



INTERNAL INSTABILITY AND THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY: THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIA POLICE FORCE*

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The socio-economic, political development and growth of any nation is possible only in a stable and peaceful environment which permits the realization of the individual's fullest potentials as well as reward industry. In an atmosphere strangled with chaos and instability, progress is hampered in all spheres of human endeavour thus resulting in decline and decay. It is for this and other reasons that every nation takes any threat to peace and stability within its national borders seriously.

The greatest threat to Nigeria's stability and corporate existence came in the wake of the civil war that raged between 1967-1970. Since the end of the civil war, new kinds of threats different from armed conflict have emerged, thus, posing new challenges for the managers of internal security, and more especially, the police. These new sources of destabilisation and instability have their roots in economic deprivation, poverty and population expansion. This write-up is an attempt at considering the role of the Nigerian Police in the management of internal threats to peace and national stability.

The police has to perform a much more delicate and thankless task while dealing with riots and public disturbances in comparison with what they have to do in dealing with the problem of ordinary crime. It is in this area of security activity that police conduct comes in for public scrutiny, and maximum commentary. In Nigeria, threats to public security and stability emanate from the exploitation of religious, communal, regional and political issues, and, recently, may be added economic issues arising out of oil exploration especially as it affects the oil producing communities of the country in general, and those of the Niger Delta region in particular.

The other difficult situations faced by the police are those wherein students or labour unions are parties to a dispute. These circumstances call for forbearance and perseverance as they embody great potentials for degenerating into anarchy or mayhem. On the one hand the police stand condemnable if the force applied is considered "excessive" and on the other, the police risk being branded "incompetent" if it approaches the situation with caution. All in all, therefore, it becomes obvious that in theory, it is alright to tell the police that they should exercise restraint and apply minimum



force, but in practice it becomes very difficult to observe, when circumstances of mob control flare up and get "beyond control". Higher police authorities have to pacify two mobs like parties, the rioters and the riot police. As earlier stated, the main sources of internal instability which represent 'major threats to the nation, are religious, ethnic, economic, crime, labour and students/youths restiveness.

2.2 RELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

For purposes of this paper, religious conflicts in Nigeria may be considered from a tri-dimensional perspective. Firstly, it could be intra-religious conflict, i.e. conflict between different sects or groups within the same religion. Secondly, it could be inter-religious conflict, i.e. a conflict pitching adherents of different faiths against one another. Thirdly, it could be the state versus any of the various religious groups or a combination of them. It is also proper to point out that one form of religious conflict can easily metamorphose into the other such as when an intra religious conflict gives way to a state versus religious group conflict. This -kind of situation may occur, where, for instance, a fight between two sects of a particular religion degenerates into anarchy (burning, looting and even raping) and government moves in to restore law and order. An already charged atmosphere of violence and mayhem may rapidly see erstwhile antagonists joining forces to battle law enforcement agents especially when they are perceived as representing an unpopular government.

2.2.1 Intra-Religious Conflicts

Intra-religious conflicts are conflicts within the same religion. They, sometimes originate from doctrinal teachings or interpretation of sacred teachings and scriptural texts. In Islam until recently, this kind of conflict had pitched the Tijjaniyya against the Quadiriyya sects. Clashes between both groups occurred in the 1950s and early 1960s leading to the establishment by the Sardauna of the first Islamic Advisory Committee in 1963, as a means of putting an end to these conflicts¹. From the late 1970s however, the struggle for the hearts and minds of Muslims has been between the Shiites and the Tijjaniyya/Quadiriyya sects, between the Izala movement and the Tijjaniyya/Quadiriyya sects and between the Izala and the Shiites. There have also been intra-sect quarrels within the Shia movement and within the Izala group. The various Maitasine clashes were also of the nature of intra-religious conflict



with the Maitasine faithful rejecting what it considered to be the crass materialism of the orthodox mainstream Islamic sects.

On the part of the Christian religion, Nigeria has not witnessed any large scale violent intra-religious conflict of the kind seen for many years between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the rivalry between Catholics and Protestants (unless carefully managed and monitored) holds a potential for trouble which may lead to a broader law and order problem.

