

Arresting political thuggery and other vices among social miscreants in Lagos State, Nigeria for sustainable development

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Accepted 12 May, 2015

ABSTRACT

The social miscreants have positioned themselves as anti-social agents as they continue to work against the complete well being of the citizens as a whole and the state in particular. They have become ready tools in the hands of most politicians as they are hired as thugs to unleash harm on political opponents. They are also given to all forms of vices. Some of the criminal activities of the social miscreants range from outright killing to disruption of commercial life. They are also a threat to the law abiding citizens of the state. The study applied both sociological and historical methods in its investigation. It is recommended that it is quite expedient for all stakeholders to address the myriad of harm done by social miscreants in Lagos State. This, to a large extent, would drum the clarion call harder to all and sundry of the need to urgently ameliorate the situation. The government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the church should thus apply concerted efforts towards addressing the challenge.

Keywords: Arresting, political thuggery, social miscreants, sustainable development, vices.

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INTRODUCTION

The entire nation greeted the present political dispensation in Nigeria with great expectation. Before the 1999 (May 29th) handover of the military to a democratically elected government, the nation had gone through a long period of painful military rule, with the incessant military administrations taking over from each other often through coup-de-tat. The pain in this arrangement was that the civilians had no direct input in the choice of who should govern them. As a result of this, the sincere desire of majority of the citizens was a return to democratic system of governance. This became a reality on May 29th 1999, with the election of General Olusegun Obasanjo as the civilian president through a democratic process. He had served as a former military head of state (1976 to 1979).

However, the present political dispensation threw up several challenges. One of such is the emergence of a group of social miscreants. This situation has been fanned by some common factors. One, the different

group of political parties and their members have been commonly indicted to command a retinue of thugs. These are groups of young men (and occasionally women) who are hangers-on. They are ready tools in the hands of politicians to be used for their defense and even to mete out attacks on their opponents. These thugs can go to any extent, if only to defend and carry out the biddings of their benefactors. They kill, destroy properties, maim or completely annihilate their opponents.

The activities of political thugs are not only restricted to intra-parties, but politicians from the same party are also seen settling their disagreement and occasional squabbles by inviting thugs (who are also social miscreants). There has been consistent repetition of such dastardly act in Lagos State and parts of Nigeria. At every slight political provocation and disagreement, some politicians are in the habit of recruiting these young men who are often more than willing to carry out their biddings. These political thugs, who are nothing short of

social miscreants, are seen carrying out all sorts of deviant activities even if it means taking the life of an opponent.

The political solidarity that these deviants receive from their “god-fathers,” sometimes fan the ember of thuggery and calculated violence. Decrying the political violence and thuggery that erupted in the northern parts of Nigeria as an aftermath of the presidential elections on the 16th of April, 2011, Usman (2010) casts a sharp aspersion on the political class in the North. He argues: “one of the major concerns is the way members of the political class in the North engage the services of jobless youths as thugs for the purpose of intimidating political opponents and their supporters during elections. These individuals who are mainly uneducated or semi-illiterates are miscreants, used by these politicians as thugs”. He calls for the need of redirecting attention to the social needs of the region: “Rather than discuss the problem of excruciating poverty, mass unemployment, infrastructural gap, decay education system, “almajiri” syndrome and emerging youth restiveness, the political leaders are promoting the excesses of political thugs” (Usman, 2010).

The present political dispensation has continued to encourage the emergence of different categories of political thugs. These are social miscreants who have constituted themselves into social menace as they get involved in all forms of deviant activities. It is also argued that some of these social miscreants are given weapons and other types of instruments of oppression. Some have abused this as they unleash their evil and wicked activities on innocent citizens of Lagos State in particular and Nigeria in general. It should be noted that the ill wind stirred by an upsurge of political thugs, who are nothing but social miscreants, should be urgently addressed. If this does not receive urgent attention, then the entire state is on the precipice of a breakdown of law and order. The present political dispensation should usher in social progress and complete tranquility, if the dividend of true democracy is to be experienced by the citizens thus ushering in sustainable economic development. The major way to achieve this is by reducing the activities of these political thugs, who are social miscreants, to the barest minimum. It is only then that the present political dispensation can be truly celebrated by all and sundry and the supposed dividends adequately appropriated.

