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Is Petroleum 'Oiling' or Obstructing Democratic Struggles in Nigeria?

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Introduction

This paper interrogates the role and impact of oil, Nigeria's economic mainstay since the 1970s on the pace, form(s) and process of democratisation. In this regard, it raises critical questions about the linkage between a polity in which the influence of oil is writ large, the state and the conversations that Nigerian citizens have been engaged in, on the nature of the state-oil nexus. It also explores how they are located in, and relate to the power relations attendant to that nexus. This paper is also immersed in an understanding of the nature, dynamics and the push and pull between the various forces in the Nigerian political public space and the Nigerian state on matters of public interest.

The place of oil in these conversations and contestations around the political and democratic space(s) in Nigeria is underpinned by the far reaching social ramifications of this strategic commodity—power relations constructed around its (transnational) production, and the distribution of profits and revenues, that are also tied to broader struggles for equal representation, citizenship and democratic rights. Of note are the relations of power between the state and a political and economic elite on the one hand, and between them and the Nigerian public on the other.

It is therefore not possible to fully capture the trajectory of the democratic process in the country without understanding the complexion that the oil political economy casts on it, both in relation to the leverage of an oil-dependent political elite over the state, and the ways in which the public discourses that underpin the counter-claims for 'resource control' and demands for self-determination by oil minorities animate the debates within the public space(s). This is also reflected in the kind of strategies and languages that the public adopt when seeking space, speaking to, debating (among themselves), and making demands or claims on the Nigerian state.

It is therefore of critical importance to underline the place of oil and the social relations it spawns for the nature of the struggles within the public sphere in Nigeria, and how forces active within the public sphere relate to the state particularly in terms of the struggle for 'a just and democratic' access to (federally controlled) oil revenues. The thrust of this paper is that the struggles in the Niger Delta provide a critical conjuncture from which debates and public conversations over the nature of demands for increased participation and inclusion of the rights of the ethnic minorities in the governance of their resources can be gleaned. It also

strongly suggests that this same point offers a platform from which we can grapple with the contradictions and limitations inherent in Nigeria's largely military-authored democratization, and the challenges these pose both for the operation and possible transformation of the public sphere in Nigeria.

This is also the related to the issue of the platforms/organisations for, and channels through which these debates have taken place and how they are located vis-à-vis the conventional structures and (public and private media) for the formulation, articulation and pursuit of public conversations. It also calls for a nuanced understanding between the 'public' and the 'democratic' in the Nigerian context, as what is considered 'democratic' in practice, may not be 'public'. The context in which this is dealt with in this paper is in terms of public participation in influencing the parameters and depth of the 'democratic'.

There is no intention here to idealise the notion of the public sphere in Nigeria, given its rather fractured, complex and its extreme cases, highly contested nature. Yet, it cannot be overlooked that in spite of the efforts of the state, the military and in the case of the Nigeria, an extractive transnational alliance to hegemonize the control of discourses and spaces, the people and their organisations (or what may be termed fractions of the public) with varying degrees of success, have continued to debate, and demand more justice, equitable inclusion and participation in decision-making about their lives, rights, control and the use of their oil wealth.

While the nature of the struggles in the Niger Delta have been well-studied (Ikelegbe 2001, 2006; Ukeje 2001; Ukiwo 2007; Okonta 2008; Obi 2007, 2008; Omeje 2006; Watts 2007), there is some need to further analyze these struggles in relation to a broader public national conversation on the challenge of participatory democracy in Nigeria. This is considered necessary, as there is also a representation of the developments in the region in the context of predatory and violent politics, or the depredations of self-seeking militants keen on capturing a share of the oil pie.

A critical examination of these conversations and struggles is urgent, given the rather strident tone of public debates, emotions and the high stakes that underpin conversations around 'resource control', misrepresentations of the discourses of ethnic minority groups in the Niger Delta, and the securitization of Nigeria's oil by a transnational community keen on

unhindered access to cheap hydrocarbons—as a source of energy. This draws extensively on the debates and conversations by the people of, and various identity groups/movements in the Niger Delta in relation to the broadening of the democratic space to include their concerns. Such conversations and demands are often underlined by the quest to participate in making decisions that address such popular concerns within the context of a democratic nation-state project.

In setting about its task, this paper is organised into four sections. The introduction sets out the basis for a nuanced and critical understanding of the public discourse in relation to the oil-democracy nexus, drawing on the struggle for resource control and compensation for environmental pollution as a result of oil production activities, by the ethnic minorities of the oil-rich Niger Delta. It is followed by a conceptual section that highlights the relevance of the public sphere—drawing on some of the insights from the work of Habermas for an understanding of the struggles in the Niger Delta. It also interrogates the relevance of the dominant oil-state and 'resource curse' perspectives to an understanding of the public domain within which the Nigerian state and the people are sometimes engaged in a contest for space and power. The analytical fulcrum of the paper, which explores the nature of the debates and conversations on the Niger Delta, follows this. The fourth and concluding section sums up the arguments in the preceding sections and lays bare the prospects of the contestations and deliberations within the public space for advancing and broadening the democratic project in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country.

