

Political Thuggery And The Crisis Of Confidence Among Youths In Nigeria

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Abstract: *The political culture of thuggery with increasing massive youth involvement in Nigeria in the present democratic dispensation seems to have come to stay. The situation is worrisome and alarming especially as it indicates that the state is turning out anti-social and criminally oriented youths instead of credible youths with integrity. This has serious implications for Nigeria's development and democracy. In recent times, majority of Nigeria's politicians, some of whom occupy/play the role of political godfathers do not participate in politics with the desire to improve the living conditions of the Nigerian people. Rather they enter into politics with the desire to make themselves known or popular. That is, the desire for self-aggrandizement self-actualization and greed for wealth and power. Therefore, these politicians in their desperate determination to win elections at all cost, introduce violence, killings/assassinations, kidnappings, ballot snatching and distortion of electoral results into the democratic political process through the use of thugs majority of whom are youths. These political godfathers train, feed and brainwash them with their political ideologies, supply them with illicit drugs, sometimes involve them in rituals, and give them monetary and material gratifications. Some are given jobs as personal assistants. Thus, the youths take to thuggery to escape the pressures and frustrations of poverty, that has become the bane of many Nigerian youths today. They become gainfully employed with salaries by participating in anti-social activities that go unpunished and are encouraged by powerful and legitimate political elites. This paper argues that as a result, the youths see Nigeria as a failed state and choose thuggery (which is illegitimate), as a means to success. It recommends that the Nigerian government should attack thuggery vehemently and any politician that is found to be/to have been involved in thuggery or found to own thugs should be punished in election tribunal sittings. There should be no sacred cows and the public should be well informed.*

I. Introduction

In recent times in Nigeria, thuggery has become an integral part of politics. The political sphere has become characterized with incessant intimidation, assault and in some cases bloodshed by warring party gangs or political opponents (Gboyega 2004) most alarming about the situation is that youths who should be rational and confident of their future prospects are now experiencing a dirge of certainty about their future and the future of Nigeria.

Thugs are young, violent and dangerous individuals Therefore thuggery implies the dangerous behaviour of thugs. Frank and Wagnalls, 1975, states that the term 'thug' or 'thuggery' was coined from the Hindu word THAG or THAGI which implies 'murderer or swindler, an assassin, a cut throat or Rufian' Abikhualé and Tor-Anyin, 2013, suggests that 'to achieve their targets and set goals as expected by their master, thugs can eliminate any human or otherwise obstacle in their way, without any feelings of remorse'. Youths are usually full of excessive energy. Even The Holy Bible recognizes that the youthful days of a man are the days when he can exercise energy and declares that the older years will come when a man can no longer find such energy.

In line with the above, political thuggery can therefore be defined as any negative behaviour associated with violence, hooliganism, kidnapping, murder, assassination, gang action and trouble 'shooting', that is connected or related to any political process. Political thugs are often criminals or social delinquents. They are strongly instrumental in distorting electoral results, snatching of ballot boxes, alteration of election results, elimination of political opponents, under the influence of drugs and supernatural powers. (Ortese, 2004) They are constantly involved in organized acts of violence, intimidation and blackmail, directed against a political opponent to achieve political objectives (Ortese 2004).

Since 1960, that is, after the independence of Nigeria, thuggery has been an integral part of the Nigerian political and (in particular) electoral process. Samuel (2013) pointed out that 'the fact about the existence of thuggery activities in Nigeria before, during and after election is not in dispute'. He mentioned the following examples: the political tussle between Akintola and Awolowo in the first republic (1960-1969) both of whom made use of the services of thugs that resulted in threats, assassinations, violence and the breakdown

of law and order in Yoruba land (Isichei, 1984), the use of the ‘yan daba’ youths in Kano by the Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) to intercept the victory of NEPU, also in the first republic and the snatching of ballot boxes by gunmen at polling stations which characterized the 2007 and subsequently, the 2012 elections.

Again, the report of the National Human Rights Commission that monitored the conduct of security personnel in each of the six (6) geopolitical zones that involved eighteen (18) states of the federation and the federal capital territory in the 2007 April elections revealed that a number of state security personnel were overpowered by thugs who snatched ballot boxes in the same polling stations (NHR 2007) The Human Rights Watch (a body that is committed to defending human rights world wide) also reported that less than three hundred (300) Nigerians were killed in violence linked to 2007 elections. The 2015 election held in April was not an exception, in particular, the governorship elections. Though some accredited observers registered the elections as free and fair, it has also been reported to be marred by widespread violence, snatching of ballot boxes as well as killings in some states and massive rigging involving security agents and officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in many of the states (Uche-Okobi, 2015). These states include, Anambra, Enugu, and Delta. She also observed that in Akwa-Ibom, and especially River State, it was reported that the 2015 elections witnessed widespread violence with massive hijacking of election materials by armed thugs and killings by suspected political thugs (Uche – Okobi, 2015). Similar cases of killings and assassinations by party rival thugs (some of whom also lost their lives or were caught by security personnels) characterized the election.

