

Book Review
The Fire Next Time: Violence and Democratisation in Northern Nigeria

By

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The Fire Next time: Youth, Violence and Democratisation in Northern Nigeria is a good blend of narration and exposition authored by Dr. Ike Okonta of New Centre for Social Research (NCSR) as Discussion Paper. It is published in December 2012; by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Nigeria Office (FES). The Paper focused on post-election violence in northern Nigeria during the last Presidential Elections conducted on the 16th of April 2011 in Nigeria. It is a short paper of 21 pages printed in bold characters. It has a small map of Nigeria on its cover which is engrossed with Nigeria's National Flag's colour. The main title: The Fire Next Time: is written in red colour, perhaps to indicate that it is a publication on issue of violence, threat or danger; while the rider which has three key syllables: Youth, Violence and Democratisation in Northern Nigeria is written in yellow colour.

The key Extracts of the Discussion Paper also published on the cover page are:

1. Election rigging and brigandage were the leading causes of the 2011 post-election violence in northern Nigeria.
2. Youth, who constitute over 50 percent of the voting population in Nigeria, have been deliberately excluded from the political process.
3. Northern youth are disenchanted with their traditional rulers, governors, and other politicians and showed this in 2011 by attacking their homes.
4. Poverty and youth unemployment are growing in the north and are driving social unrest in the region.
5. So far, Nigerian leaders have failed to appreciate the depth of the rage and resentment of the younger generation of northerners. Effort should be made to include these youth in the political process before the critical 2015 elections.

The name and address of the publisher – FES – is at the base of the cover page taped with purple colour. The publication is distributed free of charge (i.e. not for sale) and it is available online on FES website; its copyright is NCSR and FES. It is a formal publication with ISBN: 978-978-931-623-6. The foreword is written

by Thomas Mattig, the current Resident Representative of FES; Mattig stated that violence has become the norms in Nigeria, a nation-state of 160 million people with oil and natural gas resources “... but bedeviled by poverty, corruption and mismanagement”. He asked the salient questions on spontaneity of the violence, causal factors and possible preventive mechanisms of such carnage in future elections; all of which Ike Okonta attempted to address in this Discussion Paper frontally, without calling a shovel a big spoon. In his conclusion, Mattig hoped that the Paper “... will find the attention it deserves and further enrich the debate on how to prevent “the fire next time”.

This Discussion Paper which is organised into five progressing sections is a thesis on violent conflict reduction/prevention mechanism and processes to address socioeconomic malady in a developing state/region. The author did a great job to ensure balance of opinions of respondents to issues raised. The publication is useful to both the demand and supply-side (state and non-state) actors including Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), (inter-)Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), Media, Academia, Researchers, Security Agencies, concerned Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and International Non-Government Organisations (iNGO) amongst others. Okonta used storytelling approach which gave voices to different actors involved in the conflict either directly or indirectly. He also oscillated from descriptive, narrative and expository style of writing, which greatly enriched the Paper and simplified the issues discussed. More importantly, the book is highly informative as it puts together facts that the intended audience would ordinarily have spent more resources to gather. The timing of this publication is also very apt, giving both the supply and demand-side actors adequate time to understand what led to the fire last time and prevent such ‘fire next time’.

Ike Okonta has used his exceptional experience as a writer and policy analyst to contribute to peace-building process in Nigeria through this publication. Even though, the Paper is short and would have added greater value by explaining some of the key concepts – violence, youth and democratisation and northern Nigeria especially as the targeted audience is large and not homogenous; it is nevertheless a worthy contribution to body of knowledge on social engineering.

Historically, (healthy) conflict is a key process of democratisation in both developed and developing polities, as politics according to Harold Lasswell is about ‘who gets what, when and why’ in ‘allocation of scarce resources’ or what David Easton called ‘authoritative allocation of values’. This gives rooms for healthy competitions, debates and quest for members, supporters, and sympathisers by political parties in

advanced democracies. In nation-states with low political culture or ritualistic electoral democracy; violent conflict is inevitable as self-seeking politicians use every means possible – formal and informal, legal and illegal, plausible and ludicrous; in their bid to steal political power, siphon the common-wealth and repeatedly suppress the docile majority. Okonta's Paper is therefore very relevant to Nigeria as we attempt to advance our democracy, hold government accountable and play pivotal roles in electoral democracy as citizens. More importantly, this work can serve as an early warning and early response (EWER) stratagem to guide Nigeria in its search for sustainable security and enduring peace.

