violence and rigging the PDP has maintained a virtually monopoly on elective offices in the state since 1999. The 2003 and 2007 elections in Rivers were more violent and more brazenly rigged than in most other parts of the region and the country no thanks to oil rent (NDCBP, 2009: 31).

In the run up to the 2003 general elections hell was let loose in the Niger Delta most especially in Rivers State as rampaging armies of political thugs conduct campaigns of violence directed at dislodging opposition and laying the foundation for electoral success. Many parts of Rivers state were thrown into conflagration as factions within the ruling party positioned themselves for the

coming electoral battles resulting in the death of more than a hundred people. Perhaps the most prominent of opposition silencing was the assassination of Chief Marshal Harry, the All Nigerian People's Party national vice-chairman for the south-south zone. Harry's assassination was symbolic given the fact that the ANPP has a stronghold in Rivers and is likely to gain electoral victory in the polls. The assassination followed a pattern of violent repression of ANPP and other opposition candidates and stalwarts across Rivers state and other states in the region.

The instrument of intimidation and violence use by the administration former Governor of Rivers State, Peter Odili to secure a second term in office was the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force control by Asari Dokubo and Niger Delta Vigilante control by Ateke Tom. The brute force wielded by these two armed militias groups and their affiliate gangs and cults was highly instrumental to the questionable victory of Governor Odili and the ruling PDP in Rivers state. Reports have it that in the run up to the election officials linked with Governor Odili and then Federal Minister of Transport, Abiye Sekibo works closely with Asari and Ateke to secure electoral victory (Human Rights Watch, 2008: 12-13; 2004: 14-19). Asari and Ateke assiduously worked to ensure the success of the "carry go" re-election of Odili using weapons provided by their patrons to intimidate and harass oppositions and electorates. Asari was reported to have stated that he promised only to work for the re-election of Odili and not Obasanjo, given the former president perceived anti-Niger Delta policies. In his own admission, Ateke was quoted to have stated that then Governor Odili had promised cash and jobs in great quantities for himself and his 'boys' and that in return, "Any place Odili sent me, I conquered for him, I conquered anywhere" (Human Right Watch, 2007: 81; Chigbo, 2004a: 13).

In specific instance the state government under the direction of Abiye Sekibo provided logistic and political protection for Ateke Icelander cult as the group launch attacks directed at countering and wresting the control of Okrika and Ogu-Bolo local governments from the opposition ANPP in the 2003 elections<sup>5</sup>. The struggle for the traditional stool of the Amanyanbo of Okrika was also couched as a PDP-ANPP context thus weaving politics with chieftaincy tussle. In the context of the hunt for real and perceived enemies of the ruling cohort, prominent Okrika sons, including former Governor Rufus Ada George an opposition ANPP stalwart were hounded out of the state and their houses and properties worth millions of naira destroyed (Joab-Peterside, 2007: 16). Through the mindless use of violence Ateke was able to effect a change of guard in Okrika and Ogu-Bolo for the ruling party and consolidate his own reign of terror on Okrika and surrounding communities. For his service, the state government gave political protection that affords Ateke the chance to engage in profitable oil theft in the swamps and creeks of Okrika speaking part of the state.

Armed militia and cult groups were also used by two rival politicians who are members of the ruling PDP in Rivers state in the battle for the soul of Bodo in Ogoniland. The two figures at the heart of the Bodo crisis were Kenneth Kobani, former commissioner for Finance under Odili and Gabriel Pidomson who serve in the state house of assembly within the same period. Pidomson employed the services of the Deowell cult while Kobani use the Deebam cult to retaliate. The

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Abiye Sekibo hail from Okrika and was then the Secretary to the Rivers state government. Sekibo coordinated the Icelander as a counter force to the Bush Boy, the ANPP aligned political thug that was in control of Okrika and Ogu-Bolo. The attack was aimed at chasing the ANPP stalwarts and their armed group the Bush Boy out of Okrika so as to facilitate PDP takes over of the politic machinery of the two local governments. This pattern was replicated in other opposition stronghold in Rivers State in the run-up to the 2003 general elections.

Bodo war of attrition that commenced from 2003 resulted in the loss of dozens of lives on both sides of the divide and led to serious crimes against residents of the community (CEHRD, 2006). By 2007 Kobani through his Deebam cult had wrestled control of Bodo from Pidomson and chase Deewell cult group out of Bodo. While this spelt the end of violence in Bodo, it also left the community at the mercy of the Deebam cult members who flaunt their new found influence through the terrorizing of innocent members of the community with near impunity.

