

WESTERN NIGERIAN SECURITY NETWORK (AMOTEKUN): SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Over the years, insecurity has been identified as one of the challenges Nigerian and Nigerians have been contending with. The insecurity situation of the country has continued to defy the various strategies put in place by the government at the center to address the situation. The insecurity situation had led to agitation for true federalism and restructuring by the section of the country to enable various regions/states to take charge of their security giving the failure of the federal security architecture to curb insecurity that has been inimical to socio-economic development of the country. In order to address the insecurity challenges bedeviling the southwest region, the governors of the region established the Western Nigeria Security Network (WNSN), codenamed 'Amotekun' the Yoruba name for Leopard, a wild animal known for its great agility and hunting prowess. This paper explores the evolution of Amotekun security network; the opposition by the Buhari led administration and other groups, successes and challenges confronting the security outfit. The paper concluded by proffering practicable way forward towards ensuring the effectiveness of the security network.

Keywords: Security, Insecurity, Amotekun, Police, Regional security, Southwest Nigeria

Introduction

The primary responsibility of every government globally is to provide adequate security and maintain law and order to enhance socio-economic, political and cultural development of the society. This implies that people in the society are free from both internal and external threats. It should however be noted that, the degree of freedom from threats is guaranteed to a large extent by the body charged with the responsibility of maintaining law and order in the society (Oikhala, 2022). Due to its significance for the socio-economic advancement of the society, security has received attention from the government over the years. As a result, the Nigerian police, the armed forces, and other paramilitary groups have been established as security architectures to ensure and promote peaceful coexistence among the populace and safeguard lives and properties from both internal and external aggression. Since independence, Nigerian has witnessed unparalleled political, religious, and ethnic conflicts with the devastating of these conflicts affecting every geopolitical zones of the country.

While the North Eastern part of country is battling the terrorism attack by the criminal Boko-Haram group which has rendered many homeless and thousands of people lost their lives while businesses have been shut down, the North Central is having its fair share of the incessant farmers-herders conflicts which have resulted to unprecedented number of deaths, injuries, and loss of properties. North West of the country is not also left out, as Zamfara State has been infested with armed bandits while Kaduna State has become a hub for religious and community clashes; where the Muslims majority in Northern Kaduna and in battle for supremacy with the Christian majority in the Southern part of the state. This has led to the killing and displacement of many people in that region. Also, the Militancy and other

agitations from well-armed youths in the crude oil endowed South-South region are also very rampant. Ritual killing, kidnapping, communal clashes banditry is rampant in the South-West and across the whole country. The South-East is also confronted with the IPOB and unknown gun men agitation for the release of their leader, Mazi Nnamdi Kanu which has also led to the death of many people and disruption of business activities in the region (Olushola & Adeleke, 2020; Otu & Apeh, 2022).

The unabated insecurity across the country has put into question, the efficacy of the Nigeria security architecture to address issues of internal insecurity in the country. However, the abysmal performance of Nigeria Police Force (NPF) and other security agencies in addressing internal security threats have been attributed to poor funding; ill-equipped; understaffed and undue political interference by the political class in the country (Otu & Apeh, 2022). There were allegations from some quarters, especially the Southern leaders that the then President, General Muhamadu Buhari and his regime's dispositions were giving tacit support to the Fulani ethnic group as security challenges and tensions aggravated in the country during this period. Attacks on farmlands and spate of kidnap activities in the Southwest were linked with destructive incursions of Fulani pastoralists who are his kinsmen (Chukwuma 2020). In comparison to the rest of the regions, the southwest had previously been relatively peaceful. Surprisingly, the region which was once known for its limpid ambience witnessed weird and outlandish kidnapping operations during the regime.

In the southwest, the persistent carnages did not just lead to widespread anxieties and fears but also stimulated discourses about an agenda (real or imagined) of the Fulani to bring the Yorùbá, the main group in the Southwest region, under its control. Rumours about complicity of the Nigerian state in the numerous cases of kidnapping for ransom were rife and strengthened by the preponderance of people of Fulani ethnicity in political leadership and key national security positions. The people of the region lose trust and confidence in the federal government controlled security forces and feel unsafe. The kidnapping and killing of the daughter of the leader of Yoruba socio-cultural group, Chief Reuben Fazoranti, Mrs. Funke Olakunrin by Fulani kidnapers aggravated more agitation in the region for state police. The daring criminal activities of the Fulanis in the region led to the emergence of a non-state actor, Sunday Adeyemo popularly known as Sunday Igboho in defensive efforts against the Fulani herdsmen and kidnapers, killing, maiming and preventing farmers from accessing their farm lands.

