

‘Agony in the Garden’: Incongruity of Governance and the Travails of Port Harcourt city, Nigeria

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Abstract

Port Harcourt, Nigeria’s Garden City, was a desirable ‘home for all’ and a true garden city worth its name. In recent times, however, it has been transformed into a city with a rough and tumble character. This paper anchors the issues and crosscutting issues of concern in the concrete experiences of Port Harcourt city. It highlights the transitions of the city to its present state (witnessing considerable tension and violence over the past fifteen years) noting failed governance, leadership crisis and the marginalization/deprivation and suppression of the people as the factors that accentuated its downturn. It explores the role of crude oil in shaping socio-economic and political framework of the city, and shows the linkage between its history and the threat it currently constitutes to peace and stability in the city. The paper concludes that indeed, Port Harcourt harbours risks for violence, but also has the potential to create new civilizing arrangements. It argues that where the social pendulum would swing necessarily depends on a number of factors in the handling of the city’s and its peoples’ affairs. Responsive and sustainable democratic development and consolidation in terms of governance were further highlighted as the possible ways out of the woods.

Introduction

The concept of ‘garden’ presupposes a place of gentle progress and nurturing, freshness and peace, beauty and rest; a largely sustainable ‘green’ environment. The use of “Garden City” as an *alias* in the description of Port Harcourt – due to residents’ flair for nurturing flower gardens around their houses, a result of the influence of the early White settlers in the area (Ogionwo, 1979) – shows the city’s stature in the past. This is in addition to the numerous opportunities available in the city for just anyone to make it in life there: very cosmopolitan environment and blessed with an array of economic concerns. At one moment, everything looked possible in this once adorable city; but suddenly, everything went wrong. Ghettos and slums started sprouting everywhere; organised crimes became the order of the day; fraud and stark violence took stage and the city started losing its serenity, greenness and greatness. Today, Port Harcourt city is at the brink of total collapse.

This paper, a synopsis of the travails of this city, highlights the roles of failed governance in the dynamics of the city’s historical sociology. It interrogates the decline of a once glamorous urban milieu to a city of crime and despondency, and shows the future possibilities of this ramshackled city. The crisis is not solely or even largely about ‘crime’ narrowly construed, but about the unraveling of a socio-economic and political order. Or more properly, about *the legitimacy of a failed government*, as Watts (2007) puts it. Port Harcourt’s historical experiences cannot, however, be fully understood unless it is placed on the larger canvas of the wider collapse of Nigeria’s Niger Delta.

The Setting: A Brief Outline

Originally known as *Igwe Ocha*, this port and the city that eventually developed there due to migrations and enhanced economic activities therein were re-named Port Harcourt, after the then Secretary of State for the Colonies (1910-15), Lewis (Viscount) Harcourt. Lugard (1913), in a letter addressed to Lewis Harcourt, notes thus:

...I have the honour to enclose for your information charts of the estuaries and rivers in the neighbourhood of the proposed port and terminus of the Eastern Railway at Diobu or more correctly Iguocha...In the absence of any convenient local name, I would respectfully ask your permission to call this Port Harcourt, and I anticipate, that, in future, it will be one of the most important ports in the coast of West Africa...¹

Port Harcourt is the deepwater port city-capital of Rivers state, Nigeria. It lies along the Bonny River (an eastern distributary of the Niger River), 66 kilometers upstream from the Gulf

¹ Nigeria 183, CO. 583/4/Vol.3. Sir Frederick Lugard to the Rt. Hon. Lewis Harcourt, Secretary of State for the Colonies, 18 August 1913, Public Records Office, London.

of Guinea, about 40 feet above sea level and a very few degrees above the equator and located on the edge of the Niger Delta's mangrove foreshore and swamplands (Wolpe, 1974:15). The largest and most significant urban center in the Niger Delta, Port Harcourt's origins are rooted in the discovery of coal in the present day Enugu city. Effective exploitation of the Udi coal fields required the development of a distribution network to a port for exportation. The search for a site that would be suitable both as a seaport and as a railway terminus led to the exploration of the Bonny River and eventually, to "the founding of a natural harbour that was to become the economic *raison d'être* of one of Nigeria's most important commercial and industrial centres" (Wolpe, 1974:14).

The railway and seaport created vibrant socio-economic scenarios in Port Harcourt, encouraging various European commercial concerns to establish branches in the town. The many job opportunities all these establishments provided stimulated African migrant-labour from the local populations as well as other parts of the colonial territory, even beyond what is today Nigeria, thus giving a cosmopolitan atmosphere to the population. The railway and seaport, however, provide only one part of the explanation for Port Harcourt's significance. Petroleum and natural gas round out the equation. Thus, the founding of oil in the Niger Delta area in the mid 1950s further transformed the city, the operational base for the multinational *petrobusinesses* in Nigeria, which refines oil both for local consumption and export. An important industrial and commercial center in Nigeria, Port Harcourt possesses two seaports, two airports (one international with a local wing and one for the Nigerian Air Force), two oil refineries, two universities, two sports stadiums and a railway terminus. Its population is about 2,820,200 (in 2007) (Ohiagbuchi, 2007) and home to a number of Nigeria's ethnic minorities.

