



# Minority political mobilization in the struggle for resource control in Nigeria



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## ABSTRACT

Pressure from outsiders as groups within a state or as the state in its dominant ideological form is the main driver of ethnic political mobilization. It is no surprise that the state played a prominent role in the minority ethnic revival witnessed in the early 1990s in the developing world. Relying on primary and secondary documentation and the analyses of political events from colonial times, this article examines the role of the state in the development of the oil-based ethnic minority political mobilization in Nigeria. It notes that Ogoni political mobilization and the resource control theme developed by Saro-Wiwa, drew on the Nigerian ethnic-based and major ethnic group skewed electoral competence/structure of political power, unfavorable resource allocation principles, and the abuse of centralized major ethnic group-controlled political power. It is evident from the protest of the Ogoni and other Niger Delta ethnic minorities who imitated their example that violent repression does not definitely terminate protest arising from discontent over deprivation but drives it underground and transforms hitherto non-violent protest into violent protest. Thus, shows Saro-Wiwa's ethnic political mobilization of the Ogoni to be sublime, enduring among the Ogoni and finding replication among the neglected Niger Delta ethnic minorities.

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## 1. Introduction

The flames of Shell are flames of hell; We bask below their light; Naught for us save the blight; Of cursed neglect and cursed Shell. (Saro-Wiwa, 1992: 10).

The Abacha military dictatorship definitely sought to use the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, the leader of Ogoni political consciousness and foremost agent of oil-based political mobilization, and his eight Ogoni colleagues, to discourage, and ultimately, end the political mobilization/protest of the minorities of the oil-bearing Niger Delta against the Nigerian state. Yet the Ogoni have sustained Shell's forced exit from Ogoni land in 1993. With a combination of creative writing (over a dozen books on Ogoni condition, two book-like letters to the Ogoni, several newspaper articles), petitions (addressed to governments and the United Nations), and protest marches, Saro-Wiwa ignited modern minority political mobilization of the Niger Delta. The flames of this mobilization have refused to go off in the face of relentless repression by the minders of the Nigerian state. Thus, the person of Saro-Wiwa was not the barrier to the unhindered exploitation of

oil in the Niger Delta that the military dictators who killed him thought he was. The barrier was political/economic marginalization. His execution only encouraged his Ogoni and Niger Delta folks to continue to press for redress.

As Gurr (1993:20) has written, "the ability of a movement to remain active for five years in its region of origin suggests that it draws on a significant under-current of support." It is remarkable that less than three months after Saro-Wiwa's execution, the youth of Ogoni defied the army to mark 'Ogoni Day' on 4 January 1996. Vowing that Shell will not return to Ogoni land for oil exploitation unless the issues the Ogoni protest raised were resolved, they chanted anti-government and revolutionary slogans.

The Ogoni continued with their protest, marking the Ogoni Day on 4 January every year, despite the severe repression of the government including arrests, detention, torture, killings and restriction of freedom of worship. In September 1996, the National Youth Council of Ogoni People protested the contemplation of Shell Petroleum Development Company to resume oil production in Ogoni. It vowed that the Ogoni will 'resist non-violently such a move by Shell unless it is by popular consent.' (*Delta Newsletter*, No 2, November 1996:8) Bodo residents came out *enmass* to protest two major oil spills in 2008. (Frynas 2001; Pegg and Zabbey, 2013) In 2013, Ogonis engaged in protest marches on the streets of Port Harcourt over the non-implementation of the United Nations

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Environmental Programme Report, which recommended, among others, a cleanup of the Ogoniland. (UNEP, 2011)

Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) led Ogoni to reject the pact between Shell and Ogoni traditional rulers to resume oil production in February 2015. (*The News*, Lagos, 19 February 2015) Thus, the feeling of discontent over their material condition and political marginalization aroused through Saro-Wiwa's superb political mobilization has not been extinguished by political repression.

This article shows that Saro-Wiwa's ethnic political mobilization of the Ogoni is sublime, enduring among the Ogoni and finding replication among the neglected Niger Delta ethnic minorities. In the next section, I discuss the emergence of political minorities in Nigeria, followed by an outline of the origins of oil based grievances. The next three sections present the Saro-Wiwa-led political mobilization of the Ogoni, its influence on the contemporary political mobilization of other Niger Delta ethnic minorities, and the failure of state violent repression to extinguish its flames. The article ends with a brief conclusion.