Conceptual Issues:

A Note on the Public Sphere:
While there is a plethora of writings on the public sphere, some of the credit for exploring and understanding its transformative potential for democracy can be traced to the influential work of Jurgen Habermas. Commenting on Habermas' 1962 study of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Douglas (nd: 3), notes, that "it contrasted various forms of an active, participatory bourgeois public sphere in the heroic era of liberal democracy with the more privatized forms of spectator politics in a bureaucratic industrial society in which the media and elites controlled the public sphere".

Influenced by the thoughts of Habermas on "theorizing the limits of democracy in late-capitalist societies" (Fraser 1992: 109), but also providing a critique of discourses on the public sphere, Fraser, defines the public sphere as, "the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, and hence an institutionalized arena for discursive interaction. This is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state" (Fraser 1992: 110-111). One also agrees with Fraser, that while noting the importance of Habermas' contribution to the discourses on democracy in late-capitalist societies, there is also the understanding that there are other "competing histories and conceptions of the public sphere", particularly with regard to other parts of the world and Africa.

Yet, the themes of debating and deliberating which underscore a participatory model of democracy, in which the 'public' plays a key role remains an important point that we shall return to in this paper. This point echoes a similar one made earlier in a speech that Habermas made a few years ago, in which he noted that "the conceptual triad of "public space", "discourse" and "reason" had dominated my work as a scholar and my political life". Importantly, in that speech he distinguished between two types of "public and publicity" (Harbermas 2004). He noted that, "in today's media society, the public sphere serves those who have gained prominence as a stage for self-presentation...by contrast, the intention behind participation in political, literary or scholarly debates, or any other contribution to public discourse, is quite different: reaching agreement on a particular subject or clarifying reasonable dissent takes priority over the self-presentation of the author. Here, the public is not the domain made up of viewers or listeners, but instead a space for the contributions of speakers and addressees, who confront one another with questions and answers."

This definition of the public as an arena of 'speakers and addressees' contain both issues that have been critiqued by some scholars, and a particular representation of bourgeois democracy. Fraser (1992: 137) has pointed to some of the limitations in Habermas' conception of the public. Of note, are the issue of social inequality (which impacts on the nature of, and capacity for deliberative politics), the multiplicity of publics, the existence of strong and weak publics (with different capacities and mediated by relations of power), and the labelling of private and public spheres. Without going further, it is clear that the notion of the public sphere is a contested, but necessary concept in seeking to understand and extend the limits of democracy in various societies.

The representation and rendering of public deliberations on the Niger Delta in the context of Nigeria's oil politics though not extensive, is already in existence. As earlier noted, some of the works by Ikelegbe, Okonta, Obi, Ukiwo, and Ukeje, have explored some of its dimensions. Such views have also been articulated through reports, opinion pieces, published interviews, and paid announcements in Nigerian and international news media. However, the article by Gore and Pratten (2003: 211-240), dwells in some detail on the public " rhetoric's of order and disorder in Southern Nigeria," drawing on "four cases of youth-led identity-based social movements in Benin-city and in the Annang area of Southern Nigeria". However, the authors locate the discourses of these movements, not in some ideal of such groups seeking to expand their democratic participation in politics and governance, but rather, in the "politics of plunder".

This underscores the ways in which some of the analysis of "popular responses to economic mismanagement, regional marginalisation and crime waves since the return to democracy" (Gore and Pratten 2003: 211) in the Niger Delta can be (mis)interpreted to suit existing values and perspectives. It is important to note, that such skewed analysis that fail to see any link between the discourses and responses in the Niger Delta to any form of democratic impulse, and thus provide justification for the view that oil blocks popular deliberations for extending the limits of democracy, and subverts democratic possibilities, are often based on a misreading of the impact of the political economy of oil on politics in Nigeria. Beyond this they divert attention from the more nuanced and dialectic perspective to the popular discourses in the Niger Delta, both for the nation-state and democratic projects in Nigeria. It is for this reason that some attention will be directed at two dominant perspectives to the Nigerian political economy of oil: the oil rentier and oil curse thesis.

