

Hijacking civil society: the inside story of the Bakassi Boys vigilante group of south-eastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Analyses of the rise of violent vigilantism in Africa have focused increasingly on the ‘uncivil’ character of African society. This article challenges the recourse to cultural or instrumentalist explanations, in which vigilantism is portrayed as a reversion to violent indigenous institutions of law and order based on secret societies and occultist practices, or is viewed as a product of the contemporary institutional environment of clientelism and corruption in which youth struggle for their share of patronage resources. The social and political complexities of contemporary African vigilantism are revealed through an account of the rise and derailment of the infamous Bakassi Boys vigilante group of south-eastern Nigeria. Based on extensive fieldwork among the shoe producers of Aba who originally formed the Bakassi Boys in 1998, this article traces the process through which popular security arrangements were developed and subsequently hijacked by opportunistic political officials engaged in power struggles between the state and federal governments. Detailing the strategies and struggles involved in the process of political hijack, this inside account of the Bakassi Boys reveals the underlying resilience of civil notions of justice and public accountability in contemporary Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2006, the governor of Abia State in south-eastern Nigeria created shockwaves by signing into law a bill legalising the infamous state vigilante group known as the Bakassi Boys (*Vanguard* 31.1.2006). Active across south-eastern Nigeria between 1999 and 2002, the Bakassi Boys initially enjoyed considerable popular support for their role in maintaining law and order. However, the group was later denounced by a range

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of local and international human rights groups for numerous acts of murder and torture, and was disbanded by the federal government in 2002. This public move to resurrect the Bakassi Boys in early 2006 was the culmination of a more surreptitious revival process that had been taking place in Aba for over a year, with tacit popular approval. Why did such a violent vigilante group enjoy ongoing popular support? What are the implications of the Bakassi Boys for the Nigerian elections in 2007? What does the development and revival of this notorious vigilante group tell us about the character of civil society and democracy in Nigeria?

In addition to the Bakassi Boys, violent vigilante groups and ethnic militias have emerged in several other parts of Nigeria since the mid-1990s, including the OPC in the south-west, the Hizbah groups in the north, and the Egbesu Boys in the Niger Delta. The proliferation of brutal popular militias, not only in Nigeria but across Africa, has triggered a sea change in the analysis of African civil society. The unrestrained enthusiasm regarding the democratic potential of African civil organisations has, over the past few years, given way to disappointment. Rapid liberalisation and political decentralisation have failed to unleash a societal impetus for more transparent and accountable governance; instead, liberalised African societies are noted for the rise of violent vigilantism which has spread instability and criminality rather than democracy (Ikelegbe 2001; Reno 2002).

Explanations of the rise of vigilantes and ethnic militias in Africa have focused increasingly on the inherently 'uncivil' character of African societies (Faton 1995, 1999). In the growing literature on African vigilantism, two broad and sometimes overlapping tendencies have emerged. The first trend, most closely associated with anthropologists, emphasises the role of African culture in the rise of vigilante violence (Boas 2002; Gore & Pratten 2003; Harnischfeger 2003; Paciotti & Mulder 2004; Smith 2004). A key impetus behind violent vigilantism is seen to lie in a reversion to traditional institutions for the maintenance of law and order, owing to widespread disillusionment with the inability of the state to provide security:

the police and judiciary are no longer able to protect citizens, and have therefore lost all respect, while Western concepts of justice have similarly been discredited. ... Most people are sceptical as to whether Western ideas about human rights are suitable for an African environment. Those speaking on behalf of the militia do not hide their disdain for constitutional principles; some even claim that they are reviving pre-colonial [African] traditions, including the use of the occult to fight evil. (Harnischfeger 2003: 26–7)

Analyses of the cultural roots of vigilantism focus on community-based patrols, secret societies and occultist practices. Commenting on vigilantism in southern Nigeria, Gore and Pratten (2003: 230) claim that:

vigilante action, based directly on secret society revivals or drawing indirectly on the idiom of the secret society, has been a common response to crime since the [Nigerian] civil war. Contemporary vigilantism therefore represents the articulation of claims to a set of rights based on the historical and spiritual legitimacy of young powerful men, 'sons of the soil', defending the village under the protection of locally reputed charms, medicines and oaths.

