Working Paper No. 6

DEATH-AGONY OF A MALFORMED POLITICAL ORDER

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2005

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The primary elections for local councils for the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Nigeria's ruling party, in Nembe on 5 July 2002 was a bloody affair. Two factions, led by local politicians with substantial youth followings, battled for dominance of the political space to enable them place favored loyalists as the party's candidate for council chairman. The stakes were high. Whoever emerged victorious would most certainly romp to victory when the main inter-party elections were conducted in a year's time, given the PDP's near-total grip on power and strategic resources in the various states and the federal center. He would in turn oversee the five oil fields from which Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) produces an estimated 200,000 barrels of oil from Nembe creek daily.

By the evening of 6 July when the primary elections came to an end in Nembe and the seven other local councils in Bayelsa State, forty people had been killed in election-related violence, the bulk of them in Nembe and Twon-Brass, a satellite community where the local subsidiary of Agip of Italy, operated an oil terminal. The two factional leaders and their storm troopers were at the heart of the political violence that engulfed Nembe and forced the surviving inhabitants to flee.

Lionel Jonathan, one of the factional leaders was head of Isongufuro, a cultural group that had metamorphosed into one of the most feared youth vigilantes in Nembe.[1] Jonathan, formerly a university teacher in law, also served as the Bayelsa State Commissioner for Environment and campaign manager for the state governor's bid for re-election in April 2003. Mr Jonathan and his band of vigilantes were the governor's political enforcers in Nembe. Pitted against them was P. Barigha-Amange, a former oil executive who nursed the ambition of displacing the governor and saw the local council primary election as his opening move to realize his project. Barigha-Amange was leader of Isenasawo, a rival vigilante. Although Isongufuro had the backing of the state government and the machinery of 'legitimate' violence at its disposal, Isenasawo was the dominant political force in Nembe at the time of the elections.

The elections were a farce, albeit one in which men of violence played the star role. The Governor, anxious to ensure that candidates of his choice emerged victorious in the

[1] Isongufuro began life as a youth cultural organization in 1992. With the return of electoral politics in Nigeria during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, it was gradually transformed into a political vigilante of sorts, led by Lionel Jonathan. Isenasawo, on the other hand, emerged in 1998 to counter Isongufuro's excesses in Nembe and environs. The members chose Barigha-Amange as their leader.

primary in all the eight local councils, had dispatched teams of heavily-armed anti-riot police to Nembe, Brass, and other areas where he feared a free and open vote would go against him in the evening of 4 July. Groups like Isongufuro were to provide local backup.

When party members came out to vote in the morning of 5 July in the various towns, they found that voters cards and other electoral material had been diverted to the homes of local politicos loyal to the governor and his henchmen. In Nembe Isongufuro dispersed the voters, murdered several people who attempted to put up a fight, and made away with the electoral materials. In Brass supporters of the governor, aided by a full complement of anti-riot police, launched a violent attack on politicians and their youth followers whom they considered the 'opposition.' They were beaten up and their homes were set on fire. Officials dispatched by the PDP from the national capital to ensure an impartial vote were kidnapped when they proved 'uncooperative.'

Officials of Shell and Agip were on hand to lend support to the governor. Ordinarily, election materials were to have been taken directly to designated voting centers by non-partisan party officials since the governor was also a member of the PDP and had a compelling interest in shaping the outcome of the vote. However, Creek House, the governor's office and official residence in Yenogoa, the capital, became a clearinghouse and store for voters cards. It was from here that they were airlifted by helicopters provided by Shell to Nembe where Lionel Jonathan and Isongufuro then took over proceedings. Agip also airlifted voting material directly to its own terminal in Brass instead of Twon, the local council headquarters designated by the party's national executive as the voting center. Votes were then allocated to candidates favoured by the governor by aides sent from the capital for the purpose. In the ensuing clash between protesting locals and the anti-riot police and local toughs in the pay of the governor, four people were murdered.[2]

When the results of the party primaries were announced one week later, all the governor's candidates in the eight local councils, including Nembe and Brass, were either 'returned' unopposed or 'won' outright. The governor expressed satisfaction with the outcome and declared that the elections had been conducted in an atmosphere of 'peace and tranquility.' The state police boss dismissed press reports that the primary election had been marked by murder, brigandage and vote rigging as 'unfounded.' Local NGOs and journalists who had monitored the elections called for their cancellation and the sack of the police boss. Nobody paid them any attention.

The ordinary people picked up their disrupted lives and continued to plod on.

In the Fog of the Season's End

[2] See *Ballots of Blood: Report of the July 2002 Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Primaries in Bayelsa State, Nigeria*, Ijaw Council of Human Rights, August 2002, Port Harcourt.

