

UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY VIGILANTISM: A CASE STUDY OF THE VIGILANTE GROUP OF NIGERIA (VGN)

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ABSTRACT

Vigilante groups in Nigeria assume different structures and patterns of operation and these are determined by the nature of their societies and the purpose for which they exist. Many of them that can be classified as militias represent interests along the plural Nigerian societies and religions. Yet, there are other groups under the umbrella of the Vigilante Group of Nigeria (VGN) that do not represent any political, economic and religious interest, but only tackles crime in Nigerian communities. This group (VGN) is the focus of this paper. Thus, this paper examines a rare and interesting dimension of vigilantism in Nigeria by reviewing the VGN, which was established by placing willing vigilante groups under one national umbrella, which was later given federal backing, with the aim of operating professionally alongside the governmental law enforcement agencies in the country. This paper seizes on this opportunity to examine the VGN as a single body in Nigeria, which in effect provides a concise and more encompassing understanding of vigilantism in Nigeria. Thus, the paper looks at how and why the VGN was formed, its structure and operational guidelines, as well as its challenges. It is observed that the VGN, contrary to popular belief, is well structured and boast of educated individuals such as the present Commander General. However, as exists in other law enforcement agencies in Nigeria, there is the chronic challenge of logistics and adequate funding in not only boosting operational efficiency, but in also enhancing capacity building and manpower development to a majority of members who are still largely illiterate.

Keywords: *Vigilante, VGN, Insecurity, Law Enforcement, Professionalism*

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally perceived that the presence of or emergence of vigilante groups is either a symptom in the global south based on the pervasiveness of private security and/or the inadequacy of the police, which has necessitated the need for some form of community policing. In Nigeria, it is a hybrid of these perceptions. Vigilante groups in Nigeria have often emerged when there is the perception of increased criminality or social deviance that threatens social order. These groups have flourished not only in places where States lack capacity to protect citizens from crime, but also where the State itself is believed to be corrupt or untrustworthy. Deep mistrust of the State and formal security providers, driven by the inability of law enforcement agencies to provide basic security and protect its citizens' human rights, further encourages vigilantism. The vigilante groups in Nigeria assume different structures and patterns of operation and these are determined by the nature of their societies and purpose for which they exist. Many that can be classified as militias represent interests along the plural Nigeria societies and religions. However, the proliferation of these numerous, largely unprofessional and

unlicensed vigilante groups in the country is not a focus of this paper as the debates of whether they be classified as ethnic militia, militants or vigilantes is still ongoing.

EARLY STUDIES

Pratten asserts that vigilantism has become an endemic feature of the Nigerian social and political landscape. It is evident that groups of young men or hunters based on lineage, compounds and urban wards were common pre-colonial bodies organized for the protection of persons and property. He says that the emergence of night guards and vigilante groups as popular responses to theft and armed robbery has a long and varied history in Nigeria.¹ He adds that since its return to democracy in 1999, Nigeria has witnessed a proliferation of vigilantism, and that vigilante groups have been organized at a variety of levels from lineage to ethnic group, in a variety of locations from village ward to city street and for a variety of reasons from crime fighting to political lobbying.² Thus, it is not surprising that these groups have often existed with ethnic, religious and political identities. This is buttressed by ongoing claims of extrajudicial executions and torture, combined with evidence that vigilante groups were involved in ethnic and religious clashes in

2000 and 2001.³ Pratten's review is interesting and provides an invaluable framework to general studies on vigilantism in Nigeria. However, Pratten's analysis (despite being focused on Nigeria) doesn't mention the VGN.

Akaayar also notes that today in Nigeria, there exists more prominent heavily regionalised and sometimes factionalised vigilante groups in the three core regions of Nigeria: the Bakassi Boys among the Igbos of the East, the Hisbah among the Hausa/Fulani of the North and the Odua Peoples Congress (OPC) among the Yoruba of the West, among many other indigenous law enforcement and crime fighting organizations⁴. This fact has also been emphasized in similar studies by Fourchrd⁵, Johanness⁶, Matusitz and Repass⁷.