While these cultural practices are represented as arising from genuine concerns about popular rights and security, indigenous African security institutions are seen to be based on alien 'idioms of accountability', steeped in violence and occult practices, and giving rise to practices that clash with the principles of liberal democracy (Smith 2004: 441). Far from promoting stability, indigenous security arrangements are viewed as a dangerous assortment of 'shadow structures' which serve to perpetuate rather than contest state predation and social disorder. At the heart of this perspective is a clash of cultures argument, albeit a relatively sympathetic one.

A second tendency in the literature, more prominent among political scientists, sees African vigilantism as rooted in political opportunism rather than culture. Proponents of this position specifically distance contemporary vigilantism from purported cultural origins, attributing its rise to political opportunism in a context of social disorder (Anderson 2002; Baker 2002; Boas 2002; HRW/CLEEN 2002; Ifeka 2000; Reno 2002). Human Rights Watch (2002: 8) and Nigerian commentators point out that the brutal methods characteristic of current vigilante groups were not employed by traditional vigilante organisations, and that modern vigilantes lack the communal base typical of their traditional counterparts (Chukwuma 2001; Ekeh 2002). 'Marginalised youth', 'rebels' and 'social bandits' rather than secret societies are viewed as the main social models of contemporary vigilantism. Grounded in an institutional environment of clientelism and corruption rather than community, vigilantism is viewed as a 'corruption of civil society under the patrimonial state' (Boas 2002: 55), leading to popular responses characterised by greed, opportunism and a political culture of violence. In short, vigilantes are the latest players in what Chabal and Daloz (1999) have referred to as 'the instrumentalisation of disorder'. Far from representing genuine security concerns, Reno (2002: 838) maintains that ethnic militias use civil mobilisation as a deliberate vehicle for tapping into patronage resources,

perpetuating predatory misrule and 'crowding out' alternative forms of civil society:

These opposition groups signal the emergence of a social category associated with collapsing states and crises of patronage politics rather than broader notions of a 'civil society' distinct from the (collapsing) state. Though many see themselves as marginalized critics of corrupt rulers, they often end up serving elite interests ... most of these groups end up trying to gain as much utility from the existing political society as possible. ... Elite backers make bids to expand their power. Youthful allies try to force their way into the social system from which they are excluded, not overthrow it.

Far from attempting to reform society, vigilantes are seen as collections of thugs and marginalised youth struggling for their share of patronage, and preying on the communities they claim to protect. Patronage, opportunism and a taste for violence, rather than a commitment to institutionalised conceptions of political accountability, however foreign, are the central motivating forces. In the social disorder of contemporary Africa, everything is up for grabs, and vigilantism is just the latest strategy for grabbing.

Between the cultural and instrumental explanations of contemporary vigilantism, the prognosis for African civil society seems bleak. African popular institutions are trapped in a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' form of analysis: to the extent that vigilantism is based on pre-colonial forms of organisation, it is evidence of the incompatibility of African cultural institutions with modern liberal democracy; if vigilantism constitutes a departure from traditional forms of organisation, it is evidence of the reduction of African civil society to thuggery and political opportunism. There is very little room in this framework for understanding the relation of vigilantism to popular struggles for security and accountability, or for recognising how an environment of poverty, state withdrawal and political liberalisation have contributed to the vulnerability of genuine civil initiatives to the machinations of more powerful political groups. Incisive articles by Kagwanja (2003, 2006) and Ukiwo (2002, 2003) on vigilante groups in Kenya and Nigeria criticise these analytical failings, and underline the need to move beyond sensationalist preoccupations with occultism and brutality to a clearer focus on popular institutional struggles and their manipulation by the state.

