



The politics of environmentalism and environmental degradation in Nigeria: The case of MOSOP

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Abstract

The ills of environmental degradation in Nigeria became more prominent with the emergence of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990s. This later led to the rise of environmentalism and environmental concerns in Nigeria with the emergence of various environmental movements like the Oil Watch, Nigeria. Since then environmentalism in Nigeria has been experiencing challenges which are political in nature. This paper analyzed the politics involved in environmentalism and environmental degradation in Nigeria with the case of MOSOP. The Concept of Environmentalism was adopted in explaining the study. Also, the group theoretical approach was also adopted in explaining the study. The methodology employed in this study for the purpose of data collection and analysis is the use of secondary data and historical method. It was discovered that there is politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria, because environmental movements in their struggle for environmental rights and protection and in a bid to influence political process in Nigeria are caught in the web of politics as environmental movements often makes political demands on government. Also, it was discovered that MOSOP even as it advocates for environmental justice also made political demands on government as reflected in the Ogoni Bill of Rights presented to the Government and people of Nigeria on 26 August, 1990. The paper however recommends that environmental movements in the process of seeking to influence the political process and in their political demands/ activities should ensure that there is high level of commitment to the struggle of environmental rights and that environmental movements should focus more on environmental issues than politics.

Keywords: politics, environmentalism, environmental degradation, group theory, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Environmentalism has emerged at every critical time in history as the world is experiencing occurrence of increased environmental problems such as pollution which raised grave environmental concerns. That is, throughout history a concern for environmental protection has recurred in diverse forms, in different parts of the world. Furthermore, it can be argued that early interest in the environment was a feature of the Romantic Movement which emerged in the early 19th century. Also, it was discovered that an early 'Back-to-Nature' movement, which anticipated the romantic ideal of modern environmentalism, was advocated for by intellectuals such as John Ruskin, William Morris, George Bernard Shaw and Edward Carpenter, who were all against consumerism, pollution and other activities that were harmful to the natural world. It is believed that these ideas also inspired various environmental groups in the UK, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, established in 1889 by Emily Williamson as a protest group to campaign for greater protection for the Indigenous birds of the Island. It is seen "from a western perspective, several authors who document the growth of the American environmental movement trace the origins to the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries" (Mbah, 2006:223) [6].

Furthermore, due to the growing environmental concerns in

the 20th century, environmental ideas continued to grow in popularity and recognition. Thus "the Sierra Club, one of the largest environmental organizations in the United States, was established in 1892, and several other organizations formed in the early part of the 20th century" (Mbah, 2006:223) [6]. There was however an eye opener to environmental issues when in 1962, *Silent Spring* by American biologist Rachel Carson was published. It is in view of this that the book cataloged the environmental impacts of the indiscriminate spraying of DDT (dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane) in the United States and questioned the logic of releasing large amounts of chemicals into the environment without fully understanding their effects on ecology or human health. This is because the resulting public concern however led to the establishment of the United States Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 which subsequently banned the agricultural use of DDT in the United States in 1972.

It can be stated that environmental protection also became important in the developing world and the Chipko movement emerged in India under the influence of Mohandas Gandhi and they set up peaceful resistance to deforestation by literally hugging trees (leading to the term 'tree huggers'). There was however a landmark achievement as another milestone in the movement was the creation of an Earth Day. Thus Earth Day was first observed in San

Francisco and other cities on March 21, 1970. Furthermore, “it is necessary at this juncture to note that the impetus for environmental movements in Africa has been internal and embedded in the continent’s history and the daily struggles of its peoples to make a living from their lands and waters” (Obi, 2005:2) [7]. This is why it can be stated that “indeed, Africa has a rich corpus of environmental history” (Obi, 2005:2) [7].

In Nigeria, environmentalism became more prominent after the discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri, in commercial quantities in 1956. Oil exploration resulted in environmental degradation, lost of livelihood, poor health, among others. This led to rise in environmentalism in the 1990s which saw the emergence of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) challenging the oil companies and the Nigerian government about the oil pollution of their environment by these oil companies. Thus MOSOP was formed in 1990. And as such MOSOP, spearheaded by Ogoni playwright and author Ken Saro-Wiwa, became the major campaigning organization representing the Ogoni people in their struggle for ethnic and environmental rights. Since then, there has been the rise and emergence of various environmental movements in Nigeria, among which is the Oil Watch, Nigeria. The Oil Watch, Nigeria is a resistance network of negative oil related activities in tropical countries and has been in the fore front in the struggle for environmental rights in Nigeria. Furthermore, in spite of the rise and emergence of environmentalism in Nigeria, there have been politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria. The politics of environmentalism has been a major challenge confronting current struggles for environmental rights in Nigeria. The politics involved in environmentalism is that which creates conflict of interest among members of environmental pressure groups. Environmental movements often make political demands on government which may hinder the activities of these environmental pressure groups in Nigeria.

