

*This Troubled Land: Understanding the Bases of the Niger Delta and Boko Haram  
Insurgencies*

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This book is written in an effort to understand, analyze, explain, and possibly mitigate the armed insurgencies occurring in parts of Nigeria. Beginning with the sudden death of General Sani Abacha in 1998, Nigeria has witnessed tremendous socio-economic upheavals that are the result of a major political change. It is not out of place to describe this change, which produced dramatic changes in other institutions, as a revolution, although not in the sense of many of the world's revolutions that were extremely chaotic and disorderly. Still, chaos and disorder characterized this political revolution and the many smaller revolutions that it initiated. On June 15, 1998, Olusegun Obasanjo – a southerner, former Head of State, and coup convict – was released from prison in dramatic circumstances, going on less than a year later to be elected president in a contest, which for the first time in Nigeria's history, featured two southerners from the same ethno-religious stock as the only candidates.<sup>1</sup> This ground-breaking political development in which power shifted non-violently from the north to the south, helped spur and energize many smaller revolutions.

Some of these smaller revolutions were positive. The revolution in telecommunications – part of what Moisés Naím calls the “mentality revolution” or “expectations revolution”<sup>2</sup> – that enabled millions of ordinary Nigerians, especially poor people living in inaccessible communities to have access to mobile phones and the internet, was one of them. In 1985, David Mark, now the Nigerian Senate President but then the Minister of Communications, declared that telephone was not for the poor, effectively ruling out the liberalization of access to telephones and communication in the country.<sup>3</sup> Until Obasanjo's return in 1999, access to telephones in Nigeria was limited to the rich and ordinary people who needed to communicate with relatives abroad or anywhere for that matter, had to crowd makeshift business centers or badly run Nigeria Telecommunications (NITEL) offices across Nigeria. The poorest of the mass wrote letters, which took weeks or months to reach their destinations, or resulted to the more challenging alternative of looking for intending travelers willing to carry messages on their behalf. The privatization program in which government assets, including the inefficient NITEL and the National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) that had become highly toxic were sold to private individuals – typically occupiers of top government offices or their associates whose highly questionable governance practices made these assets toxic in the first place – was also largely positive even though the process was racked by monumental personal and institutional corruption.

There were many negative revolutions.

Since 1999, Nigeria has been racked by violence. Across the six geopolitical zones of the country – North Central, North East, North West, South East, South South, and South West – full blown insurgencies have either occurred, are ongoing, or may occur. Apart from insurgencies, unprecedented levels of armed violence, including armed robbery, piracy, kidnapping, crude oil theft, and political brigandage are occurring and ravaging communities across the country. In some instances, violence is the handiwork of separatist movements who are determined to

exploit expanding political opportunities and resource availability to agitate for the fracturing of Nigeria, which they believe is a “contraption” or a fraudulent enterprise.

In the southeast region, for instance, calls for the fracturing of Nigeria as a way of resolving some of the more enduring fissures that blight prospects for developing nationhood are growing. The *Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra* (MASSOB) has not hidden its desire to secede from Nigeria following boundaries created for the Igbo speaking people during the failed Biafran secession of 1967. Since 1970, which marked the end of the Nigerian Civil War also known as the Nigeria-Biafra War in which 1-3 million people (mainly Igbos) died, the Igbos have continued to protest their increasing political and social marginalization by the other major ethnicities in Nigeria. Being highly entrepreneurial and widely dispersed, the overwhelmingly Christian Igbo have continued to be victimized by ethno-sectarian violence in northern Nigeria. They also suffer from what they call the deliberate gang up of Nigerian ethnicities against the political interests of the Igbo nation. These “injustices” are salient in MASSOB’s agitation for a sovereign Igbo nation ominously called the Republic of Biafra.

