The Politicisation of Policing in Democratic Nigeria

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Abstract

In the security architecture of modern democratic states, the police play pivotal roles, most especially, in the sphere public order management. In the performance of this important role, the police must be professional, apolitical and above all, loyal to the Constitution of the State. However, while the foregoing ideals are internalised by the police in liberal democracies, the reverse appears to be the case in Africa and other peripheral regions where the police seem more political than professional. It is against this background that this article, drawing on evidence from secondary sources, examines the implications of politicisation of policing for democratic consolidation in democratic Nigeria. It notes that politicisation of policing in the country has its undercurrents in the over-centralized Nigerian state and the attendant struggles that often characterise the struggles to capture it by different factions of the ruling elites. It concludes that as long as the over-centralised state structure which centralises public policing in Nigeria endures, public order management in Nigeria, through the auspices of the Nigeria police, would continue to be politicised.

Keywords: politicisation, police, policing, democratic consolidation, decentralization.
INTRODUCTION

Law, as an institution, is not a modern contrivance, as men, even in the most rudimentary social formations, as painted by Thomas Hobbes and other social contractarians were ruled by the law of nature. Though, life, in such society, was hellish, yet men were still governed by law of nature (Hague and Harrop, 2007:5).

Therefore, when the fiction of the state of nature is invoked by social contractarians, it was not because there were no laws governing the society but to draw the attention of mankind to the kind of social order that would arise without the corollary of law: order, and its instrument of enforcement: government (Basiru, 2016:59). However, at a point in the evolution of mankind, the need to exit this state arose and subsequently, people opted to supplant their inalienable sovereignties to a common overarching institution- the government-which is charged with the responsibility of not only making laws for order and stability of the society but also enforcing such laws (Olaoye, 2012:69).

It was against this background that the institution designed for law enforcement-the police- emerged (Bayley, 2012:29). Since then, the police have assumed primus inter pares status in the management of societal order. This is more so in modern democratic societies in which laws, processes and procedures are fundamental to the existence of the society, the state and the citizens (Basiru, 2016:60). In discharging this historic mandate, the police must be professional, apolitical, cosmopolitan and above all, loyal to the grundnorm of the State. But, while the foregoing ideals, over the years, had been internalized by the police in liberal democracies, the reverse would seem to have been the case in Africa and other neo-colonial enclaves, where the police seem more political than professional.

In Nigeria, the police, since 1999 when democracy berthed after fifteen years of military authoritarianism, have been castigated by the various stakeholders in the country’s democratic project for their low level of professionalism in the discharge of their duties as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the extant police Act (Adebakin and Raimi 2012:8). Indeed, in some of the major political crises since the return of democracy, the police have been implicated for their dearth of professionalism and partisanship in the handling of some of these crises.

The major thrust of this article is the examination of the political dynamic has nurtured the politicization of policing in a democratizing
Nigeria and the implications for democratic consolidation. The article has been partitioned into seven sections, starting with an introduction pointing to the article’s significance, purpose and organization. Section two lays the analytical foundation for the study by reviewing literature for different models of policing a nation. The third section, in a retrospective fashion, looks at the evolution of police and policing in Nigeria. The aim here is to lay bare the dynamics of policing in modern Nigeria. Section four critically examines the roles of the police in managing major political crisis in the post-military era, with an illustration of one empirical case. In the section that follows, the article discusses the implications of political and partisan policing for democratic consolidation. In section six, an attempt is made to explain the underlying structures that may have spurred the core issue in discourse. The seventh section concludes the article.

LITERATURE REVIEW

How is the Society best Policed?

It must be emphasized that the states and the police that emerged from the embers of the old order in Europe, following the thirty years war, were not only centralized but existed to serve the wills of the sovereigns (Opello and Rosow, 2014:161). In other words, they existed to protect the monarchs against all forms of domestic subversion. However, as these countries further opened up their polities, the character and the modus operandi of police and policing began to change in order to reflect the evolving democratic realities. By this era, a key philosophical question arose: how best to police the territorial state? Interestingly, the foregoing background framed what in literature constitutes the paradigm of policing a society: the authoritarian and the libertarian models. The former, drawing inspiration from Hobbes, Bodin and other state absolutist theorists of the 17th century, posits that since there is only one sovereign in a state, whose power is absolute and supreme, there must be a unified police that exist only to serve the sovereign. In other words, the police exist to serve the sovereign and his functionaries (see Vincent, 1987). Further, the theory believes that the police like all other social institutions (education, religion, economy etc) must be controlled and monitored by the sovereign state. Instructively, the underlying assumption of this model is that some sort of authoritarian coercion is needed for societal stability and that can only be achieved under an authoritarian, centralized policing system.