Akaayar adds that the Hisbah, an Islam-based law enforcement organization, was officially responsible for enforcing the Sharia system in the North.⁸ The Bakassi Boys and OPC, on the other hand, although not religion-based (as the Hisba), often used indigenous African charms and religious beliefs to carry out their police functions.⁹ However, Akaayar's analysis leaves out the extent to which vigilante groups complement law enforcement agencies in fighting crime.

Okeke talks about vigilantism as a form of policing existing in contemporary Nigeria following the inadequacies of the police, its abysmal failure as a veritable law enforcement agency, and the discontent between the police and community. He notes that over the years, the police has been accused of bribery and corruption, extra-judicial killings, intimidation and the use of excessive force on innocent citizens, giving arms to armed robbers, involvement in the armed robbery, mass and illegal arrest, and the inability to confront armed robbers, and so on.¹⁰

Consequently, as Okeke states, community members resorted to self-defense or mob action for their own protection against criminal suspects, which was often unregulated and in the form of violent reprisals; the emerging vigilante security apparatus too stopped handing over suspected criminals to the police and instead began to carry out the extrajudicial executions killings of suspected criminals.¹¹ In other words, the increased incidence of crime since the end of military rule resulted in the formation of armed groups posing as vigilantes in nearly every corner of Nigeria.¹²

Nevertheless, this study using primary and secondary sources follows the thematic approach. The thematic approach has to do

with organizing and presenting the findings on the basis of similarity of ideas, as opposed to the chronological approach based on the sequence of events. In the thematic procedure, the sequence of events is maintained under each theme. In this way, focus is easily maintained in the description and analysis of issues throughout the study.

THE CONCEPT OF VIGILANTE

The term vigilante is derived from the Latin word *vigilans*, which means to be watchful. However, the meaning of this concept, which has an old social history dependent on the peculiarities of the situation where it existed.¹³ While there is no precise scholarly definition or understanding of what vigilantism is exactly, it is commonly understood as “an organized attempt by a group of ‘ordinary citizens’ to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their communities, often by resorting to violence, in the perceived absence of effective official state action through the police and courts.”¹⁴ Vigilante-type organizations have existed in many cultures, in past and present times, in both rural and urban settings. These groups flourish not only in places where states lack capacity to protect citizens from crime, but also where the state itself is believed to be corrupt or

untrustworthy.

Various studies also point to the effectiveness of these groups, and there are well-documented cases where vigilante success led to a dramatic decrease in crime. Of course, as the literature also demonstrates, “the history of vigilantism is filled with cases of mistaken identity, in which the wrong person was made to pay for someone else’s deeds.”¹⁵ The public image of these groups often presents a one-sided picture of vigilante groups. They are often described as mere brutal and undisciplined mobs or crowds consisting of mostly young people without any clear social or political identity, and as being emotional and spontaneous. Pratten argues that often, vigilante activities are not solely focused on security; rather, vigilantism serves a range of other functions in a community, such as the disciplining of children, sponsoring unemployed youth, recovering debts and the screening of political candidates.¹⁶ It sometimes include mediation and arbitration tasks. In Nigeria, groups created such as the Odua People’s in the South West, Bakassi Boys in the South East and Hisbah in the North have often been viewed as being either vigilante or militia groups. This study recognizes the complexity of vigilantism, and looks beyond the one-sided picture of these

movements as brutal gangs by examining it as an organized legal structure through the activities of the VGN.

RISE OF CONTEMPORARY VIGILANTISM IN NIGERIA

The increasing frustration throughout Nigeria about uncontrolled criminality, unmanaged violence and its associated problems has only highlighted the inadequacies of the police and its abysmal failure as a veritable law enforcement agency. Indeed, there is a wide gap between the police and the community that they are supposed to protect.¹⁷ It is observed that the Nigeria Police Force in particular, which was fashioned after the British security and law enforcement model, lacks indigenous Nigerian foundations and is structurally and procedurally a stranger to Nigerians. As a symbol and tool of colonial occupation, this scenario has resulted in a resurgence of indigenous crime-fighting agencies that are culturally and historically rooted in Nigeria's pre-colonial past.¹⁸ In other words, contemporary Nigerian vigilantism is inspired by the articulation of claims to a set of rights based on the historical and spiritual legitimacy of vibrant young men who are desirous of defending their communities, under the protection

of traditional or local religious practices.¹⁹ Nigerian vigilantism, therefore, represents the logical extension of traditional ethics and historical practices concerned with the policing of Nigerian communities. Therefore, it is a grassroots response to the failures of Nigeria's conventional police and judicial systems. Thus, the emergence of the vigilante groups indicates that the State security apparatus has failed to adequately protect the lives and properties of the Nigerian citizenry.