The Niger Delta region or the south-south region has also been racked by violence. The armed insurgency in the delta is the result of agitation by minority oil-producing communities for greater control of oil assets and revenue. The region, which contains the largest oil deposits in Africa and some of the highest quality oil in the world, is the heart of Nigeria’s oil-based economy. The delta’s oil, which has “unprecedented economic and geo-strategic significance and value,”<sup>4</sup> is Nigeria’s economic livewire,<sup>5</sup> accounting for approximately 95 percent of the country’s foreign exchange and 80 percent of domestic revenue. Between 1956 when oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in Oloibiri, a small rural community in Bayelsa state, and now, about \$1 trillion has been generated from oil export. Yet, basic infrastructure is lacking in the region, which is also the most devastated ecology in the world. According to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) – the largest oil company operating in the delta – a spill (the size of the largest oil spill recorded in the US) occurs a day in the delta without adequate remediation. Consistent gas flaring, oil spills, indiscriminate construction of canals, waste dumping and effluent deliberately discharged into the environment, and oil pipeline vandalism combine to daily pollute available drinking water, kill fish and agricultural crops, and critically threaten the fragile ecosystem of the delta. A 2006 United Nations report on human development suggests that the “appalling development situation”<sup>6</sup> shows a glaring contradiction where after nearly a half-century of oil exploration in the Delta, “the vast resources from an international industry have barely touched pervasive local poverty.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in addition to boasting the most polluted ecology in the world, the people of the Niger Delta are some of the poorest in the world, classically illustrating what Emordi and his colleagues call the “paradox of poverty” in the midst of great wealth.<sup>8</sup> The unremitting socio-economic and environmental marginality of the people provides a fertile ground for armed insurgency in the region and since 2003, the activities of armed groups or “militants” constantly Nigeria’s oil industry and the country’s economic and political stability. Even today after five years of the Amnesty Program, which is being spectacularly misapplied, violence continues to accompany daily living in the region but is escalating in the offshore with piracy and crude oil theft.

In the south west region, the political marginalization and repression Yorubas witnessed during the prolonged period of military rule produced a street-level resistance movement in the form of

the O'odua People's Congress (OPC). General Ibrahim Babangida's rule was truncated by political crisis that followed his regime's inexplicable annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential elections, which many Nigerians consider the freest and fairest elections in Nigeria's history and which Bashorun Moshood Abiola, an ethnic Yoruba, may have won. General Sani Abacha, who ousted the transition regime emplaced by Babangida to pacify an irate civil society and the West, spent most of his time hounding and harassing individuals and groups who insisted on the validation of Abiola's aborted mandate. The activities of the OPC and several other pan-Yoruba socio-cultural organizations have continued to pose concerns to the federal government. From effectively resisting military rule through the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), Yoruba organizations such as the OPC have frequently mounted armed resistance or "vigilance" in Yoruba communities to protest perceived injustices or even as a way to maintain social cohesion. During Obasanjo's presidency, the OPC was constantly in the news, clashing with state security forces in several Yoruba cities. Apart from clashing with security forces or other ethnic groups like Hausa-Fulani cattle herders in places like Lagos, the OPC have also been plagued by internal crisis that may be classified as leadership disputes. Today, the OPC is fractured with one faction led by its founder, Dr. Frederick Fasehun, and the other by the populist Chief Gani Adams. Struggle over lucrative oil pipeline security contracts from the federal government threatens to induce clashes between both factions during the 2015 presidential election.

In the north-central region, violence has become a daily occurrence with Plateau, Nassarawa, Niger, and Benue states witnessing diverse forms of destructive conflicts. For instance, Plateau state has experienced serious unrests following political and social disagreements between migrant Hausa-Fulani populations and indigenous populations, including the Berom or Birom. Squabble over the political control of Jos North Local Government Area has sharpened conflict between the predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani and the Christian and animist Berom, leading to many deaths, billions of Naira in property damage, and the virtual paralysis of social life, especially night life in the state. In neighboring Nassarawa State, the activities of Fulani herdsmen who attack agrarian communities in search of pasture for their cattle, spurred violent reaction from a section of the Eggon society. The Ombatse Cult, a daredevil militia of the Eggon people fortified by the "spiritual powers" of a high priest, has clashed with Fulani herdsmen and rival communities. In May 2013, the cult was responsible for the death of close to 100 personnel of the State Security Service (SSS) dispatched to arrest its high priest and to dissolve the sect.<sup>9</sup> Ambushed by the Ombatse militia, only a few officers escaped death. Earlier in 2001, invading soldiers of the Nigerian Army attacked about seven small towns in Benue State, destroying property and killing over two hundred unarmed civilians. In Gbeji, more than 150 civilians were killed and another 20 people were killed in the market town of Zaki-Biam.<sup>10</sup> The killings were reprisal for the killing of nineteen soldiers by supposed Tiv militants. In addition, ethnic rivalry between the Tiv and Idoma of Benue State and the Junkuns of Taraba State as well as frequent disagreements between these ethnicities and Fulani cattle herders, have produced violence leading to the death of hundreds of people and the destruction of property.