Contrarily, the libertarian model, leaning on the Lockean philosophical framework, contends that the police exist to serve the society at large and not only the sovereign and his functionaries as the advocates of the authoritarian school contend. It insists that since there are many levels and centers of power in modern democratic societies, that is, multiple
sovereignties, policing must thus reflect such complexities (see Vincent, 1987). It submits further that it is such complexities and diversities that separate the authoritarian state and by extension authoritarian policing from the democratic state policing model. Putting the position of this school of thought in perspective, Ogunlowo (2007:87) says: ‘one way a democratic state can be distinguished from a Police State (authoritarian State) is the extent to which the police are controlled by the government and the level of accountability built into police organizational structures as well as the involvement of the public in police issues and crime strategies’. What can be gleaned from the foregoing theoretical expositions is that the first perspective places emphasis on a unified model of policing a nation while the other considers this as an anathema in modern complex nation-states (Brian, 2004). At this juncture, a question is apt: which conforms to the Nigerian realities? We will come to this soon. But before then, it is germane to put the evolution of policing in Nigeria in historical perspective.

Policing in Nigeria: An Historical Excursion

On the origin of policing in Nigeria, different accounts abound in literature but what is common to all of them was that modern policing in the country came with the advent of British colonialism, starting from the colony of Lagos (see Tamuno, et al, 1999; Rotimi, 2001). Before the setting up of police force for Lagos and its environment, the British for centuries, it must be emphasized, had been doing business with the indigenous people of the hinterland and by that time, the British did not see any need for policing trade but as the trade became more competitive, due to a combination of factors, some of which have been extensively discussed in literature, there emerged the imperative of creating a modern police force in the hinterland to police trade.

Precisely, in 1849, the British government appointed a Consul General for the Bights of Benin and Biafra on the Atlantic Coast of West Africa to promote legitimate trade and to prevent the incessant quarrels between the African chiefs and the British traders in the area (Tamuno, 1970). The non-abatement of the clashes between the British merchants and the local chiefs in the hinterland forced the British consul, in Lagos, William McCosky, to act by requesting for a small-armed force to help him maintain peace in the troubled area. To this end, a Consular Guard comprising 30 men was established in October 1861. In 1863, the Consular Guard was named the Hausa Guard. By 1879, the Hausa Guard dissolved into Lagos Constabulary Force. In 1896, Lagos Constabulary Force, metamorphosed into Lagos police force (Tamuno et al, 1999:32). Interestingly, while the process of forming modern police was on, in the South, the Royal Nigeria Company, courtesy of a Charter granted it, in 1886, by the British Government, was undergoing the same process in the
North of the Niger. In 1888, the company established the Royal Niger Constabulary with the headquarters in Lokoja.

The main task of the outfit was to protect its installations along the banks of river Niger. However, with the coming into existence of the Northern protectorates in 1900, the outfit was split into the Northern Nigeria Police force and the Northern Nigeria Regiment. In the South, similar reorganization took place as, the Lagos police force and part of the Niger Coast Constabulary became the Southern Nigeria Police Force. Also, the bulk of the Niger Coast Constabulary formed the Southern Nigeria Regiment (Centre for Law Enforcement Education / National Human Right Commission, 1999:18).