In the introductory section entitled: **Youth Militias, Ethnic Hegemons and Democratisation in Northern Nigeria.**, Okonta considered the genesis, the trend, the widespread, level, the immediate and remote causes of the 'rage and violence' that resulted from the last Presidential Election in northern Nigeria; following the trickling in of results which indicated that Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, who was seen as 'a Christian and southern candidate' was on the verge of defeating, Gen. Muhammadu Buhari (Rtd.), who was seen as 'a Muslim and northern candidate' by the rioters based on the publication's findings. He considered the nexus between democratisation and ethnic violence as postulated and debated by social engineers in other political climes, likening this to Nigeria, Okonta tracked the emergence of various socio-cultural organisations, some of which have perpetrated socio, psychological and physical violence on Nigerians of different ethnic groups in their bid to support their ethnic groups to seize political power and allocate resources. Such ethnic-based groups listed by the author, which he referred to as 'youth-led militias' are Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra(MASSOB), O'odua Peoples Congress (OPC), Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC), Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC) and Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA). It is noteworthy to state that these groups are basically those of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The questions that emerged from this include whether there are politically motivated militias of other ethnic groups in Nigeria or the fight for the soul of Nigeria via the use of ethnic militias was limited to the major ethnic groups, i.e. Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba and Ijaw? Were these militia groups really ethnic and/or regional groups? This poser is borne out of the fact that while those of the southern region (OPC, IYC, MASSOB, SEA) may be both regional and ethnic in nature, the APC was basically regional and not really monolithic in term of its ethnic composition., What may also need further interrogation is whether the APC was joined only by Muslim youths of northern origin. Usually the various violent conflicts in northern Nigeria have been directed at Southerners, Southern Christians, Southern Muslims, and even Northern Christians. As noted by the author, in few instances, it spreads to northern Muslims that may have been suspected to have sympathy for the victims or the system as the attacks on the Emir of Zaria and Emir of

Kano, both of whom are not only Muslims, but respected leaders in (northern) Nigeria. Invariably therefore, it is a case where Nigerians attacked, maimed and killed Nigerians.

It is pertinent to add that while these militia groups have instigated violent protests in both northern and southern states in the past, they have not been able to control the conflict which they ignited, as seen during the 'rage and violence', which the author said affected 12 northern states for about three days before security forces could curb it and drive the rioters out of the streets. Citing Human Rights Watch report, the author listed the 12 northern states where the riot claimed lives and property. Further interrogation on why it did not spread to some other northern states, including Nasarawa, Taraba, Kwara and Kogi may help in stopping this kind of fire next time. We may only guess at this point that perhaps, there was swift response by the intelligence and security forces; presence of militias in these states were minimal or non-existence as at that time; or that the community leaders and other leaders of thought through direct or indirect means were able to prevent the unfriendly fire of unorganised revolts.

One important issue the author also addressed was the issue of the spontaneity of the post-election violence in the north. From his interviews, some politicians and youth leaders, without much evidence, believed the violent reactions were on impulse as the people could not reconcile the results filtering out with 'their votes' and concluded that rigging and electoral malpractices had occurred as in previous elections. Of course, there was election rigging in parts of the country, including the northern states, the fact that these riggings occurred in other elections without such spontaneous violence may indicate that the conflict was triggered. Conflict will always erupt or escalate in any society where there are unaddressed indices of brewing conflicts. The necessary agencies, security forces, CSOs, media and traditional institutions are in position to identify the structural and proximate causes of the conflict as well as the triggers of the eruption of violence in northern Nigeria following the last Presidential Election. To simply conclude without evidence that these conflicts were not triggered is to leave room for similar violent conflict in near future.

