

## **POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SMALL ARMS PROLIFERATION IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA**

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**Abstract:** *The paper examines the proliferation of small arms in the Niger Delta and is of the opinion that the proliferation of small arms in the Niger Delta is a consequence of the existential realities of the people of Niger Delta. This opinion is made more concrete with the adoption of political economy approach with takes a holistic analysis of the subject matter. It took into consideration the inherent contradictions of a capitalist mode of production which finds expression in economic determinism as the underlying factor in determining the material existence of the people of Niger Delta as occasioned by the actors of the state.*

**KEYWORD:** Political Economy, Small Arms, Proliferate, Actors of the State, Niger Delta.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The cardinal objective of man is the quest for survival. Thus, self-preservation of man becomes a natural desire of man as he is constantly in motion for felicity and self-actualization. This self -preservation instinct in man naturally leads to conflict. It follows that man can adopt measures aimed at self-actualization within the context of his socio-economic-political milieu. The socio-economic-political milieu finds expression within the purview of productive forces and relations of production which influence the distributive mechanism of resources as the basis of man's survival. It is against this backdrop that the paper takes a critical look at small arms proliferation in the Niger Delta.

#### **The political economy approach**

Considering the relevance and the contentious nature of the subject matter, the political economy approach has been adopted as a conceptual theoretical guide. It is the view of this paper that small arms proliferation in the Niger Delta or any other place in the world is a reflection of the social realities, especially as they affect man's inordinate quest for survival and self-preservation. The choice of the political economy approach is predicated on the fact that in a matter like this, small arms proliferation may not be properly appreciated outside the existential realities of the moment. Thus political economy considers event or phenomena in terms of relativity or connectivity.<sup>1</sup>

In order words, the subject matter can only be understood within the periscope of the small arms proliferation in relation to the existing realities. To buttress this point further, man during the dark ages was seen as a solitary man wandering rudderless but adventurously in the quest for survival. But overtime and as population increased with its concomitant pressure on natural resources, it heralded the threshold of private property which reproduced inequality as the basis for conflict in society. Thus, there was the need for man to protect not only his life but also his property. Consequently, man entered into social contract as a

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<sup>1</sup> Ake (1981); Gilpin, (1987).

reification of the state. The state therefore became morally justified within the context of protecting lives and property and ensuring that the scarce resources are fairly distributed to enhance not only the self and collective actualization of man but also the peaceful coexistence of man here on earth. However, there are plethora of contradictory views of the state but suffice it to say that the mere fact that no two persons are exactly the same (not even identical twins) underscores their different interests. Furthermore, the fact that the resources with which to satisfy the unlimited wants of man are scarce, conflict becomes endemic in society and the state becomes the pivotal point of interest harmonization. The point being stressed here is that political economy as an analytical construct takes a holistic view of social realities or phenomena taking into consideration intervening variables in order to have insightful appraisal and understanding of these phenomena.<sup>2</sup> It transcends mere abstraction to in-depth analysis of social realities.<sup>3</sup> It is our undistorted belief that the understanding of man and his overarching social realities would enable us to fully appreciate the subject matter.

### **Arguments of small arms proliferation**

It is expedient at this juncture to x-ray the arguments advanced in favour or against small arms proliferation. This will evidently not only enable us to be abreast with these arguments but also to advance our own argument given the existential realities, especially as they affect the Niger Delta. First was the argument advanced by Martin Killias.<sup>4</sup> He concluded that there was a correlative relationship between more guns and more victims of suicide and homicide, but not a causational relationship. His most extensive study, however, covering 21 countries, found no significant association between gun ownership rates and rates of homicide, suicide, robbery, or assault. Gun ownership rates appear to affect weapon choice, but not the total number of people killed or victimized.<sup>5</sup> Killias' argument was corroborated by Rich et al<sup>6</sup> who like wise found that increased gun restrictions while reducing suicide by gun, resulted in no net decline in suicides, because of the substitution of other methods. However, as a counter example to Killias' assertion, Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world while private firearm ownership is almost nonexistent. Furthermore, another point that can be deduced from the above argument is that while we accept the argument of Killias with reservation, we are of the opinion that the proliferation of small arms can be more dangerous in a tensed society where injustice, marginalization, suppression and exploitation are firmly rooted. Again, the assertion of Killias and the counter example of Japan prove the point that arms proliferation can be influenced differently in different societies depending on the social realities of the societies.