This article takes up the challenge through an analysis of the social and political processes at work in the development and re-emergence of the Bakassi Boys vigilante group of south-eastern Nigeria. While the Bakassi Boys are already the subject of a growing literature (Baker 2002; Harnischfeger 2003; HRW/CLEEN 2002; Smith 2004; Ukiwo 2002),

existing accounts have tended to focus on the most controversial manifestation of the Bakassi Boys in Anambra State, ignoring the processes of civil organisation and political hijack originally played out in the town of Aba in Abia State, where the group first emerged. The information presented here is the product of a unique opportunity to observe at first-hand the forces at work in the development of the Bakassi Boys during an extended period of fieldwork among the informal shoe producers of Aba – the founders and original leaders of the group.¹ Evidence is based on extensive interviews with Aba residents and with informal shoe producers involved in the original organisation of the Bakassi Boys, coupled with the realities of living and working in Aba during a key phase of their rise and derailment. Like many Aba residents at the time, I was forced to grapple with conflicting feelings of security and relief under the watchful eye of the Bakassi Boys, and dismay at their methods and growing excesses. The account is supplemented by newspaper articles, human rights reports and other secondary material to cross-check and support direct interviews, observations and personal experiences.

The narrative begins with an outline of the wider institutional context in which the vigilante group emerged. This forms the background to an account of the rise of the Bakassi Boys, with a focus on their emergence, organisation and degree of popular support. Attention then turns to a detailed analysis of the political hijack of the group, and its spread to other south-eastern states of Nigeria. This is followed by an account of the disbanding of the Bakassi Boys, and their recent revival in Abia State. A concluding section considers the factors that led to the violent trajectory of the group, and its implications for contemporary perspectives on African civil society.

THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Understanding African vigilantism begins with an awareness of the chaotic institutional context that gave rise to it. The Bakassi Boys emerged in a situation characterised by rampant crime and insecurity, a corrupt and inefficient police force, and intensifying power struggles between the Nigerian federal and state governments over the control of security forces. Even unsympathetic accounts of vigilantism in Nigeria recognise the appalling security situation faced by Nigerians during the 1990s (AI 2000; HRW/CLEEN 2002). Armed robbery had become rampant across the country, accompanied by increasing levels of brutality and murder. For a range of political and historical reasons, the south-eastern states of Nigeria were particularly badly affected by the deteriorating security situation.

Aba, a major commercial town in the south-eastern state of Abia, was beset by protection rackets, armed robbery, rape and murder which had become so widespread that residents heard the gunshots of nightly attacks in surrounding neighbourhoods, and men slept in their front rooms with weapons at their sides in case their house was the next target. By 1998, the year the Bakassi Boys was formed, Aba had been divided into eight zones controlled by organised criminal gangs (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 9; *Newswatch* 29.3.1999: 17). In addition to armed robbery, these gangs ran protection rackets, extorting money from business people and traders as well as attacking their customers. Human Rights Watch (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 9) reports that an estimated 200 people were killed in Aba by armed robbers between 1997 and 1999.

Amid this mayhem, the Nigerian police, plagued by corruption, inefficiency and institutional decay, had ceased to be a force for law and order. Part of the problem stemmed from the deterioration of the police force under the combined forces of military rule and Nigeria's structural adjustment programme (AI 2002b: 1–2). The police suffered from poor motivation, underfunding, low and irregular pay, and lack of training and basic equipment. They were also riddled with corruption, extortion and involvement in extra-judicial killings, incidents of which were regularly reported in the Nigerian press, and documented in human rights reports (AI 2002a; *Newswatch* 29.3.1999; Ukiwo 2002). Members of the police were frequently involved or complicit in armed robberies, and often released criminals in response to bribery or political pressure. The eight major criminal gangs in Aba were each reputed to have influential connections to police or politicians to ensure their immunity from arrest.

However, the problem of vigilante violence did not arise only from escalating criminality and an ineffective police force. During Nigeria's long period of military rule, the state itself had developed a taste for operating outside the law in the maintenance of security. Local and international human rights groups have decried the culture of brutality and impunity that dogs both military and civilian government in Nigeria, contributing to the increasing brutalisation of Nigerian society (AI 2002a; HRW/CLEEN 2002). Innocent Chukwuma (2001), head of the Nigerian civil liberties group, CLEEN, documents the deployment by military governors of brutal anti-crime squads composed of soldiers, police and vigilante groups charged with stemming the escalation of armed robbery in the country. These squads often circumvented legal and judicial process in their efforts to eliminate crime, often engaging in the summary execution of suspected thieves. These brutal anti-crime initiatives, such as 'Operation Sweep' in Lagos State in the early 1990s, were celebrated