In the core north, there are growing indications that the over thirty-year monopoly of power by the Hausa-Fulani political elite has not benefitted most northern communities, and this is a continuing source of tension and unrest in that part of the country. Northern communities manifest levels of poverty that are much higher than the national average, which ordinarily

should inspire the federal government to declare many parts of the north as disaster zones. The economic and social marginality of the northern mass is shocking and bespeaks the many years of plunder of the nation's resources by Hausa-Fulani political elite that continue to agitate for a return of federal political power to their class. Against this background and the increasing disenchantment of the northern mass with the apparent low political estate of the north, including contrived (and genuine) fears of southern domination, insurgent groups such as Boko Haram have emerged and are daily making life in the north unbearable. Although Boko Haram started as a small separatist religious movement focused on the implementation of strict Islamic legal codes premised on the sharia, there is an unmistakable tension between the spiritual reawakening that the sect seeks and the prevailing socio-economic and political marginality of the northern mass. In essence, although the referent for this insurgency is religion, the motivations are economics and politics, including the chronic governance deficit that has bred pervasive corruption, unusually high-levels of unemployment, poverty, disease, illiteracy, and desperation among northern populations. The parlous economic condition of the north is acknowledged by Hausa-Fulani elites like Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, the former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria and current Emir of Kano, and Nasir El-Rufai, the former minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. Sanusi, for instance, says that the face of poverty in Nigeria is northern, yet, the desperate economic condition of the north was masked by many decades of political misrule by a class of Hausa-Fulani elite of which Sanusi and El-Rufai belong. Their disastrous system of governance produced a desperate underclass in underserved northern communities and enabled Boko Haram to unpack inherent and manufactured contradictions into rebellion.

While all of the conflicts mentioned above are important and reflect the growing defiance of the authority of the Nigerian government, the focus of this book are the Niger Delta and Boko Haram insurgencies. These insurgencies, apart from creating the most destruction in recent times, have attracted and perhaps, captured local and international imagination. In addition to provoking discussions about the continuities and discontinuities of resource- and ideology-based conflicts, they also strongly allude to the increasing defiance of the authority of the state based on broad governance deficits as well as unresolved or unmitigated grievances. For instance inequities in the appropriation and distribution of political power, which has become the most frequently looted "natural" resource in Nigeria, undergirds both insurgencies. Stolen political power is often the primary tool for looting the nation's treasury, which is largely dependent on oil extracted from the Niger Delta. This means that political disenfranchisement and economic alienation are linked in ways that illuminates the basis of the ongoing violence across Nigeria. This is exacerbated by the fact that there is a vast space – physical and mental – that is essentially ungoverned in Nigeria. For example, while the delta has opened to all sorts of depravations connected to oil exploitation, a vast part of the territory is isolated from the state both materially and conceptually. Many of the delta's communities are not linked to the national grid, have no pipe-borne or safe drinking water, are not connected by roads, have no medical facilities or schools, and are deprived the opportunity to vote during elections. This condition – of the acute absence of the state in the lives of local people – invites cognitive dissociation from the Nigerian project and creates incentives for armed rebellion. Not only does it set the state against non-state armed groups, it also sets the political and economic elite whose interests are the motive force of the state, against members of Nigeria's underclass. This underclass, through Boko Haram and other insurgent groups, symbolize the silent rage of Nigeria's publics who remain manipulatively "loyal" to the state and its "leaders" or the thieving band of political elite.

Considering the above, this book helps to put the insurgencies in perspective by examining their causes, spread, maintenance, and reproduction but especially illuminating the crisis of governance that creates the insurgencies specifically, and insurgency ideation generally. The salience of governance deficit stands in contradistinction to the often blamed causes of conflict, including religious extremists and predatory warlords who squabble over slack opportunities and resource-rich territories. Instead of zealots and warlords, this book focuses on institutions as well as “statesmen” who occupy important positions in government and use their acquired influence to instigate violence for their own gain.