In section II, entitled – **From Voting to Violence: The Price of Unfulfilled Expectations:** Okonta addressed the underlining factors that led to the post-election violence. He traced this partly to political brinkmanship in Nigeria where assumed agreement on power rotation was expected to play out irrespective of other environmental factors that may alter it, such as the unexpected demise of late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua in May 2010. The author also pointed out the role of the political class

and the elite in determining 'who gets what', considering the role played by some northern politicians in drafting Chief Olusegun Obasanjo into the elections of 1999. This is where more politically refined citizens are important to a nation-state such as Nigeria. In the past, the electorate have been more interested in the so called dividends of democracy – roads, good health, education, etc. that were never realized; we therefore need to move from these and focus on democratic governance, a situation where citizens sit in the driver's seat and become what has been termed as 'decision making authority' by serving as "... leaders, as public translators, as watchdogs ... and as the sustaining members of a democracy". A lot of work is therefore needed in the pre-election period to ensure that citizens are positioned to organise the polity and democracy rather than remain mere beneficiaries of democratic fruits.

This section also reopened the issue of federalism, citizenship and equity in Nigeria. Is Nigeria a rallying point for its over 250 ethnic groups to explore their strength, address their collective flaws or weaknesses and maximise their opportunities, including human and natural resources or a union where the 'powerful' fully undermine, dominate and degrade the 'powerless'? As one's gender, race, disability and class increases or limits one's access, opportunities and influences in our today's disproportionate world; so also do one's ethnicity. Ethnic problems therefore cannot be wished away. We are not really starting on a tabular rasa as we already have constitutionally entrenched federal system of government which also guarantees citizens' political aspiration. As with human lives, lives of nations are equally developmental. Time constraint will not permit me to fully address the correlation between federalism, citizenship and equity/justice; as a people, we must continue to discuss this issue as we are for instance doing in this auditorium today. What is of utmost importance is that we should truly become Nigerians. This does not in any way take away our ethnicity, but we must never reduce our ethnicity to tribal sentiments. Our elected representatives are expected to protect our different interests. The courts can guarantee our constitutional interests, CSOs and media can put in public space unaddressed cases of marginalisation, but we must not take illegal action such as killing one another because we belong to different ethnic group. It is shameful and atavistic. In few months' time, this amalgamation will be a century old.

In section III entitled **Stalled Democratization, 'Eating' Governors and Violent Militias**. The author traced the emergence of militia in northern Nigerian politics, stating that it has always been there, even during the pre-independence era. So, if politicians have been using young people to wreak havoc, how many of them (politicians) have been held accountable for this? Gangsters, young people that are unemployed, under-employed and/or unemployable are always vulnerable and ready tools in the hands of untoward

politicians. So, while the State is finding solution to addressing poverty among young people, the system should as well punish elites that take advantages of these young people at the detriment of our nation-state. Unemployment in Nigeria is a structural problem and outcome of corruption, low political culture and bad governance. There are lots of youth organisations here in the north today working on addressing different malaises that affect young people in our country. These organisations should be more strategic in their actions through collaborative efforts amongst themselves and with supply-side actors, i.e. relevant institutions of government including security agencies.

At this point, I can recall that Gen. Buhari became a Federal Commissioner (Minister) of Petroleum and Natural Resources at the age of 34; Gen. Yakubu Gowon (Retd.) became the Head of State when he was under age 30. Such opportunities have not been availed to youth in northern Nigeria under the civilian dispensation. How long shall the young people wait to participate and shape the destiny of our nation-state? Today, virtually, all the major political parties have youth wings. Recently, one of the leading political parties lost its youth leader at the age of 60! Do you still wonder why the youth wings of political parties are unable to address youth issues, including use of young people as political thugs in the political process? The excuse in some quarters that some of the young people that have served the nation (for instance: Salisu Buhari – convicted and pardoned) have abused their offices unfounded. The law is always there to guide. Similar excuses have been used to remove women from position of authority. This is obviously a discrimination targeted at the vulnerable and minoritised groups. It is at this point that one would have appreciated the author to deepen the analysis on youth and the political process in northern Nigeria beyond their involvement in the ‘rage and violence’ of post elections.

