

MEND: The Nature of an Insurgency

Written by Morten Boas

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MORTEN BOAS, MAY 11 2012

As a consequence of a corrupt and mismanaged oil sector, the Niger Delta became a dangerous witches brew of poverty, marginalisation and underemployment, combined with severe environmental problems, crime, and militia formation. The result was a militant uprising where different insurgency groups fought against the army, destroyed oil installations, and took oil workers as hostage. This threatened not only Nigeria's oil production, but also the country's fragile democratic transition. In the end, after several military campaigns against the insurgency groups had failed, the Nigerian government sought to end the conflict through an act of amnesty issued on 25th April 2009. Those militants that turned themselves in between 6th August and 4th October 2009 would not only be pardoned, but also receive 'integration and rehabilitation' packages that supposedly would prepare them for other income opportunities and a life in peace.

Initially, this was seen as a success as a good number of young men turned up at the integration and rehabilitation centres, and even high-profile leaders of the insurgency such as Ekpemupolo Tompolo, Tom Ateke, and Boyloaf turned in their weapons and declared support for the amnesty. However, the sustainability of the process can be questioned. Money that was supposed to go to the rehabilitation of the former militants, disappeared as public money so commonly does in Nigeria. Most likely it was shared between government officials involved in the amnesty programme and some former militia commanders through fake payments, inflated contracts and reporting higher number of militia men turned in than what was the case. Some insurgents were also suspicious of the process from the very beginning. For example, the main insurgency in the Niger Delta, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) issued this statement in its typical language of mockery of the Nigerian government:

We call on political thugs, armed robbers, kidnappers, pirates etc., from other states in Nigeria to take advantage of the government's offer by travelling to one of the centres in Niger Delta and trade their weapons for amnesty. Come with the whole gang and get rehabilitated with gains of free education, money to start legitimate businesses etc. This is a unique opportunity in a country where so many graduates cannot find jobs and girls no longer marry for love.

Thus, as the rewards from the amnesty process were highly unevenly shared and the dialogue between the government and the insurgency groups on the social and political issues also failed to produce any tangible results, new acts of political violence started to appear, suggesting that a second phase of the Niger Delta rebellion could be in the making. The question is therefore what is the nature of this insurgency? Is it only about gaining illicit access to rents from the oil economy or is it also concerned with social and political grievances? Two aspects of the situation in the Niger Delta are particularly noteworthy in this regard. First, there is little doubt that connections exist between militia groups and local political elites in the Delta. The second notable aspect of the rebellion is the degree to which the young armed men wear different hats.

Militia groups and political elites

The vantage point for the convergence of violence, crime and politics in the Delta are the elections in 2003 and 2007. In Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, the governor Peter Odili spearheaded a strategy of violent vote-rigging in favour of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Election violence therefore became widespread in Rivers, but was successful for those who had initiated it as this strategy saw Odili receive 98 percent of the popular vote in 2003. However, as soon as the elections were won, Odili – along with other 'patrons of violence' – tried to distance

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themselves from the men they had hired for the campaign. Some accepted this 'remarginalisation' as a fact of life in the Delta, but others reacted with anger, threatening violence and rebellion against their former masters. The consequences were a proliferation of guns, gangs and violence. Some of these groups were new, others old, but both old and new alike were related to the Nigerian 'cult' phenomenon.

This is a phenomenon worth considering in some detail as its very existence reveals the embedded history of co-optation between elites and marginalised youths. The term 'cult' refers in this context not to specific religious practices, but to the criminal gangs that originally emerged as fraternity organisations on university campuses. However, since the establishment of the first 'cult' at the University of Ibadan in 1952, such groups have not only multiplied, but also morphed into violent and highly sophisticated criminal organisations. Membership is only open to students, but most cults have formed 'street wings' by recruiting off-campus members. As most leading politicians are university graduates it also means that many of them belonged (or even still belong to cults), suggesting that the relationships they cultivate with militias today is not a novelty for them, but in fact a continuation of an intimate relationship between politics and violence that they internalised in the formative campus years of their life. Conversely, many prominent militia leaders therefore started their careers as the off-campus hired thugs of these soon-to-be political and economic leaders. Some later rebelled – or at least partially, as experiences of betrayal led to the development of political grievances – whereas others by and large returned to the service of their original masters when called for (during elections and other times when their services were in demand). When not operating under 'command' the latter groups were 'allowed' to cater for their own needs as they saw fit with the tools at their disposal (guns and the readiness to use them) as long as their actions did not interfere too much with the business of the elite.

The very same period therefore also indirectly constitute the birth of MEND as the betrayal that many militia members and leaders felt, led some – obviously, not all – to develop political grievances against their former political sponsors who they saw as having refused to fulfil their promise of money, employment and education. The groups who came together to form MEND therefore have a past as violent supporters of the regime that they would later claim to be rebelling against. There may be some irony in this, but that does not make the grievances they articulate any less real. What happened can therefore be seen as an initial marriage of convenience that came to a halt when the elite no longer could control the 'monster' they had created.

