POLITICAL THUGGERY AND SECURITY IN BENUE STATE: COUNSELLING INTERVENTION

Samson Olorunda Abekhale
University of Mkar, Mkar, Gboko, Nigeria

and

Saawuan Apeon Tor-Anyiin
Benue State University, Makurdi

Abstract

Political instability and insecurity have been the bane of the Nigerian society in recent times. Benue State, which is one of the 36 states of the federation, has experienced unprecedented insecurity and political hazard since the beginning of the 21st century. The state has witnessed several ugly situations such as arson, loss of lives and property, armed robbery and intimidation of innocent citizens. This paper has attributed the insecurity situation in the state to the recent upsurge of political thuggery. Virtually every political office holder or aspirant has a chain of political thugs who are being used for political advantage. The paper has outlined the major causes and effects of political thuggery on the security and safety of Benue State. Since Government has seemingly become incapacitated in her bid to address the political situation in the state, this paper has recommended several counselling interventions which include political education, massive and intensive sensitization and youth empowerment programmes. It is hoped that when these are put into consideration the incessant cases of political thuggery will be drastically reduced and Benue State will experience socio-political security.

Keywords: Thuggery, security, instability, politics

Introduction

It is quite apparent that from the beginning of the 21st century, Nigeria has witnessed unprecedented cases of insecurity in every sphere of human endeavour. Violence has reached its peak, and Nigeria, which was hitherto a more relatively peaceful country, has suddenly begun to experience terrorism. Youth restiveness among the people of the Niger Delta and the ongoing sectarian destruction of lives and property in the Northern States, which is popularly referred to as Boko Haram, have taken the front pages of Newspapers for over a decade now. Peace in Nigeria has been threatened and the principle of unity in diversity has almost gone down the drain. Innocent citizens hardly sleep today with their two eyes closed. Communal clashes and political thuggery have claimed several lives and rendered thousands of people homeless. The incessant rate of cultism in our institutions and armed robbery today cannot be quantified. All these have raised serious concern among scholars and well meaning Nigerians.

The most devastating among these concerns in Benue State is the problem of insecurity arising from political thuggery. The current rate at which thugs are used for political advantage, appears to have brought about an unprecedented degree of insecurity to lives and property of innocent and helpless citizens of the State. The situation is more worrisome when officials in government appear to be perpetrators of the ugly scenario. It becomes very difficult to call on the same Government to come to the rescue of victims.

The need for urgent intervention through counselling has therefore, become quite imperative. This is borne out of the belief that counselling remains the only potent option that can positively affect the lives of youths who are being manipulated by the political class, to commit heinous crime through thuggery.

This paper therefore, highlights the antecedent of thuggery, the causes and effects of thuggery on the Development of the state, the theoretical framework of thuggery and suggests counselling intervention that could reduce the prevalence of thuggery in the society.

Historical antecedent of thuggery

The word thug or thuggery was coined from a Hindu word THAG or THAGI, which refers to a murderer, a swindler (cheat or rogue), an assassin, cut throat or ruffian (Funk & Wagnalls, 1975). This description shows clearly that a thug is someone whose behaviour is rough and violent. He/She can kill and destroy fellow
humans without any feeling of remorse. His/Her concern is to achieve a set target by eliminating every obstacle, whether human or object to satisfy the desire of his or her master. Historically, “thugs are members of a religious sect in India who, in honour of ‘Kali’, the Hindu goddess of destruction, strangled and plundered their victims. The thugs considered their murders as pious rites, performing them in accordance with a set ritual (Funk & Wagnalls, 1975, p.142)”. It is suggested that the sect known as the thugs came into existence at about the 13th century. Membership was usually hereditary and opened to both Muslims and Hindus. This sect, according to Funk & Wagnalls, was however, suppressed by the British colonialists in the 1830’s.