Although there has not been any time in the history of Nigeria that the government was not faced with security challenges, the exit of the military and the institutionalization of a liberal democratic government in 1999 witnessed a dramatic increase in security problems, while the proliferation of vigilante groups could be regarded as an outcome of this situation. Indeed, democracies guard against the militarization of the democratic polity and hence, the increased and expected viable role of the police.

This study admits that during this time, the number of vigilante groups and militias rose steadily. However, it is important to state clearly here that vigilante groups are separate from militia groups even though militia groups also claim to offer some form of

communal policing against potential threats. This clarity is necessary seeing that both vigilante and militia have been erroneously discussed in various literature as synonyms. This paper argues that while vigilantes enforce the law of the land in collaboration with the police, the militias defy the police as they are found executing wars. In both cases however, the failure of government agencies to guarantee the protection of lives and property necessitated the provision of security from outside the formal security structures of the State.

For example, the first category of prominent groups that can be classified as militia as against vigilante - the Oodua Peoples' Congress (OPC) - emerged in 1994, pursuing two objectives, namely the flushing out of criminals from Yoruba land and protecting Yoruba interests in Nigeria and outside.²⁰ On the other hand, the 'Bakassi Boys' was created as a vigilante group in 1998 by traders in the City of Aba who wanted to protect themselves from robbers.²¹ Similarly in northern Nigeria, in the 1990s, the Hisbah groups were also formed as vigilantes who enforced compliance of the Sharia law, which was to complement the services of the police. Hisbah came about to resolve the particular security problems of their

communities.²² However, some of these groups have gradually had their security services influenced by political interests. This has resulted in the masses continually raising questions of whether these designated vigilante groups should be called militias instead. However, it is important to note that the night guard (made up of local hunters) system of Nineteenth Century Ibadan remains the veritable precursor of the modern day OPC. The vigilante groups in the north, especially in Kano, were offshoots of the *Yantauri* (traditional hunters).²³

However, the second category - known as the VGN - has been more officially recognized as it comprise the groups (inclusive of retired police and military men) that operate in both urban and rural areas in partnership with the police. Their aim was/is to protect government infrastructure and the private sector, as well as people subject to attack from hoodlums.²⁴ Generally however, it has been better known for maintaining night surveillance of the communities, halting suspicious movements and making arrests. The VGN is the focus of this study as far as vigilantism is concerned.

CONTROVERSIES AND MODES OF OPERATIONS

Vigilante-type organizations in Nigeria have often emerged due to the rise in crime and increasing failure of the State to secure life and property by maintaining law and order. These groups flourish not only in places where states lack capacity to protect citizens from crime, but also where the state itself is believed to be corrupt or untrustworthy. Deep mistrust of the state and formal security providers, driven by the inability of the police to provide basic security and protect its citizens' human rights, further encourages vigilantism. Again, the public image of these groups often presents a one-sided picture of vigilante groups. They are often described as mere brutal and undisciplined mobs or crowds consisting of mostly young people without any clear social or political identity, and as being emotional and spontaneous. More troubling is the perception of some of these prominent groups as being militias that promote the ethnic, political and religious interests of private individuals or groups who finance them; simply put, as being unprofessional in policing. For example, while some members of the OPC are involved in vigilante activities, such as patrolling the streets and chasing down criminals, others' members are

known to have engaged with issues that foment crisis than those that offer security.²⁵ The Hisbah groups in Northern Nigeria are seen as helping in the preservation of the Islamic culture. It is in recognition of their services that the Supreme Council for Sharia in Nigeria (SCSN) requested the federal government not to see the Hisbah groups as security rivals but as groups complementing the services of the police.²⁶ The Bakassi Boys, on the other hand, have been accused of operating under the orbit of the South-Eastern State Governors and also of defying laws, as well as killing real and perceived criminals.