Kushee, 2000, notes that the services of thugs are engaged during elections by party bulwarks or opponents and that in some instances employees, permanent secretaries and commissioners are mobilized in large numbers to work for the party and are mandated to deliver their wards, constituencies or local governments as the case may be. Again it has been observed that rival groups within political parties also use violence during contest and thugs play vital roles such as stifling and snatching ballot boxes (Collier and Vincente, 2008). The political patronage by the Nigerian elites since after independence ushered in and has continued to retain, political thuggery. These elites have political and material base but most importantly, they have their traditional rulers and ethnic groups as a base. They also have access to state power and resources (Karl, 1968, Isa 2008, Anucha, 2011). For example, the Oba of Lagos, Rilwan Akiolu was reported to have been so angry when it was said that the easterners voted for the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) during the elections of March 2015 that he urged the Ibos to cast their votes for Ambode of the All Progressive Congress or perish inside the lagoon (Uche – Obi, 2015)

As a result, the elites have continued to present themselves as the ambassadors for Nigerians as well as the owners of leadership, at every point in time. The youths therefore are to continue to be their tools and stooge with a bleak or no hope of becoming leaders themselves in the future. As it is generally said, power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. However, power is not a common commodity and the determination by some politicians to have it at all cost as well as the greed for money is what has produced the culture of political thuggery and has continued to perpetuate it in Nigeria.

Many Nigerians, hold the notion that it is only political power that can give them access to economic power and political positions or offices. This, as well as their agrandisements have continued to fuel the activities of political thugs, majority of whom are youths who are educated or uneducated. Political thuggery seems to have come to stay in Nigeria and is becoming entrenched not only in its politics but also in its context and culture of work or job as well as a way of life. It becomes even more worrisome for the youths of this nation, as it appears to have become a legitimate ladder of success. It is against this background that this paper has emerged. It will attempt to answer the questions, ‘Is thuggery becoming institutionalized through politics in Nigeria? What are the enabling environments or phenomena for youth involvement in political thuggery? And what are the implications of political thuggery for the Nigerian youth?’

Political Godfatherism And Thuggery Among Nigerian Youths

This paper identifies godfatherism with behaviour that is associated with the roles of a father. In the Nigerian culture, fathers are highly valued and respected. They represent the source of livelihood and success in life and are described as ‘breadwinners’ (Onwuejeogwe, A 1994, Akintunde, 2001). So also are elders held in high esteem with great respect and approval and are regarded as the custodians of the wisdom that is necessary for any child or youth to make it in life. A father also occupies the position of an elder. Again, God is seen to be ‘Almighty’ (that is all sufficient and with all power). Thus anyone with the synonym ‘godfather’ will not only attract the attention of any Nigerian youth but will appeal to him/her especially if he is seen to have the ‘bread’ (money). Hence the ideology of ‘godfatherism’ is capable of giving the youths a false image and dulling the pains that result from the criminality of political godfatherism and thuggery. Political godfatherism may be defined as the abuse of behaviour that is related to the roles of a father.

Political godfathers are financiers and instigators who dangle their affluence, wealth, money and ideologies before the people in lower classes (particularly, the poor and disadvantaged) and/or illiterates

(Odivwri, 2003, Albert, 2005). They play money politics and train and empower thugs to harass, intimidate, victimize or kill opponents or perceived opponents. Thugs empowerment include supply of guns, and regular supply of illicit drugs. Samuel 2014, described Nigerian political thugs as 'violent, unemployed and mostly drug addicts'. According to him, these thugs include area boys, students, criminal gangs and ethnic militias such as Oduwa Peoples Congress (OPC) in Lagos, Egbesu Boys or ex-militants in the Niger Delta, Bakassi Boys in Calabar, and the Sera-Suka (cut and Stab) in Bauchi. The godfathers employ some of these thugs to protect them and do their dirty jobs. That is some of the thugs are actually salaried (Nnamani 2003, Nigerian compass 2011, Mbala 2013). The children of godfathers (and sometimes family members) are kept out of thuggery activities. They are hidden away.

