Osita Agbu

Ethnic Militias and the Threat to Democracy in Post-Transition Nigeria

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Introduction

The democratic opening presented by Nigeria's most recent transition to civil rule (June 1998–May 1999) has unleashed a host of hitherto repressed or dormant political forces. The Nigerian state[1] has in recent times been at the receiving end of a dramatic upsurge of ethnic militias. Indeed, it has generally been observed that this has also been the case in a significant number of African and Asian countries seeking to transit from the stage of electoral politics to the consolidation of democracy. Examples abound from Côte D'Ivoire, Niger, Indonesia and Malaysia. The weight of evidence suggests that democratic openings have often aggravated ethnic and communal tensions in divided societies (Akwetey, 1996; Conteh-Morgan, 1997; Sandbrook, 2000). Indeed, the drive towards ethnic-national self-determination, in whatever form it manifests itself, appears to be the greatest challenge facing the international community from the 1990s onwards (Shehadi, 1993). According to Vickers (2000), we live today in an "era of militant ethnicity", with its grave social, economic, political and human costs. Among the most critical and indeed violent of this new brand of unleashed political forces which many have referred to as a 'resurgence' is the intractable phenomenon of ethnic nationality/identity movements. In Nigeria, this development has taken on the guise of ethnic militia movements purportedly representing and seeking to protect their different ethnic interests in a country in which the state is largely perceived as nonchalant to the demands of the ethnic nationalities in the country. The most prominent among these militias include the plethora of the Niger Delta militias like the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), the Niger Delta Volunteer Force, and the Chikoko Movement. Other recent and more visible militias include, the O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC), the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) and the Arewa Peoples Congress (APC). The number grows daily and so far, the government appears to be at a loss as to how to deal with this problem in an environment where individual and group rights need to be upheld, quite apart from the ethnic and political implications. These groups are now contesting not just the political space and the dividends from democracy as it was orchestrated prior to the transition but also the social and economic spaces as part of the liberalization of the political environment. To a rather ridiculous but alarming extent, democratic freedoms have obviously been

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1. Nigeria with its wealth, human resources, population and size could be considered a giant relative to its neighbours. It is the sixth largest producer of crude oil in the world, and attained political independence from Britain on October 1, 1960. It was in 1898 that a British journalist, who later became the wife of the first Governor-General of the country, Sir Fredrick Lugard, suggested that the collection of protectorates and colonies around River Niger be called Nigeria. This suggestion was accepted.

understood or misunderstood by many to mean unbridled freedom. In densely populated slums of Lagos, Aba, Onitsha, Kaduna and Kano, militant groups sporadically unleash extreme violence on civil society as well as on the symbols of governmental authority. The intensity of the carnage wrought by these militant groups is better imagined than experienced. Rampaging youths brazenly overrun state security squads, ransack police stations and take over the streets for days. Curfews are imposed time and again while embattled governmental authorities resort to shoot-on-sight orders to quell riots and restore order in the volatile Nigerian urban communities (Anifowoshe, 2000:2).

For Nigeria, with a population of about 110 million and composed of over 250 ethnic groups, the threat posed to the country's newly-won and fragile democracy by the aggressive emergence of ethnic militias is real. Official estimates indicate that since the successful elections in 1999, more than 2,000 people have died in sectarian and ethnic feuding (Singer, 2000). This is a country, which apart from its ethnic diversity, is frequently susceptible to religious violence especially in the Muslim dominated north. Ethnic and religious differences are solidified by geographical contiguity coupled with sectoral economic considerations. Being multi-ethnic and characterised by deep-seated social inequality, uneven territorial development, and a variety of other forms of potentially destabilizing popular identity, including especially religious identities – 47 per cent Muslim, 35 per cent Christian and 18 per cent "traditional worshippers" (Sandbrook, 2000: 51), the country is susceptible to conflicts and this explains why it has been extremely difficult to address the issue of the "National Question" (Olukoshi and Agbu, 1996:72). The surge in militias ironically appears to be what unifies Nigerians against the excesses of the state after thirty years of deleterious military rule. Generally, Nigerians share a lack of faith in their government, the rule of law, a sense of being oppressed, and of not receiving their fair share of Nigeria's bounty. Whilst the OPC claims to represent Yoruba ethnic group interests, MASSOB Igbo group interests, the APC evolved to protect Hausa-Fulani interests perceived by their elite as being under threat due to the activities of the OPC and the politics of the new democratic dispensation. Apart from these, there are also a significant number of other proto-militia groups linked to the three major ethnic groups of Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa-Fulani, in addition to those linked to the minority ethnic groups.[1] Rather than striving to consolidate democracy which entails the internalisation of rules governing the exercise of power on a day-to-day basis, as well as rules determining free and fair electoral contests (Sandbrook,

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1. Though the Hausas and the Fulanis are two separate ethnic groups, the term Hausa-Fulani is used in this context as encapsulating the regional political interests of the two groups.

2000), the Nigerian state appears to have internalised the ethnic contradictions that today are threatening its viability and coherence.

Common to these militant groups are the following attributes: the uncritical use of violence, a preponderance of youth membership, ethnic identity affiliations, movements of a predominantly popular nature, demanding change over the *status quo* except for the APC which is against the calls for a Sovereign National Conference or a National Conference as the case may be. Most of all the other ethnic organizations and the militias are in support of a Conference of ethnic nationalities that will address the imbalances in the Nigerian Federation.

Colonial Rule, Indigenous Societies and the State

As observed by Azar (1990), two main factors stand out when discussing the rise of conflict in politically active multi-communal societies. These are the colonial legacy and the historical pattern of rivalry and contest amongst communal actors. The colonial legacy bequeathed by the British was one that outrightly encouraged the solidification of the ethnic differences existing amongst the various peoples in the geographical space now called Nigeria. This was done mainly for economic gains and administrative convenience through what has aptly been tagged the "divide and rule" policy. Historically, indigenous societies ante-dated Nigeria, and these consisted of the three largest ethnic groups, the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest, each of which now has a population of not less than 20 million. Other indigenous societies include the Ijaw, Kanuri, Edo, Nupe, Tiv, Efik, Ibibio, Gwari, Itsekiri, and Urhobo each of which now number no less than two million. These societies came under British colonial rule in three different ways: Lagos Island in the southwest was acquired by the 1861 Treaty of Cession, the Sokoto Caliphate (later Emirate) in the extreme north was conquered in 1903, and the rest of the country, particularly in the south by "treaties of friendship" in which the native Kings agreed to come under British protection with their people (Ige, 1995:3). Consequently, the British Crown had complete control over the legislative, executive and judicial processes and used this to their advantage to the detriment of the traditional political and social institutions, which had existed amongst the peoples of Nigeria for centuries. In later years, especially during the religious and electoral crises among the three regions of West, North and East in the 1960s, the British government acted as if it was unaware that Nigeria's basic problem was sub-nationalism (Nwankwo and Ifejika, 1969:258).

It is against the background of the extreme disenchantment of the ethnic nationalities with the Nigerian state perceived as a colonial contrivance, and the resurgence of ethnic identity politics that we seek to understand the nature of the

growing challenge by ethnic militias to the Nigerian Project. How the resurgence of ethnic militancy in the post-transition period can be explained, and how this challenge can be managed are uppermost in this enquiry. Further, it is important to understand the origin and objectives of these militias with a view to identifying common causative factors, if any, and possible strategies for addressing this problem. My central thesis however, is that the over centralisation of power in Nigeria's federal practice and the failure of post-transition politics to urgently address the distortions in the polity are responsible for the emergence of "ethnic militias" as a specific response to state incapacity and a means for achieving the decentralisation of state power.

The aim of this study is to increase our understanding of the root causes of this phenomenon so that from an informed position policy options could be broadened. What is evident however, as has been attested to by many observers of Nigeria's political scene and statesmen, is the imperative of addressing what has aptly been recognized as the "National Question" in Nigeria. Should Nigeria's leaders and politicians continue to hold on to the inherited colonial political contrivances and suffer perennial ethnic and religious violence and the risk of possible secessions or even civil wars, or should they boldly re-visit the basis and structure of the federation with a view to re-designing the polity through popular participation? It appears that the tensions and conflicts will remain as long as this question remains un-addressed.

Increasingly, the Olusegun Obasanjo civilian administration finds itself mired in the task of defining and addressing protests by the various rebellious groups and outright criminality and mayhem perpetuated by urban miscreants who in the absence of meaningful social welfare programmes by the government capitalize on the state's incapacity to improve the social problem. The threat posed by the ethnic militias is a factor that can truncate the Nigeria's fragile democracy if not addressed. The emerging pattern is that of a tripodal ethnic terror machine represented by the OPC, MASSOB and APC, that may turn out to be the greatest threat to Nigeria's unity in this millennium. Experience has shown that civil wars develop when regional or ethnic movements are emboldened by state incapacity to challenge their legitimacy or by a perceived ethnic enemy within the contested political and economic spaces. This is already happening in Nigeria.

Democratisation, Ethno-Nationalism and Conflicts – A Review

There is little doubt, that there is some linkage between democratisation, ethno-nationalism and violence in divided societies that are going through political and economic transitions. The controversy remains however, whether this relationship is 'positive' or 'negative' in its manifestation, in regard to national unity or

democratic consolidation. The literature is replete with instances of situations in which democratisation and the opening up of the democratic space have led to incidences of low-intensity conflicts and undesired tensions (Akwetey, 1996:103; Olukoshi and Laakso, 1996:8; Hameso, 1997:7; Wippman, 1998:5). Akwetey (1996) for instance, drew attention to the nature of the democratisation process in Africa in the light of the resurgence of ethno-political violence during transitions to democracy. He cited Ghana's experiences in 1981 and 1994, when violence resurged under elected civilian regimes. According to Hameso (1997), issues of ethnicity and self-determination are still prime on the agenda today. For Africa, the salience of ethnicity ought to be seen in relation to its historical and political experience which corresponded to highly centralized and authoritarian (often, military) regimes that professed to avoid the 'divisiveness of ethnic diversity', which was really nothing but a mask for ethnic domination. Hameso (1997) believes that whatever nauseating conflicts exist, they ought to be understood from the unique nature of ethnic conflicts in Africa, which lies in the inherited artificial boundaries, domestic colonialism and uneven development. Hence, for Hameso (1997:99), it is reasonable to maintain like Horowitz (1993:6), that in ethnically divided societies, majority rule is not a solution, but a problem as it permits domination apparently in perpetuity of the dominant groups over the minority groups.

Olukoshi and Laakso (1996) and Olukoshi (1998:16) argued that deep-seated economic crisis on the continent which continued into the 1980s served to undermine state capacity and legitimacy in Africa whilst simultaneously reinforcing the structures of authoritarianism. With the weakness of the post-colonial African state, people increasingly had to fend for themselves by resorting to primordial sources of identification and assistance. Some sought solace in new and resuscitated or re-invigorated ethnic or religious associations (Osaghae, 1995). According to Olukoshi and Laakso (1996:20), in spite of the boom in associational life witnessed in most parts of Africa, the scope for social solidarity was generally narrowed, even as the possibility for people to turn on each other in the increasingly fierce competition for access to resources and what was left of the state increased. They concluded that the crisis of the nation-state in Africa is, therefore, as much a crisis of politics and institutions as it is a crisis of the economy and society. Wippman (1998:5), however notes that the strength of ethnic cleavages tends to pre-empt competing sources of political loyalty, especially in instances in which group members perceive a threat to the group's culture or position in society. This usually leads to apparently dormant ethnic cleavages surfacing violently during periods of state collapse or transition.

Buttressing Olukoshi's position on state incapacity as a major cause of ethnic conflicts and violence, Nnoli (1995a:6) identifies ethnic group access to state

power or a lack of it as complementary to the already explosive situation. He observed that in Africa, access to state power is important for various ethnic groups because of the extensive intervention of the African state in the many spheres of life of African society. Nnoli believes that the awesome power of the African state impels individuals and ethnic groups to seek to control the state or, at least, to have access to it as a matter of security. This security is necessary since the state has largely failed to live up to the 'social contract'. Hence, each ethnic group mobilizes its people in order to ensure this access, and this mobilization invariably heightens ethnicity and ethnic consciousness. In the case of Nigeria and other African countries that had been under military rule, the military interventions in the body politic usually had an ethnic character, and this prevents other ethnic interests from being expressed and accommodated politically. Therefore when military rule ends, these forces re-emerge at a higher level of intensity and the people then resume the historical experience of learning to accommodate one another (Nnoli, 1995b:251).