However, this study analyses the politics involved in environmentalism and environmental degradation in Nigeria with the case of MOSOP.

2. Conceptual Framework

For a vivid understanding of this research paper, a conceptual framework is adopted to explain the politics of environmentalism and environmental degradation in Nigeria with reference to the case of MOSOP. The Concept of Environmentalism is adopted for explaining this study.

The Concept of Environmentalism is also known as ecologism or environmental rights. Mbah (2006:218) [6] sees environmentalism as “the philosophical doctrine that the environment is more important than heredity in determining intellectual growth”. Thus environmentalism is “a broad term incorporating the concerns and actions in aid of the protection and preservation of the environment” (Mbah, 2006:218) [6]. And the word Environmentalism was first coined in 1922. Environmentalism is a form of activism aimed at protecting the environment or improving its condition, particularly nature. And “this activism is based on the ideology of an environmental movement and often takes the form of public education programmes, advocacy, legislation and treaties” (Mbah, 2006:218) [6]. Furthermore, “environmentalism is a political movement that is anti-conservative in nature” (Conservapedia, 2016:1) [2]. This is why “environmentalism is a priority for everything, living

and non- living, in order to secure the long- term sustainability of the Earth” (Conservapedia, 2016:1) [2]. For David L. Levy, “environmentalism refers to a social movement and associated body of thought that expresses concern for the state of the natural environment and seeks to limit the impact of human activities on the environment” (Levy, 2010) [5].

The Concept of Environmentalism is a very crucial concept in this study as it provides a lens for explaining the study. Environmentalism as a broad philosophy, ideology or social movement seeks to influence the political process as regards the struggle for environmental protection and rights. The above conceptualisation then provide a political view of environmentalism in that environmental movements activities are political in nature as they seek to influence the political process by lobbying, activism and education in order to protect the natural environment and resources. The Concept of Environmentalism is however relevant to this study: ‘the politics of environmentalism and environmental degradation in Nigeria’. As it is believed that environmental movements or pressure groups often seeks to influence the political process in a bid to achieving their goals and in turn their activities are often hindered by political factors such as political demands, government interferences, lack of quality leadership and wealth as well as conflict of interest among members within most environmental movements or pressure groups.

3. Theoretical Discourse

To put this paper in its proper perspective, a theory is adopted to explain the politics of environmentalism in Nigeria with reference to the case of MOSOP. The theory adopted for this study is the Group theory.

The Group theory is a very suitable theory for analyzing various groups in the society. It can be stated that Arthur Bentley is widely acknowledged to have originated the group approach to the understanding of politics in his classic, *The Process of Government*. It is discovered that the framework got further elaboration from David Truman in his, *The Governmental Process*. The basic assumption of the group theory is that the group approach seeks to explain politics by reference to groups. Thus “as Bentley put it: ‘when the groups are adequately stated, everything is stated. When I say everything I mean everything’” (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24) [1]. This is because the complete description will mean the complete science, in the study of social phenomena, as in any other field. Thus, it can be stated that this statement clearly equates a description of group activity to a description of all politics. It is discovered that “there are, however, proponents of the group approach who do not share this extreme position” (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24) [1]. Thus “there is however other position holds by some group theorist concerning this extreme position. It can be stated that “such theorists, including David Truman, hold that politics is not the sum of group behavior but is at the centre of the political process” (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24) [1]. This is why to most group theorists as with most political scientists, ‘a political group exists when men with shared interests organise, interact, and seek goals through the political process’. Thus, “what is emphasised is not the structural composition of a group but its activities” (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24) [1]. That is, the emphasis should not be centred on the individuals or the group’s structural

composition but on the group's activities. Furthermore, it can be stated that "the group approach conceives of society as a mosaic of numerous interest groups with cross-cutting membership" (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24)^[1]. Thus "exponents of the approach posit that the form of politics of any society is ultimately determined by the interaction among groups within the society and the competition among such groups to influence government in the allocation of societal resources and exercise of power" (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24)^[1]. That is why "each group therefore seeks to gain access to decision points within the government and its success in this regard is usually affected by factors such as group cohesion and organization, status, quality of leadership and wealth" (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24)^[1].

