



# Agitators to legislators:

The migration of ex-militants into Niger Delta politics

## Summary

Since the 2009 start of the Niger Delta amnesty programme, dozens of self-described former 'agitators' (ex-militants) have migrated out of the creeks and into politics. Initially, many acted as political thugs, or 'godfathers', to help mainstream politicians win elections, in exchange for payoffs, privileges, and the protection of their activities. Increasingly, though, ex-militants are entering mainstream political positions, obtaining government appointments, and winning local government, federal, and state legislative elections. The role and performance of these actors will continue to evolve up to, and beyond, the 2019 elections. Whilst this does not represent a positive trend for democracy, early indications suggest that it poses no more of a threat to democracy and governance than the continued dominance of the region's violence-sponsoring political class.

## Key messages

- The Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP) helped bring ex-militants into the mainstream; position themselves as legitimate candidates for political positions; and provide resources to build their support base.
- As senior ex-militants have migrated into political positions, it has become easier for politicians to mobilise ex-militant groups to protect and enforce their mandates.
- Although most ex-militants are dependent on appointments granted by the existing political class, they are increasingly running for office themselves to reduce dependence and consolidate power.
- The effect of ex-militants migrating into politics, who are easily able to deploy force and violence to subvert the democratic process, may not pose any greater threat to the region than the already violent and heavily patronage-based political system.
- Initial indications suggest that the perception in communities may be that ex-militants are more capable and willing to provide security and development, as there are stronger ties between militant leaders and their constituents.

## Introduction

This briefing paper highlights the trend of ex-militants entering formal politics in the Niger Delta – how they become involved, why, what roles they play, and the implications of this. It is based on interviews with local experts and researchers in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers, discussions with ex-agitators, and desk research.

## The pathway into formal politics

How are ex-militants – many of whom made their name rebelling against state authority, and lack the educational and professional pedigree prized by political elites—migrating into government?

Primarily, they are opportunists who see an opening in politics created by their rehabilitation under the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP). The established political class and traditional leaders in the Niger Delta are seen by the public as divisive figures who are self-serving, compromised by the region's oil politics, detached from the lived realities of constituents, and declining in popular legitimacy. Political appointments offer ex-militants an opportunity to reinvent themselves as legitimate leaders and decision-makers, who are champions of hometown interests, and thus enjoy a genuine level of localised constituent support.

For an incumbent politician, low-level political appointments are an easy way to reward loyalty, buy-off a dissenter or potential rival to their agenda, and build constituent support for a second tenure. Common appointments such as special assistants, local council chairmen and councilors, or members of ad-hoc security task forces have

few responsibilities, so are attractive to appointees who can continue with other occupations alongside the role. A pioneer of this approach was the first civilian Governor of Bayelsa state, Diepreye Alamieyeseigha (May 1999 - December 2005), who instituted a patronage system that has been followed by successors in Bayelsa state and beyond, resulting in thousands of political appointees to date.

This type of political opportunity is within the gift of the benefactor, meaning the position can be easily revoked or investigated, ensnaring the appointee in the governor's agenda and political machinery. As one ex-militant leader explains: "if you are given an appointment under a political party, then you are a politician." In this capacity, they play a supporting role to their political godfathers, whose demands for loyalty constrain ex-militants' day-to-day decisions and long-term career potential. Often self-interested and neglectful, these political sponsors frequently fail to deliver promised patronage to ex-militants' communities. This increases ex-militants' incentives to short-circuit the political order by running for office themselves.

## Marshaling money, muscle, and relationships

Ex-militants make formidable political candidates because they already possess the tools to mount a successful election campaign: financial wherewithal, grassroots networks, mobilisation capacity, and the means to intimidate opponents, election officials, and even voters themselves. A political career does not necessarily preclude an ex-militant leader from maintaining these financial and operational interests; it can even be an opportunity to use these assets to increase power and resources.

As previous elections in the Niger Delta have demonstrated, politicians have long relied on ex-militants and other armed youth to act as violence entrepreneurs (thugs) to secure election outcomes. "Politicians need groups of criminals and assassins around them to provide intelligence and do their dirty work", according to a local political researcher interviewed for this report. Having played this role for others, ex-militants are well positioned to flex such grassroots political muscle on their own behalf.