Thuggery has been a common feature in Nigerian history since independence but it is quite difficult to ascertain the exact time it became an indispensable part of the Nigerian polity. The political tussle between Akintola and Awolowo during the first republic (1960 - 1969), which witnessed an unprecedented violence is one of the earliest crises recorded in post colonial era. Isichei (1984) asserts that “the unpopular minority government of Akintola used violence and coercion in the attempt to stay in power”. Whether this assertion is true or not, events that followed revealed that both parties employed the services of thugs to bring about confusion, practical violence, assassinations, threats, assaults, public intimidations and a total breakdown of law and order in Yoruba land. In Benue State, thuggery was witnessed in its brutality during the Tiv riot of 1964, in the political days of Late Senator J.S. Tarka, leader of the United Middle Belt Congress (UMBC). Isichei (1984), asserts that “there were serious outbreak of violence in Tiv land in 1960 and 1964. In 1964, it was estimated that 337 people died”. Tiv people often refer to the brutal attack as ‘Atemtyo’. Literally meaning killing of political opponents by smashing their heads.

The issue of thuggery during the first Republic is not limited to Yoruba and Tiv lands. It was a common phenomenon in several parts of Nigeria. Since then, the use of thugs by politicians to gain political advantage became widespread. Recently, political thuggery appears to be the only means of gaining political power without any consideration for meritocracy and popular opinion of the masses. Memberships of thugs are predominantly youths (males and females). If youths who are the leaders of tomorrow are deeply entrenched in violence and intimidation by unpopular and selfish politicians to gain access into power, political insecurity and instability may become the order of the day. Moreover, the manipulation of the police and soldiers to the advantage of politicians and not the rule of law, calls for a serious concern. It creates fear among the civilians. Ndibe (2007) lamented that “there is no greater anarchy than to make police officers and soldiers malleable instruments in the hands of any ruling party. Violence spawns violence”. He asserts that the attacks on uniform men may be a response to the government’s employment of soldiers and police officers in illegal criminal acts. Ndibe made this remark because the 2007 national elections witnessed the killing of 13 police officers in Kano; 5 police officers in Port Harcourt and the burning of several police stations across the country(Ndibe, 2007)

This trend has made several scholars view thuggery in recent times as an organized and formidable arm of the Nigerian politics. Ortese (2004) describes political thuggery as an “organized act of violence, intimidation and blackmail, directed against a political opponent to achieve a selfish political objective”. He remarks that thuggery is an instrument of terrorism organized against political opponent.

In Benue State, several organized groups of thugs exist. They include Youth militia; workforce team; Grass root team and consensus team. The authors of this paper have therefore, viewed political thuggery as an act of aggression aimed at coercing political opponents into surrendering their political will. It is equally a weapon in the hands of politicians to outwit their opponents through intimidation, violent attack, arson, assassinations, blackmail and public insults. The major concern of this paper is the high level of insecurity in Benue State occasioned by the use of thugs. Many innocent and loyal citizens are being killed; there is wanton destruction of properties, farmlands and produce. The fear of intimidation has forcefully restricted people’s movements in all parts of the state. Political insecurity in the state is obviously a negative signal for any meaningful development. Effort must therefore, be made to forestall this ugly scenario. This is the crux of this paper.

Theoretical framework of thuggery

Thuggery has already been associated with violence and aggressive behaviour. Psychologists like Sigmund Freud, Konrad Lorenz and James Watson have postulated some theories to provide possible answers to why some people like the thugs are violent and aggressive (Kassin, 1995)

The psycho-dynamic or Instinct theory posits that the deficit in the character structure of an individual predisposes him to display aggression or violence. Sigmund Freud and Konrad Lorenz who belong to this theoretical stance, maintain that aggression is an in born and adaptive instinct. Freud believes that children who
are fixated during the oral and anal stages of development tend to be very aggressive. The theory suggests that aggressive instincts can be channelled into other areas such as sports, debates and hunting. Instinct theory has been criticized because there are some aggressive behaviours that can be linked with differences in culture. Moreover, aggression can be influenced by other factors such as genetic component, sex and alcohol.