Violence as it relates to contestation for political control and conduct of elections was not restricted to Rivers state alone, it was indeed a delta wide crisis. Months before the 2003 elections, armed groups belonging to Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo communities had unleashed reign of terror over the oil city of Warri. Violence over political contestation was not new to Warri, however the stake and monumental destruction that resulted from the 2003 crisis was monumental and highly unprecedented in the history of violence in Warri. The cause of the 2003 round of mayhem centred on the number of local government wards to be use in the conduct of party primary election for the PDP Delta South Senatorial Seat (Courson, 2007; Leton, 2006; Human Rights Watch, 2003). While all the sides to the Warri crisis employed the use of ethnic militia groups, the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities, FNDIC militia emerged the most organized of all. Though prominent, the above noted instances were just but a tip of the iceberg in the instances of violence arising from the violent conducts of the 2003 and 2007 general elections in the Niger Delta. The deployment of armed youth groups for violent electoral acts not only resulted in the loss of lives and property, violence was also maximally use as tool to denied the people of the region the rights to partake actively in the electoral process.

The result of the commodification of violence that characterized the conduct of elections in the Niger Delta was such that it makes the elections to lack legitimacy and credibility. The Transition Monitoring Group reports that the highest level of violence during the 2003 elections was recorded in the south (Niger Delta states) and the southeast, where PDP governors and their supporters universally succeeded in resisting opposition bids for office. These were also the area where the greatest rigging and fraud were recorded by electoral observers. The report noted that in these areas, the direct link between violence and electoral frauds were clear. More than three quarters of the incidents of ‘violence, intimidation, harassment, ballot box stealing and stuffing and vote buying’ reported by TMG observers occurred in the Niger Delta and southeast states (Transition Monitoring Group, 2003: 85-86).

The use of violence as tool for electoral malfeasance in the Niger Delta states was worse such that the Environmental Rights Action that monitored the elections in the region characterized the process as “low intensity armed struggle” (ERA, 2003). Similarly the EU election observer mission listed Cross-Rivers, Delta, Rivers and Imo all oil bearing states as among the eleven states in which the 2003 elections did not even meet the minimum democratic standards (EU EOM, 2003: 4-6). The glaring perversion that characterizes the electoral process in the region made Naneen (2004: 6-7) to assert that Rivers state did set a macabre trend of electoral fraud in the 2003 elections. According to elections result; 98% of registered voters were alleged to have participated and vote for the ruling PDP in the National Assembly, Presidential, and Governorship elections. The ruling PDP awarded itself all the 23 seats in the state house of assembly and the trend was repeated in the 2007 elections. In effect, Rivers state became a one party state having hounded all opposition parties out of the political process. Similar trend was replicated in other states in the region and across the federation.

In an apparent turn about, Asari that work for the ruling party in Rivers state during the elections end up condemning the results. Asari was quoted to have stated that:

Before the general elections of April 2003, we agreed that they should not rig the election for Olusegun Obasanjo in the Ijaw areas of Niger Delta. We appealed to all governors of the states where Ijaw are found not to rig election for Obasanjo.... But there was no election. They colluded with INEC and allotted votes for themselves. There was no election in Ijaw land. So as the president of the IYC, I stood up and condemned the election in a press statement (The News, 2004: 20).

In fact there was not even an election, so they did not rig. They only allocated votes to Obasanjo. Before the election, we had warned the governors of the Niger Delta that we will not compromise with anybody if the elections were rigged. And they rigged the elections and we said no, no, no (Chigbo, 2004a: 16).

These statements by dwelling more on the rigging of the elections for President Obasanjo without relating it to the general context of the fraudulency that was the hallmark of the elections in the region seems to give credence to the notion that Asari did collaborate with Rivers state government to ensure the re-election of Governor Odili. Asari stance that there has never been credible elections in Ijaw land and his condemnation of the electoral conduct and the characterization of the election as a 'carry go' exercise marks the turning point in his relationship with the government of Rivers state (The News, 2004: 37).

Shortly after his fall-out with Governor Odili Asari alleged that attempt were being made to eliminate him by the Rivers state government using Ateke NDV/Icelander as proxies. Sequel to the said instigated attacks on Asari and his interests by Ateke, Asari was quoted to have stated that he reluctantly decided to take on the responsibility of defending himself and the hapless indigenes and residents of Rivers state from fear of death, daily incidents of extortion and intimidation by Ateke Icelander and affiliated cult groups (Chigbo, 2004b: 20-21). By this, the face-off between Asari NDPVF and Ateke Icelander/NDV and their affiliate groups commence in mid 2003.

Between 2003 to late 2004 the two foes engaged in turf war that resulted in the death of hundreds and left tens of thousands of people in Rivers state homeless. Buguma, Bukuma, Tombia, Amadi-Ama, Okrika communities were badly destroyed in the raging war of supremacy and the control of oil bunkering turf. In a daring bids to show his capability, Asari launch series of attacks on areas in and around major oil installations in Port-Harcourt thus extending the theater of battle. The successful coordinated attacks on Port-Harcourt forced the federal government to response to the state of lawlessness by deploying a combined joint military task force and Asari respond by threatening to launch an 'all out war' against oil installations. When this militaristic approach failed to give desired results, the Federal Government in collaboration with Rivers state government called the two groups for a peace meeting in Abuja. The result of the meeting was an October 1<sup>st</sup> peace deal that calls for immediate ceasefire, disbandment of militia and militant groups and disarmament and arms buy back spearheaded by Rivers state government (Chigbo, 2004c: 12-20).