On the notion and reality of democracy and democratisation in relation to conflicts and societal decay, Salih (2001:3) opines that democracy is not about the mechanical transfer of political experiences from one society to the other, rather it is about political participation. It is about the ability of people to express their preferences freely without intimidation, and how this is guaranteed according to a given institutional framework and jurisdictional powers. To this extent, Salih observes that democracy constitutes the sum total of values and attitudes that people nurture over a long period of trial and error whilst improving on its quality. Contributing further to the debate on ethnic conflict and democratisation, Nnoli (1995a:22) noted that both are linked, in the sense that while ethnic conflicts may abort, truncate and distort democratisation or even prevent it from starting, in turn, democratisation may directly impact on ethnic conflict to exacerbate it during its various phases. Again, further indicating the conceptual difficulty surrounding the democratisation-conflict nexus, Mustapha (1997:206), citing the various incidences of ethnic politics in Malawi in 1994, also in Togo, and the controversial annulment of the June 12 presidential elections in Nigeria observed that focus on "tribal" conceptualisation have tended to ignore the emergence and re-invigoration of organs of the civil society such as the trade unions, human rights groups and the press, which have given the principal impetus to the democratisation process in Africa. He believes that there is a need to elaborate the complex relationship between ethnicity and democratisation as the African experience unfolds. Generally, Nzongola-Ntalaja (2001:24) sees the link between democratisation and ethnic conflicts as undesirable as the incidences of ethnic hatred, ethnic cleansing, wholesale massacres, and genocide indicate.

These he understood as violence against democracy, which is quite capable of derailing the various democratisation processes going on in Africa.

But where does ethno-nationalism lie in all this? The literature on what may be referred to as sub-nationalism is closely related to discourses of 'ethnic identities' (Barth, 1969; Anderson, 1983; Gurr, 1993; Horowitz, 1993). Indeed, it has been argued that nationalism and not liberal democracy is the real successor to communism. This means that history will continue (Avineri, 1992:30) and not necessarily democracy as argued by Fukuyama (1989) in his 'end of history' thesis, which maintained that the disintegration of Communism left the idea of liberal democracy standing alone with no viable ideological competitor in sight. Suberu (1999:119), for instance, noted that ethnic identities become politically salient when uneven development, political competition and the self-serving tactics of ambitious politicians aggravate them. Olukoshi and Laakso (1996:105) had noted in line with this view that an ethnic identity is objective to the extent that it denotes specific historical, cultural and linguistic traits that distinguish one group from the other. They also noted that the objective attributes are often amenable to subjective manoeuvres accentuated by some real or felt sense of deprivation and denial.

Wunsch and Olowu (1990:119) in trying to adduce reasons for ethnic based conflicts observed that the centralising project of state-consolidation or nation-building in many plural societies almost universally involved the cultural devaluation, political repression and/or economic deprivation of the more vulnerable geo-ethnic segments of the political community. Further they note that in a global moral and intellectual milieu that has become very sensitive to abuses of group and individual rights and other excesses of centralized states, such centrist dispositions have invariably provoked both domestic and international stricture. In culturally fragmented communities, group identity exerts a powerful and autonomous emotional, psychological, symbolic or consummatory role. Hence, ethnic affiliations naturally acquire greater salience and attraction as groups increasingly find it necessary to mobilize against historic and contemporary inequities and injustices in the socio-political processes of heterogeneous states (Suberu, 1999: 119).

Another related dimension of the issue under discourse is the potential for the escalation of ethnic and self-determination conflicts. Shehadi (1993:53) identifies two mechanisms by which escalation occurs. These are through contagion and demonstration. According to him, contagion is the most threatening in divided societies, but also threatens peaceful ones by creating and then feeding new divisions in the society. The presence of militias and weapons is not easily restricted to particular areas. The entire society can be affected by militarisation, by paralysis of the state's institutions and, by its ineffectiveness to provide law,

order and security in the face of the onslaught by self-determination groups. The availability of weapons and military expertise also make it easy for militias to be formed. Generally, militias increase the feelings of insecurity in society, further paralysing existing political institutions, and may eventually set off a chain of escalation culminating in civil war (Shehadi, 1993). Indeed, the proliferation of small arms can be directly linked to increased violence as also evident in Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone. In Nigeria, the inability of the state to gain effective control over the monopoly of violence has further worsened the situation. In terms of the availability and proliferation of small arms, Nnoli (1995b:251), noted that this factor has led to the periodic massacres of people in Nigeria in certain parts of the country and has therefore contributed to the sharpening of ethnic consciousness in other parts of the country. He cited the incidences of the Tiv riots, the ethnic pogroms that preceded the civil war, the Jos riots and the Kano riots. This to him is an indication that people have arms sources independent of the government, and that the unregulated use of these arms has created social insecurity that subsequently bred ethnic solidarity, ethnic consciousness and ethnicity.

The problem under discourse raises questions about the capacity of the post-colonial African state, especially about its capacity to fulfil its own part of the social contract. Some social scientists have conceived of the post-colonial African state as "prebendal", where nepotism reigns, while others insist that it is an "entrepot state", where the multinationals are lords; or an "overdeveloped state", which lacks the capacity to carry the structures it inherited from colonialism (Odion, 2001:17). More common in recent times and rather nauseating is the view that it is a "failed state" in the sense that it is outrightly incapable of governing (Jackson, 1990; Kurosaki, 2001) . This I think is an extreme view totally in dissonance with the anthropological, and historical experiences of what today is referred to as the post-colonial African state. More specifically, the Nigerian state has been seen as a "hanging state" in which the state has no connection whatsoever with the people and a "state of two publics", borrowing from the theorisation of the renowned Nigerian political scientist, Peter Ekeh, in which a Nigerian's conduct when holding public office is different from his conduct when he is serving his community (Ekeh, 1975). However, it is important to note that the post-colonial African state has over the years exhibited appreciable signs of 'resilience', perhaps what is required is not the oftentimes repeated terms of opprobrium but a radical re-structuring of its internal political features and its external relations in order to ensure its survival. Therefore, the post-colonial African state is more of an "enduring state", than a "failed state". On political violence proper, it appears that in Nigeria, this cannot be explained with reference to ethnicity and faith in isolation from the socio-economic and political conditions prevailing in

the country. In Nigeria, it is clear that the vast majority of violent conflicts have occurred during 'democratic' civilian rule. While it is not appropriate to associate democracy with violence, it is valid to ask why violence intensifies during periods of democratic rule in the country, particularly in northern Nigeria. For instance, since violence has been associated with the calls for the introduction of the Islamic Shari'a legal system in the northern part of the country, why is it that such vociferous calls were not as rampant during military rule given that the majority of Nigerian rulers since independence have been Muslims (Salih, 2001:144)?

Democratisation and Violence

On the nature of violence that may occur during periods of democratisation, Anifowoshe (2000:3) noting the conceptual difficulty of a general definition, observes that violence can be used to describe every variety of force, militancy, coercion, destruction and aggression directed against persons, properties, and symbols of perceived sources of discontent. This includes such phenomena as riots, armed robbery, arson, guerrilla warfare, civil wars, coup d'état, assassinations, insurrections, rebellions, revolutions and the like. He however, identifies mass violence and in particular, civil violence as suited to the understanding of situations in which violence is directed at people or things that are symbols or agents of the political or civil order. Anifowoshe (2000:5) identified three probable theoretical explanations for the resurgence of civil violence in Nigeria. The first, which derives from psychological studies, is what he terms the "relative deprivation, rising expectation and frustration-aggression hypotheses". The central thrust of this school of thought is that aggression is always the result of frustration and anger, especially when we feel thwarted in our attempt to get something we want. We are likely to get angry, and when we get angry, the most satisfying inherent response is to strike out at the source of frustration. Anifowoshe (2000), thus observes that the origins of the O'odua Peoples Congress and the other ethnic militias are traceable to mass misgivings over perceived political marginalisation, poverty and unemployment, collapse of social infrastructure and state welfare programmes as well as the perceived inefficient and corrupt state security system. He therefore notes that an effusion of rising expectations that have generally remained unsatisfied accompanied the advent of the present democratic dispensation. The second systemic model which he identified just as Nnoli (1995a) did is the widespread belief that there is a paradoxical relationship between modernization and political disorder. Most post-colonial African states are going through a period in history in which there is tremendous stress and strain on the traditional, social, economic and political systems. In fact, it is a period in history that I have referred to in various other writings as one of "total crises" (Agbu, 1995; 1997;

2001). It therefore follows that in a society in which modernizing leaders for example, rapidly expand education by increasing the number of educated persons without the corresponding increase in levels of economic opportunities, there will most probably be some sort of political anomie. This, as Anifowoshe (2000:6) pointed out, is certainly the case in the Nigerian urban towns of Lagos, Onitsha, Ibadan, Kano, Kaduna and Aba where many youths who drifted there found themselves unemployed, underemployed or even unemployable. Ultimately, this group of urban dwellers become a ready base for recruitment as criminals, *area boys and girls*[1] and members of ethnic militias. The third is the "group conflict model" which sees violence as a product of a struggle among various groups within the society. Proponents of this school of thought readily identify the various cleavages existing in the society such as ethnic, regional, political and religious cleavages as possible sources of civil violence. Though this view fails to explain why there still exist multi-ethnic communities who have lived in harmony for ages without serious conflicts, it nevertheless provides a plausible explanation of the possible causes of conflicts in divided societies.

Finally, the obviously problematic connection between democratisation, ethnic sub-nationalism and violence was very well put by Anugwon (2000:69), who insists that ethnic conflicts negate the developmental function of democracy and may ultimately attack the roots of democracy in a society. He however observes that the existence of minimal ethnic conflicts or rivalry in ethnically plural societies is to be expected. He further argues that when these conflicts are minimal or dissociated, they may be regarded as dynamic forces that help to propel the development of a society. Though conflict is a principal variable for explaining social change in the society, it becomes detrimental to the consolidation of democracy when it is extreme. The situation in Nigeria, and events in Rwanda, Burundi, Zaire or even far-flung places like the Balkans and the Middle East easily bear this out.

Nigeria's Ethnic Militias – Origin and Objectives

The phenomenon of the rise of ethnic militias in Nigeria did not just start overnight. It arose as a result of certain circumstances in the body politic that the ordinary people on the streets could not tolerate any more. This is not the only time that the country has experienced some form of ethnic militancy or secessionist

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1. "Area boys" and "Area girls", may be defined as groups of unemployed and/or unemployable youths found on the streets of highly populated urban towns like Lagos, who have organised themselves in such a way that they lay claim to, or control, sections of the cities for various extortion and criminal activities.

agitations. There have been the Agbekoya uprising in the Western region in the mid-1960s, the Tiv riots, the secessionist bid by Adaka Boro and his colleagues in the Niger-Delta and, of course, the fratricidal Biafran war of self-determination between 1967 and 1970. By the late 1980s and in response to the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the federal government, several groups in the civil society emerged to oppose state autocracy and to complement the activities of the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASSU), the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and the Muslim Student's Society (MSS). Some of these groups include the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Constitutional Rights Projects (CRP), Human Rights Africa (HRA) and a host of other professional and civil organizations (Olukoshi, 1995:179; Agbu, 1998). These organizations were fighting the case for accountability, the rule of law, the right to free association and dissent, the freedom of the press, an end to detention without trail and other basic civil liberties (Olukoshi, 1995:179).

However, the struggle against tyranny and oppression took on a far more serious note with the purported involvement of the state in the assassination of Kudirat Abiola, wife of Moshood Abiola, the killing of Alfred Rewane, the judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the death of Gideon Akaluka, who was beheaded in a Kano prison by a mob supposedly for desecrating the Holy Koran. Further, the Yorubas and other ethnic groups in the country saw the unjust incarceration of Olusegun Obasanjo and other prominent Yoruba by the Sani Abacha junta as a threat to their collective survival that warranted serious opposition (Anifowoshe, 2000:12). Feeling frustrated and endangered, the other ethnic groups, different from the Hausa-Fulani, decided to take their destiny in their own hands by forming militias, both for their protection and the protection of their ethnic interests, and also for providing vigilante services against the increasing and unchallenged menace of armed hoodlums. At this stage, no one cared about the illegality of this development, after all the Nigeria Police (NP) had abysmally failed to perform its constitutional duties of maintaining law and order. Indeed, the militias fulfilled this role effectively for a while, bringing relief to the vast majority of the people from the menace of armed robbers. Ironically, the same masses they were supposed to protect later became victims, getting killed and burned by the militias in their ethnic feuding. A common denominator amongst these groups is that they have arrogated considerable and unimaginable powers to themselves and have turned out to be increasingly above the laws of the land. Primarily, they have usurped the police powers of investigation and arrest, seized the powers of the state to prosecute criminal cases and wrestled from the courts the powers of trying and convicting accused persons.