The two forces, even after the 1914 amalgamation, operated distinctly, until April 1930, by virtue of ordinance No 3 of 1930, when the two merged to form the Nigeria Police Force under the command of an Inspector General of Police. By virtue of this law, all the local police forces that existed in various parts of the country were brought under the authority of Inspector General of Police, with headquarters in Lagos (Akuul, 2011: 18). As the country embraced federalism in 1954, courtesy of the 1954 Lyttelton Constitution, policing was reorganized in line with the principle of federalism. This was the pattern of policing in the country until 1966 when the military, first under General Aguiyi Ironsi and then under Yakubu Gowon, when policing, in the country, again became centralized. Instructively, since then, it has remained so. Today, the Nigerian Police, under the control of the Inspector-General, are, constitutionally, primus inter pares, in the management of public order in the country.

It clear from the foregoing that modern police and policing in Nigeria emerged in the context of colonialism. Specifically, the police emerged to serve and protect the interest of the colonial ruling elites, mainly Britons, who exercised power authoritatively and whimsically. They were not set up to serve the interests of the natives. So, ab initio, the model of policing was not democratic but authoritarian. Even, at the regional levels, in the 1950s, the police served the interests of the ruling elites in the region. The point being made here is that police during the pre-independent era, saw the populace as conquered entity, always to be intimidated, harassed and tormented at the behest of the ruling elites. At independence, the existing order was not reversed as there was change without changes. According to Chukwuma (1998:26) ‘the government that succeeded the colonial authority found it more convenient to retain all the colonial structures of coercion in dealing with the people’.
This situation was even worse under the military where the police, in order to please every praetorian regime, alienated themselves from the people that they were meant to serve and protect. A former Inspector General of Police, Alhaji Ibrahim Coomasie, was reported to have said, in March 1998, that 'the Force has been torn between the civil populace and the military, so much so that its civil traditions are almost lost to military authoritarianism’ (quoted in CLEEN/ NHRC, 1999:8-9). By the time their patron, the military, left the political scene for the civilians, on May 29, 1999, the police like other coercive institutions of the Nigerian State had already been militarized and privatized. Thus, as democracy beckoned, the already bruised citizens expected much from the police since the military, under which they perpetrated their malfeasance against the citizen had wound up.

**Public Order Management in Post-Military Nigeria: New of the Old**

Irrespective of the form of government in a society, the police, as stated at the beginning of this discourse, have as their primary responsibility, the management of public order, or what is generally regarded, even in the local parlance, the maintenance of law and order. However, it appears that such role is more challenging in a democracy, especially in a society that had suffocated under authoritarian order for a long time. In such society, democracy, once enthroned, after years of struggles, most times, unleashes forces-ethnic, communal, religious- that had been suppressed by the authoritarian regime, in the past (Adebakin and Raimi 2012:10). The point bring made here is that democracies, because of its open nature, offers greater avenues for citizens’ participation in public affairs and thus often increase the tempo of political activities, most especially among politicians (O’Donnell, 2007:4). However, most times, political activities in terms of power struggles among political actors would snowball into open violence. In such scenario, the police must act accordingly, in managing, such conflagration, so as not to degenerate to the level that it would destroy the society.

In Nigeria, since the advent of democracy in 1999, the Nigerian police, in line with their constitutional mandates, have been managing political conflagration among political actors, both at the centre and the peripheries of the country’s federation. However, in most of these crises, their neutrality and level of professionalism have been called into question. One of such crises, in recent times, where the Nigerian Police, through its officers, led by a Police Commissioner, displayed unprofessionalism and partisanship and which caught both local and global attention, is the Rivers State’s political crisis (Ukpetenan, 2014). In the pages that follow, a narrative of the crisis and the roles of the police are undertaken.
It must be emphasized at the onset that the Rivers political crisis (2013-2015) had its origin in the sack by an Abuja High Court of the Godspower Ake-led executive of the People Democratic Party (PDP) on April 15, 2013, as well as the suspension of the Obio/Akpor Local Government Chairman, Mr. Timothy Nsirim, his deputy and 17 councilors by the State House of Assembly by the State legislature. It was these events that led to the factionalization of the PDP in the state that culminated into the fracas on the floor of the state legislature (Basiru, 2016:64). It is instructive to stress that the fracas ensued when five members of the state legislature, belonging to the PDP, led by Mr. Evans Bipi, attempted to impeach the Speaker, Mr. Otelemaba Amachree of the All Progressive Congress (APC) (Akasike, 2013).