The complicity of the Nigerian state and the inability of the Nigeria security structure to address insecurity in the region, the governors of the southwest region in collaboration with the traditional rulers set up security outfit known as the Western Nigerian Security Network. The security outfit is to complement the federal government controlled security architecture to address security concern in the region. However, the birth of Amotekun had since given rise to the establishment of other security initiatives in other regions of the country. The Northern governors teamed up to establish Shega-Ka-Fasa which is translated to "I dare you" in Hausa language and it has a Lion as its symbol (Enyiocha & Idowu, 2020; Isenyo, 2020; Hassan, 2020). In the same vein, the Ohanaeze Ndigbo (the apex socio-cultural organisation of the Igbo land) suggested 'Operation Ogbunigwe' as a security initiative (Punch, 2020). However, Amotekun has taken the center stage among the regional security network in the country.

The Evolution of Western Nigerian Security Network (WNSN): 'Amotekun'

The Western Nigerian Security Network code-named Amotekun was established to take decisive steps to curb the spate of killings and various crimes, including insurgency, herdsmen killings, kidnapping, robbery and rape of women in Southwest Nigeria. When it became obvious that the Buhari led administration could not guarantee security of lives and property. Moreso, the administration failure to prosecute the mastermind of the mass killings in Benue, Nassarawa, Bauchi, Taraba, Kogi, Adamawa,

Borno, Yobe, Zamfara, Kaduna, Ekiti, Enugu and other parts of the country. Amotekun security outfit was a courage taken by Southwest leaders and people to protect themselves and their region from criminals and intruders (Ologbondiyan, 2020).

In Southwest, which comprises of six states – Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo state which are geographically contiguous and share similar culture, beliefs, values and language, experienced all kinds of atrocious crimes by the Fulani marauders and yet the people could not find succor in the police. During the Buhari led administration, the insecurity situation in Southwest Nigeria went from being bad to worse. Operating on several major highways in the region were suspected herdsman, armed robbers, kidnappers and ritualists. The Akure-Owo, Oba Akoko-Akungba, Ondo-Ore, Ilesha-Osogbo, Ipele-Ido Ani, Ife-Ibadan, Ilaro-Owode-Idi-Iroko, Ijebu Igbo-Oru-Awa, Abeokuta-Lagos roads to mention a few became unsafe for commuters to ply owing to the rising criminal activities that took place there on a regular basis (Amaize et al., 2019).

The governors and the stakeholders from the region on several occasions cried to out to the world over the intolerable growing of insecurity facing their people and their resolution to establish security outfit to stop further spreading of the herdsman and the bandits who were identified as the major criminals that attack their famers, rape, rob, kidnap, and kill their people cruelly without reasonable challenge. According to reports, within a week, over eleven communities, namely, Eggua, Iselu, Orile, Igbooro, Ijaka, Agbon-Ojodu, Igan-Alade, Asa, Ohunbe, Ibaayun, Ibeju, Oja-Odan and other adjoining villages (all in Yewa North Local Government Area of Ogun State) and Imeko in Imeko-Afon Local Government Area of the same state were attacked and destroyed by the killer herdsman with over fifty-six people allegedly killed; hundreds sustained various degrees of injuries; several houses set ablaze by the rampaging herdsman hoodlums (Kayode, 2021). Similar cases were reported in Oyo, Ekiti, Osun, and Lagos States including other parts of Nigeria without any solution in sight (Akowonjo, 2004; Ojo et al, 2022).

When the danger of insecurity reached an agonizing stage for the people in the region, this impelled the six governors in the Southwest to meet in Abuja and chose the late Ondo State governor, Rotimi Akeredolu as their chairman to coordinate the activities of the governors from the region to foster unity and development. After their meeting, The Development Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN) Commission was ordered to call a security summit to have all inclusive discussion on solutions to the insecurity bedeviling the region. The summit was held in 2019 in Ibadan, the Oyo State capital at the Theophilus Ogunlesi Hall, University College Hospital (UCH). The security summit was attended by the then Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, who was represented by DIG Taiwo Lakanu in charge of southwest geo-political zone. Prominent traditional rulers from Ondo, Ekiti and Osun states were present to give their contributions to the summit (Vanguard Newspaper, 2019). Practical decisions were reached toward the addressing different insecurity challenges in the region.