Therefore, to a significant extent, it is possible to link increased militia activities in Lagos and other states in the West of Nigeria to the annulment of the 1993 Presidential elections by the Ibrahim Babangida military junta.

The origin of the OPC, MASSOB, APC, Bakassi Boys, Egbesu Boys, and the other ethnic militias can generally be traced to the mass misgivings over perceived political marginalisation, poverty and unemployment, collapse of social infrastructure and state welfare programmes as well as the perceived inefficient and corrupt state system. Further, the advent of the present democratic dispensation was accompanied by an effusion of rising expectations that have generally remained unsatisfied under the Obasanjo civil government (Anifowoshe, 2000).

In summary, the demands of the various militias include the redress of political and economic marginalisation, the decentralization of state powers, autonomy and self-determination in the sense of resource control, the provision of security and the right to determine their future in the Nigerian political space. However, the class realities underpinning many of these militias and the dynamics of their recruitment are so riddled with contradictions that were they to overwhelm the Nigerian state today, one could only expect a prolonged period of anarchy and bloodletting rather than prompt salvation. Yet, the structural weaknesses notwithstanding, taken together in their combined effects on the polity and their unanticipated side effects, these militias in a fundamental sense represent a most potent and explosive challenge to the Nigerian democratic state (Williams, 2000:9). Let us now take a closer look at some of the more popular ethnic militias as case studies.

The O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC)

This is a militant socio-cultural Yoruba organization founded in 1995 by Fredrick Fasehun, a medical doctor and former presidential aspirant on the platform of the defunct Social Democratic (SDP) with a group of Yoruba intellectuals, including Beko Ransome-Kuti, another medical doctor and human rights activist, who became the national treasurer. Initially the major source of its resistance was the annulment of the June 12 presidential elections and the necessity for Yoruba unity, and the creation of an "Oduduwa Republic". However, another source, attributed the idea of the OPC to one Tony Ngrube an Ijaw, who met with Fasehun and Ganiyu Adams (who now leads a more militant faction after a split), and sold the idea to them arguing that the Yoruba should form a militant organization to check the excesses of Abacha's oppressive measures against the Yorubas (Adegbamigbe, 2000:20). Seen largely as a the self-determination mouth-piece of the Yorubas of southwest Nigeria, the organization had at inception structures such as an Elders Council, the National Executive Council which constituted its

think-thank and its foot soldiers known in local parlance as the *Esos*. It also reportedly had a pseudo-guerrilla arm that had to undergo a systematic dismantling since the original plan that could have heralded a possible secession was overtaken by the overwhelming desire of other geo-political zones in the country for the southwest to present the presidential candidate for the 1999 elections. A major crack in its activities occurred in 1999 when Ganiyu Adams, a prominent member of the *Esos* broke away and announced that he had expelled Fasehun from the main organization. Fasehun in turn also announced that he had expelled Adams. So there are today two factions of the OPC. Initially conceived as an intellectual think-tank and made up of renowned Nigerian Yoruba intellectuals, the organization has been hijacked by the army of jobless and combat-ready Area Boys who now use the platform to perpetrate violence throughout the Yoruba heartland.

According to Williams (2000), Fasehun, the original founder, ran into difficulties when he received and honoured an invitation from retired General Obasanjo, who was then the presidential candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). He noted that by going, and in a noisy and self-advertising manner, Fasehun betrayed a lack of political sagacity, as a leader of a potent social movement must not be easily, readily and publicly available. A possible explanation offered for Fasehun's parley with Obasanjo was that as a dissident member of the political elite and a stakeholder in the economy, he does not want the polity to go up in the flames of ethnic conflagration. However, to the bulk of the his new found constituency, the miscreants and the miscasts, the outcasts and casual riff-raff on the fringes of the society, and those who are already down and out, this was a betrayal of apostolic dimension and political incorrectness of the highest order. With the embers of rebellion stoked by other dissident members of the political elite with private animus against Obasanjo and the entire political system, the falcon would no longer listen to the falconer and Fasehun is now in danger of being recorded as a casualty of his own movement. It appears that what had started out as an ethnic movement has fractured along class lines. This is perhaps why with all the intellectual, cultural and political resources available to the Yorubas, a 30 year old semi-literate furniture maker with the name of Ganiyu Adams is now the leader of the most potent social force available to the Yorubas. Williams also noted that apart from its ethnic grandstanding, the OPC is also a movement of social and political rebellion against a moribund Yoruba political establishment.

Presently made up of intellectuals and unemployed youths, the organization's main source of funding is from the tax collected from its members and from donations by the well-to-do. Their paraphernalia include guns, machetes and charms. In terms of stated objectives, an excerpt from the OPC mission statement states *inter alia* that it had covenanted with O'odua to:

– Gather together all descendants of Oduduwa all over the earth, especially in Africa, the Caribbean, South America and North America for a profound, all embracing and absolutely unflinching unity.
– Identify with our historical and cultural origin with a view to reliving the glory of our past for the purpose of posterity.
– Educate and mobilize the descendants of Oduduwa for the purpose of the above.
– Integrate the aspirations and values of all the descendants of Oduduwa into a collective platform of the O'odua entity.
– Monitor the various interests of the descendants of O'odua by whatever name, anywhere on the face of the earth and struggle for the protection of their interest.
– Ensure maximum self-determination of the people of O'odua.
– Further the progress of O'odua civilization by the protection and promoting of our values, mores and the intergenerational transmission of same. (*O'odua Peoples Congress Pamphlet*, 1996).

As was observed by Anifowoshe (2000), the OPC then appeared to be a well organised socio-political association, which wanted the Yorubas to be treated as equals or they would opt out of the Nigerian federation and establish an Oduduwa Republic. The OPC was not just protesting but rebelling against the Nigerian state. According to the leader of the more militant faction of the OPC, Adams, "our original objectives are for self-determination and social emancipation of our people, restoration of regional autonomy, self-government and self-management, for economic reconstruction and control, and for a re-structured, re-constituted genuinely federal Nigeria union which can be achieved through the convocation of a Sovereign National Conference. We are still on course (Adegbamigbe, 2000:13)".

It was observed that from 1999 after the split in its ranks, the OPC became more militant in its activities. In fact, its focus gradually changed and became more geared to vigilante services in the southwest. Since then, Nigerians living in the southwest have been held hostage by this organization through their frequent clashes with the law enforcement agencies, and other ethnic groups in the highly urbanized city of Lagos. Some of these clashes include the Ijaw-OPC clash, the OPC-port workers clash in Lagos, the kidnap and subsequent murder of a senior police officer in Lagos, the attempted coronation of a Yoruba Oba in Ilorin, a disputable historico-political action, and the carnage in Ajegunle, a Lagos suburb inhabited by different ethnic groups of the low-income level. By the year 2000, the Nigeria Police claimed that the OPC was responsible for 60 per cent of the

200 violent clashes recorded nationwide since 1999 (Adegbamigbe, 2000:14). Indeed, with the return to civilian rule, the OPC became more visible, more vocal and more violent in its activities. They actually did carry their clamour for a sovereign national conference to the streets where they engaged the police in fierce battles.

As should be expected, the vigilante activities of the OPC eventually brought it into conflict with other ethnic groups each time the OPC meted out jungle justice to persons belonging to the other ethnic groups. The militia brought down the might of the federal government on itself when it was fingered in the murder of Afolabi Amao, the Divisional Police Officer of Bariga, a suburb of Lagos. The government, which hitherto had been dragging its feet in terms of taking serious measures against the organization, officially banned it and declared its militant factional leader, Ganiyu Adams, wanted. He was subsequently arrested after a manhunt, detained, arraigned before a court of law and was granted bail in October 2001. However, it is important as observed by Anifowoshe (2000:16) that the government's feeble challenge to the OPC created a demonstration effect and indeed led to the emergence of rival ethno-militant groups like the Ijaw National Congress (INC), the MASSOB, and the APC, all with vibrant branches in the congested and multi-ethnic neighbourhood of Lagos. The activities of the OPC and the other militias in the Niger-Delta, but especially of the OPC may lead to the demise of the fourth republic if immediate and long-term measures by the federal government and the elected politicians are not taken to address this specific challenge to the legitimacy of the Nigerian state.

Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB)

This pseudo-militant group has its base in the South Eastern part of Nigeria, specifically in the Igbo dominated areas. Ralph Uwazurike, a 41-year old graduate of Political Science from the University of Bombay and a trained lawyer, formed MASSOB which professed to be a civil rights organization, in the year 2000. Uwazurike spent ten years in India, and was a former president of the Nigerian Students Organisation in Bombay. He returned to Nigeria in 1988 (Elesho and Ogunnaike, 2000:15). Though the organization claims to be non-violent in its activities, the potential for engaging in violent actions is extremely high in Nigeria's volatile social and political environment. Its claim to being pacifist could be traced to the civil war experience of the people of this area who engaged the federal government in a war of self-determination in the late 1960s. The Igbos are easily the most dispersed ethnic group in the country (Oshomha, 1990:8), perhaps this is why the ethnic group has frequently fallen victim to violence whether

political, religious or cultural, even when the root causes of the conflicts do not directly relate to them.

According to Uwazurike, who claimed to have studied "the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi for ten years" and understudied Odumegwu Ojukwu (the Biafran rebel leader), his movement remains committed to the Biafran dream. Uwazurike who disclosed that it was the sight of his five-year-old sister dying in the general pogrom of 1967 when he was aged nine that fanned this dream in him, maintains that the Igbos are now no longer talking about their marginalisation for the past 30 years or about addressing the injustice, but outrightly demanding a sovereign state of Biafra through non-violent means. However, he goes on to say, by "non-violence", we mean we shall not attack anybody. We shall carry out our 25 programmes peacefully without attacking anybody. But if you attack us, we shall not fold our arms and look at you". Quite plainly, the threat or the use of violence is so glaring that the group has to be structurally prepared to utilize violence if need be. Nonetheless, the organization still goes on to say that theirs is a struggle for freedom, just like the Nigerian struggle for independence. Basically, the organization relies on private financial sponsorship obtained both locally and from the diaspora for its activities. It is also interesting to note that MASSOB has successfully internationalised its struggle, which has made the federal government uneasy. The group has established a "Biafra House" in Washington DC, United States, for the international coordination of its activities (*Weekly Express*, 2000). On May 22, 2000, the movement attracted the attention of the government and many Nigerians and international observers by the symbolic hoisting of the Biafra flag in Aba, Abia state (see Appendix 1). During the ceremony, which was disrupted by federal security forces, Uwazurike, the group's leader officially presented the Declaration of Demand for a Sovereign State of Biafra from the People and Government of Nigeria. In the declaration, the group expressed concern about the introduction of the Shari'a in the northern part of the country, and the very disturbing silence of the federal government over the issue. It also expressed concern over the killing of over 5,000 people of Eastern Nigerian origin as a result of the fallout from the introduction of the Shari'a legal system, and noted that the Biafran war of 1967–70 was not necessarily a war of independence but a defensive mechanism to save and accommodate Eastern returnees who were being massacred in many parts of the country. To this group, it appears, and evidence abounds that the pre-conditions for the civil war of 1967 are being recreated. Quite interestingly, MASSOB says that it has packaged about 25 stages for the actualisation of a new Biafra state through non-violence and non-exodus and maintains that there was no time in the country's history when the various ethnic groups discussed the formation of any entity called Nigeria. In the closing part of the Declaration, Uwazurike says:

> Never shall we resolve to acquire inferior status in Nigeria out of cowardice. Nor shall we compromise the future of our children out of fear. It is more honourable to die in the struggle for freedom than to live as slaves. We have initiated the struggle for the emancipation of our people. It is a long-term project. God will provide the circumstance for the realization of our dream.

Fundamentally, the case of the emergence of MASSOB may be attributed to the long years of Igbo "marginalisation" from adequate representation at the national level and the neglect of the federal government in terms of the provision of infrastructure especially since the end of the civil war. The government's programme on reconciliation, reconstruction and rehabilitation was a total failure as the Igbos continued to be discriminated against in the political, economic and social spheres of Nigerian life. Whatever reconciliation exists today was attained through the passage of time and not necessarily as a result of government policy. But then this line of argument could also be put forward by many of the minority ethnic groups including those of the Niger Delta[1] who over the years have also been crying marginalisation. But some Igbos will quickly remind you that they are the only group of people in Nigeria with a case of "abandoned property" since the property of the Igbos outside of Igboland was declared by the Nigerian government after Biafra surrendered to the federal forces in 1970 as abandoned. This means that such property cannot revert back to the original owners. Others would also cite the case of an Igbo man, Gideon Akaluka, who was beheaded by a Muslim mob in a federal prison in Kano in the presence of prison officials for purportedly desecrating the Koran as another example of discrimination against the Igbos! MASSOB therefore, sees it as part of its goal to mobilize the Igbos to be alive to their plight and be in the position to defend themselves against injustice in the short-run while seeking through peaceful means a Biafran state in the future.