## 2. The emergence of political minorities in Nigeria

When Nigeria was formed by British colonial power from numerous pre-colonial political systems in 1914, *Majority and minority* had only demographic/sociological meaning or significance. As such, all cultural/ethnic categories/groups in the early years of colonialism, up until the late 1940s, were equal; at least the local government system “based on the indigenous political framework and constitution (chieftaincy and custom/tradition)” promoted equality among them. (Isumonah, 2004:436) The British colonial authorities made differentiation between groups only along linguistic and territorial lines. In the north, Islamic religion was the third basis of differentiation.

The terms majority and minority lost their innocence to the regionalization of politics in 1954. Thenceforth, ethnic minorities became part of the Nigerian political vocabulary. (Osaghae, 1991) The quest for survival or the fear of another cultural group within the reality of the colonial state or the making of an irreversible political union called Nigeria, had driven the sociological majorities into ethnic political mobilization. To gain political leverage to counter the fear of Igbo domination, the Yoruba formed the *Egbe Omo Oduduwa*, which they soon transformed into a political party, Action Group (AG). The Hausa and Fulani, originally two separate major northern ethnic groups, combined for political advantage; and taking a cue from the Yoruba, formed *Jamiyar Mutanen Arewa* cultural organization, which they later transformed into a political party, the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), to tackle their fear of southern domination. (Dudley, 1968) Thus, the major ethnic groups—Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani and Igbo—were the first to assume political salience by transforming their cultural organizations into

political parties or bloc support for a political party as Ibo State Union was for the National Council of Nigerian Citizens (NCNC), exploiting the favorable disposition of the British colonial state to ethnic political mobilization. (Young, 1976) The politics of the colonial era encouraged similar groups to merge to form groups for competitive advantage.

A characteristic of regionalization of politics and administration of Nigeria in 1954, according to Ayoade (1987), was that each region became synonymous with its major ethnic group. That meant that this ethnic group was the chief spokesman for the region. Each majority dominated region sought representation at the center to guarantee what it considered its fair share of national resources; what one observer denoted as the “Nigerian Theory of Democracy.” (Cited in Ayoade, 1987:126) Governments based on the major ethnic groups' ‘owned’ political parties were soon perceived to be oppressive by the demographic minorities because of discriminatory practices against them especially in the area of distribution).

Therefore, political power is a critical defining element of a minority group. But the characterization of a demographic minority wielding political power over a demographic majority as minority rule as the White-dominated South Africa was often described, suggests the importance of legitimacy in the portrayal of political power in intergroup relations. By the same token, abuse of power legitimately acquired by a demographic major group will bring into sharp focus the minority status of the demographic minority. If the major group continues to display arrogance toward the minor group, the latter will tend toward minority nationalism including, if necessary, secession, which can have far reaching consequences for the power structure of the country and the dominant major group. As Study Group of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (1939) on nationalism observed, even a diverse and disunited group will tend toward political unity under the pressure from others.

A minor group may also be identified by their goal. According to Gurr (1993:15), “national peoples seek separation or autonomy from the states that rule them; minority peoples seek greater access or control.” This conception of minority peoples fits the minorities of the oil producing areas given that their goal is not necessarily sovereign state. Indeed, the demands of Ogoni Bill of Rights are explicitly phrased in non-secessionist terms as do many of Saro-Wiwa's writings. (Ogoni Bill of Rights 1990; Saro-Wiwa 1993a,b,c) Saro-Wiwa had earlier shown the undesirability of secession by escaping in a canoe and joining the federal side in the Biafran civil war (1967–1970) The goal of the political mobilization focused here fits the description of second liberation struggle in Africa. (Ekeh, 2002) Its aim is a restructuring or redefining of the state and its orientation to make it accountable and responsive. The nationalism behind it is a kind of dissension over the existing socio-political order embodied by the Nigerian state.

**Table 1**  
The impact of Saro-Wiwa on Niger delta ethnic minorities.

Category	Saro-Wiwa	Contemporary
Actors	Ethnic mobilization of the Ogoni	Ethnic mobilization of various groups + elected political elites + militia groups
Themes	Environmental degradation + political marginalization + economic exploitation	Environmental degradation + political marginalization + economic exploitation
Methods	Largely non-violent + rights language	Some non-violent + increasingly violent
Goals	Non-secessionist political autonomy + resource control	Non-secessionist political autonomy + incorporation into central power + resource control
State response	Alleviating measures + violent repression	Alleviating measures + violent repression + legal action + concession of some resource control + concession of presidential office

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