SOCIAL MISCREANTS AND GANGSTERISM

These youths who are used as thugs, form themselves into violent groups. Zdun (2005), in his research, came out with the finding that: “one of the major strategies of legitimizing violence in youth groups is based on solidarity. It is not only interpreted as conventional, but also necessary to fight for the group and failure to do so carries the threat of social sanctions, for instance being

kicked out of the clique for not caring enough about the groups solidarity”. No doubt, through these fights, juveniles and deviants “risk conflict with the norms of respected others, such as their families” (Foglia, 1997). No matter how these acts are condemned, the perpetrators still attempt to justify their actions. Zdun (2007) focused on street level violence. His findings proved “guilt neutralization” and “offending legitimization,” before, during and after violent crimes. This attitude has continued to catalyze the tendency to commit all forms of crime by these social miscreants.

The theory of social disorganization was said to have been developed by Shaw and Mckay in their study of juvenile delinquency in urban areas in the 1930’s. This theory refers to the “inability of local communities to realize the common values of their commonly experienced problems”. The theory proposes that “social order, stability and integration are conducive to conformity, while disorder and segregation facilitate crime and deviance”. A social system is said to be “organized” if it has “internal consensus on its norms and values, a strong cohesion among its members and there is an orderly social interaction. On the other hand, a system is “disorganized”, “if there is a breakdown in social control, a disruption in its cohesion or a lack of integration”. Sampson and Groves (1989) carried out an empirical study in 238 localities in Great Britain. The study showed that communities characterized by sparse friendship networks, unsupervised teenage peer groups and low organizational participation, had disproportionately high rates of crimes and delinquency. The data supported the theory that “low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility and family disruption lead to community disorganization, which leads to increase in crime and delinquency rates” (Criminal Theories, part I, 2011). Reduction in the level of deviance will lead to marked economic and social progress. Lewis (2011) argued: “decrease levels of deviance aid in bringing about social order, increase in the likelihood that businesses will expand into local areas and bring economic opportunities, and decrease government expenditure into programmes and institutions that reduce, punish, and compensate for deviance”. While fielding questions from newsmen at the opening of “Britain in Nigeria Exhibition,” in Lagos, the former governor of the State, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, decried the activities of social miscreants. He admitted that they pose serious problem and threat to the nation’s foreign investment inflow drive (Tinubu, 2000). He further blamed their rising activities on the high level of unemployment among them. It is the opinion of the writer that these social miscreants are usually vulnerable tools in the hands of those who desire to perpetrate both political crimes and other forms of social vices. These no doubt have a gross negative impact on the economic, social and political wellbeing of the populace, invariably affecting the quest for sustainable development in Nigeria.

CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES OF POLITICAL THUGS IN LAGOS STATE

Social miscreants are given to all kinds of criminal activities that are contrary to the general wellbeing of the society. It is on this note that the writer seeks to examine some of the common harm done by social miscreants in Lagos State. One of the most devastating harms done by social miscreants in Lagos State was the burning of the multimillion Naira Lagos State Rehabilitation and Skills Acquisition Centre, Tekunle, Lagos State (Area Boys of Lagos and Ibadan in Action, Nairaland, 2010:1). This Centre, said to have been built by the former Governor of the State, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu in 2004, was meant to rehabilitate "area boys" and drug addicts who were arrested on the streets of Lagos. The "area boys" are trained here to acquire useful skills in tailoring, carpentry, vulcanizing and others, before they are released to lead meaningful lives. The "area boys" who were taken to the centre were said to have gone on rampage, thereby burning the multimillion naira equipment in the centre. This is said to have caused a major set-back in the rehabilitation plans of the state government.

Another major harm caused by social miscreants in Lagos State is the fear they create in the heart of foreigners who would have wished to invest in the state. Commenting on the argument by the then Lagos State commissioner for the Environment, Ibiam (2010:1) has this to say:

We all know that Lagos has been regarded as an urban jungle. It has become an eye sore, not only to the government but to our visitors. It denies government a lot of revenue. Investors are not coming for fear of "area boys" and erecting of illegal structures here and there (This Day, 2010:1).

In the opinion of the writer, the economic harm perpetrated by the social miscreants in Lagos State has a far reaching effect on the entire wellbeing of the state and the citizens in particular. This definitely would have a devastating effect on the nation as a whole. It is commonly believed that Lagos State is the economic "hob nub" of Nigeria. It means that anything that affects Lagos State would have an indelible effect on the entire nation.