The 'Rentier' Oil State
The concept of the rentier state is embedded in the history and a particular economic reading of oil-rich Middle East and Persian Gulf states, and was used in characterizing such states and kingdoms for their dependence on externally-generated oil rents/incomes and the attendant impact on politics and social life (Mahdavy 1970; Zahlan 1999). From the Middle East, the term was increasingly applied to other oil-rich states in Africa, Asia and South America from the 1980s onwards. Mahdavy's ideas on the rentier state were further extended in the work of Beblawi and Luciani (1987). The rentier state-conflict nexus has also featured more recently

in some of the analysis of mineral-rich economies by the World Bank, and the study of oil-rich countries by Karl Lynn (1997).

This perspective addresses the impact of mineral/oil endowment on the state and the larger society: political and social relations and the organisation of the economy. Its protagonists argued that in the most part payments to oil or mineral-rich states for mineral/oil exports amounted to "unearned income"—de-linked from entrepreneurial, innovative or developmental activities. Accordingly, they argued that such 'rentier states' did not rely on domestic taxes—and thereby were neither accountable to their people nor felt obliged to serve their interests, being in a sense economically independent of the people. In this regard, economic and political power was concentrated or centralised in a few hands, a view that was given added credence by the majority of authoritarian, monarchical and single-party dominant regimes in power in the oil-rich Middle East and Persian Gulf. The same view was used in generalising about oil-states in Africa as rentier states.

Another strand of the rentier 'thesis' related to a phenomenon described as the 'rentier mentality.' According to Yates (1996: 22), "the rentier mentality is a psychological condition with profound consequences for productivity", characterised mainly by corruption by a ruling elite steeped in unproductive activities, speculation, wasteful spending of public resources on prestige projects, mediocrity, the divorce of reward from hard work, or merit, a lack of accountability of rulers to the ruled, and the vulnerability of the country to international oil price shocks (Beblawi and Luciani 1987; Yates 1996; Karl 1997). More than any other factor, the rentier mentality allegedly fed into state bureaucratic inefficiency or weakness and divorced oil from democracy and development. In terms of the power relations between post-colonial oil-rich states and the world's oil-importing powers, there is a debate between those that feel that petro-states are vulnerable to rebellions/insurgencies and violent conflict, and lack any real capacity to transform oil endowment into economic and political development, and those that argue that "oil abundance does not itself determine state capacity and that state vulnerability to rebellion cannot be determined without an evaluation of the political coalitions underlying state support (Di John 2007: 963). Such states are reduced to gatekeepers, toll collectors or beneficiaries of international oil companies or agents of transnational criminal networks. Such views reinforce the perception of the impossibility of such states being democratic.

More recently, there has been a 'hook up' with perspectives on the failings of African state and ruling elites (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Bayart 1993). Moving from an economic perspective to rentierism, the recent emphasis is on the link between oil, politics, elite predation and misgovernance in African 'petro-states' (Yates 2005: 174-190; Clark 1997; Eberlain 2006; Watts, 2004; Ikelegbe 2006; Lewis 2007; Frynas et al; Global Witness 2002; Oliviera 2007a, 2007b), or what Yates, called, 'neo-petro-monialism'. It is on this score that the linkage between an 'oil curse', neo-patrimonialsm, institutional instability/crises and 'state failure' in some African oil-rich countries is being explored. But more importantly, such analyses foreclose any public space or discourse directed at expanding the democratic space, and does not allow for any focus of the kind of social conversations taking place in the public sphere.

The rentier thesis emphasises the limited incapacity of the petro-states hinged upon their capture by predatory elites and the 'rentier' mentality that is patently and pathologically profligate, unproductive and unchangeable. These ascribed features foreclose any deliberative agency on the part of the public—no matter how it is defined, and the possibility of the expansion of political space in any real sense, or the emergence of full-blown democracy in oil-rich African countries based on a rather deterministic understanding of the linkage between state and oil in Africa.

The 'Oil Curse' thesis

The discourse on an oil curse is hinged upon the belief that oil as a natural resource breed's corruption, misgovernance, human rights abuses and violent conflict (Gary and Karl, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2002; Coalition for International Justice, 2006; Obi, 2007; Ikelegbe 2006: 23-55; Ross, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2008, Rosser 2006). According to an UNRISD workshop report (2007: 11), "the resource curse thesis is based on a correlation between the abundance of natural resources—especially oil—on the one hand, and a set of negative economic, political and social outcomes, on the other". The negative consequences of the resource/oil curse are associated with "Rent Seeking" and the "Dutch Disease", and "the relationship between natural resource abundance and the incidence, duration and intensity of civil war" (UNRISD 2007: 12).