Often times an incumbent/aspirant godfather or financier will not get directly involved in acts of thuggery. They hide from and are protected from the direct line of action, bad publicity or anything that might jeopardize their ambition (Albert, 2005). They are also protected from the onslaught of the law. Gboyega, 2004 described political godfathers as persons who by design live above the laws and constitution of Nigeria, are entitled to police escorts' and whose thugs carry arms freely. These body guards and 'interest guards' (ie those who protect and defend the interests of godfathers) are relentless, heartless, brutal and very committed to their godfathers but can sometimes be irrational. It is important to note here that most of these thugs are illiterate, redundant and unemployed youths (Nda, 2004, Samuel 2013). Who readily find employment with remunerations in the systematic criminalization of politics with or without appointments, by the very elites who should be protecting the sanctity and social order of the Nigerian polity. Such appointments include those of special advisers, special assistants and personal assistants (Mbaka 2013).

There is no doubt therefore that the youths involved in thuggery no longer have their own dreams and even if they do, they cannot sustain it. They no longer think for themselves or for their country. Their dreams as well as interests are lost in the dreams and interests of the political godfathers. They lose their individualities and identities and put on those designed for them.

Causes Of Youth Involvement In Political Thuggery

Past studies have projected various causes of the spontaneous and increasing thuggery activities among youths in the recent democratic dispensation. However, this paper focuses on what may be considered it's major causes.

Unemployment and Poverty

Environments of economic hardship and poverty can be responsible for youths thuggery activities. Some studies (Reno 2002, Umar, 2003, Haruna and Jumba, 2011), have argued that youths who grow up or that live in environments of social disorganization such as slum areas where poverty, prostitution, single parenting, drug abuse, drunkenness and violence abound are most likely to end up as thugs because such areas also represent residences of low-income earners or jobless individuals. Again, there is a strong likelihood that the youths will take to political thuggery as a means of survival. In addition, political elites may capitalize on the youths' vulnerability to poverty and make efforts to enlist them into their army of thugs. A study carried out by Ali, 2014 to find out the relationship between drug abuse and political thuggery in Kano metropolis revealed that 51 percent of the 134 youths sampled, engaged in violence and 25.9 percent of the 51 percent indicated that they derive monetary benefit by engaging in political violence. He observed that "the youths considered the benefits as more than the risk and the possible apprehension by the police" (Ali, 2014). Other studies (Adebanwi, 20014, Afobarometer 2006, Mehler, 2007) have also shown that youths who readily submit themselves to violence and acts of thuggery are unemployed and wallowing in poverty. They are sometimes promised jobs, contract awards, material gifts like cars and good clothings. Some youngstars from very poor homes have been enticed with just the promise of three meals daily. Njoku, 2012 posits that "the availability of various groups of idle men and gangsters in many urban cities in the country, provides opportunity for the recruitment of thugs". Also Haruna and Jumba 2011 notes, that in line with the common saying, 'a hungry man is an angry man', little effort is required for the poor and needy to join any group of militia/thugs'. On their part Yesufu and Ifua 2015, reported that seventy-nine (79) members of the House of Representatives had urged President Mohammed Buhari to declare a state of emergency on employment and that the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics put the nations unemployment rate this year 2015 at 7.5 per cent.

Political Ideologies

The ideology of 'do or die' and godfatherism among Nigerian politicians is one of the root causes of political thuggery. Some of them believe that politics is a war in which the winner takes it all and therefore, winning is a must irrespective of the cost. That is winning can be by 'hook or crook'. Therefore, the political arena, becomes more of a war field. It is as a result of this that politics in the country is characterized by violence, gunshots and bloodshed, blackmail, kidnapping, etc Fabowale 2011, writes as follows:

“In Nigeria, politics is not a game, it is a war. The blood-stained pages of the nations political annals, it’s do-or-die character exemplified by thuggery, violence, blackmail and vendetta that define political behaviour of stakeholders all testify to this” (Fabowale 2011 p12).

The ‘do or die’ ideology emerged because politics became a very lucrative business. The remunerations of political officers have become exceedingly attractive. www.nigeriabestforum.com revealed that according to Sanusi Lamido Sanusi former controller of Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) now Emir of Kano, indicated that the National Assembly took the bulk of the federal budget in 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively and that most of government spending was on recurrent expenditure and not on the masses. This trend runs through the federal, state and local governments. It has also been further revealed that Nigerian’s state political officers earn more than those from the United State of America and the United Kingdom (Rawala and Aniyu, 2006).

Noteworthy also, is the fact that money politics has been introduced into Nigeria’s politics. Politicians spend huge sums of money to secure or buy political offices. For example, they buy votes, ‘king-makers’ (that is the political cabals) and thugs (Mehler, 2007). They therefore, see themselves as investors and whatever will stand or attempt to prevent them from gaining their investments must be done away with through, thuggery activities of violence, killings and kidnappings.