As our narration makes clear, the present political order in Nembe is founded on and sustained by violence. Our argument in this chapter - and which is also the overarching thesis of this book - is that this order, inaugurated by the British colonial project in 1895 with unprecedented violence and reproduced and institutionalized by local Nigerian political elites since formal independence in 1960, is a malformed political order that is now in its last death-throes. Nembe and the other oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta are the epicenter of its decay and eventual death.

Central to this order was a regime of rapine despotism and the poverty and powerlessness that is born of this condition. We shall argue in this chapter that it is a malformed political order because, producing political repression and scarcity instead of the freedom and prosperity that is the legitimate quest of citizens globally, it has not been able to find legitimacy in the eyes of the local people it has reduced to subjects these past one hundred years; and thus unable to find fertile soil in which to root and flourish. This malformed political order is dying because new social forces, forged in the cauldron of violence, unremitting serfdom and material scarcity that are its legacy, are now pressing against the barricades.

We shall locate the prominent symptoms of this malformed and dying order in the political, economic, and social crisis in which Nembe, the wider Niger Delta, and Nigeria are engulfed currently. The three corresponding components of this crisis are the accelerating loss of state sovereignty and concomitant decay of state institutions, locally and nationally; the failure of neo-liberal programmes of structural adjustment and its devastating impact on the people of Nembe; and the worsening communal violence and youth anomie that are reshaping social relations into malignant forms in Nembe and the other oil communities. Linking the local (Nembe), the national (Nigeria) and the global (Shell in Nembe creek oil fields), we shall show in this analysis the ways in which the cross-cutting tensions generated in these three arenas play out in Nembe and underline our argument that the present regime of institutionalized rapine despotism is now collapsing under the impossible weight of its violent past and present inequities.

When Politics Fail: Three Symptoms of a Dying Political Order

Rory Carrol, the Africa correspondent of the Guardian of London, filed this story from Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, on 24 October 2003: 'What Nigerians call bunkering and oil executives call rustling has hit the big time: criminal gangs are siphoning so much crude oil from pipelines in the Niger delta that they have started using tankers to spirit it away.

'A Russian-registered tanker laden with 11, 300 tonnes of allegedly stolen crude has become the latest vessel intercepted by the Nigerian navy in the gulf of Guinea. The vessel, African Pride, is believed to be part of a fleet which aids the theft of an estimated 200,000 barrels a day from the delta's swamps…Siphoning off such quantities amid a landscape of jungle and marsh, with thousands of creeks, requires sophisticated

equipment and organization. To the dismay of the government and oil companies, the thieves have proved that they have this in abundance.'[3]

Nigeria is the sixth largest oil producer in the world presently. A daily output of 2.2 million barrels accounts for 80 per cent of government revenues and 90 per cent of foreign exchange earnings. Oil, clearly, is a strategic resource, at least viewed from the perspective of the country's governing elites. Yet governmental power and the administrative structures vital to securing the all-important oilfields is precipitately shrinking in the Niger delta as elsewhere in the country. What the British journalist neglected to point out was why the oil smugglers are able to so flagrantly ply their illegal trade with impunity: The 'bunkerers' too are members of the governing elite – invariably senior political figures or military officers deployed to the delta to police the oil fields and ensure that 'restless' youth protesting the adverse impacts of the oil industry on their farm lands and water sources do not disrupt production.

As social and economic conditions worsen in Nigeria, politics is no longer the instrument through which contending interests are conciliated in a structured framework. Politics is itself a struggle for the control of the oil largesse, which, once secured in the form of booty, is used to further and consolidate political ends. In this struggle, the state and the paraphernalia of violence at its disposal is the ultimate booty. For whoever dominates the state necessarily controls the means to displace rival contenders for a disproportionate share of the oil bonanza. The adept, the unscrupulous, and sometime the lucky, emerge triumphant in this bruising contest. The losers, smarting from defeat and humiliation, turn their sights to lesser prizes. The oil bunkerers belong to this category.

Terry Lynn Karl has rightly argued that 'the revenues a state collects, how it collects them, and the uses to which it puts them defines its nature.'[4] Oil rent and the array of political and economic arrangements it throws up to perpetuate this predatory enclave economy not only powerfully shapes the nature of the Nigerian state, the vicious, bare-knuckled struggle between dominant and rising elites to control this rent ensures that the state is a key player in the economic and political spheres at the same time.

Its autonomisation as the impartial arbiter of last resort between competing interests, embedded in social, economic and political society but sitting above them, is hindered. As a political instrument hijacked by the temporarily successful faction in the struggle for the oil prize, the Nigerian state is resented by unsuccessful rival factions. It may still be able to project power, but is power lacking in real authority because its motives are suspect. It is also power without legitimacy because rival factions and ordinary people alike on whom it is exercised see only commandments backed up by the threat of violence; worse, commandments designed to make them part with their property on the pain of death.