The report by the Daily Sun (2010:1) puts the previous argument succinctly. It recounts the way social miscreants brought both social and economic activities in Oshodi and its environs to a standstill. According to Okoye (2010:1), the fracas was caused by the death of the Lagos State caretaker committee chairman of the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW), Alhaji Saka Saula. As soon as the news of his assassination broke out, the union members and other

social miscreants went on rampage as they unleashed mayhem on traders and other law abiding citizens of the state. At various motor parks across the state, fracas aimed at avenging the death of Saula broke out. The consequence was an abrupt halt on commercial activities, with commuters having to trek long distances since commercial vehicles were not allowed to operate. The depth of the harm caused by these "area boys" can be better mirrored by the agony expressed by one of the victims: "... some days later, some group of boys led by 'Kunle fighter', came in the midnight and set our shops and goods on fire". This has become a routine. They always capitalize on any opportunity to cause confusion so that they can loot stalls. All the money the traders make could be said to be for the "area boys". They harass and intimidate them with dangerous weapons at will (Daily Sun, 2010:3).

Another major account of the harm caused by social miscreants was reported by Utebor and Nwogu (Punch, 5 May, 2010:5). They gave an account of the pandemonium that erupted on Wednesday, 5th of May 2010, between two rival groups of social miscreants. Both groups had clashed over the control of a motor park at the junction of the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Idi-Araba. The social miscreants were seen employing all sorts of dangerous weapons, like cutlasses, axes and fire arms. They soon sacked the entire area preventing commercial vehicles from operating. This affected the social life of the people as they were made to stay indoors. The economic life was also affected. Market and shops were short.

The activities of these thugs extend beyond Lagos State. It has been argued that they seize every opportunity to unleash mayhem. Adetayo (2010:5) reported on the invasion of the Luyole Local Government Secretariat, Idi-Ayunre, Ibadan by political thugs. These thugs reportedly chased out the counselors whom they suspected were not in the camp of the chairman. In the same vein, Makinde (2010:5) reported of a bloody clash between members of the National Road Transport Workers Union (NURTW) in Ado-Ekiti. Their aim was to change the leadership of the union led by Omolaye Aderiye. This however left a member of the NURTW dead as the two factions engaged each other. These examples have become relevant due to the fact that the harm perpetrated by social miscreants in Lagos State will soon begin to spread like wide fire as other states are beginning to also "savour" this ill wind. Majority of those involved in these dastardly acts could be said to be social miscreants who often double as political thugs.

The catalogue of the harm done by social miscreants is innumerable. In a heart-rending account, Ibemere, (2011:8), described the experience of the residents of Amukoko, a Lagos suburb, on the 1st of January, 2011. He declared: "for fear of being maimed, residents locked themselves in, while the miscreants took over most of the streets, smoking and unleashing havoc on unsuspecting

victims". He continued, "The miscreants laid ambush at strategic places to attack motorists, loot and vandalize vehicles." According to his account, "dangerous weapons such as bottles, machetes, knives and others were freely used, forcing passers-by to flee for their lives. At the end of the crisis, over eight vehicles were destroyed at Market Street in Amukoko".

ARRESTING POLITICAL THUGGERY IN LAGOS STATE

The menace of political thugs can be reduced or brought to the barest minimum by applying some of the following:

Rehabilitation process

Rehabilitation Centers are mainly established to take care of deviants within the society. The sole purpose is to assist these deviants to develop a new and progressive positive world-view. The objective is to make them turn a "new leaf" and become useful members of the society.

It is believed that if the government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the church aggressively establish rehabilitation centers, where skills are taught to the social miscreants their negative impact on the society will be minimized. The benefit of the rehabilitation centers, in addition to others, will be to give an opportunity for positive re-orientation to the social miscreants. This will definitely bring about an outstanding change of attitude. The rehabilitation centers have the advantage of bringing the different political thugs under an organized umbrella, thus making it easier to render any physical care or service to them. This definitely would have been difficult or impossible if they were scattered all over the city of Lagos, as they are quite ubiquitous. Those saddled with the responsibility of attending to them are also able to adequately monitor them, while the necessary commensurate attention is given to each and every one of the social miscreants. This definitely will make the solutions applied to be effectual. It is important to mention the value of rehabilitation centers. These centers, according to Sherwood (2011), are designed for restoring someone to a useful place in society. It provides support system to help restore people to their place in the society. The major function is to provide the means and space to assist people in the recovery process.

Addressing the challenge of drug addiction

The effect of drug addiction has been found to be one of the major causes of the increase in the upsurge of political thuggery in Lagos State. These social miscreants who are often hired as political thugs are commonly believed to subsist on drugs such as alcohol, marijuana

and others. The influence of these drugs is manifest in the negative activities perpetrated by them. Most of them, when under drugs, pour their venom on the law abiding citizens of Lagos State.