Its position on the use of non-violence notwithstanding, on July 21, 2001, Uwazurike, the MASSOB leader was arrested along with several of his aides by a combined team of the Nigerian Army and the police. He was released after 10 days of interrogation in police detention at Abuja, and on his release still vowed that the struggle for a Biafra will continue. At one stage, more than 40 members of MASSOB were on trial for alleged treason, punishable by death (*Weekly Express*, 2000). MASSOB accused the Obasanjo led government of foot dragging

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1. The Niger Delta produces about 85 per cent of Nigeria's total crude oil output. The area covers the North Atlantic coastline, criss-crossed by tributaries and mangroves of the River Niger. It is made up of many ethnic groups like the Ijaws, Urhobos, Ibibio, Ibeno, Eket, Annang, Ikwerre, Efik, Ogba, Isoko, Itshekiri, Edo, Ogoni, Andoni, Okirika, and Kalabari. Apart from their demands for economic restitution and ecological rehabilitation, or resource control there are also various inter and intra-community conflicts amongst them.

over the OPC issue and high-handedness in persecuting its members. MASSOB further observes that rather than confronting the forces of disintegration threatening Nigeria's fragile democracy, the government is busy hunting down its innocent and law-abiding members and civil rights campaigners of the former Eastern Nigeria (*The Biafra Foundation*, 2000).

The Bakassi Boys

Another militant group in the Eastern part of Nigeria is the "Bakassi Boys", though fundamentally an efficient and effective vigilante outfit, the potential of its use both for political and ethnic interests is also very high. Retrospectively, the origin of the name "Bakassi" could be traced to the territorial war between Nigeria and the Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula in Cross River state. Since hostilities broke out between Nigeria and her Southern neighbour in the 80s over the oil-rich peninsula, Nigeria has massed troops in the peninsula to check the frequent intransigence of the Cameroonian gendarmes. Given the tension that this generated, it was not long before the word "Bakassi" slipped into the everyday use of the local population. Naturally, people began to associate vigilante activities with the Bakassi Boys (Odion, 2001:14). The Leader of the Bakassi Boys is one Gilbert Okoye, a trader by profession. The Bakassi Boys also had branches in many other towns in the Anambra and Abia states.

The Bakassi Boys phenomenon however, first emerged in Aba, Abia state, a key trading centre as a response to the menace of merciless armed robbers who not only relieved residents and traders of their hard earned money and property but often murder their victims. The administration of Orji Uzo Kalu, the youthful Governor of Abia state on seeing that the group was effective in checking the activities of hoodlums in his state, gave the group official backing in 1999. The group literally swept criminals out of Aba, the state capital only for the incidence of robberies to increase in the other Eastern commercial towns of Onitsha and Owerri like the canker they are. Beleaguered Onitsha residents then invited the "Bakassi Boys" to come to their rescue. Although the group is linked to a traditional cult of the small Ogoni ethnic minority, its activities have been confined to the areas populated by the Igbos. Prior to this development, the Nigeria Police had lost its pride of place as a law enforcement authority in the major commercial cities in the southeast like Aba, Onitsha, and Owerri. The police force was seen as not only unable to cope with the increasing crime situation but was generally suspected of being a collaborator. In the face of the incapacity of the police, therefore, the Bakassi Boys arose mostly made up of illiterate and semi-literate youths, traders and the unemployed. Armed with guns and their favourite weapon, the machete, and reputed to employ magical powers in identifying robbers, the vigi-

lantes usually operate with the support of the local governors in the Igbo-dominated states of Abia, Anambra and Imo. Arrested and confirmed bandits usually have their heads and limbs chopped off, gathered in a heap and set ablaze in the full glare of the public to serve as a deterrent. It is also important to note that the Executive Governors of these states appear to have little or no confidence in the Nigeria Police that is supposed to maintain law and order in their states. Perhaps this was why states like Lagos and others in the southwest regions of the country called on the federal government for permission to establish state police forces. In Anambra state, the activities of the Bakassi Boys became politicised when the political opponents of the governor accused the latter of using the outfit to intimidate his critics for political ends. In order to reduce the criticisms directed at him and distance himself from the activities of the group, the name "Bakassi Boys" was changed to "Anambra State Vigilante Services (AVS)". The group was further provided with logistical support by the state government such as vehicles, arms and ammunition and was able to effectively check the activities of armed robbers in the commercial town of Onitsha, which has a population of over one million. Though Nigerian human rights groups are alarmed at the activities of the Bakassi Boys, the group remains quite popular with the residents of Onitsha and Aba, a fact demonstrated by the spontaneous demonstrations of support for them when President Obasanjo ordered the group disbanded in July 2000 (UN OCHA, 2000).

Other groups which are in one way or the other protesting Igbo marginalisation and neglect include the Igbo Peoples Congress (IPC), and the Ohaneze N'digbo. These are more like umbrella organizations, which have been formed to protect Igbo interests. It is however important to note that some members of the Ohaneze N'digbo are also members of MASSOB, though the MASSOB leadership perceives the other groups as made up of archaic, moribund and unprincipled Igbo leaders who oftentimes are more interested in the protection of their class interests than Igbo interests. Nonetheless, Ohaneze's primary concern appears to be the perceived marginalisation of the Igbos from political power and the neglect of Igboland in the provision of infrastructure and social amenities since the end of the Nigerian civil war. Ohaneze's position in respect of Nigeria's federalism for instance, is that there should be a zonal structure within a federation of states where there is devolution of powers to the zones, creating room for a zonal army, security forces, judicial and civil service. While they do not want the states abolished on any account, they prefer that the presidency be rotated from zone to zone, and it is their conviction that if the centre sheds its powers in these areas of frequent conflict, the country may have peace and lasting democracy. Indeed, the above position is similar to that adopted by the Conference of Southern Minorities in December 1998 (Momoh, 1999:20). However, what is interest-

ing here is the difference in the style adopted by MASSOB vis-à-vis the other Igbo organizations in the pursuit of almost the same objectives. MASSOB does not appear to be pleading or condescending, it is out rightly demanding a new state of Biafra and insists that it is not interested in a Sovereign National Conference if the objective is to have a confederacy. It wants out of Nigeria and welcomes other Igbos who may not want this, but whom the organization says are free to carry Nigerian passports if they so desire. From these cases of group rebellion to the authority of the Nigerian state, what is obvious is that the post-transition political environment is indeed very suspect in terms of the consolidation of democracy.

Militant Ethnicity in the Middle-Belt

The Middle-Belt area of Nigeria is made up of many minority ethnic groups amongst which are the Tivs, the Idomas, the Jukuns, the Gwaris, Igala and the Igbirras. This area is home to about 130 of the country's estimated 250 ethnic groups. According to Bala Takaya, a political leader in the Middle-Belt, (Orinya and Atabo, 2000:27), the cultural Middle-Belt comprises the core central zone of Kogi, Nassarawa, Plateau, Benue, Kwara, Federal capital Territory Abuja and the ethnic minorities of Bauchi, Gombe, Southern Borno, Southern Yobe, the whole of Taraba, Adamawa and Southern Kebbi stretching from Zuru South-West across Mubi in the North East. This categorization is important because it clearly shows that in reality one big unified North does not really exist. In the recent past, politicians from the Middle-Belt have complained of "internal colonialism" in the North, and are presently working out political strategies to carve out some sort of political autonomy for this region. They, together with the ethnic minorities of the Niger-Delta in the South, are often seen as the cement holding the three big ethnic blocs (Hausa-Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba) together. As is the case in other parts of the country, this area also experiences inter-communal conflicts, which have exacerbated since the successful transition to civil rule in 1999, giving the federal government much concern. In recent times, such words like "ethnic-Tiv militia men" and "Jukun militia" are increasingly being uttered. Though in some instances, there have been long-standing communal conflicts of over ten years like the Tiv-Jukun communal conflict (Best et al., 1999), the situation has now deteriorated to the extent that federal security forces sent to separate the warring parties have now become their common enemy. This was the case in the Tiv-Jukun communal conflict in October 2001. How do we explain this?

The roots of the incessant armed conflicts between the Tivs and the Jukuns can be traced to the colonial period, more precisely the 1920s. The Tivs were traditionally an agricultural society, and can be found today in Benue, Plateau,

Nasarawa and Taraba states of Nigeria. On the other hand, the Jukuns were predominantly riverine people who depended on fishing for their livelihood. They can be found today in Plateau Nasarawa and Taraba States. Hence, for a long time after the geographical encounter of the two groups around Wukari and Takum in the present day Taraba State, there was no clash of interests. But with the growth in population and advent of modern politics introduced by the colonial power – where size of population matters – the two ethnic groups began to exacerbate their contradictions. This was not only over the ownership and use of land but also over the control of local political power. Further, since the two ethnic groups are now more inter-mixed in the southern part of Taraba State not even the creation of more states and local governments have been effective in curtailing the conflicts. The point to note here is that there is still a major constitutional problem of properly defining who is a citizen in Nigeria. The issue of who is a 'settler' and who is not, who is an indigene and a non-indigene of a state and therefore, the implications of this in accessing political power at the local level is still highly contested and remains a key component of the national question in Nigeria. This as in the case of the Tiv-Jukun conflict is a major source of conflicts, which often-times require the services of militias defending what they consider to be ethnic turf. A constitutional solution is imperative.

The conflict in Benue state in October 2001 was attributed to the ethnic Tiv militia who abducted 19 soldiers sent on a peacekeeping mission to stop the fighting between the Tivs and the Jukuns over land. The 19 soldiers were later found dead in a village called Zaki-Biam and in a fit of rage, which indeed should have been expected, soldiers retaliated by murdering at least 100 villagers of the Tiv ethnic group and burning down their villages. Nearby villages such as Vasae, Anyiin Iorja, Ugba, and Sankera, all located in the two local government areas of Logo and Zaki-Biam bore the brunt of the revenge attack by the soldiers on unarmed civilians. Even the family home of the former Nigerian Army Chief and an acclaimed ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) commander, General Victor Malu (rtd.) was not spared. The village head and his wife were also unfortunate victims of this rage. The situation in Benue was reminiscent of the events in Odi, in Bayelsa state in Southern Nigeria in November 1999, when soldiers seeking to avenge the murder of 12 policemen by local armed groups razed the entire town and killed scores of civilians. Tragically, the lessons of Odi were never learned. Prior to this particular incident, fighting had broken out in June 2001 pitting the Tivs against their mainly Hausa speaking neighbours in Nassarawa state, leading up to at least 100 dead with about 50,000 displaced (UN IRIN, 2001). Also, by September 2001, riots broke out between Christian Tivs and the Hausa Muslims in Jos, the capital of Benue state over a political appointment made by the state governor, which did not go down well with the indigenous Tivs. As is

often the case, a political disagreement quickly became a religious war with many lives lost and property destroyed including churches and mosques.

Apart from the militias, there are a couple of pseudo-political organizations in the Middle-Belt seeking a separate identity for the region. Some of these include the Middle-Belt Forum, Middle-Belt Progressive Movement (MBPM), Middle-Belt Patriots (MBP), Middle-Belt Youths Association (MBYA) and Association of Middle-Belt Academics. All these groups appear to have one homogenous agenda: to bring about a severance of political ties with the core North and realize the objective of the creation of the Middle-Belt political region in a non-violent way. The MBYA has been the most radical in its crusade, openly criticizing the North for subjugating the Middle-Belt politically over the years for its own selfish ends and also criticizing the Middle-Belt elite for conniving with the North.

As mentioned earlier on, the Middle-Belt region is strategically very important as the cementing force or a bridging group holding the three big ethnic groups together. This implies that incessant conflicts in this area can only further undermine the already wobbly base of the country's existence. The picture is further complicated by the fact that the minority groups of this region are too small to be viable as modern nation-states and, indeed, do require the umbrella provided by the Nigerian state for their security. Probably realizing this, the people of this region have over the years demonstrated a greater keenness to have the country remain as one as they, for instance, provided the bulk of the soldiers who fought against the Biafran secession during the Nigerian civil war. In fact, it can safely be said that there is no government in the country that has been established without the Middle-Belt playing a major role. Perhaps recognizing the role played by the Middle-Belt since the country's independence, the Obasanjo government has done significantly well in appointing people from the Middle-Belt to key political positions. For instance, in the early period of the elected Obasanjo administration, the Chief of Army Staff, Victor Malu, the Chief of Naval Staff, Ibrahim Ogohi, the Chief of Air Staff, Air Vice-Marshal Isaac Alfa, the Defence Minister, Lt. General T.Y Danjuma (rtd.) and Abu Obe, the Head of Service of the federation were all from the Middle-Belt. It was therefore not surprising that the far North which hitherto had monopolized many of these positions became alarmed and has since then tried to design political booby traps for Obasanjo, like the elevation of the Shari'a legal system in some states in the North, knowing full well the likely reaction it will provoke.