The consequence was therefore formation of alliances between different gangs who having lost their elite sponsors saw their income drop as others monopolised the networks of state patronage. This led to 'turf wars' between different gangs and the army that created havoc, death and destruction in Port Harcourt as well as in neighbouring communities, but also to increase the bitter grievances of young men with militia connections who once more realised that after the dirty business of elections was completed the political and economic elite had little if any concern for them. The result was renewed attacks on oil installations and infrastructure in the Delta. This time under the banner of MEND. This militia is best described as an 'organization without organization' as MEND is just as much an idea as it is an amalgam of several groups operating across the Delta. It is much less of a cohesive force than a brand name for different groups of insurgents, militias and gangs, and due to its networked and fragmented nature also very hard to crush with one decisive military blow.

The many faces of MEND

The violence of the Niger Delta is therefore not only some sort of crude resource war between different political and illicit elites; between the 'cults' and the 'boys in the creeks'. The very same young men involved in this 'war' also use the banner of MEND to attack oil installations and take oil workers as hostages in order to put forward political demands for increased regional autonomy (such as 'true federalism') and control of oil revenues ('resource control'). In addition, the same people also sometimes deploy as the armed wing for the grievances of local communities – taking hostages for local communities, as a means of addressing – or at least highlighting – local company-specific grievances. In the latter case, hostages are taken by a group of armed young men, who then hand them over to a local community that has grievances against an oil company. Both the original kidnapping and the subsequent hostage situation leading to negotiations, although different in type and nature, could be considered political acts, stemming from legitimate grievances and demands. This is, however, also the same group of men who take hostages purely for ransom, with no political pretence, and who work – as we have seen – as hired thugs for local

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strongmen and politicians, especially during election campaigns. Thus, roles and activities overlap. They are conducting an armed political insurgency, but also operating as bandits, and in the latter role actively co-opted by the same elite as they also rebel against. The only way to make sense of the rebellion in the Niger Delta is therefore to approach it as a combination of efforts based on tactical as well as strategic agency, the insurgency is thus an attempt to address social injustice (a strategy) as well as a mode of production and a way of making a living (a tactic).

As one role does not seem to exclude the other, the question is rather whether violent youth mobilisation in the Niger Delta rebellion will continue to have a social profile or deteriorate solely into criminality. However, the way in which its participants are embedded in patrimonial clientelistic relationships with local strongmen, and the quantity of oil money and multitude of actors in the region, all implies that those mobilising and being mobilised walk a very fine line between 'greed' and 'grievances'. If they overstep this boundary, they may turn what is still also a political project into a market-based entity operating in a downward-spiralling, dysfunctional patrimonial order.

The amnesty offer made by the Nigerian government in June 2009 and MEND's unilateral ceasefire around the same time could have constituted a political dialogue in its very infancy. However, a meaningful dialogue is only possible if the various elements of the insurgency and its connections with the state it is rebelling against are sorted out. The question is not how to bring the insurgency under political control, as it was the very control by the political elite that created the context for the rebellion in the first place, but rather to facilitate the creation of autonomous spaces for dialogue as well as legitimate political resistance against the dysfunctional structures of neopatrimonialism that informs politics in the Delta. MEND undoubtedly has many faces, but not only are all of them shaped by the political economy of oil in the Delta, some of its faces are also more legitimate than others.

However, what is currently simmering underneath the surface in the Niger Delta is unfortunately less genuine social dialogue and rather the fact that the amnesty period is about to end (either in 2013 or 2015). This means that those that has benefited from it will not be able to 'eat' anymore. These boys may therefore return to the creeks and the MEND phenomenon may start all over again. Added to these frustrations is the fact that the federal government may have economically empowered some former heads of the Niger Delta insurgency and thereby disadvantaged others. One example is the contract worth 169 billion Naira for maritime security awarded to Global West Vessel Specialist Agency, a company said to belong to former Niger Delta militant Ekpemupolo Tompolo. Such acts clearly ignites division in the rank of former militia members and we should keep in mind that it was previous attempts by the state sponsors of violence to play a game of divide and rule among the youth they had hired as political thugs during election campaigns that led to the formation of MEND in the first place. It would add yet another wound to Nigeria if the situation in the Niger Delta is allowed to spiral out of control once more.

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Morten Bøås is Head of Research at Fafo's Institute for Applied International Studies in Oslo, Norway. He has conducted numerous fieldworks in West and Central Africa and published extensively on African politics, development and conflict. This paper draws on Bøås' chapter 'Mend me: the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta and the empowerment of violence', in Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad (eds) *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-Violence* (Zed Books, 2011, pp. 115-124) and ongoing research on the political economy of violence in Nigeria. Other of his most current publications include *African Guerrillas: Raging Against the Machine* (Lynne Rienner, 2007), with Kevin C. Dunn, and *International Development, Vol. I-IV* (Sage Publications, 2010), with Benedicte Bull. Bøås is about to publish another book together with Kevin Dunn called *The Politics of Origin: Autochthony, Citizenship and Conflict in Africa* (Zed Press, forthcoming) and a book for Routledge with the working title *Among Miners, Merchants and Warriors in African Borderlands*.