The frustration-Aggression theory states that an individual becomes discomforted when he/she is frustrated and that the sad condition leads him/her to aggression and violence. An individual can be frustrated when he/she is unable to realize his/her goals or meet his/her needs (Kassin, 1995). This position is still being debated because not all aggression is caused by frustration. Aggression can be caused by stress, negative effect or unpleasant emotions (Bernstein, Clark Stewart, Permer, Roy, Wickens 2000). Aggression has equally been linked with high temperatures. According to Anderson (1989), political upheavals, riots, assaults and rape are usually more prominent in the months of June, July and August.

The Behaviourists hold that aggression and violence are learned behaviours. They believe that “humans learn how to behave in social interaction—whether properly or improperly (Schaefer & Lamm 1998). In his definition of aggression, Akinade (2005) states that “aggression is a behaviour that is intended to inflict physical or psychological harm on others”. He maintains too that aggression is believed to be largely learned. For instance, children who grew up in an environment where aggression and violence are prevalent are at particular risk of becoming aggressive and violent. Osarenren (2000) asserts that “when some individuals are brought up in an environment where they witness violent displays, they tend to conclude that violence is a way of life”. Thuggery in Benue State could therefore, be seen in the perspective of the behaviorists theory. This theory is adapted for this paper because the rate of violence in Benue State, particularly among youths, is gradually getting to an alarming rate. It is difficult to pass through a street in any part of the state without noticing youths either displaying violence or practicing violence through the use of weapons in fighting, burning houses, and destroying lives and property. Children are growing to believe that aggression and violence are part of the culture of the people. This is a dangerous trend that must be addressed with all seriousness. Hence this paper.

The sociological theory states that social factors are the reasons for aggression and violence. Such factors include illiteracy, hunger, diseases, poverty, unemployment, stress and social isolation (Osarenren 2000; Ortese 2004 & Akinade 2005). This theory is equally adapted for this paper because majority of youths who are thugs in Benue State are found in the categories above. The most prevalent among them is unemployment. In a study by Ortese and Ada (2000), it was revealed that among the numerous social problems confronting youths in Benue State, unemployment tops the list with 40%. This is followed by poverty 30% and drug abuse 15%. Moreover, the near-absence of industries in Benue State makes unemployment prevalent. In view of the fact that the civil service which is the only avenue for employment in the state is already saturated, the majority of youths who are unemployed often see political thuggery as the only resort for survival.

It may appear surprising that Benue State which is the food basket of the nation still suffers poverty and hunger. The simple reason is that most of them are small-scale farmers and their crops are seasonal crops. Since there are no large-scale mechanized farmers and there are no industries that could convert the raw crops into preservable foods, most farmers experience acute hardship between February and July every year. Until the question of high rate of unemployment, illiteracy and poverty among youths in Benue State is critically addressed, political thuggery and its attendant problem of insecurity will continue unabated.

Reasons for political thuggery

The reasons for the use of thugs by politicians are not far fetched. One paramount reason for political thuggery is the wholesale determination of political lords to perpetrate themselves in power at whatever cost. Those who have tasted the sweetness of political power know that when they relinquish it, they are likely to live in frustration and regret throughout their lives. Therefore, they struggle to remain in power by exterminating all hindrances including human lives through the use of thugs.

Another obvious reason for political thuggery is the desire of the ruling class to plant an unpopular candidate who would be a stooge and be manipulated to their advantage. They ensure that their candidate wins at all cost. While the electorate would prefer to vote for a candidate with good credentials and has the potentials to deliver his manifestos, the ruling class would prefer a robber because he can be manipulated to suit their selfish political interest.

Closely related to the above reason, is the notion that political power is the only access to economic power. This category of politicians aspires for political power...
basically for the acquisition of wealth at the expense of service to humanity.