The outcome of the summit led to the launching of a security outfit, Western Nigerian Security Network (WNSN) code-named “Amotekun” on the 9th January, 2020 at the Car Park of Oyo State Governor’s Office, Agodi, Ibadan by the Southwest governors to protect their region. ‘Amotekun’ which is an operational nomenclature for the WNSN means leopard in English. The leopard (Amotekun) represents strength, perseverance, ambition, independence, toughness, patience, wisdom, and fearlessness. The Amotekun is also known for its distinct hunting behavior and well-camouflaged appearance, which enable it to defend its territories from intruders. In either case, the animal exudes confidence, strength, and the ability to chase and catch up with prey at lightning speed (Oladele & Adeniran, 2020; Adetunmbi & Adedigba, 2021; Nwoko, 2021). With the emergence of Amotekun, the efforts of the Nigeria police in tackling crimes and criminalities within the region as well as preventing the spread of

Boko Haram terrorist and the nasty aggressive bloodsheds of the herdsmen and bandits in the region would have been presumably reinforced.

Operational and Administrative Structure of Western Nigerian Security Network

The Western Nigerian Security Network was formed to supplement the activities of traditional policing organizations such as the NPF, NSCDC, SSS and other state security institutions to combat insecurity in the region (Olawale, 2020). At the inauguration of the security network in Ibadan, Oyo state capital, the six states of the region donated One hundred and twenty (120) truck van and one hundred (100) units of motorcycle effective operation. The personnel of the security network were locally sourced more like neighborhood police. They rely on Dane guns for their weapons and ammunition, which are similar to those used by hunters when hunting animals in the forest (Egbas, 2020; Aneasonye, 2020). To ensure professionalism in their operations, governors of the region appointed retired security personnel as commandants of the security network in their various states.

For instance, in 2020, the Ondo State Governor, Mr. Rotimi Akeredolu appointed Chief Adetunji Olu Adeleye a retired Deputy Commandant General of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) as the corps commander for Ondo state. Similarly, the due of General Ajbola kunle Togun (rtd) and Colonel Olayanju Bisiriyu Olayinka (rtd) as Chairman and Commandant of the security network for Oyo State respectively (This Day Newspaper, 2020). Also, the former governor of Ekiti, Dr. Kayode Fayemi appointed Brig. General Joe Komolafe (rtd) as the commander of the amotekun corps for the state. In Osun state, the former Governor, Gboyega Oyetola appointed retired Gen. Isah Aderibigbe as Chairman, Governing Board and Brig. Gen. Bashir Adewimbi (rtrd) as the corps Commander. The Ogun state government appointed late David Akinremi a retired Commissioner of Police as commander of the Amotekun corps for the state.

The security outfit has units in each of the six states of the region for effectiveness and collaborative efforts. The activities within its jurisdiction will be coordinated by the local government organ. Each local government will have a relationship with the state command. The six-state commands will report to the regional command and operate from the control center in Ibadan, Oyo State and work closely with the Developmental Agenda for Western Nigeria (DAWN) which oversees the initiative administratively. For coordinated operations and administrative robustness, the security outfit has its regional headquarters located in Ibadan, Oyo State. However, in each of the six states' capitals, a correspondent office is located and coordinated by the commandant, with its activities regulated by the commissioner of Police in each of the states. To cater for the financial commitment of the outfit, a security trust fund was established to foot the bill. Each state is also obliged to recruit the number of personnel they are capable of maintaining. The initiative not only serves as an intelligent arm for conventional security; it also assists security forces in conducting more intensive and extensive routine patrols throughout the region. As a result, they serve as CCTV in most rural areas, gathering information about crimes and suspicious activities for interpretation and appropriate action (Ajiboye, 2023).