Ross (2004) presents a concise description of the resource curse based on findings, 'that natural resources play a key role in triggering, prolonging, and financing conflicts.' In an

earlier article, he had observed that, "many of the poorest and most troubled states in the developing world," have paradoxically high levels of natural resource wealth that may harm their prospects for development" (Ross, 2001: 328). More recently he zeroes in on oil (Ross 2008: 2), by noting that, "oil wealth often wreaks havoc on a country's economy and politics, makes it easier for insurgents to fund their rebellions, and aggravates ethnic grievances".

In a more recent study of the resource abundance – conflict nexus, De Soysa and Neumeyer (2007: 202), identify "two distinct and prominent models explaining the link—finance for rebellion and weak states". This perspective emphasises the institutional weaknesses that plague resource-rich countries mainly as a result of the 'rentier effect' that fuels corruption and misrule by predatory elites who privatize and personalise state power and subvert the developmental process (Fearon 2005; Herbst 2000). Of note, is the view that oil-dependent states are more vulnerable to the "state incapacity – violent conflict" link, leading some security thinkers in the post 9/11 era to draw attention to the likely threats posed by 'failed', 'failing' or 'likely-to-fail' oil or mineral-rich states, to international security. This position comes out strongly in recent analysis of Nigeria and other oil-rich countries in the Gulf of Guinea (Shaxson 2007; Lewis 2007: 238-267; Frynas, Wood and Oliviera 2003; Oliviera 2007a).

The resource curse thesis has been faulted on several grounds, particularly its "prevailing evaluation methodologies on the basis of measurement errors, incorrect specification of the models, and the high probability of spurious correlations" (UNRISD 2007: 12). Most critical perhaps, is a methodological flaw in the resource curse thesis, mainly based on "multiple regression, statistical studies that draw broad-brush causal conclusions based on what could be mere spurious correlations. Any number of alternative explanations (missing variables, for example), other than natural resource abundance, could explain the outcomes in question" (UNRISD 2007: 12).

Ross' view that "oil and mineral wealth tends to make states less democratic" (2001), appears to capture the linkage between oil-fuelled "neo-patrimonial" politics and the crisis of democracy in an oil-rich Nigerian context. In providing a deterministic explanatory framework for the connection between oil and the failure of democracy, Ross is quick to generalise across various oil-rich contexts, the historic, socio-political and cultural specificities not withstanding.

The result of such an approach approximates a descriptive rendition of "the dirty politics of African oil" (Shaxson 2007), without paying attention to the nuances, significant differences and variations in the ways petro-politics and conflict dynamics play out from one country to the other. Some writers and scholars have applied the "neopetromonial" perspective so uncritically across African oil states such as Nigeria, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea and Angola— a tendency that is bound to distort rather than promote a proper understanding of the differences and specificities of each case. Apart from this, it does not bring out in clear relief the close connections between internal and external actors in the exploitation of, and accumulation of wealth from oil.

The main argument that flows from the protagonists of the oil curse approach is that oil endowment in Africa is subversive of democracy, development and peace, because it is a recipe for inevitable elite predation, corruption, state failure and violent conflict. This then fuels analysis and the depictions of oil-rich African states as "failed," "rentier," "predatory," "criminal," or "kleptocratic" states (Oliviera 2007a; Wood 2004). Yet, such analysis remain largely descriptive, as they are not able to analyse the more complex and nuanced forces and processes that differ from one country to the other, and end up prescribing the same solution to all cases.

Such perspectives either ignore, or play down some evidence of positive developments in resource-boom periods, just as they fail to provide explanations for conflict in non-oil, or resource-poor contexts in Africa. In the same regard, they tend to focus on the ways in which popular discourses tend to navigate through or seek survival in the dominant oil political economy, rather than challenge it. As noted elsewhere, "in spite of all its attractions, the 'resource curse' does not fully capture the complex dimensions of the politics and international linkages that underpin violent conflicts in resource-rich African countries" (Obi 2007: 14). Di John (2007: 965) also notes the limitations inherent in the rent-seeking variant of the resource curse thesis. In his view, "the issue of political legitimacy needs to be central to any analysis of the impact of mineral abundance or rent-seeking on political outcomes, including patterns of conflict and violence".

Nigeria, Africa's largest oil exporter,[1] has also been largely analyzed from the oil curse perspective (Human Rights Watch 2005, 2002; Ikelegbe 2006, Lewis 2007; International Crisis Group; Pham 2007: 44). Of relevance to the analysis of the violence in the oil-rich Niger Delta and Nigeria's political instability is the focus on the role of oil as a driver of conflict—linked to a "resource curse". Beyond this, the oil-related conflict in the Niger Delta has been analysed in the context of a "critically weak Nigerian state" (Rice and Patrick 2008: 16), considered unable to ensure security within its territory (Pham 2007). However, in a recent critique of this perspective based on the case of the Niger Delta, Watts (2007: 650-651), faults its assumptions on the following grounds: the neat but false dichotomization between government and rebels, that contrary to the claims by protagonists such as Ross, the evidence establishes that oil is a 'lootable' resource in the context of the Niger Delta, and that the exclusion of external actors from the conflict dynamics in the resource curse 'paradigm' is based on false assumptions as foreign oil multinationals and oil companies play a "central part in the political dynamics of community conflict" in the Niger Delta (2007: 651).