The Nigeria government has put in place different machinery to check the abuse and trafficking of the different illicit drugs that the people can easily be addicted to. The National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) was established by the Nigerian government. Among other functions, she is to check the trafficking in illicit drugs. It is confidently canvassed by other countries of the world that once the aspect of drug trafficking is put in check, it follows logically that the spread and use of such drugs is also grossly minimized. The influence of such drugs drives the users into activities that they would have probably found themselves unwilling to participate in, if they were operating from a sound mind. This calls for an urgent need to check drug addiction. A positive drive in this direction will bring about a lasting panacea to the menace of social miscreants and political thuggery in Lagos State.

In Nigeria for example, marijuana (popularly known as "Indian hemp") is trafficked and used commonly by those involved in this dastardly act. According to Odiegwu (2010:5), a man was arrested by the Niger State command of the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA). The man admitted that he has been conveying Indian hemp (marijuana) for a long time to any destination specified by his clients. According to him, his clients cut across the country and they apply different criminal methods in conveying the substance. This includes concealing the bags in large water tanks before conveying them to their destinations. He receives a fee for every contract that he secures. The consequence is that this illicit drug is consistently trafficked all over the country. In the opinion of the writer, this process guarantees the spread of the drug, and makes it accessible to the different users, including the political thugs. As they continue to have access to this drug, they subsist on it and are influenced to continue their nefarious activities. The spread, including the trafficking, and consequently use of such drugs should be checked and stopped. This will minimize both the upsurge and activities of social miscreants in Lagos State.

Some of the ways of preventing drug addiction include:

- (i) The organization of prevention programs and advocacy directed towards youths and teenagers.
- (ii) Parents talking to their kids about the danger of drug abuse.
- (iii) Establishment of projects that will teach youths and others how to live healthy life styles, and arm them with skills that will help them to handle and cope with the challenges of life (eHOW, 2010:1)
- (iv) The need for people to give support, encouragement and guidance to the drug addicts. This involves family members, friends, counselors and those from their

religious community (church, mosques and others).

(v) Drug rehabilitation. Drug rehabilitation (often called “drug rehab”) is the medical and psychotherapeutic treatment used to enable a patient to cease from substance abuse and become normal and productive.

Drug addiction is definitely a deviant behaviour from the overall norms and cherished expectations of every healthy society. It must be avoided with all vehemence and tackled spiritedly. This will bring the menace of political thuggery in Lagos state under a reasonable check. The consequence of this is a return to both social peace and economic progress for the citizens, proximately, and the State, ultimately.

Addressing the unemployment challenge

It is commonly argued that the level of unemployment in Nigeria has worsened over the years. With reference to Lagos State, Abiodun (2010:10) posited that “unemployment continues to be one of the greatest challenges of the metropolis....” Many youths and other able-bodied people are left without employment; hence this is seen as one of the causes of the upsurge in the number of social miscreants in the state. In solving the problem of unemployment, some of these solutions can be considered as outlined by the “Fear of Area Boys (Agbero) in Lagos” (2010:1). The social miscreants (“Area Boys”) should be organized into a body that will assist commercial drivers in the collection of revenue. They should be trained in different areas such as road construction and engaged with at least a minimum level of remuneration. It is also argued that the government should give them social benefits to cushion the effect of unemployment. In addition to this, the government can train them as ticket inspectors, bus conductors and terminal operatives in the government transport scheme.

The solution to the high level of unemployment in the country can also be viewed from the perspective of child/population control. It is posited that countries that thrive well are “countries with less people to fill their jobs, than with too many people” (The fear of Area Boys (Agbero) in Lagos, 2010:6). It is further warned that unless Nigeria practices child-prevention, many of the kids may end up as “Area Boys” (social miscreants). Parents should be encouraged to appreciate the importance of adequate child spacing and having only the number of children they can cater for.

The Federal Government appreciates the harm caused by unemployment; hence, the Federal Executive Council has decided to create one million jobs within the next six months through the establishment of the National Action Plan on Employment Creation (NAPEC). This was reported by Nwankwo et al. (2010:2) in order to drum home the fact that the Federal Government acknowledges the social harm caused by unemployment.

Before now, the government has set up projects and programmes directed towards addressing the problem of unemployment. An example is the National Directorate of Employment (NDE), which among other things is saddled with the responsibility of equipping, especially graduates, with required skills for self-employment. They are sometimes provided with materials and funds to address these needs. The government, during the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, also initiated the National Poverty Alleviation Programme (NAPEP). This programme also addressed among others, the unemployment scourge and its attendant consequence, which is poverty and upsurge in the population of social miscreants. The different solutions advanced in tackling the effect of unemployment is expected to go a long way in minimizing the negative consequences of the scourge of social miscreants in Lagos State, and the nation in general. Suffice it to say that these programmes are laudable, but there is still room for improvement. In the opinion of the writer, there is the need to intensify the quest for a lasting solution to the challenge of social miscreants and political thuggery which requires the intervention of both the church and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This should be done by mounting an aggressive advocacy towards ameliorating the issue at stake.