Although the modes of action somewhat varied among the community watch groups and the vigilantes interviewed here, there were several similarities. Usually, patrols were made up of groups of young men who meet after dusk (any time from 9pm to 12 midnight) to patrol specific areas until the morning hours (until about 5:30am, latest). While these young men patrolled or gathered with one another, they kept a vigilant eye on their surroundings for possible trouble and criminal elements. These patrols stopped and interrogated any stranger that entered their neighbourhood, especially at odd hours.²⁷ Once a person was deemed suspicious, the group would question the

individual to ascertain motives or intentions for being in that area. If they found the explanation acceptable, they would let them go or escort them to where they claimed they were going. However, if the person in question seemed to have been lying, then other actions were taken.²⁸

The specific course of action taken by different vigilante groups, when faced with a criminal or a potential one, seemed to greatly vary from group to group. Those groups that had approval from the police to operate as community watch groups clearly recognized that even criminals have rights and 'with power comes responsibility'. However, at times, the captured person was never immediately (and not always) brought to the police, and an individual's guilt or innocence was often determined on the spot after an interrogation.²⁹ Patrolling the streets is a dangerous undertaking, with group members saying that they themselves have often been injured when facing criminals. As a result, they have armed themselves with cutlasses, bows and arrows, iron bars and so on, claiming that the criminals were often better equipped than they were. Consequently, they felt forced to respond with armed violence.³⁰

Baker touches upon this issue of escalating violence. He argues that

the most fundamental response to the use of force is counterforce. Despite the fact that citizens arm themselves, criminals continue their illegal activities while preparing themselves to meet defensive violence with violence. However, criminal violence not only drives people to defend themselves, but also to retaliate in anger.³¹ When this happens, the escalation of violence is often unavoidable. The 'defensive violence' of Nigerian 'vigilantes' could thereby be seen both as a response, a consequence and a contributing factor to the structural and physical violence of everyday life in Nigeria. These aspects highlight that the existence of vigilante groups leads to a number of negative consequences. The most obvious one is when these groups become more of a threat rather than the defenders of the community.³² The unpredictable nature of these groups can become particularly exacerbated when the young men patrol the streets under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or when their vigilante ways become profitable; for example, when they resort to extortion or other gang-like activities.³³ On the one hand, there is much evidence that 'so-called' suspects' rights are severely violated by these methods and the manner in which they are apprehended. But on the other hand, one can wonder who is

protecting the rights of the community members who live in constant fear from burglary and other crimes. However, this study observes that the escalating violence was not only a reaction to better armed criminals, but also a result of frustration. Sam Eze notes that many vigilante groups typically feel a strong sense of frustration about the fact that apprehended criminals were not properly dealt with by the police or the courts, and that in many cases they were released after a day or two.³⁴ This may be due to a combination of either corruption, due process or lack thereof.

In their defense, a police officer in the department of operations, Force Headquarters (annex) Lagos, explained that often these groups would apprehend a suspected criminal and bring the person to the police without any concrete evidence.³⁵ He also claimed that the group members were not always willing to follow up these cases and/or testify against the suspected criminals in court.³⁶ This study observes that most vigilante groups seemed more willing to take the law into their own hands rather than to hand over the suspected criminal to the police force, which the vigilantes believe is inefficient and corrupt. This clearly demonstrates an area where better communication and increased awareness between the

police and Vigilante groups could lead to a possible reduction of violence and mob justice. However, this improvement between the police and vigilantes is already being seen following the activities of the VGN.