If applied to African oil rich states, the oil curse analogy will present the inevitable conclusion that oil is at the root of all evils plaguing such countries, most significant of all being that oil 'blocks' democracy and development (Ross 2001), and promotes instability and crises. Yet, such a conclusion would be simplistic and inaccurate, given the complexity of the politics, and the reality that the real problem lies not in the existence oil in the region, but the ways its production, transformation and commoditization spawns social contradictions, unequal power relations, and inequities at two levels: state-society and local-global.

As Watts (2007) aptly demonstrates with regard to Nigeria's Niger Delta, there is a high level of complex and contradictory 'meshing' of state actors, political elites and militia in the Niger Delta, such that alliances and lines of opposition are fluid and contingent on expedient calculations. For example, the leader of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force, Asari Dokubo, one of the militia groups in the Niger Delta has earlier enjoyed a close relationship with some leading politicians in Rivers state. By his own admission as one of the leaders of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) he had 'worked' to ensure the victory of the governor during the 1999 elections. Another militia leader, Ateke Tom, leader of the Niger Delta Vigilantes

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[1] According to the most recent figures, as a result of the insurgency in the Niger Delta that has resulted in damage to oil infrastructure and oil production shut-ins, Nigeria has for the first time been overtaken by Angola as the continents leading oil exporter.

(NDV), which later fought pitched battles with the rival NDPVF, and more recently with the Nigerian military, admitted to a journalist that he had helped intimidate voters to ensure victory for a certain politician in Rivers state (Simmons 2007).

Some premium has been placed on the violent and criminal activities of ethnic militias in the Niger Delta (Ianaccone 2007). In extreme cases these armed groups have been described as "terrorists" in a bid to attract the attention of the Western security establishment (Cesarz, Morrison and Cooke 2003; Marquardt, 2006). What is not usually discussed is the kind of debates and discussions that underpin the struggles in the Niger Delta, and how the nature of, and breakdown in the 'lines of communication', have influenced the relationship between violent groups, local political elites, the public, and oil companies. In the case of the latter, some internal reports including the well-cited WAC Global Services (2003) document and studies have established the fact that some oil companies have not responded to the initial demands of the people, but resorted more to the distribution of patronage/largesse to local elites and youth groups to ease entry and provide 'protection' to company interests and assets. They have provided some 'fuel' for conflict, while also relying on the coercive apparatus of the state to protect its oil assets in the region. In spite of the large sums on money devoted through well-publicized oil company Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) budgets for the Niger Delta, it has been shown that the projects and monies devoted do not adequately address the needs of the communities, while in some instances, feed into the cycle of intra and inter-community violence (Best and Kemedi 2005; Ikelegbe 2006, Obi 2004; Human Rights Watch 2005).

> There is an alternative interpretation of the oil curse that has been glossed over by those concerned with the macro-issues of conflict and development. What this suggests is that the 'oil curse' thesis is not an adequate basis upon which to generalize about the nature of the oil state, or the oil-democracy nexus. It also implies that the thesis by laying premium on oil endowment as a determinate factor for instability and state failure, without paying enough heed to the historical, political and transnational structures and processes underpinning the crises of state and society in Africa, and how these are linked, and play out at the local, national and global levels, end up exaggerating the 'disruptive' role of oil, while ignoring the more salient actors operating within 'petro-states' in African countries at differentiated levels, within a transnational political

economy. It is in the regard of the foregoing that this essay draws attention to the need to examine the ways in which the public space in the Niger Delta has been contested, and how out of such contestations, we can evaluate and glean the ways in which certain social forces have sought to extend the frontier of the nation-state and democratic projects in Nigeria.

The 'Political Public' and the Quest for Democracy in the Niger Delta

The evidence that a 'political public' linked to the quest for democracy and an equitable nation-state project can be gleaned from an age-old quest of the Niger Delta Oil Minorities for self-determination, and a more recent demands for resource control (Obi 2007). Such demands preceded Nigeria's independence in 1960, and lay credence to the existence of the tradition of a robust and active public discourse on the aspirations of the Niger Delta people within a federal Nigeria before the 'oil boom' of the 1970's. Part of this tradition can be linked to their status as ethnic minorities in a multi-ethnic federation (largely dominated by three large ethnic groups), a long history of political mobilization, and the need to overcome the political disadvantages of marginalization to claim the full and equal rights as Nigerian citizens. Relying on different platforms, including political parties, states creation movements, ethnic minority/identity movements and the media: newspapers, radio, television, and the internet; public forums, protests, memoranda, public declarations, and more recently emails and images, the people of the Niger Delta have sought to ask questions and provide answers in the context of their demands for equal and fair access as Nigerian citizens to power and the oil resources produced from their region.