as a success by the federal as well as the state military governments. The culture of brutality and impunity in government law enforcement persisted even after the return of civilian rule. Amnesty International (2000; 2002a) has complained that the civilian president, Obasanjo, speaks of democracy and due process, but sends in soldiers and military police to crush unrest and mete out reprisals with excessive force and loss of innocent lives, completely outside the framework of the constitutional and legal order. At the local level, the state had been encouraging the formation of informal community-based vigilante groups from the 1980s to supplement the activities of the police (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 8; Sesay *et al.* 2003: 16).

With the return of civilian rule in 1999, the security situation was further complicated by power struggles between the federal and state governments over the issue of decentralised police forces. While the Nigerian Constitution only allows for a federal police force, state governors were agitating for police forces under their own control. In 1999, the issue of state-level police was the subject of heated debates within the government and in the Nigerian press after it was approved in principle by the Federal Executive Council (*Vanguard* 25.10.1999). State governors argued that, as chief security officers of their states, they had the right to their own police forces. Critics highlighted the danger that state police could be used as tools of political repression during elections, and suggested that the call for state police was just a distraction from the failure of governors to perform their existing constitutional obligations, such as paying civil servants, addressing severe youth unemployment, and providing basic services.

Power struggles between the federal and state governments were also being played out within the framework of factional politics. Various regional elites were looking for a trump card to use against the federal government in their demands for a greater share of federal petroleum resources, as well as agitating for a zoning of the presidency to guarantee them a 'turn at the trough'. The return of civilian rule was accompanied by the imposition of Shari'a law in many of the northern Nigerian states, as well as an increase in community-based petroleum politics in the Niger Delta, and increased manoeuvring by Igbo politicians and ethnic associations. In south-eastern Nigeria, the issue of state-level police forces became embroiled in power struggles within the ruling PDP party (Ukiwo 2002). Igbo state governors in the president's faction of the party supported the constitutional requirement that policing should remain under federal control, while governors in the opposing faction, including those of Abia and Anambra States, began manoeuvring for security forces

under their own control. These various developments, rather than pre-colonial security systems, secret societies or the opportunism of disgruntled youth, constituted the key institutional factors that gave rise to the Bakassi Boys.

THE RISE OF THE BAKASSI BOYS

Origins

The Bakassi Boys vigilante group originated not from a traditional organisation, but from among the informal leather workers located in the sprawling Ariaria International Market in the town of Aba, a major commercial town in Abia State in the Igbo heartland of south-eastern Nigeria (HRW/CLEEN 2002; Meagher 2004: 278ff.; Ukiwo 2002). The Aba leather workers, predominantly shoe producers, are communally and ethnically diverse, coming from a range of Igbo as well as non-Igbo ethnic communities. Their occupational roots are also urban rather than rural, and contemporary rather than pre-colonial, since informal shoe production is an activity that developed in Aba during the late colonial period, and has no connection to pre-colonial occupational groups (Forrest 1994; Meagher 2004: 114). While the vigilante group that emerged among Aba's shoemakers undoubtedly made use of a range of Igbo organisational practices relating to communal protection, these were mixed and matched with institutional practices from more contemporary associations in order to meet new, more cosmopolitan urban objectives.

Aba's informal shoe producers constituted a large, socially marginalised, but economically expanding occupational group who were highly dependent on out-of-town buyers for their livelihoods. The shoe production areas of Ariaria market were frequented by traders from all parts of Nigeria, as well as from a wide range of west and central African countries, including Benin Republic, Ghana, Cameroon and the former Zaire. The rampant insecurity in Aba during the late 1990s was beginning to frighten away customers and threaten the economic survival of shoe producers, as well as their personal security and that of their families (Meagher 2004: 279; *Newswatch* 29.3.1999: 18).