A major strength of the group theory is that the group theory remains a useful framework for explaining politics. Another major strength of the group theory is that "it has also been found useful in the study of community power structure" (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:24)^[1]. On the other hand, the major weakness of the group theory is that the group theory has been criticised for leaving out the characteristics of individuals and for not considering the nation, the state and the society.

The group theory is however relevant to this present study as it can be applied to the politics of environmentalism and environmental degradation in Nigeria with the case of MOSOP. The group theory is of the belief that each group therefore seeks to gain access to decision points within the government and its success in this regard is usually affected by factors such as group cohesion and organisation, status, quality of leadership and wealth. In this regard, there is a constraint on the part of most environmental pressure groups or movements in their bid to gain access to decision points within the government and they are meant with challenging factors such as lack of group cohesion, quality of leadership and wealth, which have hindered these groups in achieving their goals. These factors hindering environmental pressure groups or movements in achieving their goals are political in nature.

4. An Overview of the Politics Involved in Environmentalism in Nigeria

This sub section is an overview of the politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria. A critical look at the history of environmentalism in Nigeria reveals that "environmental and social justice movement in Nigeria came to the fore when the Ogoni people issued the 'Ogoni Bill of Right' in 1990 to the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN)" (Sobrasuaipiri, 2014)^[9]. Thus "the issuance and public declaration of this document has changed the socioeconomic and political landscape of the Ogoni people, and the entire Niger Delta region of Nigeria" (Sobrasuaipiri, 2014)^[9]. This singular action laid the foundation for the rise of environmentalism in Nigeria, with the emergence of various environmental movements or pressure groups in Nigeria.

There has been politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria. Before taking a critical look at the politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria, it is pertinent to define the term '*Politics*'. It can be asserted that "politics is a struggle between actors pursuing conflicting desires on issues that may result in an authoritative allocation of values" (Winter and Bellows, 1981 cited in Anifowose and Enemu, 1999:4)^[1]. Thus, environmental movements or pressure groups are

often involved in political process as such their struggle sometimes leads to conflicting desires on issues that may result in an authoritative allocation of values.

There is a greater conflict of interest among members of most environmental movements in Nigeria. This is because, most members belong to different tribal, ethnic, religious, regional and political divides and often put forward their interest at the fore front before the entire group's interest. Thus, a conflict of interest is a set of circumstances that creates a risk that professional judgment or actions regarding a group interest will be unduly influenced by a personal interest. Also, government's undue interference is mostly the case with most environmental movements as their activities are mostly influenced by government actions and officials. Also environmental movements in their struggle for environmental justice often make political demands on government which may hinder their struggle for environmental rights. This however are major challenges confronting environmentalism in Nigeria.

Having clearly discussed the politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria, our next focus in this paper is on the case of MOSOP.

4.1 The Case of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP)

This section presents a historical analysis of the case of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) to examine the politics of environmentalism and environmental degradation in Nigeria. This section focuses on three (3) subsections to analyze the case of MOSOP. And these subsections includes; (a) An Overview of MOSOP and the Genesis of the Conflict between Shell/SPDC and Ogoni Community; (b) The Political Activities and Demands of MOSOP; (c) The Lesson Learnt from the Emergence and Struggles of MOSOP.

a) An Overview of MOSOP and the Genesis of the Conflict between Shell/SPDC and Ogoni Community

The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) is a social movement that advocates for the environmental rights especially with regards to Ogoni Land. It can be stated that "the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni people (MOSOP) was founded in 1990, as a mass-based democratic social movement to represent the Ogoni community with the launching of the Ogoni Bill of Right (OBR)" (UNPO Representation Publication).