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[3] Rory Carroll, 'Smugglers use tankers to steal Nigerian oil' The Guardian, London, 24 October, 2003.

[4] Terry Lynn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States*, University of California Press, Berekeley, 1997, p. 13.

Those who are able to challenge this illegitimate power, like the oil bunkerers in our story, do. The little people, in this instance the people of Nembe and the other oil-bearing communities in the Niger delta whose traditional sources of livelihood – their farmlands and fishing waters – have been devastated by half a century of uncontrolled oil exploitation, resort to civil disobedience and sabotage, and in the case of youth, direct confrontation with Nigerian troops and riot police, the immediate, direct face of the oil rentiers who have visited so much grief and ruin on them.[5]

The victorious faction respond by dispatching special forces equipped with rocket propelled grenades, machine guns, tear gas, stun grenades, attack helicopters, fast-attack naval patrol boats, and other paraphernalia of modern warfare, including experts in psycho-terror to the 'volatile' region. Whole hamlets and villages are razed down and some of the inhabitants murdered or mutilated. Faced with a well-organised and determined opposition with popular grassroots support as in the 500,000 Ogoni in the eastern delta fringes, they decide to 'sanitize' the area and root out the 'subversive elements' disturbing the 'public peace.' The entire nation is boxed in in a lightening military manouvre that would have impressed Shaka the Zulu; and then the death squads are sent in. Where the squad suffers fatalities, as in Odi, a central delta town in December 1999, you simply shoot everything in sight, including goats, chicken, and eighty-five year women too frail to get out of the hut. The houses are torched and the experts in psychological warfare scrawl graffiti on the charred walls insulting the dead town and its gods. [6]

It is all very impressive; very military. This must be a powerful state, with its striking arm reaching out to smite its enemies even in the furtherest, uncharted parts of the empire! But you can see that all this display of disproportionate violence, obscene in its extravagance; all this spectacle; it is all a put on. The rentiers and the men of violence in their employ may be deadly serious in their determination to maintain their grip on the oil fields; this is demonstrated clearly enough by all the shooting of unarmed youths and raping of young girls. The piling corpses and the barren wedded ones traumatized for life testify to their earnestness.

But they have no heart in the fight. The soldiers pile back into their trucks and beat a hasty retreat as soon as the latest round of killing is done. They do not hold conquered territory. There are no proconsuls to 'discipline and punish' the new subjects. A few soldiers are left to guard the oil wells and the oil company workers, and the rest scamper off. The survivors crawl out of the bush, bury their dead, and resume their cry for justice.

In the capital, spokesmen of the rentiers deny that massacres are taking place in the delta. They speak only of rival ethnic militias hacking each other to death with blunt machetes. They are killing each other because…well, they hate each other. It is a 'tribal' thing;

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[5] See Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights and Oil,* Verso Books, London, 2003. See in particular chapter four, 'A Dying Land.'
[6] Environmental Rights Action, Silent Genocide.

ancient, not at all amenable to rational political solutions. They speak also of the bunkerers, loudly, threatening them with 'the full rigour of the law.' The oil companies join the charade; indeed, they amplify it by flying in obliging journalists from London and Paris and New York to witness 'first hand' what these tribesmen are doing to each other. 'This has nothing to do with us. We don't understand the thinking of these people. They are not like 'us.' Frankly, we don't know why they are fighting and killing each other.' Then they bring in the subject of oil bunkerers. 'They are ruining our business! We don't know what to do about them. And the guns. Where did they get such sophisticated weapons? The government must step in. We need more security or else this place will go up in flames!

But it all rings hollow. Everybody, the rentiers and oil executives included, know who the oil bunkerers are. They cannot move against them because they are all partners in the same dirty crime: plunder. They all know the source of the guns that have flooded the delta: poorly paid soldiers selling their weapons to anyone, including 'enemy' youth, for hard cash; the oil companies, stocking up their private armouries and arming 'company' police who subsequently pass them on to third parties; youth vigilantes recruited by the oil companies to 'protect' their facilities and who use the money so obtained to buy rifles and machine guns to secure yet more 'protection' work.

These are guns for hire, like in the American west in the time of the gold rush. Only here crude oil is the new gold. Governmental presence is only felt in the form of machine guns and jackboots; but they have an eerie evanescent quality to them; here now and gone the next instant; leaving bullet-perforated bodies to bear witness. Mute testimony.