The Bakassi Boys vigilante group initially emerged as a spontaneous popular initiative to protect property rights and fill the gap in state security provision – a social impulse celebrated by the new institutional economics as critical to healthy institutional development and the flourishing of 'social capital' (North 1990; Stiglitz 2000). Numerous sources have documented how the Ariaria shoe producers, provoked by a spate of

particularly horrific killings by armed robbers in the preceding weeks, including a pregnant woman trader and two shoemakers, took up their matchets on 6 November 1998 and declared war on criminality in Aba (HRW 2002: 9; *Newswatch* 29.3.1999: 18; Ukiwo 2002: 41). Clashes between the shoe producers and the criminal gangs of Aba lasted for several weeks, in the course of which the vigilante group took shape. It was based in one of the shoe production zones of the market known popularly as 'Bakassi', from which the vigilante group took its name.² The Bakassi Boys succeeded in re-establishing security in Aba within four months, enjoying enormous popular support despite their brutal methods.

Organisation

Although the Bakassi Boys had contemporary rather than traditional social roots, the vigilante group was not, as Reno and others have suggested, a gang of thugs bent on profiting from social disorder (Reno 2002; HRW 2002). Within the first few weeks, the vigilantes developed a clear structure and code of conduct centred on responding to popular demands for security and the protection of property rights. The organisational structure was based on contemporary associational models involving chairmen, secretaries and treasurers, rather than on pre-colonial Igbo communal defence organisations. The group initially involved an executive composed of informal shoe producers that ran the actual vigilante operations. The original chairman of the group, Ezeji Oguike, was the former chairman of the Bakassi shoe production zone, who resigned from the zonal leadership to take up the chairmanship of the vigilante group (AME Chairman 2000 int.). The vigilante group and its executive were responsible to a supervisory committee originally composed of the chairmen of the six shoe production zones of Ariaria market, all of whom were also active shoe producers (*ibid.*). While the vigilante executive organised operations on the ground, including patrols, investigations and executions, the supervisory committee oversaw their activities, made strategic decisions about the running of the group, and carried out the recruitment of vigilante forces, originally based on the criteria of physical appearance and a recommendation from a respectable person (Ukiwo 2002: 42–3). As one shoe chairman described the relationship between the supervisory committee and the vigilante group, 'We are the generals, and they are the foot soldiers' (AME Chairman 2000 int.). A few months after the emergence of the Bakassi Boys, the supervisory committee was expanded to include the chairmen of all of

the traders' associations in Aba, shifting supervisory control away from shoe producers toward the wealthier and more influential traders' associations. However, the chairmanship and key positions of the group itself remained in the hands of the Aba shoemakers, and the shoe chairmen still retained considerable day-to-day influence in the control of vigilante operations.

The Bakassi Boys were known for their strict code of conduct, which involved not just the interrogation and public execution of suspected thieves, but investigation of allegations and the character of suspects, and destruction of any property seized along with them. While the methods of execution were brutal – those deemed guilty were normally dismembered with machets and burnt – the Bakassi Boys rapidly built a reputation for fairness and honesty (Baker 2002; *Newswatch* 29.3.1999: 18; Ukiwo 2002). The execution of the notorious armed robber known as 'Jango' on Christmas Day 1998 is widely regarded in Aba as indicative of Bakassi's strict adherence to an anti-corruption mandate. The vigilantes rejected a bribe of N2 million (US\$ 20,000) to set Jango free, and after executing him, burnt rather than sharing out his property (*Newswatch* 29.3.1999: 18). This story was widely repeated among Aba residents. Moreover, evidence from Aba residents, press reports and the shoe producers involved in the vigilante group indicates that where suspects were found innocent, or there was insufficient evidence, they were released (*ibid.*). I came across no reports of unjustified killings during the first fifteen months of Bakassi's operation, with one important exception which is discussed below.

References to charms and occult practices, while somewhat overstated, indicate a tendency to bolster the contemporary organisational structure of the Bakassi Boys with an older informal institutional repertoire of communal security organisations and secret societies. However, ominous accounts of secret societies in contemporary literature tend to obscure rather than clarify their institutional significance. In pre-colonial south-eastern Nigeria, the stateless character of local societies meant that institutions regulating long-distance trade tended to be embedded in religious rather than political authorities. Occult practices and attribution of supernatural powers were used to institutionalise the legitimacy and authority of trans-communal systems of economic organisation and law enforcement (Dike & Ekejiuba 1990; Northrup 1978). Similarly, secret societies such as the Okonko and Ekpe societies played a central role in the maintenance of law and order *across* community lines in order to facilitate trade, and were so effective that a European trader is known to have joined the Ekpe society in Old Calabar in order to

benefit from its debt collection machinery (Northrup 1978: 109; Oriji 1982).