It can be noted that "the origins of the conflict between the Ogoni and Shell/ SPDC date back to the company's discovery of oil in this part of the Niger Delta in 1958" (International Crisis Group, 2008:2)^[4]. To further trace the origin of the conflict between the Ogoni and Shell/ SPDC, it is believed that "as early as 1970, seven Ogoni chiefs sent a memorandum to SPDC and the military governor of Rivers State complaining of environmental degradation from the company's operations" (International Crisis Group, 2008:3). Consequently, "the year 1993 proved decisive in Ogoni SPDC relations" (International Crisis Group, 2008:3)^[4]. This is because on 4 January, 1993, about 300, 000 Ogoni staged a peaceful mass protest against the company and the environmental degradation of their land.

b) The Political Activities and Demands of MOSOP

The activities of MOSOP especially in the 1990s were political in nature as their struggles for environmental

justice also witnessed some form of political demands by MOSOP from Nigerian government and oil companies. It is believed that “the Ogoni confrontation with SPDC over its environmental and community relations practices was only part of a much wider range of demands and grievances that led to the crisis of the mid- 1990s” (International Crisis Group, 2008:12) ^[4]. This is seen that historically, Nigerian politics have been dominated by three large ethnic groups. Thus “the smaller ethnic groups such as the Ogoni have been systematically excluded from power” (International Crisis Group, 2008:12) ^[4]. It is in light of the above reason that “some Ogoni demand the creation of an Ogoni State as a means for greater political autonomy” (International Crisis Group, 2008:13) ^[4]. The above political demand has also been championed by MOSOP in recent times even as it advocates for environmental rights and justice.

MOSOP in carrying out its activities have as “its mandate of non-violent campaign are to: promote democratic awareness; protect the environment of the Ogoni people; seek social, economic and physical development for the region; protect the cultural rights and practices of the Ogoni people; and seek their appropriate rights of self-determination” (Ikerionwu, 2014:16). This is to say that MOSOP has one of its mandates as promoting democratic awareness which is political in nature. Also, the Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) even as it contained environmental demands of Ogoni people also have political demands contained in it. As the Ogoni Bill of Rights presented to the Government and people of Nigeria on 26 August, 1990 frowned “that today, the Ogoni people have: No representation whatsoever in ALL institutions of Federal Government of Nigeria” (Ogoni Bill of Rights, 1990; Tamuno, 2011:321) ^[8, 10]. And, the Ogoni Bill of Rights as some of its political demands, however, demanded political control of Ogoni affairs by Ogoni people as well as adequate and direct representation as of right in all Nigerian national institutions. The above political demands were reflected in the Ogoni Bill of Rights and are championed by MOSOP even as it carries out its activities in advocating for environmental rights for Ogoni people. MOSOP is championing its political as well as environmental demands have used protests as a tool for achieving its demands. Thus, protest can be seen as a political tool used by most environmental movements to press their demands. MOSOP have used this political tool to effectively attract attention and concerns especially from the international community in respect of environmental degradation being experienced in Ogoni land due to oil extraction and exploration in the area.

c) The Lesson Learnt from the Emergence and Struggles of MOSOP

The lessons to be learnt by other environmental movements from the emergence and struggles for environmental rights of MOSOP is that MOSOP despite its political demands was very committed in the struggle for environmental rights of Ogoni people. As MOSOP never allowed its political demands to distract the group from its struggles for environmental rights which was very key and paramount at that time to the Ogoni people and this became an eye opener as it led to the emergence of other environmental movements like Oil Watch, Nigeria. And also garner international attention as the eye of the globe was now focused on the environmental degradation in Ogoni land. However, other environmental movements should learn

from MOSOP experience and be more committed in the struggles for environmental rights and not to be distracted by the politics of environmentalism.

This study is very critical and crucial with regards to its major findings. Firstly, in this study, it is discovered that there is politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria. This is because environmental movements in their struggle for environmental rights and protection and in a bid to influence political process in Nigeria are caught in the web of politics as environmental movements often makes political demands on government.

Lastly, it is discovered that MOSOP even as it advocates for environmental justice also made political demands on government as reflected in the Ogoni Bill of Rights presented to the Government and people of Nigeria on 26 August, 1990.

5. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, environmentalism in Nigeria became more prominent in the 1990s, especially with the emergence of MOSOP. This led to the rise and emergence of other environmental movements such as Oil Watch, Nigeria. This study adopted the group theoretical approach and the concept of environmentalism in explaining the politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria. It can be argued that there is a politics involved in environmentalism in Nigeria.

Conclusively, environmentalism or environmental movements are very vital in the struggle for environmental protection and sustainability. This is because they play a very crucial role in the struggle for environmental rights, protection and sustainability in Nigeria and elsewhere in the globe. Though environmentalism or environmental movement cannot do without been involved in the political process, this paper therefore recommends that environmental movements in the process of seeking to influence the political process and in their political demands/ activities should ensure that there is high level of commitment to the struggle of environmental rights. Also environmental movements should focus more on environmental issues than politics.

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