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Razed, repressed and bought off: The demobilization of the Ogoni protest campaign in the Niger Delta



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the demobilization of the Ogoni protest campaign in the oil producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria in the mid-1990s. The contentious politics literature suggests that protest campaigns demobilize as a consequence of the polarization between radical and moderate protesters. In this study, we offer a different causal mechanism and argue that protest campaigns can demobilize before such polarization occurs if states respond to the expansion of a protest campaign with brutal and indiscriminate repression. Moreover, states can prevent the subsequent radicalization of a protest campaign followed by harsh repression by coopting the radicals and the remaining moderate elites while continuing to use repression to prevent collective action. Our conclusion assesses how relations between extractive industry firms and their local host communities have or have not changed in the twenty years since the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995.

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1. Introduction

On January 4, 1993, around 300,000 Ogoni people in Rivers State, Nigeria peacefully protested against the environmental devastation of their land caused by the Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria (SPDC), the Nigerian subsidiary of Royal Dutch/Shell (hereafter, Shell). These protests, under the leadership of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) also expressed the Ogoni peoples' right to self-determination, including greater control over the exploitation of the natural resources (oil) found on their lands. The protest campaign succeeded in securing both mass and international support, and it lasted more than two years under a highly repressive military dictatorship. The campaign demobilized rapidly when the Nigerian military dictatorship executed the leader of the protest campaign, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders on November 10, 1995.

This study examines the dynamics of the demobilization of the Ogoni protest campaign. We argue that government's brutal and indiscriminate repression of moderate, nonviolent activists and its subsequent cooptation of the remaining opposition prevented the protest campaign from diffusing widely to different oil-producing communities and going through an upscale shift. Typically, social

movement scholars argue that protest campaigns demobilize as a consequence of the polarization between radical and moderate protesters. In this study, we offer a different causal mechanism and argue that protest campaigns can demobilize before such polarization occurs if states respond to the expansion of a protest campaign with brutal and indiscriminate repression. Moreover, social movement scholars also contend that the brutal repression of nonviolent tactics usually leads to the radicalization of protest campaigns. Here, we demonstrate that states can prevent this radicalization from becoming a major challenge by coopting the radicals and leading moderate elites while continuing to repress the bulk of the moderates.

To examine the demobilization of the Ogoni protest campaign, we employ McAdam et al.'s (2001) *Dynamics of Contention* framework. As discussed below, this framework is designed to identify crucial relational mechanisms and processes that shape the trajectory of campaigns by breaking the processes of specific campaigns down into their constituent mechanisms. A major advantage of using this framework is that it takes the contingent and endogenous aspects of protest campaigns into account while simultaneously allowing for the identification of common mechanisms that shape various processes of protest campaigns.

We therefore investigate the mechanisms that were at play in the mid-1990s Ogoni campaign and examine how certain mechanisms were critical in explaining the demobilization process. Even though our focus is on the demobilization of the campaign, we also look at the mechanisms throughout the

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mobilization phase in order to understand better the point at which demobilization began (Tarrow, 1998). If we can understand the dynamics of the expansion of the Ogoni campaign and pinpoint the turning point in which the campaign changed course and began to demobilize, we can identify the mechanisms (or their lack of) that triggered this change more effectively.

The examination of the Ogoni protest campaign, therefore, contributes to the literature in three major ways. First, this study contributes to the literature on extractive industries and the “resource curse” by focusing on the emergence and subsequent demobilization of one of the most effective non-violent indigenous protest movements seeking to change the political economy and environmental impacts of oil production the world has yet seen. The January 4, 1993 mass protests across Ogoniland remain the largest peaceful demonstrations ever held against an oil company and the Ogoni claim to be “the first indigenous people in the history of our planet to force a transnational oil company to leave our land by peaceful means” (*Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People*, 1998). There is a vast, growing and valuable literature on the Ogoni more specifically and the Niger Delta more generally which touches on many themes closely related to the focus of this study. Numerous studies have assessed the Ogoni or Niger Delta self-determination claims (Ejobowah, 2000; Osaghae, 1995; Senewo, 2015) while Frynas (2001) convincingly highlights some of the corporate and state responses to the protests we emphasize in this study. A number of studies have highlighted the corporate role in violence and human rights violations against the oil-producing communities (Manby, 1999; Pegg, 1999) and others have analyzed the turn toward violence or the growth of militant insurgency in the Niger Delta (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Ikelegbe, 2001; International Crisis Group, 2006). Obi (2014:150) emphasizes the increasingly fluid boundaries in the Niger Delta between resistance, militancy and criminality while Ukiwo’s (2007) work on how the turn toward militancy is specifically connected to a consistent failure to meet peaceful demands is particularly relevant for some of the arguments advanced in this study. None of these studies, however, have employed a contentious politics framework to study the demobilization of a resource-focused non-violent protest movement or examine how resource abundance shapes the response of states and other external actors to protests by oil-producing communities. In doing this with the Ogoni campaign, we seek to address Obi’s (2014:148) critique that “explanations of conflict in oil-rich contexts should be more nuanced, historically-rooted and context-specific.”