Asari continued to anger the federal government by joining the rank of growing voice of dissent in the southeast and southwest calling for the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference that will have the mandate to discuss the state of Nigeria federalism and the future of the union. He also becomes a strident voice of the Niger Delta on the issue of resource control, derivation and fiscal federalism. Asari was arrested on treason charges on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2005 a move seen by many as an attempt at curtailing his growing criticism of the state on issues bordering on the Niger Delta question. Asari arrested was interpreted by Niger Delta militants as a fore warning of state plot to decimate militant groups by incarcerating vocal leaders and this they take as signal to go under-ground (Ukiwo, 2007). The incarceration of Asari compounded the fear and anger of the Ijaw (the most populous ethnic nationality in the oil region) as it coincide with the arrest of Bayelsa state Governor DSP Alamiyeseigha in London on money laundering charges and the arrest of Chief Ebitimi Banigo and the closure of Banigo's Allstates Trust Bank (Courson, 2009: 17).

The incarceration of Asari results in the re-grouping and formation of new organizations by militants in the Western and Eastern sections of the oil region prominent of which is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND; the Martyrs Brigade, the Reformed Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, the Coalition of Militant Action in the Niger Delta, COMA, the Niger Delta Strike Force, NDSF. Of all these disparate groups MEND has evolved to be highly coordinated in its military operation and coherent in its political demands for the Ijaw and other Niger Delta minority groups. MEND evolved as a face-less organization using the internet to communicate its agenda with the Nigeria state through the press in an apparent lessons from past decimation of MOSOP and NDPVF. The core objective of MEND is to destroy the capacity of the Nigerian government to export oil (ICG, 2006: 5).

MEND's military tactics has largely been directed at crippling the oil industry through attacks on critical oil installations. The group main political tactic is abduction of oil workers, crippling attack on oil production installations, and face off with state security force. The group maximally uses the media to create awareness on the plights of the Niger Delta; its activities and its impacts on the oil industry and the state (Obi, 2009). MEND military attacks on oil installations which commence in January 2006 have had adverse effects on the operations of the oil industry and by extension the Nigeria economy and federal treasury. The federal government has responded to the threat of MEND by deploying large scale military force code name Operation Restore Hope. The commodification of violence that the organizing and arming of youth cults, gangs and militia groups and the new phase of militarization of dissent that MEND emergence represent have all give rise to complex economies of violence in the region (Ikelegbe, 2005).

The series of attacks by MEND and affiliate groups against state targets and the reprisal attacks against communities accused of harbouring militants operational bases by the Nigerian Armed Forces since 2006 have resulted in catalogues of rights abuse, loss of hundreds of lives, destruction of property and instances of total military onslaught and destruction of Ijaw communities in the region particularly in the Delta State axis. Though the 2009 amnesty deal and disarmament and demobilization package have restore a sense of order in the region however, the prevailing peace can be likened to a "peace of the grave yard" as some elements of MEND opted not to be part of the deal. If one decides to go by the word of Naneen the descent into anarchy in the Niger Delta since 2003 is but the price to be paid for the ruling PDP constriction



of the political space, the reification of politics as war and entronement of corruption and patronage as the defining act of governance rather than service delivery (Naneen, 2004: 7).

## **Conclusion**

After more than a decade of democratic practice, Nigeria's attempts at democratic consolidation at best remains a fitful one. No doubt there had been great improvement in the areas of human rights, press freedom and the opening of the political space. Yet these improvements has failed to translate into greater participation of the Nigeria people in the democratization process nor has it afford them a chance to determine those that govern them through free, fair and credible electoral process. Combination of the failure of the Nigeria state to translate improvement in the nation's economy to better living condition for its teeming poor population, glaring perversion of the electoral process, large scale corruption and resource mis-appropriation by politicians and bureaucrats at all level of governments, heighten crime and increasing state of insecurity among other have dampened people's enthusiasm for democratic process and eroded their support for the ruling regimes.

Turning to the Niger Delta, this paper has aptly demonstrated that the overall situation in this all important region has not witnessed appreciable improvement since the nation's return to civil rule in 1999. Though other factors might have work to reinforced the trends of armed dissent in the Niger Delta, yet the arming, organizing, financing, and deploying of youth gangs and militia groups by regional politicians has contributed in no small measure to heighten violence and insecurity in the oil bearing region. The rise in the tide of violence in the Niger Delta has in turn moderates the dynamics of the region's agitation. Armed dissents has emerged the preferred modes of expressing the region's feelings of marginalization and neglects to the state-oil alliance in place of non-violent agitation of the early 1990s. In the same vein armed groups whose modes of operations is a blend of armed political militancy and criminality have emerged the vanguard of the region's popular agitation and struggle. Rather than aid peaceful resolution of underlying socio-political tension, the violence that has characterized electoral politics in the region has worsening the conflict situation. Against popular expectation democratization has failed to bring the much anticipate peace and tranquility in the Niger Delta. Instead, democratic politics has been the harbinger of violent conflict and human insecurity in the region and the nation's at large.

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