Worried by the frequent clashes between the various ethnic groups in which hundreds of lives have been lost in recent times, the government, apart from holding meetings with the state governors on the issue, has adopted a hard line position as in the case of the OPC menace in Lagos. Human rights groups have expressed fears over the frequent inter-communal conflicts in this area especially

in the states of Benue, Nasarawa, Taraba and Plateau and are not exactly happy about the highhandedness of the federal security forces who use disproportionate force to counter what are in many cases civil disturbances (*Human Rights Watch*, 2000:2). However, it is important to note that the people of this region also have grievances linked to the present structure of the Nigerian state and would like to see their grievances addressed. According to Solomon Lar, the Chairman of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and a leading figure in the Middle-Belt in a speech he delivered on Nigeria's "Democracy Day", May 29, 2001 at Abuja, "we seek arrangements in which fiscal federalism will be restored as was the case before the first military interregnum so that the regions will have no less power than we agreed upon at independence, such that each region can determine its own priorities and develop at its own pace" (Oshunkeye, 2001:20). Subsequently, in a communiqué emanating from a parley held in Abuja, a call was made for the people of Nigeria to exercise their democratic right to review, amend or draw up a new constitution after due consultations, in order to address the various issues threatening the unity, peace and sovereignty of the country.

The problem of inter-communal conflicts in this region of the country therefore has a link with the increase in the emergence of new militias like the ethnic Tiv militia. The fear as witnessed by the Zaki-Biam incident in October 2001, is that these militias will become increasingly political in their activities. Again this does not augur well for the fragile democracy in the country.

The Arewa Peoples Congress (APC)

This group was formally launched on December 13, 1999, after a series of meetings were held in Kaduna and Kano on December 4 and 5. The brain behind this group is one Sagir Mohammed, a former operative of the Directorate of Military Intelligence in the Nigerian Army. He became a rallying point when the APC was launched in Kano specifically to checkmate the militancy of the pan-Yoruba O'odua Peoples Congress and threats that might emanate from other ethnic-based organizations. Mohammed was able to rally together and form a committee of Northern traditional rulers, retired judges, and lawyers, retired senior members of the armed forces and the police, labour and student leaders, traders, farmers and politicians. It was after the meetings held by these various interest groups that it was resolved among other things to "carry out activities aimed at protecting and promoting the cultural, economic and political interests of the northern states and their peoples" (Appendix 2). The 23 final resolutions of the APC include one which asserts that the preservation of Nigeria as "a corporate entity" with its current composition is "not negotiable". In fact, APC has as the motto of the organisation – "to preserve the indivisibility of the country". Now, this partic-

ular stance is obviously one that can lead to a clash of interests between those groups demanding all sorts of autonomy and the APC. The OPC, as we have seen, wants an O'odua state. MASSOB wants a new Biafra and the Middle-Belt is demanding political autonomy from the North. The stage for serious conflicts is evidently being set. It has often been said that the north is not really a monolithic bloc as it encloses other significant ethnic groups that are different from the Hausa-Fulani majority. At the broadest level, there is the cross-bond of Islam, built around the Fulani Sultan of Sokoto, the head of the Muslim community. Over the years, minority groups of the north like the Nupe had benefited from being protégés of the Hausa-Fulani. At another level is the dichotomy between the Sokoto (Hausa-Fulani) and the Borno (Kanuri) which is built around the historical Kanem-Borno empire-state, which remains a contending centre of Islam.

The Kanuris who are a political minority are to some extent competitors of the Hausa-Fulani. In fact, the British colonial administration recognised this difference by not placing Borno under the ideological and religious umbrella of the Sultan of Sokoto. At the final level are the non-Muslim groups, which have always fought and resisted Fulani overlordship and Islamisation. They are located in provinces more open to Christian and westernising influences (Lehtinen and Ogunbor, 2000:170). Christianity has invariably served as a counter-ideology for opposing the use of Islam by the Hausa-Fulani northern elite to sustain a pan-northern unity (Osaghae, 1998). Though the APC maintains that the thrust of its activities will be based on dialogue, it nonetheless warns that it will use decisive action to protect northerners wherever the need arises in the country, as they believe that they have the capacity to do so.

In this balance of terror that is presently playing itself out in the Nigerian state, even the defence of the Shari'a in the North is seen as a justifiable goal that may necessitate decisive action. But then, the Shari'a issue has already led to violence of significant proportions in Kaduna and Kano. An estimated 750 Nigerians, mainly Igbo Christians and other persons from the South were killed in Kaduna when a riot broke out during a demonstration against the introduction of the Islamic Shari'a law in the state. This subsequently resulted in a retaliatory attack on Northern Muslims in the Igbo heartland of Aba and the burning of a mosque. So far, the federal government is still at a loss as to how to address this politically explosive issue. It was in January 2000 that the Shari'a legal system was first upgraded as state law in Zamfara state under Governor Ahmed Sani. Since then, around a dozen states in northern Nigeria have introduced either full or partial Islamic law despite opposition by Christians and the Nigerian government. The law bans amongst other things stealing, alcohol, prostitution, gambling, adultery and public dancing. The problem however, is that its implementation in the cosmopolitan towns of the North where there are people of other reli-

gions or from other parts of the country is problematic in the sense that it may lead to conflicts of an engulfing nature.

Again as with the other groups cited, this development does not augur well for the efforts being made to consolidate democratic practice. To some extent, the manner of the formation of this organization may only serve to protect the interests of the elite rather than the masses. Prior to the formation of this group, there existed the Northern Elders Forum, which is basically conservative in its approach to issues affecting the 'north', and purportedly defends "northern interests" against the rapacious and insidious offensive of "Southern groups" and other northern "irritant" interests (Momoh, 1999:21).

The Niger Delta Militias

The emergence of ethnic militias in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria can be attributed to various forces, both historical and contemporary. The emergence of militias and proto-militia groups like the Egbesu Boys of Africa, the Ijaw National Congress (INC) and the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), considered to be a proto-militia group amongst a host of others cannot be divorced from the dynamics of minority politics in Nigeria, which in a way is the logical outcome of the growth of ethnic consciousness in the country (Dappa-Biriye, 1995). Such consciousness first led to the formation of ethnic unions in the 1950s and 1960s and then to the emergence of ethnic militias by the late 1990s. The 1954 constitution which established a federal structure in the country, giving residual powers to the regional governments exacerbated minority fears of marginalisation by the dominant ethnic groups in each region and strengthened the demand for the creation of states then (Sklar, 1963:133). Even the establishment of the Sir Henry Willinks commission of enquiry in 1958 with terms of reference to ascertain the facts about fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria and to propose means of allaying them whether well or ill-founded did not achieve much.

According to Williams (2000) in a well-researched article, properly speaking, the first armed challenge to the Nigerian post-colonial state was the Isaac Adaka Boro rebellion in the riverine province of the country in 1966. Boro, a former police inspector, chemistry student and president of the University of Nigeria Students Union proclaimed a sovereign Ijaw nation to be known as the Niger Delta Peoples' Republic (Saibakumo, 1998:9). But such was the might of a highly professionalised Nigerian military and the residual authority of the state that the protagonists were swiftly overpowered and convicted of treason. This was the forerunner to the resurgent riverine nationalism, which with the encouragement of the federal government was channelled away from the state and towards what

was perceived as Igbo over-lordship in the Eastern region. As a strategy for isolating and containing secession in the Eastern region of the country, it worked and probably broke Biafran resistance. However, Williams noted that this strategy let the genie of ethnic mistrust out of the bottle. Beyond the mainly peaceful pursuit of materialism and acquisitiveness very few can actually accuse the Igbo political elite of having a systematic political philosophy and a messianic worldview for local imperialism. This is because an average Igbo person is highly individualistic, hardworking and gregarious partly as a result of the demographic pressure in the Igbo heartland which makes them migrate to other places, and partly as a result of a cultural inheritance which extols individual achievements. To this extent the Igbo are not easily amenable or given to group mobilisation on an identity basis for purposes of attaining any sort of political hegemony. But having been so demonised, this stuck, making it impossible for the mainstream Igbo leadership to achieve any unity of purpose with their minority neighbours in the south (Williams, 2000).

It was in the Ijaw town of Oloibiri in the minority populated Rivers state that oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in the second half of the 1950s. Since then the Niger Delta has produced more than 85 per cent of total crude oil output in the federation. The area's diverse ethnic minority communities have been at the receiving end of the country's inequitable distributive politics and revenue sharing policies and have been in the forefront of the political agitation for the promotion and protection of the economic and ecological rights of the oil producing areas (Quaker-Dokubo, 2000:5).

Today, the minority ethnic groups of the Niger Delta are not only struggling against the federal government, but are also fighting amongst themselves and with the multinational oil companies in the area, in a context of grinding poverty. It is ironical that this area which hosts enormous oil resources is famished through poverty and has the most elementary social infrastructure. Perhaps, this may be why the agitation from the people verges on aggression and desperation.

What is probably the greatest challenge to the Nigerian state comes from the activities of the various political and pseudo-militant groupings in the Niger Delta. The array of political associations and ethnic militias in the Niger Delta is simply mind-boggling. They include the following: the Ethnic Minorities Organization of Nigeria (EMIRON), National Youth Council of the Ogoni People (NYCOP), Movement for the Survival of the Ijaw Ethnic Nationality in the Niger Delta (MOSEIND), Movement for the Survival of the Itsekiri Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN), Urhobo Youth Movement (UYM), Movement for the Reparation of Ogbia, Movement of the Oroh People, Elimotu Movement, Arogbo Freedom Fighters, the November 1895 Movement, Meinbutu and a host of others. The list is almost inexhaustible. Surely, a major problem exists here.

The militant Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA) and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVE) both operate under the umbrella of the Ijaw National Congress (INC). In recent times, the more militant and younger elements, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), have taken over the direction of Ijaw nationalism and empowered it both locally and internationally. The Ijaw militants operate through sister organizations like the IYC, EBA, INC and the NDVF. Just like the Ogonis who drew up an Ogoni Bill of Rights on the 26th day of August 1990 and an Addendum exactly a year after (MOSOP, 1992), the Ijaws produced the Kaima Declaration of December 11, 1998, which contained the essence of Ijaw nationalism (Obi, 2001:71). Representatives of over forty Ijaw clans converged on the said day at Kaima, the hometown of their late secessionist hero, Adaka Boro, and deliberated on seeking solutions to the problems associated with what they called "our present enslavement in the fraudulent contraption called Nigeria". The result was the Kaima Declaration (Appendix 3). Part of this Declaration was that "all land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within the Ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities and are the basis of its survival", and that it ceases to recognize all undemocratic decrees that robbed "our communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent". These decrees refer to the Land Use Decree of 1976 and the Petroleum Tax Decree of 1969. The conference therefore demanded the immediate withdrawal from Ijaw land of "all military forces of occupation and ... stoppage of all oil companies' exploration and exploitation of gas and oil work in the Ijaw area". It took pleas from well-meaning Nigerians for the Declaration to remain only a demand of intent. Action was suspended but has since the declaration manifested itself in increased violent activities of the various Ijaw ethnic organizations on oil operations in the Niger Delta.

As for the Egbesu Boys, it is believed that they derive their spiritual and objective motivation from the cultural origin of the name "Egbesu". The group is led by one Alex Preye and can now be found in many towns in the country where there are concentrations of Ijaws including Lagos. According to Obi (2001:71), in his seminal work on identity politics in Nigeria, Egbesu is synonymous with truth and justice; as such it provides legitimacy for those fighting injustice and oppression. It is also interpreted to mean that with Egbesu on their side, the Ijaw are assured of success in their campaigns (Obi, 2001:72). The EBA maintains that it is committed to the liberation of the Ijaw, and their claim to the control of oil in Ijaw lands. There are allegations that members of Egbesu generally, swear allegiance to the Egbesu deity, and undergo certain rituals that fortify them against bullets and assure them of victory. The Egbesu Boys came to the limelight recently when they engaged the OPC in an all-out combat in Ajegunle, a suburb of Lagos, after the OPC purportedly killed some Ijaw youths suspected to be

armed robbers. The fact that they were able to do this in Lagos, which is in Yoruba land is significant on its own and tells much about their organization. On the other hand, the NDVE derives its origin from identifying with Boro's brand of Ijaw nationalism. It should be noted that Boro's organization was also named the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF). It also claims to fight for the Ijaw by assisting in preventing the federal government and the oil multinationals from oppressing the Ijaws (*Nigerian Tribune*, 1999:7).

