The Uromi 16 And The Problem With Nigeria

by

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The killing last Friday of 16 Northern travellers along the Uromi-Ubiaja road in Edo state is an event that will live in infamy. Twenty-five travellers from Port Harcourt going home to the North, Kano specifically for the Eid el-fitri celebrations were intercepted by vigilantes along the way on the suspicion that they were kidnappers and they were lynched to death. There were 25 of them travelling together, nine of them managed to survive, but for the majority, it was an encounter with death. Some of the victims are from the Bunkura and Rano Local Government Areas of Kano State, mostly from Garko, Kibiya, Toronkawa and Rano villages. The fallen victims had wives, children and mothers. The men were said to be hunters and they were suspected by the vigilantes because they were reportedly carrying dane guns, and they had dogs with them too. It was a tragic incident. Madam Sadiya Sa’adu, for example, lost her son, her brother and her nephew: “They were not criminals; they were simply out to make an honest living. My son’s blood must not be spilled in vain,” she said.

One of the victims, Abdullahi Harisu, 21, got married only four months ago. In one account, the Edo Vigilante Commander was said to have ordered the killings. He had concluded that the travellers were Boko Haram terrorists and kidnappers. Three of them were reportedly taken to the police station, with the vigilante commander telling the police that they had brought in kidnappers. He then, in spite of the police, instructed that the remaining persons who had been apprehended should be killed by the vigilantes. Now, the people of Bunkura and Rano LGAs are mourning. More orphans and widows have been created. Nigeria happened to the Uromi 16. When Nigeria happens to you, it means literally that the state has turned you into a victim of its many imperfections, and justice may never be done. In some other places in the world, even when a person dies unjustly, the law takes its course, but here in Nigeria, a country of over 230 million persons, when a whole village is razed to the ground due to jungle justice, the media would make righteous noise, the people would oh and ah, and just almost immediately, the country moves on. Everything wrong with Nigeria is written all over the Uromi tragedy. It is such an irony that Uromi in that axis is the home-town of prominent nationalist and statesman Anthony Enahoro, and his brother Peter Enahoro – the inimitable “Peter Pan”, two brothers who championed the ideals of national peace and progress.

The Nigerian 1999 Constitution guarantees the right to life (Section 33), the right to the dignity of the human person (section 34) and the right to be free from discrimination (Section 42), and the right to the freedom of movement (section 41). The rights of the Uromi 25 to all these fundamental human rights were brutally violated. Only a court of law can determine that life be taken after the accused person has gone through the justice system and he or she has been taken through due process, and fair hearing has been allowed, and it is established that a criminal offence, punishable by death, has been committed, as provided for in an existing law of the Federation of Nigeria. But things have gone so bad that vigilante groups of different colours in all parts of the country take the laws into their hands and dispense jungle justice. The vigilante group in Uromi reportedly went to the police station. What did the police do? It was the duty of the police to step in, and not allow the vigilantes to inflict punishment and commit murder. We need to know the exact police station where the complaint was lodged, who the officers on duty were, and what exactly was done or not done. Vigilantes telling the police that they had arrested Boko Haramists and kidnappers should have prompted the police to intervene immediately. They are definitely complicit in the tragedy that followed by their inaction. The least that the police could have done was to establish whether or not the apprehended persons bearing dane guns have the required licenses under the Firearms Act. The Nigerian Constitution further talks about the duty of the government to ensure the safety and welfare of every citizen (Section 14 (2b) and says that every Nigerian can move freely, reside in, and egress in and out of every part of Nigeria.

The dangerous and painful reality that we have seen in Uromi and elsewhere is that this is never the case. It is possible for a Nigerian to leave home in the morning, but the road is forever lying in wait, hungry and ravenous, cruel and unkind, either in form of bad roads, dangerous, unlatched container trucks, tankers bearing toxic and flammable cargo that could fall over at the mere rush of saliva, or armed vigilantes and other criminals inflicting jungle justice and a reign of impunity. This is so because the state is in retreat. This is so also because the state has been captured by unscrupulous elements. The emergence of non-state actors, otherwise called vigilantes or by whatever other appellation, is one of the responses to this failure. We are in a country where the routine loss of lives, and the habitual conflicts that have enveloped our lives, have forced many to resort to self-help. People have also lost faith in the state’s institutions. They don’t trust the police because they believe every policeman can be easily compromised. They doubt the judicial system because they are convinced that the courts no longer dispense justice. They do not trust anyone who does not speak their language. The Uromi 25 were labelled and profiled as terrorists and kidnappers because they are from a certain part of the country – the North, and yet there has been no report that they were engaged in any act of aggression, or violence that could be considered suspicious. They were travelling, they had dane guns, they identified themselves as hunters travelling back to the North. They were citizens moving from one part of the country to the other! They didn’t deserve to die just because they spoke a different language or looked different. The problem with Nigeria is that ethnicity is written into every fabric of social interaction.