2.2.2 Inter-Religious Conflicts

Inter-religious conflicts in Nigeria did not quite assume an alarming character until as recent as the 1980s. Two main factors have been largely responsible for this escalation. The first factor was the emergence and development of religious militancy in the institutions of higher learning.

In 1987 an inter-religious conflict occurred when the Christian students' community at the College of Education, Kafanchan organized a religious crusade. The Muslim students felt that a speaker at the rally misinterpreted the Quran and considered that as blasphemy. The agitated students wasted no time starting a free for all fight. Again, another fight broke out in Kaduna and subsequently in Zangon Kataf, all with ethnic and religious overtones².

The next factor to which must be ascribed the escalation of inter-religious conflicts was the inception of the so called Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the General Babangida Administration. This programme precipitated a decline in the living conditions of a significant percentage of the Nigerian citizenry. One of the consequences of the worsening economic conditions engendered by this programme was that people began to seek for a solution to the crisis at the minimum corporate level. The effect of this was that community identity became a signal mobilizing factor in expressing each community's frustration. Communal tension grew across neighbouring communities, pent-up anger and economic frustration burst forth in religious conflicts where the combatants were divided along ethnic and religious lines. This manifested clearly in the Kafanchan, Zangon-Kataf and Tafawa-Balewa conflicts which were sparked off by religious misunderstanding and market squabbles. Events showed that the remote causes of these conflicts were questions, of land ownership, means of economic sustenance, and local traditional ruler ship institution. In all of these cases, the "indigenous" Christian people allied with traditionalists {animists} believed that the Hausa-Fulani Muslim "settlers" have appropriated their land in addition to a strongly felt



resentment against the Hausa-Fulani traditional institutions imposed upon them right in their own domains. It is not mere coincidence that as the SAP crisis degenerated, this type of disturbances spread from the original flashpoints to afflict urban cities such as Kaduna, Kano, Zaria, Funtua and Bauchi among others.

2.2.3 State Versus Religious Groups

The third kind of religious conflicts is that which brings the security forces and law enforcement agents on the one hand, into opposing camps with religionists. Some of these religious groups appear to either reject the authority of the state or question its legitimacy. The Katsina state conflict of 1991 and the Kaduna version in 1996 illustrate this specie. In the Katsina case, the quarrel hinged around a planned demonstration by the Shiites in protest against a Daily Times publication (Fun Time) which according to them was derogatory of the prophet Mohammed. The State Governor issued an order banning the demonstration and which order they defied. The Governor apparently saw this as a challenge to his authority and responded by calling out police and military men who wasted no time clashing with the religionists. A similar order banning a demonstration by the Shiites demanding the release of their jailed leaders was defied by them resulting in the confrontation that spilled over to Zaria. In 1997 there was a religious confrontation between Shiites and police in Kano during that year's Id-eil Fitri prayer when Shiites used the occasion to demand the release of their leaders³.

On the part of the Christians, the one sect that has a disdain for state authority is the Jehovah's Witness group. While this group does not recognize national flags or anthems, they have no record of open violence of the kind described above.

3.3 ETHNIC DISTURBANCES

Otite⁴ views ethnicity as the contextual discrimination by members of one ethnic group against others on the basis of some exclusive criteria. It admits of a conscientious invocation and mobilization of the ethnic criteria to enhance the cause and/or fortune of individuals and groups, Ethnicity acquires an enhanced status in circumstances wherein resources are scarce relative to the interests surrounding them, and which sharpens competitiveness.

In Nigeria ethnicity becomes more pronounced in situations of inter-group competition for acquisition of control over economic, bureaucratic or



political power and its concomitant benefits. Thus the competition for jobs, contracts, promotions, admission into institutions of learning, scholarship and bursary awards provide the needed fertile ground for nurturing ethnicity. The quest for these advantages often result in the "winner" and his allies taking all, while leaving the losers in the cold with the resultant cries of "marginalisation" and its propensity for tension and instability.