Although the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta gained some measure of local autonomy and self-determination as a result of the states creation exercise(s) in 1963, 1967, 1976, 1987, 1991, and 1996 (Alapiki 2005: 49-65), and the power-sharing arrangements within the post-civil war national unity project (Orji 2008) gave some Niger Delta elite access to lucrative state and federal appointments and patronage, many people felt short-changed that in spite of their support for the federal side during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), they, as ethnic minorities, were being marginalized from the control of the oil produced from their region. The increased centralization of the control of oil at the federal level, and the progressive abandonment of the derivation principle implied that their region/states could not claim or control the oil produced within their territories, but rather had to either rely on the

'benevolence' of a distant faraway federal government, or suffer from its neglect of the concerns of their group(s).

The sense of grievance was worsened by military repression of protests, widespread impoverishment and increased oil-related environmental degradation of the Niger Delta. It was also believed that a "distant" federal government dominated by elite from the majority ethnic groups, and foreign oil multinationals had no regard for the rights and welfare of the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta. One of the earliest signs of stirrings in the public space in the Niger Delta in post-civil war Nigeria came from the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), which in 1990, presented the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) to the federal government, demanding among others, self-determination, local autonomy, the control of the resources in their land, fair and adequate compensation for oil pollution, and an equitable share of oil revenues (Saro-Wiwa 2005; Obi 2005; Okonta 2008: 180). Although the Ogoni followed up the OBR with an Addendum in 1991—this time directed at the international community, they got no reply from the federal government or the oil multinationals.

The struggle of the Ogoni people was purposely non-violent, emphasizing the use of the public space for engaging the military government and oil companies. One of its leaders and main spokesperson, Ken Saro-Wiwa, wrote numerous articles in national newspapers, gave public lectures and engaged in debates within Nigeria and abroad—all aimed at promoting the cause of (ethnic minority) Ogoni resistance and campaign for redress, local autonomy and a fair share of the oil produced from Ogoniland (Saro-Wiwa 1995; Obi 2005). Continued non-response from the Nigerian state, cracks in the leadership, coupled with restiveness within the rank and file of MOSOP, and the use of coercive methods by the state in response to MOSOP's demands contributed to the decline of the organisation in 1995, following the execution of some of its leaders, including Saro-Wiwa by the military government.

Although MOSOP and the Ogoni people were repressed by the military, the international condemnation of the executions and the widespread exposure of the human rights abuses of the military in the region, and the poor environmental practices of international oil companies contributed to the erosion of the legitimacy of military rulers and their decision to hold elections surrender power to elected civilians. The struggle for resource control was in part derived from the lessons of the Ogoni struggle. Its mantle was picked up by other Niger Delta civil society organizations in the Niger Delta (Ikelegbe 2001: 442-457). Of note however, was

the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) an organization of ethnic Ijaw youth from the states of the Niger Delta, which in 1998 made the Kaiama Declaration, which among others demanded for resource control for the ethnic minority Ijaw people of the Niger Delta.

Ikelegbe (2001: 437-469), provides an important perspective to the 'types and profiles of civil society in the Niger Delta', categorizing them into communal and ethnic groups (apex associations, specialised groups and youth associations), pan-ethnic, Niger Delta or national organisations, and civil and environmental rights groups. Due to the limitations of space the numerous groups will not be listed here. However, it is important to mention some examples such as the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ijaw National Congress (INC), Ijaw Elders Forum (IJF), Movement for the Survival of Itsekiri Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), National Union of Ogoni students (NUOS), Egi Youth Movement (EYF), the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), and the Conference of the Traditional Rulers of Oil Mineral Producing States (TROPCON). Others include the South-South Peoples Assembly (SSPA), Niger Delta Youth Movement (NDYM), Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Human and Environmental Rescue Organisation (ND-HERO), Environmental Rights Action (ERA), and Our Niger Delta (OND). These groups have been all engaged in the public conversations on the concerns of the people of the region. In some cases, a few organisations have engaged in 'conversations of violence'—partly intended to force that state to respond to their demands often framed as that of the larger 'public'.