In the free for all fight among members on the floor of the legislature, as reported in video footages and disseminated by social media, all over the world, Mr. Chidi Lloyd was shown hitting his colleague with a maze. Also, a policeman, joined by his State Security Service colleague, was also seen beating up another lawmaker. At another instance, another policeman was seen assisting the ‘de facto speaker’, Mr. Evan Bipi and his thugs, mobilized from outside, to gain entry into the Chambers (Abdallah et al, 2013). In the aftermath of violent conduct of the legislators, the police in order to further fracas sealed off the parliament. A day after the fracas, the Federal House of Representatives (FHOR) at its sitting in Abuja passed a resolution to take over the functions of the Rivers state legislature (Ovuakporie, et al2013). On 11th December, 2013, the FHOR’s resolution was however dismissed, as illegal, by an Abuja High Court, following a suit instituted by Mr. Amachree’s camp. However, the police, rather than obeying the Court’s ruling, disdainfully, ignored it by claiming that it was yet to be served a copy of the judgment. Thus, the Assembly remained closed (Basiru, 2016: 65).

Few days later, the police boss in the state, Mr. Joseph Mbu, held a peace meeting with both parties and enjoined them to be law abiding. Indeed, a statement by one of his key lieutenants, Mr. John Amadi, specifically instructed the lawmakers to report to the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police in charge of the Criminal Investigation Department, to sign undertakings. Twenty-four hours later, majority of the members honoured the police invitation and signed the undertaking. Addressing newsmen at end of the meeting, Mr. Amachree, who led 21 other lawmakers to the Command Headquarters, said the screening process by the police involved all lawmakers, including nine that were absent (Abia, 2013). But despite the signing of letter of undertakings, the police, insisted that the Assembly must remain closed. It claimed to be complying with a pending application before a Court of Appeal for a stay of execution on the
decision of the Federal High Court in Abuja. The High Court had nullified the National Assembly takeover of the State House of Assembly.

In a reaction to the police’s action, Mr. Leyii Kwanee, Mr. Amachree’s deputy, says,

We have met with the police and they said we could go back to work after signing the undertaking. They (police) thought we would not sign the undertaking. We are pro-Rivers and that was why we did all that. It is sad and frustrating to notice that we are gradually turning into a police state (quoted in Basiru, 2016: 66-67)

Instructively, as the crisis festered, the streets of Port Harcourt, the state’s capital, and its suburb, became the arena of protests and skirmishes as the group loyal to the state governor, Mr. Rotimi Amaechi and the *dejure* speaker, Mr. Amachree and those loyal to Mr. Nyeson Wike, the Minister of state for education in the Federal Government battled each other for supremacy. Interestingly, while the crisis lasted, the police boss, Mr. Joseph Mbu was publicly alleged to have been given police cover to the Wike’s group whenever they protested against the governor. On other hand, he was berated for preventing the other group from holding solidarity rally in support of the Governor. In one of such pro-Amaechi rally on January 12, 2014, the police in the state failed to secure the lives of the people at the rally and thus allowed the thugs to unleash terror on defenceless people (Punch, 13/01/14).

Indeed, on several occasions, Governor Amaechi openly accused Mr. Mbu of being a member of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). One of such instances is worthy of elaboration here. In his parting message to Mr. Mbu’s successor, Mr. Tunde Ogunsakin, the Governor described Mr. Mbu as a politician in police uniform, who attempted to cripple the economy of the state. Putting this bluntly, he says,

Unlike the former commissioner, who clearly showed us that, he was a registered member of PDP, in your own case, (referring to the new commissioner) you know that we had disagreements but you realized your responsibility to ensure the security of lives and property

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disagreements but you realized your responsibility to ensure the security of lives and property as the paramount responsibility of the Nigerian police (quoted in Onukwugha, 2014)

It is clear from the foregoing that the police in Rivers state while the political crisis lasted did not exhibit professionalism expected of a police organisation in a democratic society. Put differently, it would seem to have taken side with a party in the crisis. As a matter of fact, Mr. Mbu, few months later, told the world what his mission was in Rivers State. In his remark at the handling over ceremony for the new police boss of the FCT Command, after being promoted to the rank of the Assistant Inspector General of police, he boastingly asserted that while in Rivers State, he was the Lion that 'tamed' Mr. Amaechi! (Basiru, 2016:67)

Political Policing: Making or Marring Democracy?