Opposition against the Establishment of Western Nigerian Security Network

The establishment of the Western Nigerian Security Network generated a lot of opposition from different section of the country. While the leading sociocultural organisations in the southeast and the Middle Belt regions were receptive to the formation of Amotekun describing it as a right step in the right direction towards achieving restructuring and true federalism which they have been championing and clamoring for over the years, the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) a northern sociocultural organisation and the Miyetti Allah an association of Fulani cattle breeders, were critical of Amotekun formation. They described the security network as ethnic army and a prelude to the Yoruba declaring a separatist Oduduwa Republic (The Sun Newspaper, 2020).

Also, the Buhari led Federal government in a statement through the Attorney-General of the Federation and Minister of Justice, Abubakar Malami declared the Western Nigerian Security Network illegal and has no place in the constitution. He declared that, ‘no state government, whether singly or in a group has the legal right and competence to establish any form of organisation or agency for the defence of Nigeria or any of its constituent parts’ (Punch, 2020). This statement however generated a lot of criticism from different quarters describing it as misleading. Aare Afe Babalola, faulted Malami’s pronouncement, saying Amotekun “is absolutely constitutional and legal.” In a statement titled, ‘No law prohibits the establishment of Amotekun,’ Babalola said, “The issue of Amotekun is an issue of public safety and protection of property. There is no law in Nigeria, which prevents citizens from being able to secure their life and property. The Nigeria Police does not enjoy exclusive jurisdiction when it comes to the protection of life and property. As a matter of fact, in many parts of Nigeria, various outfits such as Civilian JTF, Hisbah Police and vigilantes have been performing the duty of protecting life and property (Guardian Newspaper, 2020).

Further criticism also emerged from the National Secretary of the Miyetti Allah who described the outfit as a resurrection of the Oodua People’s Congress with the soul aim of displacing Fulani herders from the southwest (Akinsuyi, 2020). Ololajulo (2022) however, believe that the creation of the security outfit rattles the northern groups particularly the ACF and Miyetti Allah due to their previous experience and violent clashes between the Yoruba group, OPC in 1999 in the region. This experience informed their decision to tag Amotekun a Yoruba tribal militia. Also a Northern youths group, Northern Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN) rose against the launch of “Operation Amotekun” describing it as a threat to national security. The NYCN equated Amotekun with Boko Haram, a terror group in the northern Nigeria and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), a secessionist movement in the southeast part of the country already proscribed by the Nigerian government, calling on the frontline stakeholders not to allow its operation (Yaba, 2020). However, the Oodua People’s Congress (OPC) and Ohanaeze Ndigbo Youth Council (OYC) berated the Northern Youths Council of Nigeria (NYCN) for condemning the new security initiative. The groups described NYCN disposition to Amotekun as inciting and capable of causing unnecessary tension in the country and said those against it are sponsors of terror (Vanguard Newspaper, 2020).

Also, the Muslims Rights Concern (MURIC), a religious group championing the cause of Yoruba Muslims through its President, Prof. Ishaq Akintola frowned at the creation of the security network describing it as anti-Islam on the ground that the name of the outfit emanated from the Bible. According to Akintola, adopting the name Amotekun, which is mentioned in a verse of the Bible with particular reference to guarding a city demonstrates the Christianity undercurrent of the initiative (Owolabi, 2020; Ololajulo, 2022). Akintola further alleged favouritism towards Christians in the formation of Amotekun. According to the MURIC leader, prospective Amotekun corps personnel were expected to provide birth certificates and attestation letters issued by churches as part of the conditions of recruitment. The Muslim organisation also alluded to Christian dominance of the command structure, which it claimed depicted Amotekun as a Christian agenda meant to further enforce the subjugation of Muslims in the Southwest. Successes of Western Nigerian Security Network.

It has been four years since the Western Nigerian security network codenamed Amotekun commenced operation with a view to douse the tension of insecurity in the region. The security network has recorded successes in combating the insecurity challenges. For instance in Oyo State, the corps has recorded successes in reducing farmers-herders conflict and rescue kidnaped victims in the state. The successes in declining farmer-herders conflicts has been attributed to the alternative dispute resolution strategy adopted by the corps rather than the use of force or coercion. The corps in 2021 in collaboration with other local security architecture arrested six suspected bandits at Kajola Local Government Area of Oyo state (Channels Television, 2021). The corps has succeeded in dismantling several criminal

syndicates engaged in bike snatching, cow rustling, armed robbery, one chance, frauds, and rituals among others.