Personal links to local cult groups are also a political asset. These secret societies – such as

the Supreme Vikings Confraternity, Neo Black Movement of Africa, and the Icelanders, among others, link powerful politicians, ex-militants, and criminal gangs across the Niger Delta. Belonging to a cult or confraternity is often a prerequisite for obtaining a government appointment or ascending the political ladder. Aspiring politicians “must tick the box”, according to another local researcher; cultism in the Niger Delta is “like a vine that is growing: it will never stop.”

The PAP has also served as a financial stepping stone for ex-militants seeking to transition into government. In the first phase of the programme, the region’s top militant leaders were put in charge of distributing stipends to their followers. Several leaders also received lucrative pipeline surveillance and other government contracts. The second and third phases of the amnesty bolstered these leaders’ financial position and political relevance, functioning as a form of patronage to ‘clientelise’ local youth, some of whom had not necessarily been active as militants. In the words of one ‘first phase’ leader: “Third phase amnesty is a business amnesty, because most are still our boys.” The Second and Third Phase ex-militants are now returning from overseas scholarships and vocational training opportunities, which bought loyalty that can be converted into support during campaigns and elections.

Successful ex-militant leaders like Tompolo and Pastor Reuben also operate visible and well-funded philanthropic foundations that distribute basic resources such as rice, potable water and cash to communities in their political orbit. These foundations have increasingly provided basic services, such as education and healthcare, where the government has not. This increases the influence of ex-militant leaders beyond direct dependents. However, it ties their legitimacy to their ability to generate material benefits for their constituents, which is a precarious position to be in without direct access to state resources.

## Motivations to move into formal politics

Several factors drive ex-militants’ involvement in mainstream politics. First, political power opens up new opportunities for them to accrue power and wealth, especially in relation to the oil and gas industry, which are otherwise controlled by the political elite. According to one ex-militant leader:

“It’s only politics that can put people into positions, not any other thing. Forget about the oil companies, it is politicians that control them...it is only those who can influence oil companies to give you a job, so we have to move with politicians to get things from companies. I go direct to get what I want, that is how we play.” Ex-militants often claim they want to bring tangible benefits – jobs, contracts, training opportunities, and other forms of patronage – to their local communities, which echoes the rallying cry from their militant past. While there are many factors that mean this may not happen in practice, it provides a powerful campaign narrative at the grassroots level.

With their comparatively strong grassroots connections, ex-militants believe they can curtail security challenges and deliver on the development needs of the people more effectively than incumbent politicians. As one ex-militant leader explains: “They [incumbent politicians] are not doing it, and we don’t have the right people there to do that. Many of those that got into office [their aim] is to fight for themselves, how they can enrich themselves, that is the business of these days... If I am [elected] today, I will use initiative. I have ideas what I will do to generate funds, that most of those people sitting in that seat do not know.”

In becoming a politician, some ex-militants hope to capitalise on their capacity as violence entrepreneurs, by organizing political violence on their own behalf, rather than as a thug-for-hire for another politician. Human Rights Watch observed that much of the compensation that politicians promised to the groups they helped finance and arm during the 2003 elections never materialised, whether in the form of cash or government jobs<sup>1</sup>. This has become common in subsequent election cycles in the Niger Delta. Rather than continue risking betrayal, ex-militants may use their capacity to back their own trusted candidate, or even run themselves.

Finally, ex-militants are mindful that the PAP will not last indefinitely and that their window to pursue a more lucrative and less risky career is closing. The PAP has been running for almost one decade, far beyond the planned end date. There is constant speculation surrounding its existence, and it will continue to be used as a bargaining tool with the region during elections so long as no exit strategy is defined. Without political independence, ex-militants are forced to remain ‘loyal’ to the Chairman of the PAP, even if in disagreement with them and/or the Federal Government.

## Ex-militants in formal politics: five archetypes

Our analysis of over 60 ex-militants (and close associates) engaged in politics has identified five overarching – but in some cases overlapping – categories of individual. They are:

### The Godfather:



Several ex-militant leaders have become kingmakers in local and – in the case of Tompolo, Ayiri Emami, and Ateke Tom – state politics. These individuals have turned the tables on the political class in their states, having served politicians and accrued sufficient power and wealth to pick their own winners and losers. In key parts of Rivers State, former warlord-turned-traditional monarch Ateke Tom plays this godfather role. Since 1999, his ability to furnish political thugs to the PDP has been a key factor in its continued dominance over state politics. Speaking about his role in securing then-Governor Odili's 2003 reelection, Ateke said: "Any place Odili sent me, I conquer[ed] for him. I conquer[ed] everywhere."<sup>2</sup> Ateke considered running for governor in 2015 but ultimately supported the PDP candidate, likely securing contracts and government appointments for his own collection of political godchildren<sup>3</sup>.