Democracy once embraced by a country must be guarded jealously by the stakeholders as to prevent it from sliding into authoritarianism (Ojo, 2008:170). This is what, in literature, is meant by democratic consolidation. Suffice to stress that the concept of democratic consolidation assumed global currency with the arrival of the third wave of democratization (see Huntington, 1991). Bratton (1998) conceptualizes it as the wide-spread acceptance of roles to guarantee political participation and political competition. From a slightly different angle, Ojo (2008:171) sees it as the process by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate among citizens that it is very unlikely to break down. Aside from conceptualizing and contextualizing democratic consolidation, democratic theorists have also attempted to identify the pre-conditions for its attainment vis: the substantive and stability factors (see Svolik, 2007). The first encompasses the multiplicity of institutions, norms and beliefs that could nurture democracy in a given society (Guillermo and Philippe 1986).

The second and the most fundamental, most especially, in new democracies such Nigeria, is stability. In the words of Ogundiya (2010:235) ‘the tiny gap between stability and consolidation is that stability begets consolidation. Indeed democracy must be stable for it to be consolidated’. What is implied here is that stability is a *sine qua non* for democratic consolidation. In the light of this, any phenomenon that threatens the stability of a community inevitably arrests development and could ultimately undermine the process of democratization. How does this apply to policing? It may happen this way: when public coercive institutions such as the police that ought to prevent, contain, curtail and
manage violence fail and even get embroiled in political struggles, rule of law, a core element of democracy, might be in abeyance. In such scenario, democracy itself might be in the reverse gear.

In the case of Rivers examined earlier, perhaps, it would have been a more serious crisis if the party that was against the action of the police boss had countered the action of the police via violence! May be, while the crisis lasted, the state would have been embroiled in greater political conflagration. This would have made the Federal Government to declare a state of emergency. Resultantly, constitutional rule would have been suspended as were the cases in the Western Region and Ekiti State, in 1962 and in 2006 respectively. To be sure, no matter how one views it, emergency rule symbolizes democratic reversal and not democratic consolidation. The thesis here is that politicisation of policing in a democracy could have serious implications for democratic consolidation especially in countries that have just emerged from a long period of dictatorships.

The Crux of the Matter: The Triple Syndrome of Statism, Authoritarianism and Centrism

The seeming politicisation of public order management in post-military Nigeria, really, cannot be treated in isolation. At the root of the problem is the structural character of the Nigerian state and the politics it engenders. As Ake (1996:7) puts it:

Much of what is uniquely negative about politics in Africa arise from the character of the state, particularly its lack of autonomy, immensity of its power, its proneness to abuse, and lack of autonomy and lack of immunity against it. The character of the state rules out a politics of moderation and mandates a politics of lawlessness and extremism for the simple reason that the nature of the state makes the capture of state power irresistibly attractive.

As fascinating as the above contention is, it cannot be divorced from the country’s political history. The precursor of the post-colonial state, in Nigeria, emerged in manner that was nothing but undemocratic. Unlike the American federal state that emerged organically through the franchise of the peoples, the Nigerian colonial state was forcefully cobbled together by the forces external to it (Ezonba, 2012:326). So ab initio, the state that emerged in Nigeria was a product of force. Upon its consolidation, it also depended
on force to extract surplus from the natives. Its raison d’être was hard policing of the colonial economies for the benefit of the metropoles (Onoja, 2012:22).

Interestingly, the post-colonial state that succeeded it, in 1960, was not structurally different from its precursor as there were changes without change. Momoh (2010), talking from the general African perspective has this to say: ‘the post-colonial state in Africa was deracialized and Africanized but it was not democratized’. Therefore, all the apparatuses of repression inherited from the ex-colonial masters were indiscriminately applied without being dismantled. At independence, the inheritors of the colonial state, in their race to catch up with their counterparts in the metropoles, institutionalised state capitalism. This soon generated its own antitheses. In the first instance, the state became an avenue for access to wealth and protection and capturing it thus became a matter of life and death. In the struggle for power, the political system was polarized into two blocs. In the first bloc was the party in power and its core gladiators, both at the centre and the regional levels. In the second bloc are the opposition party and its core gladiators, at the centre and the regions, as well.