The Nigerian state is not only in retreat; it is speedily losing sovereignty. IMF and World Bank officials vet the annual budget before it is read in a public broadcast by the President. They are quick to take a knife to aspects they don't like, usually too 'generous' an allocation to social services. It does not matter that hospitals are emptied of doctors and medicines, and that school children have never held a textbook in their hands since 1986 when the structural adjustment regimen kicked in. The finance minister is powerless to countermand the dictates of their red felt pen.

The new civilian government is under intense pressure from the Bush White House to pull Nigeria out of OPEC and join the club of producers more amenable to American interests. This is yet to happen, but regime officials are talking loudly about the need for 'more flexible options' that will enable the country maximize its production potentials. The Nigerian state has over the years benefited tremendously as a result of OPEC's price-fixing ability. It is in its long-term interest to stay in OPEC, not outside it. But then the calculations of the rentiers are shaped, not by the long-term interests of the state, but by considerations of regime survival and private gain. Bowling with America meets both needs, at least in the short term. This is a state without a mind of its own.

The decay of state institutions continues apace. In June 2003 a leading weekly reported that the Inspector General of Police, the nation's chief security officer, had been soliciting and accepting financial gratification from state governors in the country in

return for 'co-operation' during election time. (Read turning a blind eye when thugs hijack ballot boxes from polling station to enable them inflate the vote in the governors' favour.[7] The April 2003 presidential and governorship election were openly and blatantly rigged by the party, in some areas returning more votes than there were actual people in the electoral register. The Carter Centre, which had sent a team to monitor the exercise, declared it a fraud. A former deputy governor, under investigation for aiding and abetting the murder of the country's Minister of Justice, was sprung from detention and 'elected' a senator on the platform of the ruling party. High court judges assigned the case had to drop it like a hot potato when they began to receive threatening phone calls in the night, and senior government officials in the capital donned the coat of innocence.

Elsewhere in one of the eastern states, a political contractor whose only claim to fame was that his brother was the President's chief of staff, organized the abduction of the governor whose 'election' he had bankrolled only the previous month, sequestered him in a hotel toilet, and obtained his resignation at gun point. But not before readying a more pliable candidate to take over. In so doing he offered clear proof, if indeed any was needed, that the ruling party was the state, the regime, and the government melded into a seamless whole; a veritable racket sustained by violence and deploying violence to eviscerate all obstacles to its endless trips to the oil wells that alone possess the secret of the alchemy that turns mere viscous substance into American dollars.

The Maxim gun brooked no opposition in colonial times when Her Majesty's proconsuls embarked on the hazardous but very profitable project of taking the fat of the land, and in the process, reduced its owners from citizens to subjects. One hundred years later their clones continue dutifully on this path. The state sits on society; it does not emanate from it the better to secure it and make it more prosperous. Lacking a raison deter, the Nigerian state looks more and more like a beached tilapia thrashing the hedge to death before its own turn.

A National Economy? The Basket as Metaphor

The economy is hemorrhaging, and government officials do not know how to stop the flow of looted funds to Western banks. In October 2003 President Olusegun Obasanjo's government contracted lawyers in London to begin proceedings against the Chancellor of the Exchequer for refusing to hand over the sum of three million pounds sterling customs officials at Heathrow airport had seized from a courier of the late dictator, General Sani Abacha, in 1998. Alhaji Daura, the courier, had arrived at Heathrow on a private jet carrying three suitcases of cash.

The money represents a tiny fraction of the estimated five billion dollars Abacha had transferred from the Nigerian central bank to his private accounts in London and other European capitals in his five years of rule. 'I hope it is possible to reach a solution to this situation without the necessity of court proceedings, wrote the lawyers acting for Nigeria's newly established Economic and Financial Crimes Commission in a letter

[7] See The News Magazine story on this event; 4 May 2003.

addressed to Gordon Brown, chancellor of the exchequer. The UK Treasury department did not respond to the letter.[8] Treasury officials claim that they are playing a leading role in efforts to stop stolen money being laundered through Western banks; but representatives of the Nigerian government complain that they have received little help from Britain in their efforts to retrieve the five billion dollars Abacha salted away before his death in 1998.

The Abacha saga is only the tip of the capital flight epidemic that has virtually smothered the economy to death. The rentiers, having dug the fatal hole in the hulk of the ship by their looting of the oil windfall these past three decades, realize it could sink at any moment. The rush to spirit the loot abroad has turned into a stampede. Paul Collier of the World Bank has calculated that funds held by Nigerians in private accounts in Western banks is some US $170 billion. This money, noted J.K. Randle, a writer and President of the respected Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria, in a newspaper article in October 2003, 'represents a sizeable chunk of the US $300 billion which Nigeria has earned from oil in the last twenty years together with unrepartriated nonoil export earnings.' [9]

Manufacturing industry is not only declining, Nigeria is increasingly being marginalized by better-performing countries regionally and world-wide, even in areas like oil, petrochemicals, and raw materials-based light technology manufacturing where it has a competitive edge given the size of its internal market and natural resource endowments. Total manufacturing value added (MVA) declined from US$2.4 billion in 1985 to US$ 1.7 in 1999. MVA per capita also dropped from US$16 in 1985 to US$14 in 1999, one of the lowest in West and central Africa. Senegal, in comparison, over the same period emerged as a strong industrial performer.