Whereas ethnic rivalries are, nothing new the saddest manifestation of the evil effect of ethnic bitterness took place in 1966 when persons of certain ethnic origin were killed in large numbers and displaced from their homes in virtually all parts of the country. Ironically, this episode and the events that followed must rank as the greatest threat to internal security and national stability (and corporate existence) of Nigeria. Since the years, fierce ethnic conflicts with grave potentials for disturbing national peace and stability have raged on in various parts of the country, and in some cases so stretched police resources to the limits that the army had to be called out to the rescue. In this regard, mention must be made of inter ethnic conflicts in Bauchi, Kaduna, Taraba, Adamawa, Ogun, Lagos and the Niger Delta States.

In Bauchi, the struggle has been between the Sayawa and the Hausa-Fulani. In Kaduna, the Katafs in particular and other Southern Kaduna minorities have been pitched against the Hausa-Fulani. In Taraba, the Kutebs, Chambas, Jukuns and Tivs have been at each others throat. In the Plateau the Beroms and the Jasawa (Hausa-Fulani) have been having a running battle for the control of Jos: The most recent 'threat to peace in the Plateau is the Yelwa-Shendam crises that resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency. This' crisis-' too, 'has ethno-religious undertones. In Ogun, the widely publicised Shagamu clash between Yorubas and Hausa adds to the list. The Ketu riots in Lagos have been presented at least officially as a dispute between rival market groups, but other sources seem to give it a Yoruba (OPC) versus Hausa affair. All these crises and conflicts have common features about them. They arise out of unfair method of political engineering by various governments, the refusal of the authorities to create separate chiefdom for oppressed and repressed communities, and the feeling of marginalisation by certain groups. The ethnic conflict in the Niger Delta is a much more complex one pitching the Ijaw against the Itsekiri, the Urobho against the Itsekiri, and the Ijaw against the Ilajes. Oil exploration activities and the attendant pollution of water courses and fisheries, as well as the degradation of agricultural farmlands allied with the politics of "resource control" have all combined to



fuel the troubles of the Niger Delta region.

It is also necessary to mention that all the major ethnic groups are characterized by sub-ethnic identities and thus, do not really exist in monolithic forms. Such internal divisions based often on the existence of minor linguistic or dialectic differences also have a potential for trouble capable of threatening the peace. Examples of this include the seemingly endless Ife versus Modakeke conflict among the Yoruba, the Umuleri versus Aguleri quarrel among the Ibo, and the internal political division that existed for long among the Ogoni.

4.4 ECONOMIC DECLINE

It has earlier been posited that the introduction of SAP by Babangida Administration brought about a decline in the living conditions of the Nigerian people. Before the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme, there were clear indications that pointed to a reversal in Nigeria's economic fortunes after the oil boom era of 1970s. The collapse of oil prices at the beginning of the 1980s engendered a jolt and an unanticipated financial crisis which the state could not effectively respond to. The effect of this change in fortune reverberated at all levels of society. The economy suffered a shortage of foreign exchange for import of raw materials and spare parts since most of the nation's industries depended on foreign technology and training of indigenous personnel overseas. The immediate consequence of this sad state of affairs was the closure of many manufacturing concerns, retrenchment of workers, less than optimal production in surviving industries, and the inability to pay workers salaries as and when due both within the public and private sectors.

Starting from the outbreak of the economic crisis, the state reacted in ways which include imposition the number of austerity measures, the adoption of what was called "belt, tightening", and then the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP). Other components of SAP such as the devaluation of the naira, and deregulation had disastrous effect on diverse social categories. The decline of real income of the salaried class and the urban poor generated additional pressure on rural dwellers who depended on them for additional support. Many workers declared redundant went back to eke out a living from farms without adequate resources. Faced with the withdrawal of subsidies on fertilizer and other vital inputs, subsistence farming hardly allowed for meeting the cost of education and healthcare. Uptill this day, the frustration and resentment brought about by these economic policies have continued to



underlie scores of crisis and conflicts throughout Nigeria. Ethnic or religious conflicts always have economic underpinnings. For instance, so long as there was "prosperity", not much attention was paid to agricultural activities. However, with the onset of economic decline and the movement back to land, those who lay traditional and historical claims to the land tended to turn attention to "strangers" who initially were supposedly given land on the footing of traditional African hospitality with implicit right of reversion. After years of "silence" any sudden attempt to assert title to land often resulted in clashes which often are prosecuted along ethnic or religious lines.