The activities of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People have been fairly well documented from the mid-1990s (Olukoshi and Agbu, 1996; Obi, 1997; Ibeanu, 1997; Na'Allah, 1998). This arm of the Ogoni struggle for self-determination was able to graphically bring to the homes of many Nigerians and the international community the problems of not only the Ogonis but of all of the Niger Delta. Under the vibrant and able leadership of late Ken Saro-Wiwa it grew into a very potent force challenging the Nigerian Nation-state project and demanding a re-structuring of the federation and the modus operandi of the Nigerian state. The MOSOP case was one of historical pride founded on the fact that the Ogonis were never defeated in any war before the coming of the British. The Ogoni struggle had immense grassroots support, as the Ogoni Bill of Rights was drawn up after wide consultations with different strata of the Ogoni society drawing from the archetypal inheritances of the people. The Bill demanded compensation from the federal government among others for oil exploitation and extraction and the pollution of Ogoni land. It maintained that the Ogoni demand for the control of its oil-rich territory was morally correct and just (Obi, 2001:71). The nature of the grassroots support which the Movement had emboldened MOSOP to confront the Nigerian state and Shell. MOSOP had not only a flag but also a national anthem, which summed up the aspirations of the Ogoni People. Since the November 10, 1995 judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his kinsmen, MOSOP has tended to withdraw into its shell but there is little doubt, that the seeds of revolution sown by Saro-Wiwa and his countrymen will one day grow into radical changes in the Niger Delta.

A major feature of the agitations in the Niger Delta generally attributed to the various militant groups include the kidnapping of both local and expatriate company staff of the multinational oil companies. This is usually followed by demands for ransom. Sometimes, these groups engage in repeated invasions and blockading of oil installations. In 1993, the operations and installations of Shell were disrupted by at least a hundred communal disturbances, leading to the loss of some 12 million barrels of crude oil (Quaker-Dokubo, 2000:5). As an aggregate, the various movements in the Niger Delta demand a constitutional restructuring of the Nigerian federation that can guarantee the peoples of this area access to the control and management of their mineral resources, protection of

their environment, repeal of the Land Use Decree and the various Petroleum Laws and above all, self-determination in the sense of having the right to determine their future. They contend that mineral land rights, and oil royalties, should rightly belong to communities or state of derivation, and that the federal government should put in place appropriate institutional and financial arrangement to compensate their communities for the ecological problems they have been facing since the 1960s. The calls for self-determination should therefore not be taken lightly. The reasoning here is that being a part of Nigeria should not be by force, but rather by agreement arrived at after due discussions. In short, if Nigeria is desirable, it has to be negotiated, not imposed. Hence, many of the groups of the Niger Delta support the call for a Sovereign National Conference. Note that this position is similar to those canvassed by the OPC, and the political associations of the Middle-Belt and the Southern minorities, but markedly different from the position taken by the APC, which maintains that the political entity called "Nigeria" is "non-negotiable". Now this position is indeed extreme in its connotation and I dare say a relic from military rule. As was noted by Vickers (2000), whether under civil, political, or military rule, grassroots cultural and political realities remain largely constant, and the demands of the peoples of the Niger Delta remain real to them, and in the midst of today's strife, angst and turmoil of the stricken giant – Nigeria – it is well to recognize and remember these realities. I do not think that these demands can be easily pushed aside.

The problem as has been noted is that the situation in the Niger Delta is a fundamental crisis of underdevelopment, the people are poor in the midst of abundant resources and this has a way of elevating anger and violence. This situation is blamed on the government that has done little to systematically resolve the crisis. For instance, it is known that a major factor fuelling communal conflicts in the Niger Delta is the high number of the unemployed youths roaming about with nothing to do. Pressed on all sides to do something, but also mindful of the sensibilities of the oil companies, the post-transition Obasanjo government has adopted a gradualist and pacifist approach bearing in mind its desire to attract foreign investments. However, there are some polemics between those who fear that attending to the demands of the oil minorities may provoke the disintegration of the Nigerian state, and endanger their monopoly over power and oil, and those who are keen on transforming the *status quo* to ensure the equality of access to power and the democratic control of power. This latter position is informed by the knowledge that the oil minorities' question cannot be resolved independent or outside of the democratic resolution of the "National Question" (Obi, 2001:99). It therefore appears that the decentralization of power and the recognition of minority demands would have to be integral to the democratisation project.

State Response to Militant Ethnicity

The response of the Nigerian state to the phenomenon of ethnic militancy is, to say the least, inadequate. The initial foot-dragging by the federal government was believed to have created a negative effect, which led to the proliferation of other ethnic militias (Anifowoshe, 2000:21). Following the massacre of militant Ijaw youths and civilians in Odi, Bayelsa state, and the brutality meted out to the members of MASSOB during the launch of their organization in Aba, Imo state, the federal government was accused of double standards for not immediately meting out the same treatment to the OPC in spite of their varied atrocities in the southwest. Also, Obasanjo's initial attempts to rein in the Bakassi Boys was easily interpreted as biased and heavy handed in the face of his inability to do the same to the OPC operating in his Yoruba homeland or to the Shari'a vigilantes, whose activities allegedly violate the constitution. The very serious disturbances in Lagos in October 2000 involving the OPC finally forced the politically sensitive government of Obasanjo to declare the OPC banned while ordering the "arrest of its leaders or anybody who claims to be a member". The government subsequently issued a directive to the police and military personnel to dislodge all ethnic militia groups in the country (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2000). The federal government also took measures to strengthen the coercive capacity of the much-vilified Nigeria Police, providing it more manpower, logistics and equipment. Even then, the police still remained largely overwhelmed and corrupt, and demanded rather an increase in its manpower in Lagos state from its 10,000 numerical strength to 20,000 which also includes civilian staff (Okiro, 2000:24). The then Minister of Police Affairs, David Jemibewnon, was better known to the public for giving excuses as to the non-performance of the police than actually doing the job, before he was involved in a motor accident and had to be removed by President Obasanjo. Prior to this incident, the public had been calling for his resignation. It was not long before Musilimu Smith was appointed in his stead as the new Inspector-General of Police. At another level, the Lagos state government tried to put in place measures to reduce the incidence of crime and the activities of militant groups in the state. It has for instance, made attempts to reorient and reintegrate the area boys who supply the OPC with the bulk of its foot soldiers (Anifowoshe, 2000:22). Some of the unemployed boys and girls have been recruited as street sweepers or sent for skills acquisition training in vocational centres. Also, the National Assembly worried over the incessant verbal assaults between the president and the Lagos State Governor, Bola Tinubu, through the senate instituted a committee to investigate the activities of the OPC. The committee held public hearings, interviewed 52 persons including OPC leaders and received 73 memoranda from the public. At the end of its investigations, the

committee blamed poverty, unemployment and police inefficiency for the activities of the OPC. Indeed, many believe that it is poverty that is the fuel driving endemic communal violence in Nigeria, and that this has to be squarely addressed before some enduring solution can be found. So far, the official government policy on the issue of ethnic militias is to discourage their activities and to treat each incident as it arises.

The other dimension of this phenomenon is the vigilante services supposedly provided by these militias as a result of the wide-spread insecurity in the country. The OPC for instance, ran into trouble with the federal government when its members began to engage themselves in duties other than apprehending robbers, embarking on vengeful missions against non-Yorubas believed to be opposed to Yoruba interests. An example was the Ketu market clash in Lagos in which OPC members attacked Hausa traders who had a dispute with their Yoruba counterparts. Now, this is one of the possible negative effects in situations in which militias perform duties that should normally have been done by the police. In the Eastern part of the country, apart from the barbarity associated with the way the Bakassi Boys mete out jungle justice to their victims, the services of this outfit are very much appreciated by the populace especially in the light of the clear incapacity of the police to curb the menace of armed robbers in the area. Generally, fears have been expressed about the use of militias as instruments for the maintenance of law and order especially in a civil political dispensation. The first is that there is every possibility that these groups could be hijacked or used by politicians and self-seeking individuals to either settle scores or to achieve other selfish ends. Some have also argued that it is possible that some of these groups have been promoted by politicians to carry out attacks on their opponents, or to be used as potential weapons when the need arose. No doubt, sometimes, the militias come in handy as thugs. This was what appeared to be the case with the Bakassi Boys in Anambra state, when Governor Mbadinuju was accused of using the group for the political persecution of his rivals. Another side of the argument is that the vigilantes lack the necessary training to fight crime and therefore should not be allowed to do so.

The point however appears to be on the one hand, that the Nigerian state has proved incapable of maintaining law and order in the sense of providing the necessary protection for its citizens. This created a vacuum, which the militias have ostensibly filled either for good or bad. On the other hand, we cannot also rule out the fact that many of these groups are genuinely demanding for some social and political space in the entity known as Nigeria in order to ensure their welfare and survival. In other words, a simplistic interpretation of what is happening, as just a case of rampant poverty, may not truly be so. The historical relations and the dynamics of the country's political history must be placed side by side with

the existential realities of the peoples of Nigeria before a clearer picture will begin to emerge.

However, against the fears that the country may not be able to get through its second elections in 2003 considering the activities of the political parties and the ethnic militias, Nigeria successfully held both the presidential and parliamentary elections to usher in the second half of the fourth republic. Though there were many misgivings about the elections won by the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), especially by ordinary Nigerians, the international observers considered the irregularities not serious enough to pass a negative verdict. Many of the ethnic militias are now more entrenched in terms of their organisational structure, though their activities have been significantly curtailed by the federal government under President Olusegun Obasanjo. The Niger Delta region, however, still constitutes a major flashpoint as the militias have continued to kidnap expatriate workers of the various oil concerns for a ransom. The State has correspondingly increased military surveillance of this area in its bid to maintain some stability and peace in the area. Suffice it to say that for Nigeria, the phenomenon of ethnic militias, marginalisation and exclusion could only be fundamentally addressed when the National Question gets the attention it deserves through a national conference.

Conflicts, Democracy and the Survival of the State

The specific emergence of the phenomenon of ethnic militias as a specific challenge to the Nigerian nation-state project cannot be divorced from the opening up of the political space for the exercise of rights and for electoral activities. For years, the military held sway under the jackboots of authoritarian leaders like Muhammadu Buhari (1983–1985), Ibrahim Babangida (1985–1993) and the late Sani Abacha (1993–1998). The result of course, was that arbitrariness and mediocrity were consciously and unconsciously celebrated and a gradual but steady militarisation of the Nigerian society continued until the successful elections of 1999 that led to the emergence of Obasanjo as the elected president of the country. Rights were trampled upon with significant instances of extra-judicial murders. Most Nigerians were afraid of the military, knowing fully well the financial and military might that the government wielded. There was little doubt that the Nigerian state under the military was a strong state and with the centralized command structure that it enjoyed, its tentacles could indeed reach far and wide. The fear of its might was the beginning of wisdom for many. Nonetheless, the Nigerian military was not cohesive as an institution as greed and petty jealousies among the officer corps resulted in coups and counter-coups which not only robbed the country of the crop of its trained officers, sometimes at great expense,

but also further militarised the society unconsciously enthroning a culture of violence. Tired of the military as Nigerians were, they could do very little until the presidential elections of June 12, 1993, when with one voice they broke the age-long jinx of ethnic, sectional and religious politics. However, there was to be no celebration as the military under Babangida annulled the freest and fairest elections ever held in the country, purportedly won by the late Moshood Abiola, a millionaire politician. I would argue that it was at this stage that something broke in the Nigerians' psyche or in their resolve for a better country. While some resigned themselves to faith, others, especially members of the civil society engaged the Babangida government in a running battle on the streets for the soul of the country. Organizations worthy of note include the Campaign for Democracy (CD), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR), Human Rights Africa (HRA) and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). At this stage, groups began to organize for more sustained resistance (Agbu, 1998), and did not have any compulsions about resorting to armed struggle if necessary. The emergence of the OPC as we saw coincided with this period in Nigeria's history of autocratic rule under Abacha. The point is that there is a history to the emergence of ethnic militias in Nigeria and this is inextricably tied in with the dynamics of its political governance and the underlying ethnic connotations. Solutions must therefore be all-embracing, reaching to the roots of the problem by revisiting the history of governance and the nature of federalism in the country.

As was noted by Anifowoshe (2000:23), the conditions that gave birth to the proliferation of the ethnic militias include the declining economic climate which created acute discontent and frustration among the people, especially residents of the urban slums who had always had their grievances against the government, coupled with a sense of relative deprivation. I quite agree with his observation to the extent that brute force was used to bottle up the pent-up fury of the aggrieved masses, which was only to be given an outlet with the dawn of the democratic era, itself accompanied by a euphoria of expectations and an exaggerated air of freedom to express grievances without restraint as was the case in South Africa when the Apartheid regime was defeated.