The struggle for resource control is directed at a return to "the principles of true federalism" which demands for a re-negotiation of the structure of the Nigerian federation in ways that transfers power over all resources within the 'territory' of the states of the Niger Delta to the people within the region. It has also been contested on the legal terrain, where the oil producing states unsuccessfully contested federal government control of oil revenues from offshore oil fields at the Nigerian Supreme court. On the political front, the campaign of the delegates from South-South (Niger Delta) states for resource control by demanding that the derivation principle of revenue allocation to be raised from 13 to 25 (and then 50 within five years) per cent at the 2005 Nigerian Political Reform Conference (NPRC) did not succeed, prompting most of them to boycott the closing session of the conference. Part of the fall-outs from the rejection of the demand by the Niger Delta delegates for an increase in the derivation

oil formula to 25 per cent by the NPRC was the escalation in the agitation by militant groups in the Niger Delta in the rather complex struggles for resource control in the region.

Since 1999, it has been possible to discern two logics at play in the volatile oil politics of the Niger Delta. The first, had to do with the intensification of the factional struggles over the control of oil revenues, constructed within the context of the campaign for resource control by the six oil producing (ethnic minorities' South-South) states of the Niger Delta, in which they demanded for a derivation-based redress in Nigeria's fiscal federalism that would translate into their control of at least half of the oil revenues realized from their "territory." The second, had to do with the post-9/11 securitization of the oil in the Niger Delta by the West (led by the US), that felt that increased militant activity in the region could subvert their energy security interests and felt obliged to strengthen the capacity of the Nigeria State to reign in the militants, and also protect Western energy interests from possible terrorist strikes.

The militarization of the Niger Delta by the Nigerian State in the 1990's, the reduced global support for the rights campaign in the region, and the return of power to a local Niger Delta elite faction after the 1999 Nigerian elections, largely eroded the middle ground in the public discourse on the demand for equity and resource control. Increasingly the non-violent protest movements began to share, and gradually loose the public space to militant groups made up largely of angry and armed youth, some of which had links with disenchanted or opportunistic local elites. Of note are the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

In 2006, MEND attracted local and international media attention by kidnapping and holding hostage some expatriate oil workers, blowing up oil installations and attacking security personnel in the Niger Delta. These militia groups were partly the result of the militarization of the public space and discourses of resource control, the organised large-scale theft and sale of oil tapped from oil pipes (illegal oil bunkering), and the struggle for power by the Niger Delta elite with links to the Nigerian State and the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). These violent groups provided alienated, unemployed and marginalized youth, some of them university and high school graduates, with a platform to challenge the federal and transnational hegemony over oil, tap into a groundswell of anger against the State and the Oil

Multinationals to draw attention to their cause and benefit as individuals from their capacity to unleash violence capable of disrupting a critical transnational energy resource flow.

Following the well-known Ogoni resistance in the early 1990's (Obi, 2005: 6-11) led by the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the largest of the Niger Delta oil minorities, the Ijaw mounted a new struggle for the control of oil. In December, Ijaw youth from six states of the Niger Delta, organized under the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), met in Kaiama, the birthplace of Ijaw martyr Isaac Adaka Boro. At the end of the meeting, on December 11, 1998, the IYC drew up the Kaiama Declaration (KD, 1998), which asserted that, "all land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within the Ijaw territory belong to the Ijaw communities and are the basis for our survival." The IYC refused to recognize 'all undemocratic decrees that robbed the Ijaw of the right of ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent.' On this basis, they demanded for "self-government and resource control by the Ijaw people," and gave all oil Multinationals an ultimatum to quit the Niger Delta by December 30, 'until issues related to the ownership and control of Ijawland and oil were resolved.' Like MOSOP's OBR, the KD was widely published in local and international media, while its core demands formed the substance of public deliberations on the demand for resource control in the region and beyond.

In response, the federal government declared a state of emergency in the Niger Delta, and flooded the region with armed troops. Ijaw protesters were arrested, and anti-riot police shot some during demonstrations in support of the Kaiama Declaration (Ukeje, 2001: 29). The Ijaw local resistance was repressed, but as in the case of the Ogoni, it survived, and re-generated itself particularly after the return to democratic rule in 1999. Across the Niger Delta other radical groups organized around the demands for the control of local autonomy, and self-determination for the control of oil (for their development) appeared. These included the Movement for the Payment of Reparations to Ogbia – Ogbia Charter of Demands, Egi people – Aklaka Declaration, Oron National Forum - Oron Bill of Rights, Ikwerre Charter of Demands, among others. In all cases, there was no clear cut debate or dialogue between these groups and those in (the elected) government, who felt that their control of state power, the huge resources at their disposal and control of the state's coercive apparatus provided them with some leverage in deflecting or manipulating the demands of the people to reinforce their power base and legitimacy within the national ruling bloc..