The *Mélange* of Gold and Rust, Oil and Blood

Port Harcourt city has had both sunny and stormy sides in its a little over a century history of existence. Port Harcourt city has had an interesting and intriguing history – one of a *mélange* of gold and rust, and of oil and blood. Its proper take-off towards an urban development started in 1914, following closely with its re-naming. The first main activity of the colonial administrators there was the construction of a railway link to the Udi coalfields. Arguably, the city stood out as Nigeria's best planned city and its beauty, cleanliness and freshness was unrivalled at the time. Archibong (2004) reports on its early allurements:

Here, there and everywhere, the city looked planned and designed with aesthetics and sanitary considerations in mind. Apart from its famed nightlife, many parts of Port Harcourt had playgrounds; noise level was low, taps flowed with water and streetlights were taken for granted. Roads, especially in the "Township" and Government Reservation Area

(GRA) were in good shape. That is how Port Harcourt came to be foisted with the Garden City sobriquet.

To live in Port Harcourt between the 1930s and early 1980s was desirable, cherished and, indeed, a privilege, as the city had the best of almost everything good. Its progress was gentle, gradual but steady until sometime in the early 1990s when the repercussions of dire governance started taking tolls on the city's development. From this time, apart from rapid population growth as a result of migration, Port Harcourt expanded physically at a fast rate too. This growth was, nonetheless, associated with uncontrolled urban development, especially in the rural – urban fringe to the north and the waterfronts to the south (Izeogu, 1989:60).

Of course, the problems of governance in Port Harcourt, nay the Niger Delta, are not divorceable from the general mis-governance which the Nigerian state witnessed. The only twists are that: the region is a very delicate one, produces oil which accounts for up to 95% of Nigeria's export earnings and over 80% of its revenue (pumping about 2.5 million barrels of crude *per day*), devastated by environmental and ecological degradation due to oil exploitation, totally neglected by governments and *petrobusinesses* operating there and the least developed region/zone in Nigeria. In all, the woes of Port Harcourt are that of corruption which is rooted in the oil of the delta region. As (O'neill, 2007:1) notes:

Oil fouls everything in southern Nigeria. It spills from the pipelines, poisoning soil and water. It stains the hands of politicians and generals, who siphon off its profits. It taints the ambitions of the young, who will try anything to scoop up a share of the liquid riches – fire a gun, sabotage a pipeline, kidnap a foreigner.

Conflict in the Niger Delta arose in the early 1990s due to tensions between the foreign *petrobusinesses* and a number of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups who felt they were being criminally exploited. Ethnic and political unrest has persisted till date (2008), and has led to a crisis situation in Port Harcourt, where the politics of oil is hottest. At this stage, an insight into the city's major problems would be desirable, as this would underline its main challenges for sustainable development.

Environmental Devastation and Social Degradation

Decades after the first gush of oil in the creekside village of Oloibiri, 80 kilometers west of Port Harcourt, was made in 1956, *petrobusinesses* have transformed this remote wetland into industrial wilderness. The imprint: 7,200 kilometers of pipelines, 159 oil fields, and 275 flow stations, with gas flares visible day and night from miles away (O'neill, 2007). Leaks from pipelines and wells, the building of roads and canals, and decades of oil spills and acid rain from un-abating gas flares have damaged the ecosystem. From a satellite-based study of the delta, it was found that between 1986 and 2003, more than 50,000 acres of mangroves disappeared from

the coast, largely because of oil and gas exploration. Jimmy Adegoke² notes that this "...is a significant amount given how valuable the mangrove ecosystem is....the loss of one acre is too much. You're wiping out the means for people to sustain themselves" (Polgreen, 2007). Furthermore, a 2006 UN report warns: "[T]he degree and rate of degradation are pushing the delta towards ecological disaster" (Ohiagbuchi, 2007:9).

Thus, the Niger Delta has been subverted by the very thing that gave it promise – oil. The cruelest twist is that half a century of oil extraction in the delta has failed to make the lives of the people better. Instead, they are poorer still, and hopeless. A Chief from Oloibiri was reported to have charged: "If we had never seen oil, we would have been better off" (O'neill, 2007), a stark indictment on the government and *petrobusinesses* that have been exploiting the region for decades. Due to this situation, people started drifting to the outskirts of Port Harcourt to make a living, setting up shanty neighbourhoods/slums, especially along the river banks. There are forty-seven waterfront shanty towns in Port Harcourt today and the once adorable city is worse for it. Gradually, the famed "Garden City" degenerated into a 'Garbage City', and its marvelous flowers proved no better than wreaths. An observer notes thus:

Dense, garbage-heaped slums stretch for miles. Choking black smoke from an open-air slaughterhouse rolls over housetops. Streets are cratered with potholes and ruts. Vicious gangs roam school grounds. Peddlers and beggars rush up to vehicles stalled in gas lines. This is Port Harcourt, Nigeria's oil hub,...smack-dab in the middle of oil reserves bigger than the United States' and Mexico's combined. Port Harcourt should gleam; instead, it rots (O'neill, 2007:2).

