



Ending Cultism in the Niger Delta

Policy Recommendations

1. There is need to improve the material conditions that throw up cult activities and other related violence through mass job creation driven by both public and private sectors.
2. Families, religious bodies and traditional institutions are to be encouraged to continue their roles as the bedrock of character formation and moulding of values.
3. Formal and informal education in the region should be re-tooled to also focus on vocational training and skill acquisition.
4. Bayelsa state government should match their campaign with action by prosecuting offenders and their sponsors in line with the 2018 Secret Society Act.

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The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been described as one of the most polluted and underdeveloped areas in comparison to other deltas of the world (Etekpe, 2009; Asuka, 2010). The region is also embroiled in various forms of violent conflicts. Nevertheless, reprieve was achieved when the Federal Government of Nigeria launched in 2009 the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) for ex-agitators in the region. The PAP is a comprehensive peacebuilding programme anchored on disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) with the aim of arresting youth restiveness in the region. Despite this effort, sustainable peace has remained elusive as the region remains one trapped in violence (Ibaba, & Etekpe, 2013).

In addition to [militancy, kidnapping and attacks on energy infrastructure](#), trajectory of violence in the region has expanded to include cult wars and killings which [became more prominent from 2014](#). Unlike the older forms of violence (oil resource militancy, piracy and kidnapping) that targeted officials of government and transnational companies, cult wars put everyone at risk as they are fought in major cities and communities.

The emergence and sustenance of these groups is linked to the

“patronage of politicians, [who either employ them as informal security or use them to intimidate, attack or kill their opponents](#)”.

These groups consist of both men and females from every ethnic group in the region. The most notorious cult groups in Bayelsa and River states include Agadagba, Klinsmen, Icelanders, Greenlanders, Dewell, Deybam, Afro baggers, Axemen, Vikings, Germans, etc.

The cult killings seem to continue unabated. As recent as June 12, 2019, [at least five persons were killed in another spate of cult violence](#). Given the foregoing, this edition of **NEXTIER SPD WEEKLY** discusses the violence and possibility of an escalation of the situation especially with the Bayelsa state gubernatorial election scheduled for November 2019.

The study adopts the social production and reproduction argument by Ogban-Iyam in discussing cult violence in Bayelsa state. The approach, which is an offshoot of the Marxian dialectical materialist approach, holds that the fundamental concern of human beings and perhaps other living

things is survival and security (Ogban-Iyam, 2005).

The struggle to guarantee survival and security through the social production and reproduction process, gives rise to violent considerations like militancy, cult groups, and kidnapping. Cult groups in the Niger Delta feed off the high-stake politics for control of the “commanding heights” for economic resources in the region. These acts of violence are either [community-based or built around certain charismatic individuals who serve as rallying points for members](#). As argued by Nwokolo and Aghedo (2018), “many of the power elites in the area have become cogs in the wheel through their activities which are inimical to durable peace building”. The power elites deliberately fund and fuel violent cult activities as channels for winning elections or maintaining political dominance.

The cult clashes and gang activities cannot be discussed outside the political economy of oil in the region which is linked to illegal oil bunkering and refining activities. It is well evidenced that many of [such clashes are over control of territories that provide access to illegal oil bunkering camps, control of royalties accruing from the crude oil business, and also control of the job opportunities](#) provided by oil companies in the region.

[The Secret \(cult\) Societies and Similar Activities Prohibition Amendment Law was passed in 2018 stipulating a 20-year jail term for offenders](#). This law does not appear to be much of a deterrent for cultists in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Mindful of relationship between cultism and power struggles in the Niger Delta, and in view of the Bayelsa state gubernatorial election in November 2019, this study recommends the following approaches for ending cultism.

1. There is need to improve the material conditions that throw up cult activities and other related violence through mass job creation driven by both public and private sectors. There are a number of government programmes (such as the Presidential Amnesty Programme and the Anchor Borrowers' programme) that can be leveraged to support cooperative societies that can serve as a source of funding for youths who want to engage in small and

medium scale businesses. Considering the aquatic nature of the state, many of these businesses could be in value chain industries around agriculture (fishing, food production, livestock husbandry), and services to the petroleum industry.

2. Families, religious bodies and traditional institutions are the bedrock of character formation. Family and traditional values, which ordinarily act as checks on errant behaviour, are fast being eroded without complementary state interventions. As argued by Patrick Deneen, in his book, “Why Liberalism Failed”, “Liberalism has ruthlessly drawn down a reservoir of both material and moral resources that it cannot replenish” (2018:18). Indeed, families are very essential in moulding these values.
3. Formal and informal education in the region should be re-tooled to also focus on vocational training and skill acquisition. Educational training should be demand-driven to cater for what the market needs. Deliberate effort is required to understudy successful societies with similarly large armies of young people to see how they have resolved youth unemployment.
4. In line with the 2018 Secret Societies Act that prohibits cultism and related offences, Bayelsa state government should match the campaign with action by prosecuting offenders and their sponsors, at both the community level and state level. Politicians found to be relying on cultists to either coerce electorates, threaten opponents or carrying out any form of electoral or political violence should be banned from contesting the forthcoming elections, and be made to face the full weight of the law.

In conclusion, the battle to end cult violence in the Niger Delta should be mainly driven by the government but must be seen as the collective responsibility of all stakeholders. There is need to build up structures that will reduce the general level of violence in our society. This will, in turn, reduce the level of election-related violence. Furthermore, as unemployed youths become more gainfully employed, there will be less incentive for them to be used as tools by politicians and conflict entrepreneurs.

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