Also, since its inauguration in Osun State, the corps has embarked on over 200 notable operations, which led to the arrest of over 250 suspected criminals including kidnappers, drug peddlers, rapists, ritualists, burglars and illegal miners. Scores of abductees have been rescued unhurt by the security outfit in the state. The corps have also identified and raided many dark spots where they grow Indian hemp in the state (The Nation, 2022). In Lagos state, the Lagos State Neighborhood Security Corps (LNSC) operates in the place of the Amotekun corps. The LNSC has been providing intelligence to security personnel in the state and have been very effective. Many crimes have been busted in Lagos state through their active support through intelligence gathering.

The Amotekun corps in Ekiti state has foiled several abductions, apprehended some kidnappers and rescued kidnapped victims. It has also prevented and resolved so many clashes between the farmers and herders. In 2021, the corps arrested four suspected kidnappers in Eda Oniyo, Ilejemeje Local Government Area of the state during a routine patrol by the security operative in the state (Adejumo, 2021). In Ogun state, the corps has arrested over 200 suspects from robbery, rape, assault, stealing, and cultism. In 2022, the corps arrested four suspected kidnappers and recovered carbonized human skull from the suspects (Punch, 2022). Also in 2023, the corps in the state arrested forty suspected kidnappers, robbers and cultist in the state (The Sun, 2023). These and many other successes have been recorded by the state command of the Amotekun corps and across the region.

The collaborative efforts of the crops with security agencies in Ondo state has helped to chase out kidnappers and armed robbers operating in the state. The corps presence in different communities has reduced farmers-herders clashes tremendously. Many herders were made to pay farmers whose crops were destroyed. Through these efforts, over 600 conflicts between farmers and herders in the state have been resolved. Also in the state, the signing into law the Anti-Open Grazing bill has helped to boost the morale of farmers in reporting incidents of herders' destruction of farmlands to the corps rather than engaging them. The corps commander, Adeleye disclosed that Operation Clean Up and regular patrol has led to the arrest of over 4,000 suspected criminals across the state between January and May 2022. Also between January and June, 2024, the corps has prosecuted in the court of law about 600 suspected criminals in the state (Punch, 2024).

Challenges of Western Nigerian Security Network

The birth of Amotekun in 2019 initially met with a brick wall as the Presidency declared it illegal. It argued that the Nigerian constitution does not provide for a regional security outfit as the federating units for a regional security but state. This development forced the six state governors to go back to the drawing board, and urged all their Houses of Assembly to adopt a common security edict, which were giving accelerated hearings, passed and accented to by all the governors. Aside the initial challenges faced when it was inaugurated, Amotekun is grappling with the challenges of inability to carry the right arms, shortage of personnel and inability to prosecute criminals directly. The corps is also facing the problem of underfunding and logistics problem (The Nation, 2024). The corps is facing the challenge of sustaining public trust as some of the personnel of the corps are engaging in extrajudicial killings, torture and profiling of innocent citizens. This has attracted condemnation from the people as they are being likened to the disbanded SARS due to their excessive use of force on armless and harmless citizens. This development has led to the dismissal of erring personnel of the corps in some states.

Conclusion

The establishment of Western Nigerian Security Network codenamed Amotekun to address insecurity challenges by the southwest governors is a good step in the right direction. The primary responsibility

of every government is to secure the lives and properties of the people and nothing is too big to fulfill this obligation to the citizens. Despite the recent pocket of crimes in the region, the level of successes achieved in the region since its establishment have proven the governors and stakeholders in the region right. There is therefore the need for continue support for the security network through adequate funding, collaboration with other security agencies and capacity building for the corps personnel.

Way Forward

The western Nigerian security network has come to stay in the region. In order for the security network to be more effective, efficient and sustainable in combating various crimes that are inimical to the socio-economic development of the region, the following must be taken into consideration;

Governors and stakeholders in the region must work out sustainable funding models to enable the corps meet up with financial obligations in terms of operations, personnel welfare and logistics.

There must be the provision of capacity building program to training the personal on crime management techniques and handling of security equipment/gadgets

The governor of the region must continue to engage the government at the center to allow the corps access to right weapons after proper and adequate training.

There must be the integration of technology to enhance surveillance system and data analysis for effective operation

There must also be a continuous collaborative effort with other security agencies enhance intelligence gathering and expertise

There must also be proper check on all personnel to be recruited to avoid recruiting criminals into the corps.

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