There were two reactions to the non-response of the state to the demands included in the documents produced by various ethnic minority groups. While a faction of the Niger Delta elite felt that mere dialogue without pressure would not get the attention of the federal government, there was a widespread feeling among the youth that having 'exhausted the non-violent' option, the only language the State-oil alliance understood was that of violence. This along with the patronage from some local political elites, further emboldened militia groups to adopt violent methods to press home their demands and political or even personal agendas. Their struggles found expression along four poles: against the State-Oil alliance, against local traditional rulers, chiefs and elite that were reportedly colluding with the State-Oil alliance to betray their people in exchange for pay-offs, contracts and lucrative appointments, fractional fighting within the same community for power, or over the spoils of oil, or inter-community or inter ethnic conflicts over the control of oil territory.

The emergence and complex architecture of groups like MEND, NDPVF and Martyrs Brigade in the violent conflicts in the Niger Delta is however not without its 'public face'. Although official sources have openly dismissed these groups as "rascals and criminals", the groups have publicised their demands and activities using the local and international media. Apart from the growing anger, insecurity, and increased militarization of the region, is the fact that the activities of militant groups have resulted in the cut in Nigeria's oil production by 25 per cent, with each incident having ripple effects in the global oil market in the form of price hikes.

The activities of armed groups in the Niger Delta have not just heightened concerns about the security of the region, and the energy security concerns of the world's powers, it has led to a new initiative by the current Nigerian government to engage in dialogue with various 'publics' –defined as stakeholders in the Niger Delta as a way of mediating the struggle for resource control in the region, and exploring the possibilities for conflict containment, management and resolution. This comes out clearly in the inauguration on September 8, 2008 of a 40 person (Presidential) Technical Committee on the Niger Delta, by the Nigerian Vice President in Abuja. Chaired by MOSOP's president, Ledum Mittee, the committee is expected to "collate, review and distil the various reports, suggestions and recommendations on the Niger Delta", and "make suggestions for Government's necessary and urgent action" (Jonathan Goodluck 2008).

The present policy thrust also includes some considerations for social provisioning, employment generation and the greater inclusion of the people in the region into the mainstream of Nigeria's political and socio-economic life, even though the government continues to pursue the military option with regard to militant groups. Although the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta is already operating behind schedule, and has no real powers to effect any change in the troubled oil-rich region, beyond being a platform for various publics to ventilate their views, it also clear to the Nigerian government that it can no longer ignore the popular demands of the people of the Niger Delta. More fundamentally perhaps, the resolution of the ongoing contestation will ultimately involve deliberation with, and the participation of groups/representative of the aggrieved people of the region—all linked to a (non-violent) democratic-political ethos.

Conclusion

The foregoing clearly shows that far from being framed solely by a 'politics of plunder', that some democratic stirrings are embedded albeit in complex and contradictory forms in the public conversations that underpin the politics and debates around resource control in the Niger Delta. These relate to the democratic group rights of the Niger Delta oil minorities as equal Nigerian citizens, the need to organise free and fair elections in which the true representatives of the people can emerge, and the need to spell out the benefits and obligations of Nigerian citizenship in a region in which dominant hegemonic transnational social relations of power have tended to marginalize and dispossess local peoples.

> It can also be argued that groups in the Niger Delta do more than respond to 'the politics of plunder' by resorting to violence, opportunism, and greed and "restructuring disorder". This is specifically articulated at various levels: communal, state, national and international—sometimes in a fragmented sense or framed in terms of an alternative equitable and democratic nation-state project. The point really is about the ways in which the people envision their place and role in the project at these levels, not to generalise that because all cats appear to be grey in the dark, they are all indeed black.

It is clear that Niger democratic future lies in the expansion of the space for popular deliberations within its public space. The real lesson that the struggle in the oil-rich Niger Delta teaches us is that outside of popular participation in defining the public space, and the

politics that takes place within it, force cannot be an option in extending the frontiers of the Nigerian nation-state project on a stable, democratic and sustainable basis. Local resistance in the oil-rich region has in real terms contributed to the defence of a public space and kept the public conversation on the need for an equitable distribution of oil revenues and respect for the citizenship rights of oil minorities of the Niger Delta on the national agenda.

Oil on its own, is therefore neither a lubricant nor obstacle to public conversations that could extend the frontiers of democracy in Nigeria. A lot depends on how oil is defined and valued in terms of the dominant power, politics and class relations in the country. What this calls for is not the type of oil-based determinism that can be found in some of the literature, but rather a critical understanding of the place of oil in the dialectics of the social and political struggles in the oil-rich Nigeria Delta, and by extension, the Nigerian state. It is in this spirit that the critique and transcendence of the challenges of democracy in Nigeria can learn benefit from a well-informed theory of the relation and interaction between the 'public space and political public sphere.'

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