Furthermore, political aspirants consider the use of thugs as the only way they could win at all cost, because if they fail, they stand to lose everything. Today’s political slogan is winner-takes-it-all. So, the looser is neither compensated nor given any consolation. If therefore, people have to die or be intimidated for a politician to have his way, he will not hesitate to do so through thuggery.

**Thuggery and Socio-political insecurity of Benue State**

It is crystal clear that political stability is a sinequanon to national development. It has been observed by Deng (1999) that precarious political climate tends to produce economic instability and truncated social and educational development.

Political thuggery has apparently affected every facet of Benue polity. One of the major effects of political thuggery on the development of Benue State is the promotion of communal clashes and land disputes in the state. It may be argued that land disputes and communal clashes have existed before independence and the creation of Benue State, but the dimension and the prevalence of these crises in recent times left no one in doubt that political thuggery is a precipitating factor.

A few examples of the several political cum communal crises in Benue State between 2003 to date will suffice:

- The 2003 political onslaught in Kwande Local Government Area,
- The 2003 Communal crisis between Minda and Kparev people of Makurdi Local Government Area.
- The 2006 Kwande political crisis
- The 2007-2008 renewed dispute between Mbaduku people of Vandeikya Local Government Area and Udam people of Cross River State
- The 2010 communal crisis between the people of Tsambe and Mbangur in Vandeikya Local Government Area.
- The 2010 communal crisis between Mbangur and Mbwawua communities in Vandeikya local Government Area.
- The 2010 communal crisis between Nyiev and Uyoo communities in Kwande Local Government Area.
- The 2011 communal crisis between Mbaejir and Mbacoghour communities of Guma and Tarka Local Government Areas.
- The 2011 political crisis in Ugba-Logo Local Government Area
- The 2012 communal crisis between Ojantele and Ijegwu communities in Otukpo and Obi Local Government Areas. There are many more (Akegh, 2011; Duru, 2011; Duru, 2012)
- The 2012 political crisis between Tarka and Guma Local Government Area.
- The 2013 communal crisis between Tor-Donga and Gbise in Katina Ala Local Government Areas.

The above examples show that Benue people have not experienced any respite since the beginning of the new millennium (the past 12 years). Communal and political crisis in Benue State became more pervasive after the 2007 national election. The strong assumption is that the political thugs that were hired by the political class during the campaign period were left with no job or any means of sustenance after the election. They therefore, had to seek for alternative means livelihood by inciting one community against the other. Unfortunately, the weapons and ammunitions that were given to them by their political lords were not retrieved. With those weapons, they have caused several havoc to their advantage.

Closely related is the fact that political thuggery has equally led to the high rate of armed robbery in Benue State. Prior to this time, Benue State was known not only as a food basket of the nation but as one of the most peaceful states in Nigeria with very few cases of armed robbery. Today, armed robbery has become so rampant that one cannot dare to talk about them in public. The roads that lead from Otukpo to Makurdi; Makurdi to Gboko; Katsina-Ala to Zaki-Biam; Katsina-Ala to Takum in Taraba State and many others, have been designated dangerous roads. A traveller on these roads would have to pray until he/she gets to his/her destination. Their weapons are so sophisticated that even the police cannot withstand them. These are the weapons they received from their political lords as thugs. Now that election is over, armed robbery has become the order of the day. This has apparently made some investors to be very skeptical in investing their resources in the state.

Most devastating of all the effects of political thuggery is the wanton destruction of lives and property of innocent citizens of the state. For instance, Babajide (2011) reported that 30 people were killed and 60 houses burnt in the political crisis that erupted at Ugba in October, 2011. Duru (2012), reported that 10 people...
were killed, 120,000 people were displaced and property worth millions of naira were destroyed in the crisis between Ojantele and Ijegwu communities on Tuesday, 7th of August, 2012. Overall, many lives have been sent to their early graves and property worth billions of naira have been burnt and looted, and several thousands of people including children displaced. They do not know when they will ever see their lands again. Many parts of Benue have become refugee camps. This is sad and unfortunate. The forceful migration of people to urban settlements has not only caused untold hardship on the immigrants but has also caused inflation and increased cost of house rent and foodstuff. All these have made social life highly insecure.