Nigeria is also the regional laggard in export performance. Manufactured exports dropped from US$216 million in 1985 to US$88 million in 2000, accounting for only 0.2 per cent of total exports. Noted Manuel Albaladejo, 'This is among the lowest manufacturing propensity ratios in Sub-Saharan Africa, and is the result not only of declining manufactured exports but also an increased dependency on primary exports, particularly oil.'[10] An under-funded and decaying educational system, technological stagnation of local industry, and weak Information and communication technology are key factors in the country's industrial decline.

Incoherent macroeconomic and fiscal policies are also important players in this dismal story. A primary goal of the Structural Adjustment Programme, drafted by Ishrat Hussain, the World Bank representative in Nigeria but forcefully implemented by the

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[8] See Nigeria Today, 'Nigeria to sue UK over seized 3 million pounds,' London, 10 October 2003.
[9] J.K. Randle, 'Letter to Arikawe…Of Foreign Debt and Ignorance,' Thisday, 26 October, 2003, Lagos.
[10] Manuel Albaladejo, *Industrial Relations in Nigeria: From Bad to Worse*, Queen Elizabeth House Working Paper No. 101, University of Oxford, February 2003, p. 8.

military dictator General Ibrahim Babangida in 1986 in the teeth of widespread public opposition, was to boost agricultural production. This neo-liberal regimen was also expected to streghten demand-management policies, liberalise trade and foreign exchange regimes, create a clement environment for a greater role for market mechanisms, and encourage privitisation.[11] By April 1999 when the military, under intense pressure from a deeply discontented public, relinquished power and returned to the barracks, not a single one of these goals had been met.

After four years in the saddle and still unable to turn the economy round, President Olusegun Obasanjo invited the Vice President of the World Bank, a Nigerian, to assume the post of finance minister in June 2003. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a Harvard-trained economist, told Nigerians that the reforms she planned to ram through would be very painful but that 'we have to trust that things will be better at the end of the day.' The new reform programme Okonjo-Iweala drew up was fairly orthodox World Bank structural adjustment, relying on new investments in agriculture, small and medium-scale industry, and a reinvigorated privitisation drive to boost growth. She also hopes that western creditors would forgive the country much of its 30 billion dollars in debt.[12]

The appointment of a new batch of technocrats to take the ailing economy in hand might convey a sense of stability, that the ruling rentiers have a national mission, and that their hold on power is secure. But no one has a keener sense of the fragility of the regime's power base and the fact that what passes for a 'national' economy is in truth so many rackets run by armed cabals beyond the reach of the law than Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military ruler who rigged himself back to office as President in April 2003. None of the four government-owned oil refineries has been fully operational since 1999 when Obasanjo took over from the military despite the staggering sums that have been spent to refurbish them. They are routinely sabotaged. Nigeria, an oil-producing country, spends an estimated two billions dollars yearly importing premium motor spirit and other refined petroleum products.

It was a frustrated and impotent President Obsanjo who addressed senior officers of the Armed Forces in Lagos, the commercial capital, on 1 November 2003. 'I have a strong suspicion that our refineries are not working the way they should work because of sabotage,' he said, striving to instill 'presidential' authority into his voice. 'I have a strong suspicion and I am proving it because these are people who, probably, are directly or indirectly involved in the importation of oil products.'[13] It is an open secret that a consortium of army generals and local representatives of the oil companies have the

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[11] See Thomas Biersteker and Peter Lewis, 'The Rise and Fall of Structural Adjustment in Nigeria' in Larry Diamond, Anthony Kirk-Greene, and Oyeleye Oyediran, *Transition Without End: Nigerian Politics and Civil Society Under Babangida*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 1997.

[12] Nigeria Today Online, 'New economics promises sweeping changes,' 15 September 2003, London.

[13] Adeyeye Joseph and Malachy Agbo, 'Obasanjo accuses Marketers of sabotage,' Thisday, Lagos, 1 November, 2003.

monopoly on this money-spinner. But not even the President dare name names. Indeed, he went out of his way to re-assure the officers gathered in the Nigerian Air Force Officers Mess that Friday afternoon that the new reforms, which would substantially chip away the fat perks and perquisites enjoyed by public servants, would not be applied to them. President Obasanjo was anxious to conciliate the managers of the instruments of violence and keep them on side, even as he realized that they were undermining the economy his technocrats were battling to salvage. Violence, not legitimacy, is the all-important final arbiter in a regime of institutionalized rapine despotism.

