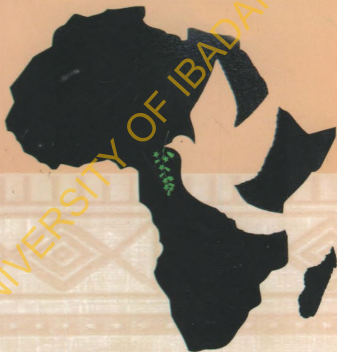


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NON-VIOLENT PROTESTS AND CIVIL SOCIETIES IN NIGERIA, 1993-1999.

Olusola O. Isola *

Abstract

Non-violent methods of agitation for civic rights have been more successful in the 19th and 20th centuries than armed insurgencies and violent protests across the world. However, media and scholarship attentions have always focused on armed conflicts and unsuccessful non-violent protests. In Africa, there is a rich culture of non-violent agitations which not only contributes to preservation of lives but has successfully been used to transform societies. The study focuses on the non-violent methods adopted by democracy activists to transit Nigeria from military dictatorship into democracy. The philosophical foundation, strategies, tactics, and methods of non-violent activities against military dictatorship are discussed. It is concluded that if the existing non-violent traditions and practices that helped in birthing democracy are nurtured, documented and disseminated appropriately among the population, they could sustain Nigerian extant fragile democracy and support the protection of civic rights of the people.

Introduction

Non-violent protests have been used effectively against some of the most brutal regimes across the world with remarkable successes. It has been used to overturn oppression and combat repression and is recognized across the world as a viable alternative to violent protests in the contemporary times. Notable examples of non-violent struggles in the twentieth century were the leadership provided by Mahatma Gandhi to secure independence for India under the

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British colonial regime and the civil rights struggle in America under the leadership of Martin Luther King.¹ A number of documentations have detailed significant unarmed strategies employed effectively against the invading Nazi forces in Europe during the Second World War by teachers and church leaders in Norway, physicians in Netherlands, academics and students in Poland, industrial workers and miners in France and Belgium among others (Semelin, 1993). Further studies are on-going on the activities of non-violent resistant movements which contributed to the incapacitation of the German forces during the world war. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed successful adoption of direct non-violent actions without or with minimal bloodshed against racist regimes, totalitarian dictatorships, communist regimes and military juntas in diverse countries such as Guatemala, El-Salvador, The Philippines, South Africa, the former Soviet Union, France, Myanmar, Czech Republic, and so on.

Recent instances of non-violent protests to achieve political revolutions were witnessed in the Middle East in 2011 in what was popularly acclaimed as the *Arab Spring*. It saw the exit from power of former President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Present El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, where political reforms are currently going on. Unfortunately, in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and few other Arab countries, protests which started peacefully aided by non-violent tactics, was transmuted into violent protests by repressive reaction from extant dictators. In Libya, the protests transmuted into large scale violent armed activities by dissidents, aided by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which resulted in the death of thousands of citizens. The rebels eventually killed Colonel Muhamar Ghadaffi. President Bashir Al-Assad of Syria and Ali

¹ For a fairly detail documentation of the non-violent activities, philosophies and ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, see Mary King (1999) *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King: The Power of Non-violent Actions*. Paris: UNESCO.

Abdallah Saleh of Yemen continue to suppress their citizen's protests with military forces, defying international displeasure against such repression.

The current development in the Middle East notwithstanding, there is a rich historical context to non-violent protests in Muslim and Arab countries, especially during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Among classic examples of non-violence in history was the struggle waged by the Pashtuns in Afghanistan against the British colonial authorities between 1930 and 1935, which quickened the independence of Afghanistan from brutal British rule. The Sha of Iran was removed in 1976 through non-violent means which included massive public disobedience, non-cooperation, industrial strikes and other actions which paralyzed the authority of the Sha, leading to the reformation of Iranian political system. In another instance, Iranian women who were banned from watching soccer games in sports stadium because of their sexuality defied the authorities by mobilizing hundreds of women to invade the stadium to watch a particular game. That brought an end to the ban.