Popular Agitations, Resistance and Youth Militancy

With no hope in sight, and very much aware of the potentials of their region and the denial of its 'blessings' by government officials and *petrobusinesses*, the people of the Niger Delta began an agitation for self determination and resource control. With no concessions being made, the stage was set for popular resistance and militancy in the region. According to a youth leader in Port Harcourt, "...the time for talking has passed. When the situation in the delta threatens to turn into another Middle East, then the world will finally intervene" (Ohiagbuchi, 2007). And another, in private communication, opines: "The activities of these oil companies in collaboration with the state are threatening our environments and natural habitat. So the battle we are waging is the battle for our life" (Oluabudu, 2008:PC). These show the resolute spirit of the youth in finding 'a solution' to their unacceptable situation.

In all these, Port Harcourt has had the most share for obvious reasons. It has the largest concentration of oil firm's expatriate workers, making them good targets for attacks that will

² A Nigerian-born research scientist at the University of Missouri

send signals to the government and the West of the people's frustrations. Pointedly, the violence that has rocked the city of Port Harcourt in recent years has been aimed at foreign *petrobusiness*, their expatriate workers and the security operatives protecting them. Hundreds of kidnappings/hostage-taking by militants, pipeline bombings and attacks on flow stations have occurred in the past three years alone. And the number and severity of these attacks have been building. Dozens have been killed and many more wounded. In many cases, and unfortunately too, most of the deaths have come from bystanders caught in crossfire.

State Violence and Suppression

One major problem that the delta region has faced over time has been that of State violence, demonstrated in several forms: wanton killings, destruction of communities, military occupation, and sexual abuses by government security operatives. The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and seven of his Ogoni kinsmen was the height and the tempo has never fallen. Again, such brazen State violence could be gleaned from State-sponsored 'punitive expeditions' like the one at Odi town near Port Harcourt in 2000, during which thousands of people were killed, livestock, farms, public utilities and houses in the town were totally destroyed and set ablaze by the rampaging Nigerian Army. There are also cases of army of occupation in many delta communities, whose penchant of abuses is very disturbing. A critical analysis of these problems would show that they are a reflection of a dilemma: failed governance. This symptom is also exhibited in the rivalry among gangs, known locally as "cults", which have ties to political leaders using them during elections to intimidate opponents and rig votes (Polgreen, 2007). The many inter- and intra-communal/ethnic conflicts, usually over the spoils of the delta, whether engineered by the State or *petrobusinesses*, which have fuelled violence between such groups, are also reflective of this dilemma. Watts (2007) notes thus:

Port Harcourt has become to all intents and purposes ungovernable: it is disorderly and lawless, and this lawlessness now extends from the waterside slums to the middle class Government Residential Area (GRA). In particular, organized robbery by well-organized gangs of alienated and angry youth has exploded since the 1990s....

Port Harcourt: Which way to go

In conclusion, what future is there for Port Harcourt, in the face of glaring opportunities for positive transformation, and also the tendencies of complete disintegration? Indeed, the social pendulum in Port Harcourt has the potentials of swinging to any one of these options. Its eventual course would, however, be largely dependent on the approach to its problems. Its continued neglect, alienation and the suppression of its people by either the government or *petrobusinesses*, or both as has been the case for a while, would be a recipe for disaster, and

could make the ‘prophesy’ of Rowell *et al* (2005) of the Niger Delta developing into “the Next Gulf” realisable. This is bearing in mind the warning of Pat Mackin³: “As terror networks are disrupted/pushed out of the Mideast, they seek sanctuary in the ungoverned spaces of North and West Africa” (Rowell *et al*, 2005:203). On the other hand, the sincerity of the State in dealing with the problems could turn the city away from its destructive drift. It is only then that the potentials of the city to truly create new arrangements through which a viable chance for all citizens to pursue their aspirations could be effectively realised.

While one agrees that Port Harcourt may not be horticultural green anymore, the city is still metaphorically ‘green’ in the context of the dollars it spins, not only from *petrobusinesses*, but from the numerous industrial, commercial and seaport activities therein. This offers the city a wonderful advantage. One has to reiterate that for this to be possible, there has to be a credible government and leadership in the city and the Niger Delta. This must be the first step towards restoring the city on the part of sustainable development and progress. The failure of these solutions portends disaster for the city, and its implications would be grave, especially as the city’s significance, both for the Niger Delta region and Nigeria, is prominent. These hard facts must have to be borne in mind, constantly, cautiously and consciously too.

³ Lt. Col. Pat Mackin is the Deputy Director (Public Affairs), United States European Command.

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