The multinational oil corporations are accelerating the decay and loss of state sovereignty. In July 2003 Shell Nigeria unfurled details of a new Exploration and Production Globalisation project that would entail massive retrenchment of local staff and the relocation of the Shell Africa Regional Head office to The Hague. Explained a company spokesman, 'The Group continues to explore best practices in its drive to evolve a more overall efficient organization. Whatever changes that take place is driven by the desire to extend its competitive edge. Globalization is one aspect of that drive.'[14]

But the oil workers union charged that the globalisation project would exacerbate the influx of expatriates into the company at the expense of local people, a trend they said had been rising since the early 1990s. They also accused the company of false declaration of expatriate personnel with immigration authorities, thereby circumventing the expatriate quota. When the workers mobilized at the company's premises to protest, they were brutalized by security personnel.[15] Appeals to the government to intervene were ignored. Meanwhile, the lo cal subsidiary of the US oil services giant, Haliburton, is being investigated in the United States following recent disclosures before the US Security and Exchange Commission that its agents paid Nigerian tax officials bribes worth US$2.4 million in 2000 to reduce the company's tax burden in Nigeria. The government is yet to publicly identify the corrupt tax men, less prosecute them.

Xavier Sala-i-Martin, a Professor of Economics at University of Columbia and Arvind Subramanian, an advisor in the Research Department of the International Monetary Fund ripped the veneer off what is dignified by the name 'national economy' when in an IMF working paper published in July 2003 they called for the oil revenue to be distributed directly to Nigerian citizens because public institutions, profoundly weakened by decades of military dictatorship, are no longer able to discharge basic governmental functions. Argued Sala-I-Martin and Subramanian, 'We showed that the main problem affecting the Nigerian economy was the fact that the oil revenues the government gets are regarded as manna from heaven which tends to undermine the quality of institutions and lower long term growth prospects. Starting from this premise, the logical conclusion is that the best way to deal with the problem is to transform Nigeria into a 'non-oil' economy. One way to do this is to prevent government officials from appropriating the oil resources directly.

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[14] Mike Oduniyi and Donald Andoor, 'Shell Workers Protest Planned Job Cuts,' Thisday, 28 August 2003.
[15] Mike Oduniyi, 'Major Industrial Crisis Hits Oil Sector,' Thisday, 2 September 2003, Lagos.

These resources should be distributed directly to the Nigerian citizens, ultimately their true and legitimate owners.'[16] As the two economists rightly pointed out, the poverty rate, measured as the share of the population subsisting on less than $1 dollar per day, doubled from 36 per cent in 1970 to 70 per cent in 2000. Out of an estimated population of 130 million, 90 million Nigerians now live in absolute poverty.

A howl of protests from governmental quarters greeted the paper when its recommendations were published in the leading Nigerian dailies. The new civilian government was dead serious about rooting out corruption, presidential spokesmen declared, and the call to remove the oil receipts from the control of a 'legitimately-elected' government was mischievous, designed to stoke up further unrest in the Niger delta. But no sooner had the protestations and effusive declarations of public virtue died down than Transparency International, the Berlin-based anticorruption watchdog, published its annual Corruption Perception Index for 2003. For the second straight year, Nigeria emerged the second most corrupt country in the world for doing business in. Ironically, President Obasanjo is a co-founder of the organization.

A defiant Ministry of Information official put forward a defense thus: 'We're corrupt, yes, but not to the extent they're putting it.'[17]

'This World is not My Home'

Millenarianism of the Islamic and Christian variety, born on the wings of profound poverty, powerlessness, and despair, is sweeping Nigeria's main cities and towns. In the north, thirteen states have embraced the Sharia (Islamic legal code) in open defiance of the Federal Government's insistence that Nigeria is a secular state. Politicians and Islamic clerics are united in the claim that 'godlessness' is the root cause of widespread social anomie and material want, and would disappear when the people returned to the 'way of God' and observed his laws in their daily lives. Ordinarily people, desperate for succour, have latched on this promise.

Mosques and Madrassas are springing up all over northern Nigeria, financed by Arab petrodollars and an ambitious Muammar Gadaffi dreaming of a new Arabia in the heart of Africa. Zealous Ulamas routinely cut off the limbs of malcontents. But for the international outcry that followed the sentence of death by stoning passed on a young unmarried mother for allegedly committing adultery, the increasingly assertive warriors for the crescent would have treated Nigerians to the equivalent of a Saudi Arabia-like public beheading.