There are numerous examples of successful and less successful non-violent protests on the African continent. It appears however, that historians and the mass media are more attracted to violent or unsuccessful non-violent struggles which eventually turned violent. The present work is aimed at focusing on the non-violent struggles in Nigeria during the military era to demonstrate that such struggles are not alien to the African continent. It is hoped that ultimately some lessons could be drawn to benefit the extant political environment in nascent democracies in Africa.

Non-violent Protests: A Theoretical Explanation: Non-violent struggle is predicated on the fact that political and economic power holders often depend on the obedience of the people for their legitimacy and relevance. Consents and withdrawal of consents are

prerogatives of the people in a free environment and loyalty to the source of power by subjects is crucial to the survival of the elite. Therefore, if protesters refuse to cooperate with the elite in sufficient numbers and persist over adequate period of time despite repressions, the dominant elite could lose legitimacy and become just another group of ordinary people (Sharp, 2005).

The common justification for the choice of non-violent method of struggle is that the potentially sympathetic public often perceive violent militants as extremists who are not ready to bend from their convictions due to inadequate preparation for negotiation in conflict situations. On the other hand, non-violent adherents are perceived as less extremist in their posture and more equipped to engage in conflict management and conflict transformation. This trait enhances the chances of non-violent protagonists in extracting from the opposition the readiness to give concessions through bargaining (Stephen and Chenoweth, 2008). In addition, it is observed that often, while governments can easily justify violent counter-attacks against armed insurgents, such violent reprisals cannot be justified against nonviolent protesters because it is likely to backfire. This has been witnessed in several conflicts which had generated international sympathy in favour of non-violent protagonists across the world.²

The political and social developments that compel people into non-violent protests can be explained within the frustration-aggression theory as propounded by Feirabend and Feirabend (1972). They describe sporadic public reactions in repressive

² The most recent example was the action of NATO in Libya in support of the actions of Libyan National Transitional Council against the regime of Muhammad Gadhafi. The Libyan conflict started out as a nonviolent protest against the regime, but the regime retaliated by exterminating its citizens who were protesting and that spurred the UN to pass a resolution to intervene in support of the Libyan rebels.

political environment as rooted in the differences between value expectations and realities about comfort, freedom and good life which authorities in political, social or industrial environments promise but fail to deliver to the people. In Africa for instance, the promise of independence came with the expectations of eventual end to the mysteries of the people who believed that transfer of power to local elite will automatically bring good life, end to inequalities and heavy yokes which characterized colonial rule. However, the post-colonial era has so far witnessed the transposition of the indigenous political elites into the place of former colonial masters who cared less for the welfare and good life of the indigenous people. The care-free attitudes of indigenous politicians, insensitivity to issues of welfare of the people and high level of corruption had caused many of the political systems of African countries to collapse. The intrusion of the military into governance did not help matters. Rather than rectify the damages done by politicians to the political fabric, the military further added to the decay; thereby complicating the socio-political environment in most countries leading to civil wars, entrenchment of impunities in the system, escalation of corruption and other vices which aggravated the social welfare of the people. Consequently, in many instances, the people were left with no option but to embark on social mobilization to liberate themselves from the indignity inflicted on them by irresponsible leaderships in forms of poverty, little hope for the future, unemployment, lack of access to good quality education and other vices in African societies.

The social contract theory can explicitly be used to explain the events that often lead to the adoption of non-violent protests. There is a social contract which basically binds the ruling class with the subjects in the modern political calculus. The contract is meant to guarantee a smooth flow of relationships between the ruling class and the ruled, each of them having responsibilities towards safeguarding the political environment and mutual relationship

between the two classes. While the subjects are expected to provide resources for governance in form of taxations in addition to carrying out other obligations to enable the state to perform effectively in providing security and comforts, the ruling elites are expected to work for a secure and comfortable present and future for the people. However, it is always the case that members of the ruling class constantly flout the components of the contracts that concern their obligations. This is mostly because citizens sometimes lack the means and mechanisms to interpret and cause the implementation of the contract in order to force the political elites to adhere to the tenets and spirits of the contract and obligations.