Political thuggery has equally caused the high rate of cultism among youths in Benue State. Most of them go into the nefarious act so as to gain some supernatural powers and arm themselves against any unforeseen accident. The prevalence of cultism in recent times caused the state Governor to make some strong statements aimed at fighting the menace especially among students in higher institutions.

Conclusion

This paper has established the fact that political thuggery is one of the most serious security challenge in Nigeria and particularly in Benue State in recent times. Its antecedent, causes and effects on the security and development of the state have been discussed. All hands must be on deck to ensure that this trend is discontinued so that the problem of insecurity in the state will be curtailed. On this basis, some counselling interventions have been put forward in this paper, and it is hoped that the acceptance and implementation of the recommendations will bring about a reduction in the rate of communal crises, armed robbery, unemployment and ensure sustainable political security.

Recommendations/Counselling Intervention

Sequel to the aforementioned effects of political thuggery on the development of Benue State, it is pertinent to make some suggestions on the way forward.

There is the need for the Counselling Association of Nigeria to embark on aggressive political education which will involve all political stakeholders including political office holders as well party members. Through this means, politicians will be exposed to the kind of administration that the electorate are clamouring for. It will afford counsellors the privilege of inculcating some sound virtues such as honesty, dedication, tolerance, respect for one another etc on all political aspirants. As an intervention strategy, counselling will assist politicians to develop the consciousness of team work and play the game of politics in the spirit of sportsmanship, devoid of ranchor and thuggery.

Moreover, Counselling Association of Nigeria should embark on an intensive sensitization campaign through the electronic and print media as well as through regular courtesy visits to political office holders, to educate them and the general public on the grave effects of political thuggery on the security of the society. Parents should be educated on the upbringing of their children. It is clear that children that are properly brought up will not allow themselves to be used as thugs. The use of thugs should be denounced by everyone because it poses security threat not only to human life but also to national development.

Furthermore, the authors strongly believe that political thuggery can be well addressed if there is a strong attack on the politics of winner-takes-it-all. Obviously, this is one of the reasons why politicians view politics as a do-or-die affair. Experience has shown that once an aspirant loses an election, he definitely loses everything including resources and job opportunities. Effort should therefore, be made as a matter of policy to have definite plans for aspirants who failed elections either to be appointed into key political offices or be given some form of consolations. We are of the opinion that when this is done, the use of force to win election will be reduced and the need for thugs will equally be unnecessary. This is a policy matter that Government should critically address.

It is pertinent to advocate for a total War Against Unemployment (WAU). The popular maxim that an ‘idle mind is the devil’s workshop’, comes to play in this case. The Frustration-Aggression theory is equally relevant at this stage. It has been observed that many youths who have graduated from schools are roaming about in search of job opportunities to no avail. The frustration that follows joblessness often results in unacceptable behaviours such as stealing, political thuggery, armed robbery and drug peddling. Vocational counselling should therefore be intensified.

Ortese and Ada (2000) rightly observed that political thuggery, hired Assassin, violent protests and armed robbery are some of the effects of unemployment. Since Government cannot fully employ the teeming youths who are in search of jobs, effort should be made to mount functional Youth Empowerment Programmes (YEP) as well as to resuscitate the existing programmes such as the poverty reduction programme; Family support programme; National Directorate of Employment (NDE), and be made functional. The current directive that all higher institutions should mount entrepreneurship programme for students is a
welcome development. Effort should be made to give it a boost and to extend it to youths who do not have the privilege of attending higher institutions. The authors believe that if government is financially and morally committed to a functional Youth Empowerment Programme (YEP), most youth will be gainfully employed or will become employers of labour rather than waiting for a white collar job. With this, the menace of political thuggery will be drastically reduced.

References