5.5 YOUTH RESTIVENESS

The emergence of an expanding army of educated and enlightened but jobless youths have tended to introduce a new equation into the causes of instability and threat to peace and security in Nigeria. From the extreme north to the Niger Delta, each passing year brings about the release into the labour market of thousands of college and university graduates, and a host of sundry school leavers all searching for non-existent jobs. Unemployment within the economy has reached such a level that it cannot be ignored any further. Macroeconomic distortions have ensured sub-optimal production level in virtually every sector of the economy. Redundancies, lay-offs, and outright corporate failures have all combined to generate a rich harvest of otherwise skilled and able-bodied citizens roaming the streets of our urban centres, unable to contribute meaningfully to the developmental process because their talents and latent potentialities remain un-utilized. All these breed frustration, and the venting of spleen by frustrated youths have taken a deadly dimension in the Niger Delta region where the heart of the nation's oil industry is located. Hostages taken by youth's sabotage of oil installations and equipments, threats of killing and expulsion of oil workers⁵ have all the same destabilizing effect, and threaten national peace and progress.

Allied to youth restiveness is the equally potentially dangerous trend in cults and cultism in Nigeria's institutions of higher learning. Campus Cults manifest the worst kind of gangsterism and insensitivity to life and property on campuses. As rival cults battle themselves, lives and property are rendered unsecured with victims sometimes reaching outside to seek revenge assistance from other like-minded groups from the larger society. Reprisals and counter reprisals, as well as outright clashes as reported between university



6.6 PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE POLICE

Nearly every literature on the Nigerian Police come out full of adverse criticisms made of the force for its members dishonesty, corruption, unscrupulous methods in investigations and general lack of efficiency. The police have always been the object of attack by press and politicians, Bench and Bar, reformers and citizens, and even by criminals! All said, the average citizen considers the police as far from efficient; defective in training and organization, inadequately equipped, under funded, ill supervised, poorly motivated, generally corrupt and oppressive, and as a result, has utterly failed to secure the confidence and cordial cooperation of the people.

7.7 POLICE AND MINORITY GROUPS

The relationship between the police and various minority groups based on religion, ethnic affiliation and even state of origin, presents some peculiar problems. The Nigerian Police have recently acquired additional bad reputation of being a tool in the hands of the dominant majority group, thus evoking some real or imaginary grievances against them. The Ogoni agitation and current events in other parts of the Niger Delta provide examples. Their peculiar socio-economic conditions bring minority groups into more frequent conflict with national and state authorities, and by extension the police. The feeling is found among some minority groups that sometimes the police do not act impartially such as during chieftaincy disputes or location of Local Government headquarters. Minority groups feel alienated, believing as it were, that the dominant groups employ the police and the paraphernalia of state power to lord it over them instead of giving them equal protection.

8.8 ROLE OF THE POLICE

Section 124 of the Constitution⁷, provides the constitutional basis for the establishment of the Nigeria Police Force. The force is charged with responsibility for the maintenance of public safety and public order. Section 214 (2) (b) clearly stipulate that the Nigeria Police Force shall have such powers and duties as may be conferred upon them by law. By virtue of section 4 of the Police Act⁸ the Police are employed for the prevention and detection of crime, the apprehension of offenders, the preservation of law and order, the protection of property, and the enforcement of all laws and regulations with which they are directly charged. They are also to perform such military



the protection of property, and the enforcement of all laws and regulations with which they are directly charged. They are also to perform such military duties as may be required of them under the Act.

As earlier pointed out, the police have to perform a much more delicate and often times dangerous task while handling riots and public disturbances. It is in this aspect of police duties that the risk of public criticism and condemnation is highest. The history of the performance of Nigeria Police over the decades reveals that it has always been used by persons in control of political authority to serve their interests. This provides the most potent cause of public dislike and disdain for the police today. Allied with this, is, the age long police conduct at "check points" and "road blocks" which the citizenry consider in negative light.