The modern political economy has turned many countries into rentier states which has further aided the flouting of social contracts. Governments may not necessarily depend on the taxes coming from the people now for governance purposes but could derive revenues from other sources including natural resources. This trend has made accountability to the people difficult and has made it possible in many cases to govern without the consent of citizens. Thus, people are forced to explore other avenues to assert themselves and obtain their rights while minimizing damages to the social fabrics. Non-violent struggle could be one of those avenues because the idea is to manage conflict without resorting to physical violence and bloodshed.

Non-violent Activism in Nigeria: An Historical Excursion

Non-violent activism is actually rooted in traditional societies in Nigeria. Before the era of colonialism, there were traditional non-violent mechanisms with which subjects expressed disapproval with ideas, decisions and actions of the traditional ruling class. These, however, varied from communities to communities and from kingdoms to kingdoms. In the Yoruba societies for instance, traditional chiefs expressed dissatisfaction with the king by boycotting the palace or by being passive in discharging their

administrative responsibilities. The citizens took several symbolic actions to transmit their dissatisfaction to traditional rulers, which ranged from protest marches in markets to boycotts of traditional events or rituals.

In the traditional Igbo communities, the various age grade societies in communities devised means of conveying dissatisfaction to the elders who constituted the ruling class without necessarily harming the fragile social fabric which could threaten peaceful co-existence or lead to disintegration of communities. There were various symbolic actions which could convey the feelings of the subjects to the ruling elite concerning any public issues which citizens were not happy about. For instance, the subjects sometimes withheld or delayed payment of taxes in form of currencies or agricultural products which were normally deposited into palaces in protest when palaces were not meeting the desire of the people. There were many instances of other non-violent actions that were taken to ensure that rulers complied with the desires of their citizens. This tradition was sustained into the colonial era which witnessed several instances of non-violent actions against the colonialists before independence.

The first recorded major industrial strike against colonial authorities took place in Lagos in August 1897. About 3000 workers of the Public Works Department (PWD) went on strike in protest against the policy of the colonial administrator which involved reduction of wages and re-organization of workers to the detriment of their welfare. Hopkins, (1966) reports that the industrial action was so effective that the colonial government under H. McCallum had to reverse the unfavourable policies against workers and restore their rights.

The Aba Women's revolt of November 1929 was a major non-violent protest against imposition of taxation on women in Eastern Nigeria by the colonial authorities. The protests which

lasted for more than one month brought women from villages and towns from various Eastern provinces together in the first of such protests in colonial Nigeria. Even though the colonial authorities retaliated violently by ordering their security agents to open fire on the women, killing and wounding about one hundred protesters, the women were strong in their resolve to achieve their aim through non-violence and adopted non-violent tactics such as protest marches, occupation of public places and non-cooperation. Eventually, they were successful in forcing the colonial authorities to defer the policy of women taxation and abolish the warrant chiefs system which was antithetical to the cultural environment of the protesters.³

The 1947 women tax revolts led by Mrs. Funmilayo Ransom-Kuti in Abeokuta was also one of the most remarkable non-violent protests led by women in Nigerian history. The women protested against the imposition of poll tax and high bride prices by going naked on the streets and disobeying the traditional and colonial authorities. The revolts not only jolted the colonial authorities, but it also led to the dethronement of a prominent traditional ruler, the *Alake of Egbaland* and his subsequent exile from his kingdom.⁴ This protest prepared the ground for subsequent formation of the Nigerian Women's Union in 1948, which became a formidable pressure group during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The union supported the agitations of women for social equality in various parts of Nigeria and it became a launch pad for the political careers of several prominent women across Nigeria.

³ For more details of the 1929 women protests in Aba, see Orijini N. John (2000), 'Igbo Women from 1929-1960.' *West Africa Review*, Vol.2, No1.

⁴ A good account of this nonviolent protest was presented at a lecture delivered by Dr Judith Byfield, titled 'Connecting the Dots: Gender, Justice and the Environment' at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan on 11 August, 2011.