### **Organization of the Book**

To illuminate the conversation about insurgency in Nigeria, this book asks several questions: what are the bases (and aims) of the diverse forms of political contention – armed rebellions, ethno-sectarian violence, strikes, cult violence, electoral violence, etc. – in Nigeria? How do these forms of political contention interact, first with the shift from military rule to civilian rule and, then, from one civilian regime to another? To what extent do these modes of political expression diminish or reinforce democratic politics? How do regimes’ transformation, including the mode of such transformation and the types of political contention co-articulate each other? Does virulent conflict such as the Niger Delta or Boko Haram insurgency necessarily accompany participatory democracy in Nigeria? These questions loom behind *This Troubled Land*.

The book proposes a dynamic, causal account of insurgency in both the Niger Delta and northern Nigeria. Its organizing questions are: what are the forces – social, political, cultural, economic, environmental, international, interpersonal, etc. – that produced the conflicts and why? What is the nature of the conflicts? In what spaces are these conflicts occurring and what is responsible for this? What has been the state’s response to these conflicts and how has the state’s response increased or decreased the threat of violence? Answers to these questions should facilitate understanding of why armed insurgencies occur in Nigeria, the nature of these insurgencies, and their mitigation. The insurgencies are important, especially because they indicate more general regularities in the interplay between governance and armed conflict. This is crucial since the governability crisis which persists, signposts a future of violence, including possible insurgencies in areas that are considered relatively safe or immune from the “conflict bug” that has infected the Niger Delta and parts of northern Nigeria. Along this line, the book addresses four main concerns, which conduces four broad sections.

The first objective is to understand the nature of Nigeria, especially the convergence of complex socio-historical forces to create Nigeria, which has continued to shape the nature of political contestation in this country. Section one examines this history paying primary attention to the pre-colonial states, colonial rule, the pre- and post-independence movements, and constituents of modern Nigeria. This focus on past and present history permits an understanding of the governability crisis that has engulfed the nation and is manifesting as full-blown insurgencies across Nigeria. Understanding the governability crisis necessitates understanding the normative context of conflict in Nigeria, especially to show that rather than emerge spontaneously from grievance, armed conflict in Nigeria follows set patterns, suggesting the existence of clear rules that guides (and regulates) insurgencies in Nigeria. In particular, chapter four uses C. Wright Mills power elite model to analyze Nigeria’s power structure and how this structure, which is

premised on unfairness and injustice, masks the lack of national integration and contributes to the unfolding identity politics that is the chemical power of the armed insurgencies in Nigeria. Analysis of the 2015 presidential election (chapter 13), for instance, suggests that identity politics based on regionalism, ethnicity, and religion will continue to negatively impact political contestation, allowing violence to thrive.

The second objective is to analyze the Niger Delta and Boko Haram insurgencies in order to show the connections between these movements and the nature of political organizing in Nigeria. Thus, section two is dedicated to understanding the phenomena that are the Niger Delta and Boko Haram insurgencies paying close attention to the drivers of the conflicts. It also examines the principal movements and actors, their ideological linkages to local and international organizations and causes, and the fragmentation of movements or their reformulation. To begin the section, the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War of 1967-1970 is discussed. This is deliberate in order to demonstrate Arthur Nwankwo's 1972 submission that armed conflict in Nigeria would be a permanent fixture of conversations about Nigeria unless the conditions that produced the Nigeria-Biafra war are addressed. Sadly, more than forty years after that war, the basic conditions that produced the conflict still exist and the resulting tensions and antagonisms as well as a succession of mediocre leadership who routinely loot both political power and the treasury, are inspiring daring challenges of the authority of the Nigerian government or its monopoly of the use of force.

The third objective is to understand the conflicts in Nigeria as part of a process of political contestation. Since Nigeria's political system (and constitution) is a mix of accommodation and integration, it is imperative to understand how its institutions, at important moments, helped to mitigate or exacerbate insecurity and instability. Using lessons from other West African countries that have experienced diverse forms of instability and insecurity resulting from political contestation, the section helps to show flaws in Nigeria's zero-sum political system where the "winner takes all" mentality inspires bitter partisanship and violence. For instance, the history of mediocre leadership and the lootability of political power in Nigeria permits a discussion of the ongoing political contest between the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the potential for large-scale violence during the 2015 national elections. Although all of the countries examined in this section have highly centralized political systems, which ordinarily should foster conflict, the example of Senegal, a model African democracy, suggests that the counter-balancing of Nigeria's federal or centralized political system with liberal institutions, especially an impartial and independent electoral commission, strong parliament, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of federating units such as state and local governments, can go a long way in reducing tensions and conflict in Nigeria by de-emphasizing the institution and power of the president.