It has also been argued that totalitarian regimes such as Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany during the World War II, as well as some Communist States such as the People's Republic of China are examples of countries that passed gun control legislation in order to facilitate their arbitrary and repressive rule. To support gun control, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was quoted as saying "A system of licensing and registration is the perfect device to deny gun ownership to the bourgeoisie."<sup>7</sup> However such countries like the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada are not totalitarian governments but have had gun control in place for many years. On the

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<sup>2</sup> Ake (1981) on Political Economy of Africa

<sup>3</sup> Ryndina (1980)

<sup>4</sup> Killias (1993) in his extensive studies on gun ownership in his home country

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/small-arms-proliferation>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

other hand, while many democracies in Western Europe have adopted gun control, there are democratic countries such as United States, New Zealand, Finland and Switzerland that allow their citizens to own firearms.

It should be noted that in such countries as South Africa and Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), the black majority was prevented from legally owning guns by the white minority, thereby rubber-stamping the establishment of white rule. Again, in Japan, during the early middle ages, there was a high percentage of weapons ownership within the general populace, and this hindered the Japanese imperial government in establishing totalitarian control within the country. The Japanese populace was eventually disarmed, and weapons ownership was strictly limited to the elite and their Samurai body guards. Peasants, without any access to arms, were at the mercy of powerful warlords or raiding bandits.<sup>8</sup>

In his own argument, Criminologist Gary Kleck said that crime victims who defend themselves with guns are less likely to be injured or lose property than victims who either did not resist, or resisted without guns. Also contributing for this issue of small arms proliferation, the economist, stated, *More Guns, less Crime*, claims to have shown that the laws making it easier for non-criminals to get a permit to carry gun in public places causes reduction in crime.<sup>9</sup> John Lott's results suggest that allowing law-abiding citizens to carry concealed firearms deters crime because potential criminals do not know who may or may not be carrying a firearm. Lott's data came from the FBI's crime statistics from all 3,054 US countries.

Apart from the fact that Lott's findings were excoriated for not actually reflecting the rates of crime in the countries he studied, it is the view of this paper that as circumstances or social realities change, it may affect one's disposition to being law-abiding and this may also affect the use of firearms. Again is the fact that there are no measurable parameters or indices of knowing at a particular point in time the person that is law-abiding. On the other hand, the efficacy of gun control legislation at reducing the availability of guns has been challenged by among others the testimony of criminals as seen in the works of such writers as (e.g. Gary Kleck, Arthur Kellermann and Matthew Miller) in<sup>10</sup> that they do not obey gun control laws, and by the lack of evidence of any efficacy of such laws in reducing violent crime. This testimony also proves the fact that what matters is not just taking away guns but more importantly proffering solutions to the social problem that gave rise to small arms proliferation. We must know and proffer solution to the reason why there are more criminals who would want to use arms to commit nefarious activities and what is the source of these firearms.

Furthermore, supporters of gun-rights such as (e.g. Lott, 2010 and David Mustard)<sup>11</sup> consider Self-defense to be a fundamental and inalienable human right and believe that firearms are an important tool in the exercise of this right. They consider the prohibition of an effective means of self-defense to be unethical and to violate constitutional guarantees. For instance, in Thomas Jefferson's "Commonplace Book," a quote from Cesare Beccaria reads, "Law that forbid the carrying of arms-disarm only those who are neither inclined nor determined to commit crimes. Such laws make things worse for the assaulted and better for the assailants.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun\\_control](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_control)

<sup>9</sup> Lott (2010)