At the onset of the struggle for independence, African elites were determined to achieve independence through non-violent methods, following the footsteps of the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in India and other non-violent advocates in colonial locations across the world. At the Pan-African meeting of the African elites in Manchester in 1945, a popular decision was taken that the independence struggle in African countries must take the positive path of non-violence. Several Nigerian elites, including Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe and Chief Obafemi Awolowo were present at the meeting and they strongly supported that resolution (George-Williams, 2006). Subsequently, among other strategies used for agitation for Nigeria independence, several newspapers were established by nationalists such as Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Ernest Ikoli to prosecute the non-violent struggle for independence. Also trade unions were formed and strengthened during the struggle and they contributed to the non-violent activities for Nigerian independence. The unions of railway workers, miners, teachers, civil servants and other prominent bodies were already active during the colonial era and they played prominent roles along with nationalists in the non-violent struggle for independence.

Shortly after independence, Nigerian government attempted to sign a military pact with the British, which would involve the establishment of a British military outpost in Nigeria. The Nigerian Students' Union protested against this proposal by organizing a mass protest and rally against the government. The protests attracted students from all parts of the country to Lagos, the former national capital. They disrupted the proceedings of the National Assembly and marched into the government secretariat, which became a big embarrassment for the government. The protests eventually led to the scrapping of the military pact. The Ogoni people in the Southern Nigeria demonstrated the virility of non-violent action in their struggle against Royal Dutch Shell Oil Company and the Nigerian

government. They adopted definite actions which included boycotts and non-cooperation, which attracted the attention of the international community to the serious environmental degradation in Ogoni communities during the repressive military era. Even though the struggle suffered serious casualties with the judicial killing of nine of the prominent leaders of the struggle, notable among who was the Playwright and President of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Ken Saro Wiwa, the Ogoni struggle remains a reference point and a testimonial to the possibilities of non-violent method of achieving social goals, even in a repressive environment.⁵

Non-violent Protests against Military Rule

Before 1992, various local Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) were campaigning in diverse ways against military rule in Nigeria. While some of them had clear-cut agenda, others were working without definite programme and agenda. However, the consensus among them was that an end must be put to military rule in Nigeria and they were strong in that resolve. Since there was no co-ordination of efforts of the various NGOs, there seemed to be no tangible result from the efforts of the NGOs for many years. In 1992, some of the NGOs came together to form an umbrella body to co-ordinate and harmonize the struggle for democracy. The Campaign for Democracy (CD) was thus formed and Dr Beko Ransome-Kuti was elected as the first president. From the onset, the philosophy of the CD was to adopt non-violent tactics to get rid of

⁵ For more information on the Ogoni struggle, please read the following: *Fact Sheet on the Ogoni Struggle*, www.insular.com/tmc-cgi; Ken Saro-Wiwa, 'Stand by Me and the Ogoni People', *Earth Island Journal* 95, no.10 (Summer 1995): 35 Ben Naanen, *Effective Non-violent Struggle in the Niger Delta*, www.sephis.org/pdf/ogonipeople.pdf. See also Desmond George-Williams (2006). *Bite Not One Another: Selected Accounts of Non-violent Struggle in Africa*. Addis Ababa: University for Peace Africa Program, pp. 68-75.

the military from governance in Nigeria and all members of the network were made to signify open commitment to this.

The initial plan of the CD was to sensitize the Nigerian public on the need to bring an end to military rule in Nigeria. The first action of the organization while carrying on the public sensitization was the adoption of civic disobedience as a first line of action against the military rulers. The CD met and discussed with umbrella bodies of trade unions, students' groups, artisan groups and other associations. Officers of the CD met with stiff resistance from the military rulers who unleashed the security apparatus on them right from inception. Some of them were arrested, brutalized, incarcerated and warned to desist from what the military government called 'subversive actions'⁶. With sheer determination, the group continued with the campaign until the general public began to respond to calls for actions.

When the convoluted transition programme of General Ibrahim Babangida was leading to an election, the CD believed that the transition programme was a farce and that the election would not produce any tangible result. They therefore called for the boycott of the 1993 general elections. However, opinions were divided among the electorates. Some believed that if the election would ease away the military from governance, they were ready to participate in order to get rid of the military. Others who were skeptical about the election processes insisted on election boycott. At the end however, majority of the electorates participated in the 1993 elections which was believed to be the best election to be so far conducted in the history of Nigeria. Few days later, the presidential election was annulled by General Babangida and that vindicated the position of the CD, who had earlier called for the boycott of the election. The

⁶ During several demonstrations in Yaba, Lagos Island and in other parts of Nigeria, members of the CD were arrested and brutalized by state agents and many were detained in inhuman conditions for varying period of time.

annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election became a rallying point for the campaign for democracy and strengthened the resolve of the members of the CD who consequently generated massive public support for its campaign against military rule. The CD in concert with trade unions called for massive strike actions and insisted on the revalidation of the June 12 election. The campaign attracted local and foreign attention and the CD was able to mobilize resources to prosecute the non-violent campaign.