The point remains that millions of Nigerians are dissatisfied with Nigeria as it is presently constituted and it would be foolhardy to pretend that this is not so. At the broadest level, democracy, devolution of power and power sharing have been recognized as the three major institutional paradigms of ethnic conflict management. Democracy can indeed be an element in the successful resolution of ethnic minority grievances because it provides representation for various opinions through multiparty competition. The most common devolutionary mechanisms include confederation, regional autonomy, regional administrative decentraliza-

tion and community autonomy (Gurr, 1993:299). There is little doubt however, that democratisation is central to any effort at the re-structuring of the post-colonial African state in terms of its ability to manage ethnic diversities. Democratic conflict management requires a substantive distribution of power between the centre and the periphery and among the various groups in the society. A balance must be maintained between steps taken to check tendencies toward the over-centralization of political power and steps taken to contain centrifugal forces that could lead to the demise of a multicultural state. There is also a tension between the liberal emphasis on individual rights and the assertion of group rights and identity that the democratic polity must find a way to balance (Diamond and Plattner, 1994). While it is difficult to generalize on the hydra-headed problem of ethnic-based conflicts, it is possible to point an accusing finger at the 'ideology of exclusion' as a major reason for the growing ethnic differences in the developing world. The failure of governments in the countries experiencing ethnic conflicts to meet basic social economic welfare needs and provide greater levels of human security, in general, have created a heightened ethnic consciousness in a majority of the people, urban and rural alike as they retreat to their ethnic communities in search of security and social welfare support.

In Nigeria, the increasing problem of communal conflicts and the periodic massacres of people on the basis of ethnicity can easily be understood from the elite and economic perspectives. While the elite manipulate the ordinary people into violently attacking age-old neighbours for selfish and political ends, the fact of poverty and the inability of the government to alleviate this, further creates the condition for a seemingly more economically advantaged neighbour to become a target of ethnic envy. The attacks and massacres of people of other ethnic groups in one part of the country usually contribute to the heightening of ethnic consciousness in the other parts. In actual fact, it is a no-win situation. The alarming dimensions of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria reflect the loss of state monopoly on the use of force. This has most recently been expressed in the violence that has attended the various border disputes. Earlier, this had manifested itself in the Tiv riots, the ethnic pogroms that preceded the civil war, the Jos riots and the Kano riots. This is an indication that individuals have arms sources independent of the government. The possibility of the unregulated use of violence creates social insecurity and ethnic consciousness (Nnoli, 1995b:251). It is indeed very disturbing to see the amount of firepower in the hands of the militias. For quite a long time in Nigeria, it has been taken for granted that citizens can carry deadly weapons like sheathed swords, bows and arrows, guns, machetes, and knives freely without much harassment by the law enforcement agencies. It appears that it never occurred to the federal government to take seriously the banning and confiscation of such lethal weapons until quite recently, after they had been used in

the maiming and killing of thousands of Nigerians. It was only recently, that the government announced a general embargo on the granting of arms licenses to the public by state commissioners of police and the possible withdrawal of the licenses. It is believed that at least one million Nigerians may posses handguns, many of which are abused by the licensed holders who instead of using them for sports and games deploy them for self-defence or hostile action. It has also been discovered that approved handguns form the bulk of weapons retrieved from combatants at scenes of ethnic and religious conflicts. No fewer than 5,000 weapons were recovered from combatants at the scene of the last bloody religious riots in Jos, Plateau state in September 2001 by the joint military and police teams sent to quell the riots. Many of these were licensed weapons (Akparanta, 2001:1). Though democracy embodies the recognition and respect of individual rights, this should not be allowed as an excuse by those who decide to exploit this for individual and group advantages through violent means. The question remains however, that fundamental to finding a sustainable solution to the Nigerian problem of managing its diversity is a re-visit of its federal practice.

Federal Practice and the National Question

Many of the demands of the ethnic militias have to do directly with what has been referred to as the National Question. Very pertinent in understanding what this is, is the way that federalism has been conceived and practised in Nigeria. Though the 1999 constitution is supposed to be a federal constitution, in reality it is not because over the years military rule and autocracy had so centralized many aspects of the constitution that the centre is disproportionately stronger than the states. This observation was lucidly put by Obi (2001:99) when he stated that:

> The issue is broadly posed as decentralising the monopolistic highly centralized command structure of governance that has undermined the spirit of federalism, and bred all forms of inequities, inequalities and disparities within the Nigerian nation-state.

Take the case of the Niger Delta agitations for instance; a possible approach to the solution is to initiate a process that would slowly but surely decentralize the control of power and resources away from the centre to the various levels of government. This process as Quaker-Dokubo (2001) suggested would involve the recognition of the rights of the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta so that they can control and use a significant proportion of the wealth derived from their territories. Since all parts of the federation are complaining of the lopsidedness in the distribution of the national wealth, what is stopping the National Assembly from initiating constitutional measures to address the genuine con-

cerns of the peoples of Nigeria? History teaches that those who make peaceful change impossible make violent change inevitable. While many of the militias representing the diverse ethnic interests are calling for a Sovereign National Conference, and for the redefinition of Nigeria's federalism, a few have even gone beyond this and are out rightly demanding independence on the basis that belonging to the Nigerian state should not be by force but by consent. It is generally accepted that so far, federalism as a conflict management system has failed to remove the bogey of ethnicity, sectionalism and religion from the country's body politic. Persisting issues of contention like the states creation exercises, politicisation of censuses, federally collected revenues and their distribution, the citizenship question, the secularity of the Nigerian state and demands for a Sovereign National Conference are all recipes for inter-ethnic tension and inter-governmental conflicts. Fundamental to the crisis of federalism in Nigeria also, is the way class interests and ideology have intermingled with other equally intervening variables like militarism, religious bigotry, ethnicity and accumulation to produce what one may term an ideology of domination. This feeling and perception of domination have led to the various agitations for power, representation and control over resources championed by the ethnic militias that are now posing a great threat to Nigeria's fragile democracy. The fundamental problem of Nigeria's federalism still remains the over-centralization of powers and resources in the national government, and the destructive and divisive struggles for the control of the centre that this centralization invariably engenders (Ekpu, 1994:6). In the short-term, there is the imperative for power-sharing arrangements, while for the long-term, the key challenge for constitutional design in the country will be the elaboration of strategies for decentralising or redistributing powers and resources. Though consociationalism has been significantly criticized in the literature (Jackson and Rosberg, 1984; Joseph, 1991; Suberu and Agbaje, 1998), this is however, not to say that some sort of power sharing is not necessary in the short-term to maintain the stability needed for the consolidation of democratic governance. Without some sort of stability achieved through political arrangements, post-transition democratic consolidation will be very difficult in deeply divided societies like Nigeria. At the end of the day, the incidences of communal and ethnic conflicts and the use of ethnic militias may be much reduced or become a thing of the past when the long-term solution of re-designing Nigeria's federalism has been effected.

Concluding Remarks

The growing problem of the emergence of ethnic militias and their activities that has posed a serious threat to the democracy project in Nigeria can be understood

when one takes a critical look at the political history of the country. The long years of debilitating military rule with the violence and arbitrariness associated with it created a society in which violence rated far above peaceful means for achieving one's objectives. This culture of violence having been cultivated over a long period of time, about sixteen years of unbroken military with a very minor interruption by the transition government of Ernest Shonekan, eventually found an outlet in the post-transition democratic environment. There are therefore, both the short-term and long-term imperatives of addressing this particular challenge to the Nigerian state. As earlier presented in this study, the federal government should be able to contain the short-term threat posed by the ethnic militias. This is the easier aspect of the solution. The major policy issue is obviously a constitutional one that requires rational reasoning and political sagacity on the part of the ruling party, the PDP, the elected representatives, the politicians and the people. The orchestrated call for some sort of conference to decide the basis for Nigeria's existence can only be further ignored at the country's own peril. It has often been said that one word is enough for the wise. In this case, the call is no longer a word, but music to the ears of those who care to listen, only it is not melodious but short and martial in its intensity.

Bearing in mind the magnitude of the threats to post-transition democratisation not only in Nigeria, but also in other parts of Africa, it is necessary for governments to create the kind of political space that can allow for the decentralization of power from situations of exclusion to inclusion. If there are any lessons to be learned from the disasters in Angola, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda and Somalia, it is that failure to "invest" in politics can be extremely costly (Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999:20). Ethnicity and the conflicts associated with it oftentimes, are directly related to the centralization of power. Social democracy as opposed to political democracy requires that in Africa we should recognize the many centres of power and build upon these in the various 'nation-state projects'. As Mafeje (1997) observed, conceptualising the National Question in Africa as the emancipation of all oppressed peoples, classes, women and religious groups may actually be the best way of combating ethnicity and of dispensing with its degenerate politics. Again the cases of Rwanda, Burundi and Somalia clearly show that there can be no such thing as ethnic justice in our efforts at seeking solutions, rather the emphasis should be on ensuring social justice and the democratic rights of all (Momoh, 1999:25).

At the end of the day resolving the conflicts boils down to the creation of the conditions that can enable conflicting interests and forces to accept arrangements and procedures for addressing social and political contradictions. There is the need for the creation of an enduring framework for the democratic resolution of

disputes, and this is only possible when all stakeholders agree on this framework through a national dialogue whose outcome will be binding on all.

For Nigeria, a country with immense human and material resources, the future will be assured and democracy consolidated when its leaders and elite decide that it is now time to build a nation based on justice for all. With the kind of pressure emanating from the civil populace such as the activities of ethnic militias, this decision must either be made now by the political elite and their representatives or others will make it on their behalf.

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APPENDIX 1

THE ABA DECLARATION
The Birth of New Biafra

Fellow Biafrans, Declaration of Our Demand for a Soveriegn State of New Biafra from the People and Government of Nigeria

First and foremost, I bring you freedom. The freedom to assert your independence. And the freedom to demand for the sovereignty of your Biafran State, distinct from the geographical expression called Nigeria. The New Biafra is the 4th kingdom of God on Earth. As you may remember, about 33 years ago, there arose the need to save our people from total annihilation. That attempt could not materialize. Rather, we lost over a million of our people, in the process.

Today, we are yet faced with a similar situation. The unprovoked and organised killing of our people in Nigeria have remained unabated. However, the most worrisome of this conspiracy is the sudden introduction of Islamic Sharia Law in the Northern States of Nigeria. There is also a plan to Islamize the entire Nigeria State. Already, Nigeria is a full member of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC). This development has thrown overboard secularity of the Nigeria State.

The introduction of the Sharia Law threatens the economic life of our people in the northern states. It also threatens the security of our people. In a recent demonstration in Kaduna State against the introduction of the said Sharia Law, about 5,000 of our people resident in Kaduna were killed. The governors of the northern states have vowed to continue with the implementation of the Islamic Sharia legal system. Majority of our people have once again abandoned their investments in the North arising from insecurity. The Federal Government of Nigeria seems incapable of resolving the Sharia issue.

The Federal Government is afraid of daring the perpetrators of the Sharia Law. We, therefore, find ourselves at another crossroads. Do we want freedom in a New Biafra or slavery in Nigeria? The memory of the past civil war stares us in the face. The issue of another Biafra therefore raises more questions than answers. We are now faced with the problem of convincing our people that the quest for the new Biafra will not cause another war. We have therefore resolved to pursue the cause of freedom in our new Biafra.

This is the greatest legacy that we can bestow on our future generations. It must be stated that the Biafra war of 1967–70 was not a struggle for independence. Rather, it was a defensive mechanism to save and accommodate the Eastern returnees who were being massacred in all parts of Nigeria, except the East. This is different from our position today. MASSOB has therefore packaged about 25 stages for the actualization of the sovereignty of the new Biafra state through non-violence and non-exodus. By this process, no life is expected to be lost in the realization of our new Biafra state. This method has worked in various countries, including India.

The process admits of negotiations and consultation. It also admits of non-co-operation and passive resistance to oppressive and obnoxious laws of the authorities. Having hoisted the flag of our new Biafra today, we wish to declare or resolve to demand and pursue the realization of our sovereignty from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. We therefore call on the Federal Government of Nigeria to open up negotiations with MASSOB without any further delay for the realization of the sovereignty of the new Biafra State. No amount of threat, intimidation or divide and rule tactics can change our resolve. It was through a struggle like ours that Nigeria, Ghana, India, South Africa, East Timor etc gained their independence.