It is most unfortunate that this happened, as the Ramadan, the Muslim Holy month was ending, and Christians were still observing the Lenten season. Nigerians are a very religious people, but they are also very hypocritical about their faith. Most of the persons who murdered the Uromi 16 in the early hours of Friday, would have gone to the Mosque later in the day, wearing the garment of piety. Others would have been in church on Sunday singing alleluia and asking their Daddies and Mummies, the entrepreneurs of Christianity, who sell salvation for tithes, to pray for them. Both religions teach self-discipline, comportment, compassion and charity, but such virtues are sorely missing in our land. The leaders set bad examples. The followers are worse. We harvest the collapse of values and ideals in the needless mass graves that we often dig, the cry of orphans and widows, and the agony of parents and communities. There is such a yawning gap between private morality – what we say to God and public morality – what we do as citizens.

The bloodbath in Uromi has been condemned by many including Waziri Adamawa Atiku Abubakar, Senators, members of the House of Representatives, the Northern Elders Forum, the Edo community in Kano, and the Arewa community in Edo State. The Governor of Edo State, Senator Monday Okpebholo has since ordered the suspension of all vigilante groups in Edo State. He has suspended the Commander of the Edo State Security Corps, CP Friday Ibadin (rtd.). The state has also disowned the vigilante group involved in the dastardly act and commenced investigations. Further, Governor Okepbholo has paid a visit to the Governor and the people of Kano State, and the families of the victims to commiserate with them. Fourteen suspects have reportedly been arrested. What this means is that the Governors of both Kano and Edo states and the leaders of the respective communities are trying their level best to de-escalate tensions, and ward off reprisal killings. There is too much shared bloodshed in Nigeria. This is what led to the counter-coup of July 1966, and the eventual blow-out that resulted in the three-year fratricidal civil war, 1967 – 70. Till date, the civil war has not ended. There has been no full reconciliation. The biggest emergency in the land is the spectre of revenge killings: seen, with tragic consequences in Southern Kaduna, Plateau state and the entire Middle Belt, and as seen most recently in the third week of March in Ondo state, with the killing of five farmers by persons described as herdsmen. In Ondo state, two weeks earlier, about 14 persons had been killed in the same Akure North Local Government Area. The killers, it was claimed, infiltrated Ondo State, through Edo State, and if we may stretch the logic, there could be a connection between the incident in Uromi last Friday and the killings in Ondo State two weeks earlier and what could come after in the nearest future in an unending cycle death and violence.

This is the real national emergency that the Tinubu administration must worry about. Insecurity in the country and a growing culture of vengeance and reprisal killings are the real issues that the government of the day must tackle, to stem the tide of imminent anomie, and anarchy resulting in the threat of disintegration. We survived the civil war. No country can afford to have two civil wars – the consequences would be terrible. The interest of individuals or specific groups relying on the advantages of power and position should not supersede that of the nation. There is obviously a need to rethink the country’s security architecture: what we have at the moment is not working. It has failed to work before now. It has no prospect of working tomorrow. With over 200 million people, and just about 300, 000 policemen, the country is grossly under-policed. The police are also under-funded, and there are too many criminals within the security sector. The police are in fact, so overwhelmed and poorly structured, that the military are often called upon to do police work. What would happen in the case of any external aggression? The same soldiers that have been immersed in police habits and culture would be the ones to defend Njgeria’s territorial integrity. The police should be restructured for efficiency and performance. The police force, as it is presently structured, cannot meet the security needs of the country. The emergence of groups like the vigilantes, and regional quasi-police structures like the Amotekun, Hisbah, Agunechemba, and neighbourhood watch groups are attempts to fill the gap and meet the people’s needs. There is now a clear case to be made for the creation of state police, and even a National Guard. The fact that an incident in Uromi or elsewhere would require a convoluted search for clearance and direction from Abuja makes mockery of the urgency of the crisis of insecurity that the country faces.

The most unfortunate part of it all is that Nigerians are quick to forget. There is an evil spirit of selective amnesia upon the land. Nothing shocks the average Nigerian anymore. We have become so numbed by state failure that once a tragedy occurs, our defence mechanism is to move on, carry on actually with life as if nothing happened, as if nobody died; like a people used to disaster, as in Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain, we seem to have developed a sympathy for death. It is a horrible place to be – for a country to be moving backwards, or at best, paralysed, bereft of empathy, when the rest of humanity is struggling to advance. The death of the Uromi 16 must not be treated like other cases before it; the investigations must be carried out to the letter, and the files must not disappear, all the police officers involved must not be transferred out of Edo state until thorough investigations are done and a report written; and the report must not disappear, and due action must be taken in this as in all similar cases. Certain questions beg for answers: what were hunters from Kano State doing in Rivers State? Rivers is a fishing community for the most part. Does anyone fish with dane guns?

Other state governments must learn from the tragedy in Uromi. It is colourful, after a fashion, for Governors to wear fanciful uniforms of auxiliary security outfits in their states, inspect guards of honour set up by untrained, ill-equipped fancy brigades who have neither the powers nor the intelligence to manage the security situation in the state. More Governors have learnt to dance on those occasions, thinking that this is some form of Nollywood entertainment. Meanwhile, Nigerians have found themselves in a situation where security is an issue, and welfare is a nightmare - with more people sliding daily into poverty. From whence then, cometh our help?