The 1994 oil workers' strike, led by oil industry leading trade unions, NUPENG and PENGASSAN was very successful in crippling the machineries of the military government, forcing them to pay attention to needed reforms in the political environment and the degradation that was going on in oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. The strike, which lasted for about a month was perhaps one of the effective weapons against military rule and the unjust oil exploitation which left more poverty in its trail in the oil producing communities. The highly coordinated strike, supported by civil society organizations including CD, was one of the master strokes that forced the military government to begin to initiate political reforms and some form of compensations to the oil producing communities.

Apart from the CD other organizations participated independently in the struggle for democracy. The National Conscience Party (NCP) of Chief Gani Fawehinmi was not part of CD but joined efforts with the CD to prosecute the struggle. The National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and National Liberation Committee of Nigeria (NALICON) took independent actions in taking the democratic campaign abroad to mobilize support for the struggle against the military. Their efforts manifested in the establishment of *Radio Kudirat* and *Liberation Radio* to broaden the non-violent campaign on the airwaves in the international environment.

Strategies and Tactics of Campaign for Democracy

Community organizing and mobilization was on top among the strategies and tactics of the CD during the campaign. Member organizations of the CD embarked on neighbourhood mobilization and campaign across the country to sensitize Nigerians for participation in the mass disobedience campaign. Since members of the CD cut across the country, they not only persuaded community associations to participate, but also convinced individuals and opinion leaders at the grassroots on the reasons why they must participate in the massive civic disobedience campaign. Issues that were central to human existence and national survival were brought up in the mobilization campaigns. The poor state of the economy brought about by military misrule, poverty in local communities, inequalities in the society, poor condition of social infrastructures, hike in school fees in spite of the parlous condition of the economy, poor states of educational facilities and falling standard of education, dilapidation of primary, secondary and tertiary health institutions were some of the issues brought up during the mass mobilization campaigns. Several of the meetings with communities by member organizations of the CD were disrupted by state security officers and it is on record that many members of affiliate organizations of the CD were also arrested in the process.

The campaign of the CD was extended beyond Nigerian borders. Various meetings were held with opinion leaders in the international community in London, New York and other major international cities to sensitize the international community about the developments in Nigeria. Representatives of the CD organized and addressed such meetings. However, on many occasions, they were detained and arrested by security agencies at airports in Nigeria and some were prevented from travelling abroad several times. This encouraged the CD to devise other methods of getting its members out of the country through land borders and other discreet

routes to ensure that international appointments were kept in ways that government security agents were avoided. Sometimes, secret agents of the Nigerian military attended such international fora and reported back to military officials. The military junta retaliated by harassing key members of the CD in Nigeria when they obtained the news of the international activities of the organization.

The Nigerian mass media, especially the privately-owned media were strong allies of the CD during the campaign. Media advocacy was part of the deliberate strategy of the CD. Indeed, the Nigerian Union of Journalists, Lagos chapel, was a staunch member of the CD.⁷ Top editors from the media, reporters and correspondents were usually invited to the meetings of the CD. That enabled the programme and campaigns of the organization to be given wide publicity. Efforts were also made to persuade media owners to support the campaign. Some of the publishers came openly in their support for the campaign while others did it discreetly. Apart from the coverage of the activities of the CD, the media were also used in disseminating educational materials produced by the CD. Since resources were available to produce drama pieces, organize workshops and seminars, to produce documentaries on the physical conditions of the infrastructures, the media were used to disseminate the products of such efforts, sometimes for free or at reduced rates in comparison with what were being charged commercial advertisements in the media.