### The Godchild:



Like conventional politicians, many ex-militants transitioning into politics do so as the acolytes of powerful political godfathers. A prime example is Kingsley Otuaro, current deputy governor of Delta State. As a major godfather figure within the Delta State PDP,

Tompolo worked to elect Otuaro – his cousin, key confidant, and the state's number two politician. Otuaro's rapid political rise from a leader of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC) – a de facto ethnic militia – to state appointee, to governor-in-waiting, demonstrates how rewarding being a loyal political godchild can be.

### The Opportunist:



Politically savvy and self-motivated, this category of ex-militants are free agents working to build their own reputations and freestanding political structures.

One such opportunist is Pastor Reuben Wilson, an ex-militant leader and candidate for Southern Ijaw Local Government Chairman in Bayelsa State. Reuben has carefully maintained cordial relations with state and regional powerbrokers while also building a grassroots political structure, based on a prominent position in the PAP administration. With an eye to the future, he is also studying for a degree in Political Science, and has established a philanthropic foundation.

### The Muscle:

Many ex-militant leaders have embraced their original role as 'violence entrepreneurs', serving as political thugs in the run-up to, during, and after elections. Some perform this role locally, at the state level, or market their services as 'commuter thugs', working as mercenaries for politicians in neighboring states. One such 'gun-for-hire' is Donbara Pere ('Don Pipi'). A cultist and ex-militant from Bayelsa State, Don Pipi and his followers have hired themselves out as thugs in Rivers state and, most recently, Akwa Ibom state. Others utilise the muscle at home to provide services to politicians or oil and gas companies, and later convert this dominance to political prominence. The Cawthorne Channel in Rivers state is a good example, where there is crucial oil and gas infrastructure, and where ex-militants controlling security contracts are ascending into political roles. This includes Sobomabo Jackrich ('Egberipapa'), Farah Dagogo and Prince Hornby ('Busta Rhymes')<sup>4</sup>.



### The Family Member:

Though not necessarily former fighters themselves, ex-militants' relatives are also embracing political roles, often as godchildren (see above). In a political environment characterised by double dealing and rapidly shifting loyalties, family members make unusually reliable allies. Tompolo in particular has worked to propel forward several of his relatives' careers. They include his younger brother George Ekpemupolo (former chairman, Warri South West local government), his nephew Julius Gbaborji Pondi (House of Representatives, Burutu Federal Constituency - pictured), and his cousin Kingsley Otuaro (Deputy Governor, Delta State



## Conclusion – Implications for stability, democracy, and governance

The migration of ex-militants into politics perhaps poses no more of a threat to democracy and governance in the Niger Delta than the continued dominance of the region's violence-sponsoring political class. Ex-militants – with access to cash and popular support – are using the amnesty and the declining legitimacy of incumbent political elites as an opportunity to join mainstream politics. In doing so, they hope to enhance their status and deliver tangible benefits to their communities.

Anecdotal accounts suggest ex-militant politicians perform better on the delivery of services and public

goods than 'civilian' counterparts. One reason for this may be stronger ties to their local community. It is also conceivable that their grassroots popularity could even reduce their need for coercion and political violence – although violence has been a key means for many to enter politics in the first place.

The transition of ex-militants into politics in the Niger Delta is a continuation of a political system highly dependent on violence and patronage. But the extremely poor reputation and track-record of the existing political class, and the ability of some ex-militants to provide support to their constituent communities, means they are gaining popularity and legitimacy. Whether this marks a continuation of the status quo, a worsening trend for politics, or the emergence of a system of politics that has a greater basis in the social contract between leaders and their constituents at-large, remains to be seen.

<sup>1</sup>Criminal Politics: Violence, "Godfathers" and Corruption in Nigeria (Washington DC: Human Rights Watch, 2007), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/nigeria1007/index.htm>.

<sup>2</sup>Criminal Politics: Violence, "Godfathers" and Corruption in Nigeria (Washington DC: Human Rights Watch, 2007), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/nigeria1007/index.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>These political godchildren include former Rivers State House of Assembly Speaker Victor Daboturudima Adams, state legislator Chisom Promise Dike, among many others

<sup>4</sup>Covering three LGAs in the Western side of Rivers State: Asari-Toru, Akuku-Toru and Degema, hosting large parts of the Nembe Creek Trunk Line, pumping 150,000 barrels per day from Oil Mining License 29.

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