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun\\_control](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_control)

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun\\_control](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_control)

They serve rather to encourage than to prevent homicides, for an unarmed man may be attacked with greater confidence than an armed man.<sup>12</sup> We accept this argument with reservation. If arms are placed in the hands of individuals for the purpose of self-defense, then the role of the state in this regard will be rendered otiose. It means that at the slightest provocation one can fall back on his firearm all in the name of self-defense. From the above arguments, it is crystal clear that the state plays a leading role in determining issues that border on small arms proliferation. In other words, the state has the capacity to determine the number of arms in the hands of individuals depending on the prevailing circumstances or social realities. To situate this fact in proper perspective, we shall look at the state and its involvement in small arms proliferation.

### **The state and small arms proliferation**

It is an obvious fact that the state plays important role in harmonizing the various conflicting interests of man. This it can do by making rules and regulations and enforcing same in order to checkmate the excesses of man, and also ensure that the scarce resources are fairly distributed. It also protects lives and property, thus, the acquisition of arms becomes the exclusive preserve of the state. The state in this context is seen as the “Machine” that transforms political inputs into output. In other words, it is the expressive means through which the ruling elites govern society and includes the entire gamut of governance in order to maintain peace and harmonious relationship for the self-actualization of man. Hobbes<sup>13</sup> sees the state as an umpire for the self-preservation of man but this is entrusted into one man-the leviathan who regulates the ever conflicting desire for felicity in man. Lock’s perspective of the state is that the state regulates the conflicting desire of man for self-preservation.<sup>14</sup> But the state is placed on a group of persons with the consent of the people. This means that the state in both Hobbes and Locke’s state of Nature is primarily concerned with the achievement of the ‘greatest good for the greatest number.’ In fact it is not exploitative but protects the interest of the people based on natural laws. The state finds expression in the character of the actors of the state which reflects on the governance of society and actualization of man. To corroborate this fact, Poulantzas<sup>15</sup> said the state can also be seen in a positive fashion, creating, transforming and making reality.

However, Marx<sup>16</sup> sees the state in capitalist society as an expression, and means of protecting the interest of the dominant class. This means the state does not protect the interest of everybody in the society and uses state apparatuses for repression of the rest of the people. According to Marx and Engels<sup>17</sup> the state is equivalent to political domination in its own interest. In that sense, every state is merely a class dictatorship. In his views, Therborn<sup>18</sup> said

A state apparatus operates simultaneously as an expression of class domination (that is, as a particular form of the class division of labour in society), and as the execution of the supreme rule-making, rule-applying, ruler adjudicating, rule-enforcing and rule-defending tasks of society.

<sup>12</sup> [Httos://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/small-arms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/small-arms)

<sup>13</sup> (1994)

<sup>14</sup> Locke (1979)

<sup>15</sup> (1973)

<sup>16</sup> (1970)

<sup>17</sup> (1970)

<sup>18</sup> (1978)

It should be noted that the state power of the ruling class is exercised within a contradictory and complex totality which is in constant flux and development.<sup>19</sup>

The class struggle is pursued in and through these contradictions and development. While the latter function in and through the class struggle, a social revolution occurs when these contradictions and disarticulating processes of uneven development reach the point at which dominant aspect turn into revolutionary mechanism of a new ruling class.<sup>20</sup>

From the foregoing, it is understandable that the state exists but the role it performs is depending on the character of the actors of the state. It is therefore expected that a state that is arbitrary, dictatorial and exploitative can do everything possible including the passing of legislation on arms control to suppress any form of opposition. This can create dissension, distrust on the state and disaffection among the people, thereby leading to violence which may warrant the indiscriminate acquisition of firearms. Consequently, the proliferation of small arms is a function of the character of actors of the state and its attendant social realities. For instance a disenfranchised, alienated, subjugated, marginalized and exploited people, no matter the legal framework put in place for arms control may engage in violent struggle for freedom. It follows that in considering small arms proliferation the social forces occasioned by the character of the actors of the state must be analyzed.