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[16] Xavier Sala-I-Martin and Arvind Subramanian, *Addressing the Natural Resource Curse: An Illustration from Nigeria*, IMF Working Paper (WP/03/139), Washington D.C, July 2003, p. 18.
[17] Nigeria Today Online, 'Govt angry at being rated second most corrupt,' London, 11 October, 2003.

In the southern commercial city of Lagos, new cathedrals are jutting into the skyline and threatening to dwarf the Basilica in Yamousoukro in size and splendour. Prosperity-preaching Pastors, bedecked in gold and Armani suits and affecting American accents, exhort the redeemed in Christ to 'challenge God to make you a dollar-millionaire tonight!' On Sundays the hungry and perennially unemployed crawl out of the hovels and mingle with the rich in the lavishly bedecked churches. All dance feverishly to joyful music in His Praise.

God, it would seem, has come down to earth in Nigeria. But the poor, north and south of the country, are still waiting for the promised bounties. Mean while, driven delirious by the hopelessness of their situation, they club each other to death with machetes. In the cities, the Muslim poor torch churches and hunt down the Christian poor. The latter retaliate with commensurate brutality. In such cities as Jos and Kaduna, residential quarters exclusive to the warring religions are the norm where once Christian, Muslim, and traditional religion worshippers mingled and prospered.[18]

Intersecting these religious tensions are powerful regional and communal tensions. Irredentist movements are making new converts. Secessionist rhetoric is on the rise. Restless youth in their millions, denied education and denied hope, roam the cities and stare at the palatial homes of the rich with baleful eyes. One day soon, the eyes seem to say.

In the sprawling oil city of Warri in the western delta, 'one day' has arrived. Day and night youth militias, flying a wide array of flags ranging from the cultic to the civic, battle Federal troops deployed to protect the oil fields to a standstill. On both sides, the bodies are piling up.

In September 2003 President Obasanjo took delivery of NNS Nwambe, the third of seven warships 'donated' by the US Government under a security cooperation programme ostensibly to check unrest and crude oil theft in the delta. Docked in Lagos port where they were being fitted with canon and machine guns, these war machines intimidate. 'Our national assets are worth billions of dollars and the arrival of NNS Nwambe would help to safeguard them,' the admiral who heads the Nigerian navy told journalists.[19]

But the youth insurgents in the delta are not impressed. Poverty, state violence, and the bald fact of a dying land have combined to drive them beyond the end of things. They are standing firm, yes, even in the face of warships and canons. You may take our oil; you may rape our land and waters. But from now on you will have to kill us first.

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[18] In Kaduna, Muslims went on rampage in November 2002 following a newspaper article by a southern journalist that Prophet Mohammed probably would have taken as wife one of the contestants in the international beauty pageant to be staged in the country that week.

[19] Nigeria Today Online, 'Third U.S warship arrives for Niger Delta duty,' London, 8 September, 2003.

The soldiers do not like what they hear. Whole swathes of the delta are virtually no-go for them. Nor are they particularly unhappy about this. It is not really their fight. The petro-dollars, after all, are shared in the presidential fortress in Abuja.

Slowly, relentlessly, the sharp edge of the all-important instrument of violence is being blunted. It may not be immediately apparent, but the Nigerian state is dying. A lion without his claws may well be dead.

A land that devours its inhabitants

How do these symptoms of a dying political order play out in Nembe, the primary subject of our enquiry? The signs of morbidity we have highlighted in the wider Nigerian system are very much evident in present political, economic and social life in the twin city. The political order has broken down as we showed at the beginning of this narration. The two rival militias are locked in a deadly dwell for power. The King of Nembe lives in Port Harcourt, some 100 nautical miles away, and rarely visits his people. He steers clear of the political turbulence generated by the militias. The majority of his council of chiefs also live in Port Harcourt, and the handful in Nembe do not participate in public affairs. Youth and vigilantes alike hold king and council responsible for the social and economic crisis that has taken over their lives.

The little semblance of authority that there exists is the armed anti-riot police dispatched by the Federal authorities to the twin-city. There is an uneasy truce between the police and the warring factions. Each watches the other like a hawk. All are armed, and patrol the streets ostentatiously brandishing their machine guns. The vigilantes say the police are partisan; they support their rivals and also give protection to oil company officials whose activities have laid waste to their farmlands and fishing waters. The Police say the vigilantes are criminal elements who have been terrorizing the city and extorting money from law-abiding oil workers. The ordinary people distrust all three groups; but keep their heads down in the face of the guns. Violence, not public virtue, is the basis of authority in present Nembe.