Second, this study examines the dynamics of demobilization which have traditionally been understudied in the contentious politics literature. Most studies on protests focus on factors that contribute to the emergence or the expansion of the scale and scope of protest activities (Koopmans, 1997; McAdam, 1983; McAdam et al., 2001; Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1978). Third, it offers a different understanding of the effects of repression and accommodation on the demobilization of a protest campaign. Scholars have shown that states usually repress radicals and accommodate moderates to increase the cost of violent collective action. However, the demobilization of the Ogoni campaign shows that states can also brutally repress the moderates and, subsequently, coopt the radicals and some moderate elites, leading to the campaign’s demobilization.

The remainder of this study comprises five main sections. First, we lay out the conceptual foundations of demobilization by explaining the main components of the *Dynamics of Contention* (McAdam et al., 2001) framework and highlighting the specific causal mechanisms advanced in this study. Second, we explain McAdam et al.’s (2001) mechanisms and processes framework and highlight the specific mechanisms and processes we believe are

particularly relevant in the Ogoni case. Third, before proceeding to the analysis, we provide a brief case study background on Ken Saro-Wiwa, MOSOP and the Ogoni campaign. Fourth, our analysis section (presented in four parts) examines the Ogoni protest campaign by dissecting it into the relevant mechanisms and processes and identifying why the campaign demobilized. Finally, in our concluding section, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

2. Demobilization from a dynamic perspective

In this study, we refer to demobilization as a decrease in the scale and scope of protest activity (Tarrow, 1998:147). Demobilization does not necessarily mean that protest activity comes to a complete halt; but it does mean that campaign activity slows down, its resources decline and its potential to challenge the state diminishes significantly.

Demobilization is a process as it involves sequences of interactions among actors, including campaign leaders, activists, the mass public and the state. Among the few scholars that have studied demobilization, Tarrow (1989) and della Porta and Tarrow (1986) argue that it is the inevitable outcome of the expansion of a protest campaign and is largely driven by the polarization between the moderates and radicals within the campaign. When protest campaigns first emerge, disruptive protests diffuse to different locations and segments of the society. Competition for mass support intensifies as both established groups, such as trade unions or political parties, and new groups join the campaign. In the meantime, the early enthusiasm for protesting wanes over time and the personal costs of participation begin to wear people down. The decline in participation further encourages group competition for mass support. While moderates lead the shift toward more conventional forms of collective action such as strikes and demonstrations, smaller and newer groups turn radical as they employ violent tactics in an attempt to distinguish themselves from the moderates. The state begins to repress the radicals selectively while accommodating the moderates, reinforcing the polarization between these groups. Faced with repression, the radicals resort to more violent tactics, resulting in a further withdrawal of public support. The split between institutionalization and radicalization eventually leads to the end of the protest campaign (Tarrow, 1989).

We, however, offer an alternative causal path to demobilization. We argue that if the state brutally represses the moderates even before a significant polarization between the radicals and the moderates emerges, the state deters the moderates and demobilizes the campaign. After repressing the moderates, the state can also circumvent any attempts by the radicals to start a violent campaign by coopting them. Moreover, while the state continues to repress the moderates, it also coopts some remaining nonviolent elites to prevent any future mobilization. In other words, in this study, we demonstrate that the brutal repression of moderates can be an effective strategy for the state to employ in order to demobilize a campaign, particularly if it is coupled with the cooptation of some moderate leaders and the violent radicals that emerge in its aftermath.

The causal mechanism we offer contrasts with other mechanisms advanced in the literature on protest campaigns. Several studies have shown that the repression of nonviolent protesters has a potential to “backfire” as repression delegitimizes the state and motivates more people to join the nonviolent campaign (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011; Francisco, 1995; Rasler, 1996). Alternatively, protesters substitute nonviolent tactics with violent ones when repression increases the cost of nonviolent collective action (Lichbach, 1987). Furthermore, repression can also have a long term escalatory effect even if it initially deters protests by

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