### **Small arms proliferation in the Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta has been described as one of the world's largest wetlands covering over 20,000 square km in South-Eastern Nigeria. The region is mostly inhabited by long settled communities. The total population of the area is about seven million.<sup>21</sup> Subsistence agriculture dominates rural land and fishing takes place on inland waters, near shore and off-shore.

Due to the asymmetrical power structure of the Nigerian State, the natural Niger Delta which contributes more than 90% of the foreign exchange reserve of Nigeria has been brazenly marginalized, especially as it concerns the control of the resources in the region.<sup>22</sup> No doubt, the Nigerian State professes to be federal, at least by virtue of the colonial fiat of 1954, but the basic tenets of federalism has been selectively applied with particular reference to the control of resources and the revenue sharing formula.

It should be recalled that prior to the era of petrodollar (and oil was discovered first in commercial quantity in Oloibiri, the Natural Niger Delta), the Nigerian economy was mainly agrarian. In other words, agriculture was the mainstay of the economy. These agricultural products such as Cocoa, groundnut and palm produce were produced in the three major ethnic groups, Yoruba, Hausa and Ibo who held on to political power. The revenue formula as it is expected in a federal system of government was based on derivation. That is those regions who produced these resources controlled them and merely paid royalties to the federal government. But the moment oil was produced in the natural Niger Delta as the mainstay of the economy, the revenue formula changed overnight from derivation to a formula based on population and needs, with the subsequent promulgation of the obnoxious land use decree (now Land Use Act) which placed all lands in the hands of the federal

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Fubara (2007)

<sup>22</sup> Adeyemo (2008)

government. The implication of the sudden change of revenue formula and the promulgation of the so called Land use Act is that the Natural Niger Delta region which bear and produce the oil is not allowed to control the revenue accruable from the oil exploration and exploitation. This is constitutional robbery of the land of the people by the federal government. It should be noted that the people of the natural Niger Delta are mainly farmers and fishermen whose livelihood is dependent on farming and fishing activities. But to take away their land and degrade and pollute their environment through oil exploration and exploitation without making life more meaningful to them is not only exacerbating the poverty of the people but also a calculated attempt to exterminate them gradually.

From the facts above, it is obvious that the people of Niger Delta are aggrieved, deprived and depraved people. Their grievance has given rise to agitations in various forms as Izon and Ijaw Development Unions and as cultural organizations to fight for their rights as an oppressed people. While it is true that problems could be solved through dialogues, the youth and people of the area are saying that the process of dialogue has been eroded by Federal Government leadership for not showing sincere concern over the deprivation, squalor habitation, hunger and unemployment in the Niger Delta area.<sup>23</sup>

When it appeared dialogue has failed as there was no sincere commitment on the part of Federal Government to solve the problem of the Natural Niger Delta, consequently, what appeared as youth restiveness later degenerated via successive declarations like the Kaiama Declaration, to militancy and hostage taking of expatriates. These violent activities were supported by the acquisition of small arms thereby leading to general level of insecurity. It should be known that the Multinational Corporations that operate in the area, in their deliberate policy of divide-and-rule have also contributed to small arms proliferation in Niger Delta.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident from the foregoing that the proliferation of small arms is a function of the prevailing social realities of the state. As these social realities change, they also affect small arms proliferation. The case of Japan is a pointer. As a follow up, the proliferation of arms in the Niger Delta is a reflection of the existing social realities which are characterized by poverty, utter neglect, marginalization, suppression and exploitation. Over time, these social realities have led to dissention, agitation and violence thereby necessitating the acquisition of small arms. We are therefore of the opinion that the proliferation of small arms with its attendant violence and crime can only be curbed if not totally eliminated in the Niger Delta by resolving the negative social realities. This can be done by fine-tuning the character of the actors of the state in line with the yearnings and aspirations of the people.

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<sup>23</sup> Fubara (2002); and Adeyemo (2008)

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