The economic life of the people turned on fishing. But this was before the incessant oil spills began to take toll on fish life in Nembe creek and the surrounding lakes, ponds, and rivers.[20] Now Nembe fishermen and women spend hours in the open sea and sometimes go home with no catch at all. The gas flaring in the vicinity of the oil fields has also substantially damaged plant life. Tidal waves also spread spilled oil through the mangroves and onto farmlands rendering them infertile. There is no manufacturing; there is little economic life in Nembe. The bulk of the food is brought in from Port Harcourt. The oil fields are all that is left; but two hundred thousand barrels are piped out of Nembe daily and the inhabitants receive neither rent nor royalties. The anti-riot Police are in Nembe to ensure that the arrangement remain in place.

[20] Ike Okonta and Oronto Douglas, *Where Vultures Feast*, pp. 79-80.

There is a sense in which it can be said that Nembe is a city in permanent curfew. The streets are always deserted. Social capital is a scarce commodity. All are at war with each other: king against his council; youth vigilantes against both and against themselves. The youths accuse the king and his council of eating the oil money and giving none to the ordinary people. Youth accuse youth of accepting money from Shell and refusing to share it. The quarrel usually ends in violence. Elders and women have been elbowed out of the public arena; they raise their voices on the pain of death and physical punishment, administered with relish by the vigilantes. The two parts of the city fight each other intermittently. They quarrel over whose king is supreme and has the right to represent the city at the state level. There are fierce arguments over where local council buildings and other social facilities should be cited. Gunshots are exchanged. Young men die. Clashes with Okrika, a neighouring community, are also frequent, chalking up more bodies. Ownership of oil-bearing land is the perennial source of conflict. There is neither thoughtful government policy nor mediating agency to deliver permanent peace.

What Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal see as the constituent elements of the African crisis – the failure of economic development, political instability, societal divisions, violence, crime and communal conflict – are very much evident in Nembe and the larger Nigerian nation. Were the two scholars to explain the condition of contemporary Nembe, they would most certainly argue that the people are suffering from 'a crisis of modernity, and that the crisis of modernity is rooted in the deep history of the societies in which it is taking place.' Political disorder may reign in Nembe but it has been successfully instrumentalised by political bosses and their clients and actually functions to allocate social and economic goods to the satisfaction of all. State and society are locked in an anarchic, but nevertheless happy marriage. Development as it is understood in the West is not on the agenda. 'These' people are perfectly satisfied with their condition and see no profit in changing it.[21]

It is one thing to highlight the prebendal practices of political elites and argue that they are happy with the social framework that sustains this. It is an entirely different matter to read in the faces of the victims of this rapine order – in this case the overwhelming majority of the people of Nembe - joy and contentment in their present state of destitution, anomie, and political impotence – all of which are direct consequences of the reign of their elites. If it is such a happy kingdom, why the ubiquitous presence of the managers of violence and the lethal tools of their trade, deployed by the rentiers and sustained by the local subsidiary of Shell in all facets of Nembe life, coercing acceptance of the present order? [22]

To reiterate our central argument, the political order in Nembe, turning on rapine despotism, has not been able to embed in society because its project run against the deep

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[21] This is the central argument of Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*, James Currey, Oxford, 1999.

[22] We shall show in subsequent chapters how officials of Shell Nigeria employ armed vigilantes to 'protect' their installations in Nembe and also terrorize local people campaigning for environmental and social justice in the community.

desire of the ordinary people for democracy and its material fruits. Power, social theorists have told us, is the ability to make someone do what you desire of them. In the colony violence, not capital, was instrumentalised to extract wealth from the colonised. The state did not deliver development; it was the very repository of the violence necessary to reduce the inhabitants into subjects and coerce them to give up their wealth, in labour and raw material. This predatory framework, since taken over by indigenous elites following decolonisation, could not be institutionalized because it has encountered sustained and determined resistance, since the early years of the 20th century, from those to whom it has given only poverty and arbitrary rule. To maintain this illegitimate regime, which we argue is now in its last death-throes, violence has to be applied and re-applied.

But herein lies the paradox of violence as the structuring basis of the political order. The more violence is deployed to prop up and sustain economic and social arrangements, the more it undermines the very goal it seeks to achieve – a degree of social order within which it can continue its business of seizing booty in the long term. People forcefully deprived of the right to represent their own interests in the crucial arenas of political and economic life are by definition impoverished and discontented subjects. Discontents not only represent a real threat to the existing order; that order is also deprived of the vital contributions they could have brought to the project of creating prosperity for the commonweal. Scarcity is the soil in which revolt is nurtured. Political violence deployed to keep subjects down achieves its project of rapine in the short term, but ultimately defeats its own purpose in the long run. This process is clearly evident in Nembe and Nigeria today.

This is why we argue that this malformed political order is dying.