The fourth objective is to identify and illuminate understanding of proposed and applied interventions both to ameliorate the conditions that produced the conflicts and to mitigate the conflicts themselves. Thus, section four discusses the interventions applied by the state to ameliorate or end armed conflicts in Nigeria. For instance, chapter 20 discusses the Nigerian response to Niger Delta insurgents, specifically the Niger Delta Amnesty Program, which has succeeded in using monetary inducements to shift or graft the violence away from the hinterland onto the offshore. Because of its conceptual weakness and the unremitting economic and social marginality of the Niger Delta peasant due principally to the effect of oil production, the

Amnesty Program cannot hope to achieve long-term peace for the delta. In chapter 21, the Nigerian government's response to Boko Haram is examined. The response, which prioritizes body counts to smarter and more robust engagement, is characterized by huge information deficiencies that make its efforts incredibly arduous and mostly ineffective. Moreover, the chapter highlights the monstrosity of corruption, particularly the looting of critical funds meant for the supply of modern war-fighting equipment for the Nigerian Army by the army leadership and the colossal damage, cognitively and materially, that this has done to the fight against Boko Haram. The chapter uses insights from peace building theory and practical applications to suggest the design and establishment of an embedded socio-cultural knowledge capability that can aid military units and development planners to anticipate tensions, respond to issues, and engage citizens not only in efforts to liberate communities from insurgents but also to enlist them as development planners and evaluators. In this capacity, they will play crucial roles by helping to determine needs, to assess the performance of programs, and to prioritize interventions.

The end product, it is hoped, will be a tool for the reader to understand the Nigerian and African socio-political environment and the numerous issues that blight opportunity for millions of people on the continent. Although the maturation of political systems and actors in Nigeria cannot be denied, the maturation appears tended towards negative outcomes. The inability of the country and its military, once feared for its awesome war-fighting prowess in Africa, to defeat insurgents that started with nothing more than machetes and rage, speaks volumes about the maturity of Nigeria's governance institutions, including its military.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See BBC 1998. "Former Nigerian ruler home from prison." *BBC* June 17, 1998. Accessed March 10, 2015. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/114803.stm>.

<sup>2</sup> Naím, Moisés. *The End of Power*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See Onwumechili, Chuka. "Nigeria: Reviving a Former Monopoly in a Rapidly Evolving Market." In *Telecommunications Research Trends*, edited by Hans F. Ulrich and Ernst P. Lehmann, 143-157. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Watts, Michael (ed.) 2009. *Curse of the Black Gold: 50 Years of Oil in the Niger Delta*. New York: PowerHouse Books

<sup>5</sup> Watts, Michael (ed.) 2009. *Curse of the Black Gold*

<sup>6</sup> UNDP 2006. *Niger Delta Human Development Report*. Abuja: UNDP  
[http://web.ng.undp.org/reports/nigeria\\_hdr\\_report.pdf](http://web.ng.undp.org/reports/nigeria_hdr_report.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> UNDP 2006. *Niger Delta Human Development Report*.

<sup>8</sup> Emordi, E.C., Oseghale, B.E., and Nwaokocha, O.M. 2008. Niger Delta Crisis and the State's Response up to 2007. Paper presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Conference of the Society for Peace Studies and Practice, Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution. The Presidency, 15-18 June, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Mammah, Emeka, Kingsley Omonobi, Okey Ndiribe, Ben Agande, and Abel Daniel. "Tension in Nasarawa: 100 Police, DSS Officers Missing in Lafia." *Vanguard*, May 10, 2013. Accessed February 6, 2015. <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2013/05/tension-in-nasarawa-100-police-dss-officers-missing-in-lafia/>.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch 2001. "Nigeria: Soldiers Massacre Civilians in Revenge Attack in Benue State." *Human Rights Watch* October 26, 2001. Accessed February 6, 2015. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2001/10/25/nigeria-soldiers-massacre-civilians-revenge-attack-benue-state>.