Information, Educational and Communication (IEC) materials were massively used in the campaign. Millions of posters, leaflets and handbills were printed and strategically circulated across Nigeria during the campaign. The CD hired young individuals to

⁷ Former chairman of the NUJ, Lagos state, Lanre Arogundade described the various initiatives embarked upon by the chapel to support the CD and efforts to mobilize journalists to support the campaign. Lagos state had the largest concentration of journalists in Nigeria.

complement their members in distributing the IEC campaign materials in churches, mosques, markets, schools and other public places. This was deliberately done to reach people where they were likely to gather in large numbers and to avoid the security officers who were often trailing to frustrate the efforts of the democratic campaigners. Peaceful street protests against military rule were conducted in many locations across Nigeria. Deliberate efforts were made to mobilize people at the grassroots to participate in such protests. Artisans, women associations, community development groups, market associations and such other grassroots groups were mobilized to participate in such protests.

In spite of the massive disobedience campaign of the CD, the organization also dialogued with the military leaders on terms and conditions of the exit of the military. However, during each dialogue session, the CD insisted on conditions such as immediate withdrawal of the military from power, organization of sovereign national conference, re-validation of June 12 presidential elections, among other conditions. Most of the time, the dialogue ended in stalemates as the military government often rejected the conditions of the CD while condemning their tactics. The CD was also adamant and was undeterred about the frustrations often met during dialogue sessions with the military either openly or in secret. Sometimes, the representatives of the government attempted to compromise members of the CD with financial inducements, but many of the leaders resisted such compromises.

Democratic Governance and Non-violence in Nigeria

Nigeria has a rich culture of non-violent protestations which could nurture and sustain democratic practices. Democracy cannot thrive in an environment where violence is the norm and where the citizens are not sufficiently equipped with the skills to express grievances in non-violent ways. The rich non-violent cultural environment in Nigeria could be an asset from which the current democracy could

tap into. Unfortunately, it appears that the country has ignored this non-violent heritage in preference for violent ways of managing its national conflicts. There is, therefore, a need to revive those aspects of the culture which has been lost due to historio-political reasons, economic disorientations of the citizens, loss of value systems and bad leadership which has been plaguing the country.

The nationality questions that led to civil war in the 1960s in Nigeria are still unresolved. Before the war, a number of violent uprisings occurred but were suppressed by the state: the Tiv riots, the Isaac Adaka Boro declaration of independence for the Niger Delta, Emeka Ojukwu's declaration of the secession of the Eastern Nigeria, the Ogoni crises, the emergence of OPC, MASSOB, MEND etc. Having fought a civil war in the past and seeing that violence did not solve the problems which were at the roots of the war, it is important to explore other methods to resolve the lingering and festering crises which often shake the existence of the country. One way of tapping into non-violent opportunities is to begin to explore dialogue. Dialogue as a non-violent mechanism offers the ethnic nationalities within Nigeria the opportunity to express opinions on the situation of things in Nigeria in order to agree or disagree on the continual existence of the nation and to carve out the basis on which the nation could continue to exist.

Many Nigerians have advocated the convening of Sovereign National Conference (SNC) to discuss and find solution to the lingering national problems. The SNC could offer the opportunity for individuals and groups to express grievances in an atmosphere of freedom. This is a viable alternative to violent options being adopted to express grievances. However, there is a need for government to provide conducive environment for such dialogue. It is important to provide assurance to all participants in such dialogue that there would be no intimidation or backlashes consequent upon participation in such dialogue.

For the Nigerian polity to benefit from non-violent method of resolving conflicts, there is a need for political leaders to pay attention to the security agencies in order to re-orient them in managing non-violent protests. There is a need for appropriate retraining of staff of security organizations in line with the demands of the democratic ethos so that their reactions to non-violent protests could change from what it used to be. The need for public education on how to express grievances in non-violent ways is equally important. This will be easier since many of the non-violent strategies are already within the cultures; government and civil societies only need to draw attention to them.

The civil society organizations which championed the struggle against the military must continue to be more vibrant even in the democratic environment. They must provide alternative and more viable platforms for expressing grievances since they are more equipped to provide leadership for non-violent protests. They must strengthen their mobilization activities to reinforce the capacities of the citizens for non-violent methods of expressing grievances to support democratic institutions in Nigeria.

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