Concerted efforts of the government, non-governmental organizations and the church

The challenges posed by the upsurge of political thugs in Lagos State and Nigeria in general are definitely a social menace which can only be tackled through the concerted efforts of all and sundry. By implication, therefore, this malaise can only receive a lasting panacea if the government, non-governmental organizations and the church can genuinely collaborate in the fight towards enthroning a miscreant – free society. This would bring their negative impact on the society to the barest minimum.

It is further posited by the writer that only a clear collaborative effort can bring about a lasting solution to the menace of social miscreants. The need for deep attitudinal change can give strength to the solution so desired. On the strength of this position, Ibemere (2011:8) argued: “over the years, several administrations have made efforts to curb the activities of hoodlums in the metropolis, but the miscreants always have a way of coming back.” He further opined that “not even the raid and rehabilitation of the boys in Tekunle, seems to have reduced the numbers”. The implication of his argument is that, as plausible as government’s effort appears, there is still a far cry concerning the right and enduring solution to the menace of social miscreants in Lagos State. There is, therefore, the need for all to join hands with the government to fight this social malaise.

Addressing the challenge of poverty

The UNDP (2004) argues that between 1987 and 1998, the entire population of poor people in Africa, rose from 217 million to 291 million people. This shows that a larger part of the African population lack basic resources like food, money and adequate employment. Furthermore, the UNDP report, as highlighted by the Guardian, (26th July, 2009:114) submitted that in 2002, Nigeria ranked 148th out of a total of 173 countries as one of the poorest in terms of the living conditions of the citizens. The consequence of the high level of poverty in Nigeria is that majority of the citizens are forced to live below adequate level of human existence. Most of the able bodied males and females remain unemployed. This has further made poverty quite palpable in most parts of the society's life. It could be argued that this has given rise to different categories of social challenges. Top among these social challenges is the menace of social miscreants and political thuggery.

How then can the problem of poverty be alleviated? It is sad to note that, Nigeria, though commands a sizeable deposit of natural and human resources, still parades a large population of the poor. The Nigerian situation is worsened by the challenge of poor leadership. The Nigerian leadership has not been able to convert the gains of adequate natural and human resources to enduring wealth for the overall benefit of the citizens. The challenge of poverty can be addressed through the enthronement of the right leadership and the provision of adequate employment for the teeming population. In addition to this, there is also the need to provide basic amenities like adequate power supply, proper transport system (including road, rail, air and water). There is also the need for building the right human capital through education for all. This will guaranty a future population of skilled labour force that can adequately cope with the contemporary global economic demands.

In conclusion, the writer posits that once the poverty level among the citizens is brought low, the corollary is that the activities of social miscreants and upsurge of political thuggery would also be brought low. This is due to the fact that poverty has been incriminated as one of the common factors that give room for the perpetration of all forms of vices. In other words, once poverty is arrested or brought to the barest minimum, its negative consequences would be brought under check.

CONCLUSION

It is the position of the author that the challenge of political thuggery and vices perpetrated by social miscreants in Lagos State in particular and Nigeria in general calls for urgent concerted efforts. This must be demonstrated by all and sundry as the miscreants' nefarious activities have continued to affect the economic life of the state in particular and the nation in general.

Most of the local and foreign investors are scared from the state as a result of this social ill wind. The youths have continued to fall prey to the political class that to manipulate and hire them for political exigencies. This is often facilitated by the lack of viable employment and morbid poverty. These youths who are also given to drugs, would likely fall prey to anything that gives them seeming assurance of survival. The entire situation must be urgently ameliorated in order to usher in sustainable development in Lagos State in particular and Nigeria in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

1. The government, nongovernmental organizations and the church should mount formidable advocacy to discourage the youths from political thuggery.
2. Expose the youths and others to the harm caused by drug.
3. There is the need to enthrone the right leadership in the Nation that will address the challenge of unemployment and others. This is possible through the right political education of the citizens.
4. Create skill acquisition centers to train youths and others in various vocational aspects.
5. Parents should be made to appreciate their role in the proper upbringing of their children.

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Citation: Omomia, A. O. (2015). Arresting political thuggery and other vices among social miscreants in Lagos State, Nigeria for sustainable development. *Net Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(3): 70-76.