The intra-class struggles to control power for purpose of wealth accumulation became so intense that police and occasionally the Judiciary, also got entangle in the crisis. The war-like politics soon paved the way for the specialists in violence, the military; to come into the picture (Basiru, 2013:8). Precisely, on 15 January, 1966, the Nigerian military abandoned their liberal constitutional role of defending the sovereignty of the nation to fill the vacuum created by the warring politicians. By their entrance into politics, they became the new overseers of wealth accumulation (Basiru and Ogunwa 2016:42). Lacking in legitimacy but imbued with coercive power, the military while they ruled had to depend on raw force to win the allegiance of the citizens. To achieve this objective, countless draconian decrees were made and the police became the major enforcers of these laws. In order to ensure smooth administration of the country, the military centralized all coercive agencies in the Federal Military Government. They were deployed for purpose of intimidation and harassment of individuals and groups that each regime considered as its enemies.

Interestingly, it was this structure of public order management that was imposed on the people through the 1999 Constitution. Thus like, the old order, the police are responsible to the Federal Government and not to the state governments. The implication of this anti-federal arrangement is that the party that controls the Federal Government controls the police. Put differently, the loyalties of members of the Nigerian police are to the Inspector-General of Police, who in turn, owes his loyalty to the President.
of the country. Therefore, in any political struggle that the presidency is involved, the police had always tended to ally with the president. For example, few days after Mr. Mbu blocked the way leading to the Rivers state government house, APC indicted the presidency.

In a reaction to Mr. Mbu’s action, APC’s National Publicity Secretary, Lai Mohammed, says,

> the Nigeria Police Force, NPF, under Jonathan’s administration had increasingly become a lawless force whose allegiance is only to the president and not to the Constitution of Nigeria. Since the onset of the President Jonathan-inspired political logjam in Rivers State and the implosion of his party, the PDP, the president has been depending on the Nigeria Police to shore up his dwindling political fortune. The insubordination of the Rivers State Super Police Commissioner, Mbu; the police-sponsored fracas in the Rivers State House of Assembly; the assault on the five visiting governors by thugs working under the direction and protection of the State Commissioner of Police (quoted in Owete, 2013).

It would thus appear that Mr. Mbu was acting the script of those opposed to Governor Amaechi style of governance. Mr. Mbu was just a loyal officer doing his job. After all, he was not responsible to the governor but to the president through the Inspector General. The issue here is clear: Mr. Mbu might have been a victim of the Nigerian structural problem. It thus implies that if Mr. Ogunsakin, Mr. Mbu’s successor, had found himself in similar situation, he would not have behaved differently. He would have probably pitched his tents in the anti-Amaechi camp so as not to face dire consequences: redeployment, demotion, retirement, e.t.c. He would only have taken side with Governor Amaechi if the organisation he works for is controlled by the Rivers State Government.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The article sought to examine the politicisation of policing and its implication for democratic consolidation in democratic Nigeria. In furtherance of this objective, it clarified concepts that are germane, sketched out the theoretical framework, reviewed extant literature and provided explanatory framework for understanding the core problematic.

From these reviews and analyses, it found that professional policing is a *sine qua non* for democratic consolidation but in Nigeria and other post-colonies the police are more political than professional. It notes and argues
that as long as extant structure which centralizes public policing in Nigeria endures, public order management in Nigeria, through the auspices of the Nigeria police, would continue to be politicized. Against these backgrounds, what should be done? One, in the short run, there is the urgent need for the decentralization of the public policing system in Nigeria. In other words, policing must be made a concurrent matter between the federal government and the state governments as was the case in the country before 1966. A unified policing method, with its attendant authoritarianism, is not sustainable in a polyglot society like Nigeria. Two, the power to appoint the head of the police establishment should no longer be solely in the hand of the President. Such power should now be shared with the President by the Legislatures and other independent bodies that are not answerable to the president.
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