THE VGN

The establishment of the VGN could be traced to 1983 when various communities in Nigeria began to establish night-watch by volunteers in the community who also consisted of local hunters and youths.³⁷ However, it was from 1985, following the increase of crime in Nigeria, that the then-Inspector General of Police Etim Inyang urged communities around the country to establish their own vigilantes to assist the police in tackling crimes, following an upsurge of crime.³⁸ These vigilante associations were to aid the police in ending the rising wave of criminal activities, which ranged from murder, rape and theft, and in protecting lives and properties. Consequently, elders in the various communities in Nigeria deemed it necessary that a civil defense organization should be reinstated. Thereafter, the VGN was established.³⁹ By 18th March 1999, the VGN was officially incorporated by the Corporate Affairs Commission and established with nine Board of Trustees members. By March

2003, the VGN had come up with a detailed Constitution.⁴⁰ Its aim and objectives were spelt out under Article 4 as follows:

- a. To assist the Police and other law enforcement agencies to curb crime.
- b. To protect and preserve public property.
- c. Assist the Police in crowd control and maintenance of peace at public functions where the need arises.
- d. With the clearance of the Police, assist public agencies in the protection of their establishment plants and equipment.
- e. To give information to the Police and other security agencies of criminals or wanted persons residing in the Ward or Local government.
- f. To locate the permanent or temporary residences of receivers of stolen properties and “419 practitioners” (obtaining under false pretence) for the purposes of enabling the police to arrest or monitor their activities.
- g. To make positive and useful contributions to the advancement, progress and well-being of the community by mobilizing and assisting in communal development efforts.

- h. To abide by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and all relevant laws and by-laws.⁴¹

According to Alhaji Ali Sokoto, the pioneer founder of the VGN, the VGN started in the Tudun Wada area of Kaduna State (Nigeria) during a certain period when there was a high rate of criminal activities and street thugs were roaming the streets oppressing people. Women were harassed and sometimes raped even in broad daylight, sometimes in the company of their partners. The situation became worrisome, which prompted the then-Commissioner of Police to instruct the Divisional Police Officer (DPO) of GidanGayu (in the Tudun-Ido area of Kaduna State) to address the matter. “The DPO was Dabo Aliyu and he together with the ‘Hakimi’ (District Head), Dan Dawa, summoned a meeting of stakeholders of the committee and elders, and I was among those that were invited. We deliberated for six weeks before we finally agreed that a security group to be known as ‘banga’ was to be formed and ‘banga’ means vanguard or watch over”.⁴²

On the VGN’s relationship with the Nigeria Police, Ali Sokoto says that it is very cordial. He says when a thief is caught, they ensure

that they interrogate him thoroughly - until he admits his faults - before he is taken to the police station. However, their problem with the police is that they don't support or assist them with anything. These writers' submission here is that aggressive interrogation of a thief when caught, as quoted by Ali Sokoto's, may go against the tenets of professionalism, especially in the eyes of most professional international organizations, and in an era of increasing voices against 'jungle justice' and human rights abuses by law enforcement agencies in Nigeria, as well as the position of the law that all accused are deemed innocent until found guilty in a court of law. What is clearly extant is lack of professionalism and due process.

In the States that such bills were passed, vigilantes were assisted with facilities and incentives to help them in the day-to-day running of affairs. In these same States, security patrols were enhanced and stipends were provided for the members. For instance in Kano State, VGN received 51 Hilux vehicles for the State Command, and for Zamfara State 18 Hilux vehicles and 1,200 motorcycles, and for Kaduna State four Hilux vehicles, 26 motorcycles and two power bikes and so on. In several states, stipends are paid monthly to the

VGN members.⁴⁵

At the national level, there is no financial support from the federal government although VGN receives full moral support from federal security organs like the Nigeria Police Force, Department of State Services (DSS), Office of the National Security Adviser and Federal Ministry of Interior. The only dependable source of income for the VGN National Headquarters mostly comes from the states where they have the full support of the state governor.⁴⁶

On the issue of carrying arms, VGN is not allowed to carry arms such as conventional guns although they patrol with the Nigeria Police. Traditional weapons like bows and arrows or local guns - the type used by hunters - are however used. They supply the police with intelligence since they are more familiar with the local terrain than the police. However, there are some exceptional cases where their members are allowed to carry conventional guns such as for instance, in parts of the North East due to the peculiar war situation involving the Boko Haram Islamic sect. Further, in some states where the level of crime is high as well as due to the severity of some cases, the vigilante are given arms but such arms are carried under license from the Commissioner of Police

in that state.⁴⁷ The VGN also boast of a database where they keep the records of all registered members of the VGN across the 36 states of the federation and the FCT, prepared according to the Local Government and State. Currently, the VGN boast about 1.4 million registered members.⁴⁸

On training, some institutions provide training for the VGN and also some private firms. For instance, they are in partnership with several leadership training centres in the country such as the Citizens and Leadership Training Centre, Shere Hills, Jos. VGN also collaborates with the Nigeria Police, which offers assistance in many ways by providing training and allowing the use of their facilities, especially some of the training schools across the states. Similarly, the DSS and Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corp offer lectures and drills using their facilities in Katsina and Abeokuta.

OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES OF THE VGN

As a way of further checkmating the activities of its own members, there are certain offences against which disciplinary action may be taken, such as breaches of the constitution, acts or conduct likely to bring the organization into disrepute or ridicule, engagement in dishonest practices including

defrauding the organization and activities likely to cause disaffection among members, issuance of unauthorized pronouncements or press releases in the name of the organization, acts of sabotage against the activities of the organization, disorderly conduct of meetings, holding of illegal meetings and making unauthorized contacts on behalf of the organization, and illegal arrest, extortion and torture of suspects.⁵⁶

The Kano State Commander Alhaji Kabiru emphasizes that a VGN member is expected to work to the best of his ability without showing any personal interest nor tribal, religious and political bias in the execution of his duties. Neither is he to take the law into his hands nor go out on duty without being assigned to such duty. Further, he is not to reveal the modus operandi of the organization or its secrets without authority.

The VGN is structured along the lines of Ward, Local Government, State, and National levels with all of them having Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen, Secretaries, Publicity Secretaries, Treasurers, Legal Advisers and Auditors. To complement the VGN, efforts of ex-officio members - comprising representatives of the communities, police, DSS, two religious leaders, traditional leaders

and one person of high integrity - at the various structural levels (as they apply) are directly or indirectly involved in supervising the activities of the VGN.⁶⁰

Contrary to popular belief, the VGN while largely consisting of poorly educated individuals, is also made up of educated and enlightened individuals. For instance, the VGN Commander General Jahun is a retired Army Colonel who possesses a master's degree and other professional qualifications. The minimum expected qualification for membership into the VGN is the First School Leaving Certificate. However, one of the main challenges apparently being faced by the VGN is that of funds not only for equipment but also for training and psychological development.

Jahun offers some examples of recent successful operations that have been carried out by the VGN with the support of the police and army. For example, he says that in collaboration with the police in 2015 and 2016, over 20,000 cows were recovered from cattle rustlers in Kano alone with 10,000 in Katsina and 6,000 in the Zamfara and Kaduna states, respectively. Further, there has been an arrest of several cult leaders in Benue State in 2016. Interestingly, according to Jahun, the VGN has also been

at the forefront in the ongoing battle against insurgency in the North East of the country. When Mubi in Adamawa State was captured by the Boko Haram insurgents, he said his men fought to take back the town and that even the Magdalli and Baga towns in Bornu were recaptured with the active participation of his men alongside the military. Jahun adds that, unfortunately, many VGN members have lost their lives in the line of duty without any form of compensation. For instance, over 1,000 died in 2009 as a result of the North East insurgency, which also claimed the life of the VGN State Commander in Maiduguri and virtually all the State Executive Officers and their family members, as well as the destruction of the state secretariat.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

An issue bearing on the success of community policing in Nigeria is the emergence of local vigilante groups to fight crime in communities where the police have done little to maintain law and order. The VGN is a national organization as well as a voluntary one whose membership is made up of people from the very community in which they operate. They are involved in community policing as a registered group with the backing of the law. In other words, they liaise with law

enforcement agencies to carry out their community policing duties. However, it must be mentioned that it is not part of their duties to prosecute criminals. Once a criminal is arrested, they forward the suspect to the police. Their closeness to the grassroots and their knowledge of the local terrain thus makes them a necessary tool in community policing. There is, however, the need for adequate funding of the VGN to enable it to improve its public perception. Such funding will help it gear towards being more professional, which would be made possible through better training and regular seminars to enlighten and educate them on their roles, in cooperation with other law enforcement agencies.

Notes

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