Again, the politicians are not only desperate to be at the helm of the affairs of the nation at all cost but also want to control men to arouse their ego as well as enhance their criminal political career (godfatherism). They want to have an army of men who will do their bidding unflinchingly (Albert, 2005). Most importantly, the army would actualize their do-or-die ideology. Therefore, both ideologies are significantly related and it is this interconnectedness that spurs the vehemence and determination with which politicians scramble and mobilize youths as thugs for political action and survival in their life time.

Corruption and weakness in the Nigerian State

Over the years, the Nigerian state has become competitively authoritarian thus creating room for abuse of state apparatus as well as fraud in the democratic process. The very institutions that are supposed to protect and maintain the sanctity of the law are the same that obstruct due process especially during elections. These include the security agents, the judiciary and officials of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Some of them in recent times are used to suppress the rule of law in order to offer undue favour to parties or groups from whom they receive gratification of some sort (Afrobarometer, 2006). Such activities sometimes lead to or end in riots or violent clashes between political entities which often times involve mostly youths.

In the present civil dispensation politicians have become so anxious about writing, that dialogue, negotiation and consensus have been relegated to the background. There is so much anxiety because of the perceived or real loss of power by an elite stratum (Onyemaizu, 2006). According to him, the struggle for political power is majorly among the elites that won it before, those that lost it and those who won it back’. It is this contention for the control and retention of power that has made intra-political party conflicts to be on the upsurge. The lack of party internal democracy is often times apparent in the party primaries and selection of party national executive officers.

The processes of dialogue, negotiation and consensus are either not properly put in place and ensured or do not exist in the first place. Instead politicians engage themselves in all sorts of anti-social and criminal activities, change the rules and legislations of the political exercise and distort laws (Collier and Vincente, 2008, Njoku, 2012). Onyemaizu, 2006, observes

‘A resort to violence including armed militancy, assassination, kidnap, et cetera have somewhat suddenly become attractive to certain individuals in seeking to resolve issues that could ordinarily be settled’ As noted by Omeje, 2010, internal democracy is one issue that has consistently eluded Nigeria’s democracy in virtually all the four republics in the country since independence. He further observed that political parties have always been hijacked at all levels by powerful elites who impose loyal clients and psychopants as candidates for elections.

The Implications Of Thuggery For The Nigerian Youths

Political godfatherism and thuggery are a twin evil that not only wastes away the lives of many Nigerian youths but leaves them with little or no hope of taking over the political affairs of this nation. The youths involved are brain washed, deceived and kept as mercenaries that take the politicians to the state thrones. As a result, often times it is the old political father (the same or new) that have mastered the tricks that win elections or hold state offices and powers. This was clearly evidenced in president Buhari’s first list of ministerial nominees in which out of seventeen (17) candidates only two of them were below fifty (50) years of age (channels Television) and majority of them were old time politicians and administrators. The two candidates whom you may consider as youths were forty-five (45) and forty eight (48) years old respectively (Channels Television, Nigeria).

Also thuggery has made Nigerian youths to lose faith in the democratic process especially, credible and patriotic youths. As identified by Njoku (2002), thuggery has contributed in no little measure in creating the unfortunate scenario in most of the states whereby only the political party in power “calls the shots in public affairs and ignores or muzzles the opposition”. Omotosho (2012) also observed that the “one-party nature of our states makes our politics look like the power plays of a criminal gang dedicated not only to committing crimes but also to escaping appropriate punishment.

In addition, the increasing attempts by political elites to entrench thuggery which is accompanied with enticing promises and actual rewards which include financial and material benefits (sometimes quite huge) into the political process seems to have established thuggery as a legitimate means to the goal of success. Therefore while the youths are losing confidence in the Nigerian state, they are gaining confidence in the ladder of crime that dirty politics and thuggery provides. Mbaya (2013) noted that “over the years, the activities of thugs have been legitimized and powerfully backed by the political class”.