The police is under obligation to preserve law and order in Nigeria. In pursuit of this duty, its role as custodian of public peace crystallizes. Unfortunately, the clashes between the police force representing the government, and the public, have continued due to the strains and stresses experienced under prolonged military rule in Nigeria, aggravated by difficult socio-economic conditions, and the peoples perception of government leaders and top government functionaries as mere looters and plunderers of the public treasury. Increase in crime rate owing to growing pressure of urbanization and rising population attendant thereto, violent outbursts in the wake of demonstrations and agitations arising from labour disputes, protests against human rights violations, problems and difficulties of students including the phenomenon of secret cults, enforcement of unpopular economic and social legislations (decrees), have all added new dimensions to police roles in the nation at large and tended to bring police roles into constant confrontation with the public much more frequently than ever before.

In order that it may effectively and efficiently discharge its constitutional obligations to society, the police should be able to combat crime and other identified sources of threats to internal peace and stability through the maintenance of a good and credible intelligence network. This will allow for swift and effective action to nip trouble in the bud before it escalates. The role of the police, thus should not be confined to merely rushing to, trouble spots in a show of force. Tear gas, rubber bullets, water canons, and live ammunition do not win the peace. They momentarily quell riots, but can never guarantee a non-reoccurrence. From this, it follows that good intelligence apparatus that enables the police to identify potential trouble



spots, and circumstances promotive of instability, with a view to alerting appropriate authorities for timely action is the need of the present hour.

9.9 CONCLUSION

If the police are to fulfil their constitutional and statutory mandate, they must not be manipulated for sectional or personal ends by persons in authority, or dominant groups. Police performance is a function of the education, training, and facilities available to its members. It serves no useful purpose bemoaning the brutality, corruption and ineptitude of a force that has continued to remain stymied in its colonial past. The Nigeria Police cadres stand in need of the right orientation, correct grasp, and motivation. To achieve these, there is need to raise the level of education of force personnel. Training and retraining of officers and men should be backed by good and efficient intelligence network, personnel welfare schemes and proper remuneration.

The Nigerian Police has for long been made an instrument of coercion manipulated by powerful persons and dominant groups in control of the levers of state power. The constitutional task imposed on the police to maintain peace and stability in the country is daunting enough. However much the police may be criticized, one fact remains incontestable, and that is, that without the police anarchy will rule the day. What is called for, therefore, is a positive and sympathetic attitude towards the police and its problems.

Indeed the same should be said of other arms of the security services. Training and retraining of personnel allied with the modernisation of equipments, and staff welfare must be properly addressed to ensure better professional performance.

The destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York, on-going events in Iraq, the recent bombing of a passenger train in Madrid, Spain, as well as the tragic loss of lives occasioned by Chechen terrorist take-over of a school in Beslan, North Ossetia in Russia are all grim reminders of the consequences of lack of peace and stability whether at national or international arenas.



END NOTES AND REFERENCES

[J. Goldface-Irokalibe Esq., Ph.d. Lecturer, Faculty of Law, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

Gumi, S.A. Where I Stand (Spectrum Ibadan) 1992, P.135. Quoted by Yau, Y.Z., in Ethnic & Religious Rights in Nigeria (HRM Kaduna) 1998.

See Yau Y.Z. In Ethnic & Religious Rights in Nigeria (HRM Kaduna) 1998.

Ibid, pp 152 – 3

Otite, O. Ethnic Pluralism & Ethnicity in Nigeria (Shaneson Ibadan) 1990, Quoted by Egwu Sam, in The Political Economy of Ethnic & Religious Conflicts in Nigeria (HRM Kaduna) 1998, P.19.

See for instance the Front Page news item in NIGERIAN TRIBUNE, Tuesday 4 January 2000, Captioned "Give Us Jobs Or . . . Ijaw Youths Threaten Oil Firms".

Clashes between cultists and natives in communities hosting University of Calabar, as well as the Ekpoma community hosting Ambrose Alli University occurred during the year 1999 and were widely reported by the print media in Nigeria.

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999.

Nigeria Police Act, Cap 359 LFN, 1990.