The exposition on Sheikh Lemu’s Committee tasked with the responsibility of investigating the causes of Post-2011 Presidential Election Violence by the Federal Government in session IV deserves commendation. It, for instance, shows that leading politicians are expected to talk **to** our nation, and not **at** our nation, irrespective of their political parties and inclinations. As the Paper highlighted, part blame was apportioned to Gen. Buhari by the Report for asking for justice from the street. The judiciary in Nigeria, though not without its own maladies, has delivered judgments in the past that corrected cases of electoral corruption. Okonta also balanced the debate between politicians from the southern and northern states on resource sharing formula and its linkage to poverty and violence. The fact of the matter as noted by some of the young persons interviewed by the researcher is that disproportional distribution of resources cannot be an excuse for maladministration, political incompetence, lack of accountability and

transparency in our political process. Japan has coped with earthquakes and uses its human resources to climb the ladder of prosperity in the comity of nations. Why not Nigeria?

What will be the final outcome of the Lemu's report as several others before it, including the under listed matters:

1. "Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Bauchi State Civil Disturbances
2. Karibi Whyte Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Kafanchan Disturbances
3. Niki Tobi Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Plateau State Disturbances
4. Justice Snakey Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Wase and Langtang Disturbances
5. Justice Disu Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Plateau State Disturbances
6. Professor Tamuno Panel of Inquiry on National Security
7. Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee." (<http://www.transparencynigeria.com/>)

This is a discussion for another day as time allotted for this review and its presentation is limited for me to delve fully into findings on the state of these inquiries.

No excuse will be strong enough to send children to the streets to beg for food because they are in (Islamic) school and their parents, tutors and the system are not able to provide for them. No excuse will be strong enough to allow children to grow into miscreants and become tools of political violence in the hands of political class. No excuse will be strong enough for us to have this fire next time. Strengthening coalitions, groups and agencies of both state and federal government that are positioned to reduce poverty and promote peace-building in northern Nigeria is therefore responsibility of all, including iNGOs, academia and everyday citizens.

Lastly, it was not clear what role the media (mass communication) played prior to the spontaneity of the violent eruption in the northern states. Here I refer to both the traditional media (print and TV) and 'new media' – blogs, GSM communication and other forms of e-journalism. Though, lots of evidences/facts were gotten from journalists and newspapers, these did not directly state whether the rioters have been motivated and discouraged by media influence. While agencies such as National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) may enlighten young people via multicultural idea of serving outside of one's enclave; similar organisation such as National Orientation Agency (NOA) and Ministry of Youth Development also ought to

evolve practical programmes that will disabuse the minds of young, Nigerians outside the scope of NYSC. NOA may collaborate with existing CSOs some of which the author mentioned in this Paper.

Gender disaggregation of victims of the carnage will also assist in planning for solution. How did the violence affect women, young girls, and persons with disabilities? The essence of this is to ensure that attention is not placed only on the perpetrators of violence, -‘ young angry men’, while the victims are marginally rewarded or even completely left unrewarded for being peaceful and ‘powerless’.

Also, deliberate efforts should be made to address typographical errors, typesetting and other key technicalities in printing especially as this is considered as an international publication. For instance, different fonts were used for the foreword and the main text. Session 3 subtitle (page 11) is not bolded as others, and actually looks like the next paragraph rather than a new section. In the last paragraph of page 19, the word ‘to’ was erroneously repeated twice. National Youth Service Corps is spelt as National Youth Service Corp (without the ‘S”) in page 4. Likewise, Peoples Democratic Parties (PDP) is interchangeable written as People’s Democratic Party and Peoples Democratic Parties. The correct way is Peoples (see page 3 & 7). A list of useful materials in form of a bibliography would have been helpful, especially to persons that may want to further research on the Paper.

These however did not in any way diminish the great work Ike Okonta has done in this Discussion Paper, which deserved a loud ovation.

Thank you.

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