II. Theoretical Framework

The utilitarian theory of rational choice derives its basic principles from neoclassical economics and utilitarianism and game theory (Levi et al, 1990, Lindenberg, 2001, Simpson, 2007). It explains access and opportunity as key factors in criminality. It argues that human beings rationalize their actions by calculating means and ends. In other words, people freely choose their behaviour-whether conforming or deviant-based on their rational calculation but choice is directed towards the maximization of usefulness and gain. Also implied in this theory is that the state is responsible for maintaining order and preserving the common good through a system of laws. Thus the state’s swiftness, severity or uncertainty of punishment influences the choice or behaviour of the individual(s). Youths choose to engage in thuggery after considering personal factors such as joblessness, poverty, financial and material gains as well as situational factors such as the power/authority, influence and protection (which includes protection from the aims of the law) of godfathers. The implication of this is that there is an upsurge in thuggery because the benefit of engaging in political thuggery is high and the cost is low and the youths are increasingly getting involved. In other words, godfatherism and thuggery in Nigeria are purposive activities or behavior. The politicians target the goal of winning elections and remaining in the office, power and affluence for the sake of money and status and they work towards it with the use of thugs. The thugs on their part, intentionally get involved in thuggery activities so as to obtain the necessities of life such as money, food and shelter, as well as other needs like status and excitement. Thus the politicians, through the activities of godfatherism are able to have access to and gain political victory while the thugs use participation in the activities of political godfathers to gain money and the good things of life, which previously, they were lacking. That is how thugs use thuggery for survival. It therefore becomes a cheer fact that both the politicians and thugs need each other for the sake of usefulness and gain. In the most recent Nigeria environment of increasing poverty and unemployment, hardship and difficulties this relatedness of usefulness and gain has become lucrative for the godfathers and attractive to the youths of this nation.

The rational choice theory, lays much emphasis on individual’s involvement in criminal activities and tends to justify the fact that involvement in crime should be beneficial. Thugs are goal oriented. They consider the cost (risk) and benefit (financial) gains and act accordingly.

III. Summary

Nigerian politicians recruit socio-economically gullible youths as thugs to perpetuate the anti-social, criminal, undemocratic and illegitimate culture of violence, ballot snatching, kidnapping and killing, as well as to protect them (ie the politicians) and obey their commands. The political fathers supply the thugs guns, illicit drugs, etc. The failure of a thug to do their bidding or betrayal by a thug, can earn him or his family member(s) very serious trouble, pain or even death. During the recruitment/training process, drugs and rituals are often involved. (Ali, 2014). The thugs are often offered/given financial and material gratifications with protection which includes protection from punishment by the law. These gratifications can be life-time promises which are sometimes extended to thugs’ family members. On the basis of these gratification which the thugs have weighed above the risk of being caught and punished by the law (a risk that is reduced by godfatherism), they then engage in thuggery. The political elites play the role of political godfathers who control power, wealth and influence, most of whom are state elites.

IV. Conclusion And Recommendations

Since the 1960s in Nigeria, thuggery has been a part of the Nigeria political process especially during elections. This is because of the selfishness, greed for money and power, and avarice of the political elites who have constituted themselves into godfathers. As a result, there is usually a breakdown of law and order and less of loss of lives during and after elections. Also, elections especially governorship elections have been seen not to be free and fair even when declared so. As the criminal activities of the politicians - majorly through the use

of things have continued to yield success for them (i.e. they win elections, offices, financial aggrandizement, power and influence), many Nigerians have come to believe that it is only criminal politics that can give them access to economic power and political positions/offices. On the other hand, the thugs majority of whom are youths grab the opportunity through they being used by the godfathers and irrespective of the risks and changes involved because of unbreakable situation of unemployment, poverty and hardship. The Nigerian Bureau of Statistic, recently revealed that unemployment moved from 1.9 million to 9.9% in the third quarter of this year 2015.

The Nigerian youths have lost confidence in the state and are turning to violence and thuggery as means of livelihood or career. They no longer have sufficient trust in the state so and so cannot leave their future in its hands. As a result, political thuggery which ought to be an illegitimate success opportunity structure is seen and increasing accessed as a legitimate means/structure. The desperate political fathers who initiated this phenomena in their insatiable selfishness, greed and avarice for political positions/offices, power and wealth, continue to encourage and sustain the illegitimate culture of thuggery as an institutional goal to success. To further buttress the conclusion of this paper, Onomuakpokpo (2015) observes.

“President Buhari loaded the first list with discredited old politicians and the second list included those who have been in politics and had recorded great successes in their different careers not like the desperate politicians of the first list but failed to allay the worry that the first list generated....the president does not have so much respect for the youths”. (Onomuakpor, 2015 p21)

This paper recommends a more urgent, desperate and aggressive attack on youth unemployment that will go beyond youth empowerment and skill acquisition. The government and private sectors should concentrate on job creation using quarterly targets and not yearly targets as has been the case. Also, jobs created should not be spread evenly to every segment of society. But they should find a way of giving the poor more access: Socio-economic background should be considered. In addition, anti-social and criminal godfatherism should be legally sanctioned irrespective of who is involved. Finally, godfatherism employment processes should be monitored and sanctioned when discovered.

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