Ours will not be an exception. MASSOB shall commence the establishment of necessary structures that may sustain the sovereignty of the new Biafra State, if after 30 days from today the Federal Government fails to initiate the expected negotiations. Perhaps it might be necessary to state that our desire to be Biafrans is our fundamental right. In as much as we do not interfere with the right of anyone in choosing his nationality no one should interfere with our own rights, to chose our nationality. More so, there was no time in our history when our various ethnic groups discussed the formation of any entity called Nigeria.

Great Biafrans, we cannot deny the fact that some of our people have their reservations over the actualization of the new Biafra state. They believe in one Nigeria. They say that Biafra is dead. They feel that the cause for which we lost over one million people is dead. They also think that over one million Biafrans died in vain. We recognize their right to freedom of expression. But it is curious that none of these dissenting voices has provided any guarantee to the safety of life and property of Ndiigbo across the Nigeria State. Some of these Igbo politicians and Federal Government contractors who feel that Biafra is dead have done nothing to stop the spread of Sharia Law in the Northern states, which threatens the existence of our people in Nigeria.

It is on record that the only reprisal action against the organised killing of Ndiigbo in Nigeria was initiated and executed by a group. Nobody cared who did the job. Rather everybody was happy that such an action was taken. It is therefore, unbelievable that some Igbo politicians who still nurse the ambition of becoming future president of Nigeria can sacrifice the lives of Ndiigbo for selfish ambition. We shall also resist the ambition of some Igbo contractors to shortchange the overall interest of Ndiigbo for their selfish interest. Our position is that the new Biafra project recognizes the right of any Igbo to retain his Nigerian nationality in the new Biafra, in accordance with the new Biafran Laws.

However, we ask Father to forgive them for they know not what they do. Fellow Biafrans, do not despair. There is light at the end of the tunnel. Never shall we resolve to acquire inferior status in Nigeria out of cowardice. Nor shall we resolve to compromise the future of our children out of fear. It is more honourable to die in the struggle for freedom than to live as slaves. We have initiated the struggle for emancipation of our people. It is a long-term project. God will provide the circumstance for the realization of our dream. Our duty is to ensure that the struggle does not die.

Being a published text of declaration by Chief Ralph Uwazurike, leader of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, during the symbolic hoisting of the Biafra flag in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, on Monday, May 22, 2000.

APPENDIX 2

APC MISSION STATEMENT

*We are hereby announcing the formation of the above organization, Arewa is back,
the Northern Giant awakens!*

1. An organization known as the Arewa Peoples Congress is formed and it has been so constituted.

2. That the organization is firmly committed to the preservation of the corporate entity known as Nigeria since 1 October 1960 and in its present composition. This position is not negotiable.

3. The organization shall use all democratic and legal methods to achieve its objectives of ensuring the survival of one indivisible Nigeria.

4. The organization shall maintain offices in each of the states of former Northern Nigeria.

5. The organization will carry out activities aimed at protecting and promoting the cultural, economic and political interests of the Northern states and their people.

6. The organization extends a hand of friendship to all other Nigerians, especially the ones living amongst us. We recognize them as our brothers and guests and in keeping with the well-known tradition of northern hospitality, we will ensure their safety so that they may remain amongst us in peace and harmony.

7. The organization deplores the recent spate of sectarian killings in various parts of the federation. While the organization has the fullest confidence in the law-enforcement apparatus of the country, it will look at ways to protect Northerners from any such attacks and this in a swift and decisive manner. Self-defence being recognized as the inherent right of the aggrieved.

8. The organization has noted with concern, the unprovoked attacks in Lagos and in Ogun States by elements claiming to be implementing the Agenda of the O'odua Peoples Congress.

9. We wish to commend and associate ourselves with the patriotic stance of President Olusegun Obasanjo on the activities of the O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC), which activities have caused so much pain and anger in the Northern states. We urge the president to stand firm and ensure that no group, no matter from what part of the country dedicated to the destruction of Nigeria should succeed.

10. The Northern states who voted for President Obasanjo so massively, using moral, material and human resources to ensure that he was elected, are irrevocably committed to his success as our elected leader.

11. The Northern states, in 1966 joined other Nigerians especially from the South-West in order to resist the threat to the unity of Nigeria and in this we succeeded together. We shall not hesitate as Northerners to make the supreme sacrifice if Nigeria's entity was threatened again, no matter where the threat comes from, internal or external.

12. The Northern state firmly believe that no matter our differences, no part of Nigeria has the right to engage in activities that threaten the corporate existence of Nigeria. The 1999 Constitution, while by no means perfect, makes adequate provision for the resolution of ethnic grievances.

13. We wish to commend and associate ourselves with the Senate President, Dr. Chuba Okadigbo for his unequivocal statement on the revision of the 1999 Constitution and his total rejection of a call for a Sovereign National Conference by the voices that want to use it as a tool for the disintegration of Nigeria.

14. The review exercise to be carried out by the National and State Assemblies as promised by the Senate president will provide adequate avenues for all nationalities making up the Nigerian Federation to address their grievances. The review will after all be carried out by none other than the elected representatives of the people. We feel that they are fully qualified to address all the grievances to the satisfaction of all Nigerians.

15. We urge and plead with Governor Bola Tinubu of Lagos State not to carry out his "Re-location Agenda" for the Northern traders who have laboured and developed their present Ketu market for the past 50 years. We have advised them to adopt constitutional means to resist the implementation of the relocation programme as ordered.

16. Our detailed investigations of the Ketu crises have established beyond all reasonable doubt that contrary to their claim, the O'odua Peoples Congress was involved and that they were at the forefront of a series of provocative events that culminated in the unfortunate Ketu incident.

17. The refusal of the Igbos of the South-East to join forces or adopt the violent methods of the O'odua Peoples Congress in seeking redress for their alleged marginalization is hereby commended. We urge them to adopt dialogue instead of violence as a tool for national conflict resolution.

18. The Arewa Peoples Congress has noted with great concern the biased editorials by the South-Western controlled media against Northern leaders while deliberately shielding from the same treatment of their own indigenes who were part and parcel of previous regimes.

19. The Arewa Peoples Congress cannot be forceful enough in its praise of the Igbo for the refusal to adopt violent methods even though they themselves have recently been victims.

APPENDIX 3

THE KAIMA DECLARATION

BEING THE COMMUNIQUE ISSUED AT THE END OF THE ALL IJAW YOUTHS CONFERENCE WHICH WAS HELD IN THE TOWN OF KAIMA THIS DAY 11TH DAY OF DECEMBER 1998.

Introduction

We, Ijaw youths drawn from over five hundred communities from over 40 clans that make up the Ijaw nation and representing 25 representative organizations met, today, in Kaima to deliberate on the best way to ensure the continuous survival of the indigenous peoples of the Ijaw ethnic nationality of the Niger Delta within the Nigerian State.

After exhaustive deliberations, the Conference observed:

a. That it was through the British colonization that the IJAW NATION was forcibly put under the Nigerian state.

b. That for the economic interests of the imperialists, the Ijaw ethnic nationality would have evolved as a distinct and separate sovereign nation, enjoying undiluted political, economic, social, and cultural AUTONOMY.

c. That the division of the Southern protectorate into the East and West in 1939 by the British marked the beginning of the balkanization of a hitherto territorially contiguous and culturally homogenous Ijaw people into political and administrative units much to our disadvantage. This trend is continuing in the balkanization of the Ijaws into six states – Ondo, Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers and Akwa Ibom states, mostly as minorities who suffer socio-political, cultural and psychological deprivations.

d. The quality of life of the Ijaw people is deteriorating as a result of utter neglect, suppression and marginalisation visited on Ijaws by the alliance of the Nigerian state and transnational oil companies.

e. That the political crisis in Nigeria is mainly about the control of oil mineral resources which account for over 80% of GDP, 95% of national budget and 90% of foreign exchange earnings. Despite these huge contributions, our reward from the Nigerian State remains avoidable deaths resulting from ecological devastation and military repression.

f. That the unabating damage done to our fragile natural environment and to the health of our people is due in the main to uncontrolled exploration and exploitation of crude oil and natural gas which has led to numerous oil spillages, uncontrolled gas flaring, the opening up of our forests to loggers, indiscriminate canalization, flooding, land subsidence, coastal erosion, earth tremors etc. Oil and gas are exhaustible resources and the complete lack of concern for ecological rehabilitation, in the light of the Oloibiri experience, is a signal of impending doom for the peoples of Ijawland.

g. That the degradation of the environment of Ijawland by transnational oil companies and the Nigerian state arises mainly because Ijaw people have been robbed of their natural rights to ownership and control of their land and resources through the instrumentality of undemocratic Nigerian State legislations such as the Land Use Decree of 1978, the Petroleum Decrees of 1969 and 1991, the Lands (Title Vesting etc.) Decree No. 52 of 1993 (Osborne Land Decree), the Inland Waterways Authority Decree No. 13 of 1997 etc.

h. That the principle of Derivation in Revenue Allocation has been consciously and systematically obliterated by successive regimes of the Nigerian state. We note the drastic reduction of the Derivation Principle from 100% (1953), 50% (1960), 45% (1970), 20% (1975), 2% (1984), to 3% (1992 to date), and the rumoured 13% in Abacha's 1995 undemocratic and unimplemented constitution.

i. That the violence in Ijaw land and other parts of the Niger Delta area, sometimes manifesting in intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts are sponsored by the State and transnational oil companies to keep the communities of the Niger Delta divided, weak and distracted from the causes of their problems.

j. That the recent revelations of the looting of the national treasury by the Abacha junta is only a reflection of an existing and continuing trend of stealing by public office holders in the Nigerian state. We remember the over 12 billion dollars Gulf War windfall, which was looted by Babangida and his cohorts. We note that over 70% of the billions of dollars looted by the military rulers and their civilian collaborators is derived from our ecologically devastated Ijawland.

Based on the foregoing, we, the youths of Ijawland hereby make the following resolutions to be known as the Kaima Declration:

All land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within the Ijaw territory belong to the Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival.

We cease to recognize all undemocratic decrees that rob our peoples /communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent. These include the Land Use Decree and the Petroleum Decree.

We demand the immediate withdrawal from Ijawland of all military forces of occupation and repression by the Nigerian state. Any oil company that employs the services of the armed forces of the Nigerian state to "protect" its operations will be viewed as an enemy of the Ijaw people. Family members of military personnel stationed in Ijawland should appeal to their people to leave the Ijaw area alone.

Ijaw youths in all the communities in all Ijaw clans in the Niger Delta will take steps to implement these resolutions beginning from the 30th of December, as a step towards reclaiming the control of our lives. We, therefore, demand that all oil companies stop all exploration and exploitation activities in the Ijaw area. We are tired of gas flaring, oil spillages, blowouts and being labelled saboteurs and terrorists. It is a case of preparing the noose for our hanging. We reject this labelling. Hence we advise all oil companies' staff and contractors to withdraw from Ijaw territories by the 30th of December, 1998 pending the resolution of the issue of resource ownership and control in the Ijaw area of the Niger Delta.

Ijaw youths and peoples will promote the principle of peaceful coexistence between all Ijaw communities and with immediate neighbours, despite the provocative and divisive actions of the Nigerian State, transnational oil companies and their contractors. We offer the hand of friendship and comradeship to our neighbours: the Itsekiri, Ilaje, Urhobo, Isoko, Edo, Ibibio, Ogoni, Ekpeye, Ikwerre etc. We affirm our commitment to joint struggle with the other ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta for self-determination.

We express solidarity with all peoples' organizations and ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and elsewhere who are struggling for self-determination and justice. In particular we note the struggle of the O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC), the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), Egi Women's Movement etc.

We extend our hand of solidarity to the Nigerian oil workers (NUPENG and PENGASSAN) and expect that they will see this struggle for freedom as a struggle for humanity,

We reject the present transition to civil rule programme of the Abubakar regime, as it is not preceded by restructuring of the Nigerian federation. The way forward is a Sovereign National Conference of equally represented ethnic nationalities to discuss the nature of a democratic federation of Nigerian ethnic nationalities. Conference noted the violence and killings that characterized the last local government elections in most parts of the Niger Delta. Conference pointed out that these electoral conflicts are a manifestation of the un-democratic and unjust nature of the military transition programme. Conference affirmed therefore, that the military are incapable of enthroning true democracy in Nigeria.

We call on all Ijaws to remain true to their Ijawness and to work for the total liberation of our people. You have no other true home but that which is in Ijawland.

We agreed to remain within Nigeria but to demand and work for self-government and resource control for Ijaw people. Conference approved that the best way for Nigeria is a federation of ethnic nationalities. The federation should be run on the basis of equality and social justice.

Finally, Ijaw youths resolve to set up the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) to coordinate the struggle of Ijaw peoples for self-determination and justice.

Signed for the Entire Participants
Felix Tuodolo
Ogoriba, Timi Kaiser-Wilhelm

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