It is worth noting in this regard, that, based on nearly a year of interviews and casual conversations with Aba residents, and extensive monitoring of press reports over a wider period, there was comparatively little reference to occult practices during the first year and a half of Bakassi operations. Occasional emphasis on such practices served largely to tap into embedded notions of authority and legitimacy, rather than to call on supernatural powers. The authority and popularity of the vigilante group was much more centrally based on public displays of impartiality and resistance to corruption than on belief in or fear of the occult. References to occult powers and practices, in the press and in later interviews, became more pronounced after the group came under the influence of state governors, when supernatural claims to legitimacy were used to cover for an increasingly compromised commitment to the public good.

The basis of popular support

The overwhelming popular support enjoyed by the Bakassi Boys has been viewed with concern by international academics and human rights organisations. Some have seen such support as a product of parochial loyalties (Harnischfeger 2003; Ifeka 2000; Smith 2004), while others have attributed it to the brutalisation of Nigerian society combined with fear of reprisals against critics of the group (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 40–2). However, as Ekeh (2002) points out, the explanation is much more straightforward. The popularity of the Bakassi Boys lay in their demonstrations of honesty, combined with an enormous sense of popular relief over the re-establishment of basic security. As Aba residents repeatedly put it, since the coming of the Bakassi Boys they could now ‘sleep with both eyes closed’ (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 15).

While the Bakassi Boys were feared, they were also respected for their accountability and lack of corruption. For the first year, there were no allegations of arbitrary or partisan arrests, investigation of crimes was perceived as thorough and fair, and political influence and bribes were repeatedly rebuffed. These popular perceptions were based not on a patrimonial ‘rhetoric of accountability’ (Gore & Pratten 2003: 221), or on a belief in their supernatural infallibility (Smith 2004), but on repeated public demonstrations of justice and impartiality which were retold and discussed across the town. Many of the horrific tales (and later films) about Bakassi activities were as much about the integrity of Bakassi justice as

about the brutality of their methods. The resistance to bribes and political pressure, the resolute execution of those found guilty, the restoration of security – these were the justifications for Bakassi's horrific methods. While local people recognised that such brutality was undesirable, in the context of rampant armed robbery and police corruption, it was better than the alternatives. As one Aba resident explained, 'Killing human beings is not good. The Bakassi Boys will go to Hell, but we thank God they're here' (Aba small businessman 2000 int).

The Bakassi Boys were also respected for their commitment to public rather than particularistic interests. Popular support for the Bakassi Boys depended critically on the perception that they were *not* an ethnic militia, an image they endeavoured to maintain even after it began to break down in practice (Baker 2002: 230; Smith 2004: 446). Indeed, one of the original motivations behind their formation was the security of traders from other ethnic areas who came to do business in Aba. In Aba, the Bakassi Boys enjoyed the goodwill of non-indigenous as well as Igbo residents, and indigenes and non-indigenes alike willingly paid a modest monthly levy (in 2000: N100, or US\$1.00) to the running of the vigilante group. In August 2000, six months after the Bakassi-led Aba riots in which hundreds of Hausa migrants were killed, a Hausa trader in Aba told the *Weekly Trust* (6.8.2000), 'They are doing a good job here. They have battled armed robbers. The rate of crime has reduced to zero level now.' Overall, the early history of the Bakassi Boys had more to do with the realisation of public concepts of justice and accountability in a corrupt and chaotic social environment, than with opportunism, supernatural beliefs or patrimonial notions of accountability.

THE PROCESS OF POLITICAL HIJACK

Unfortunately, the success of the Bakassi Boys proved to be their undoing. The growing popularity of the group attracted the attention of the governors of the Igbo States, who saw in Bakassi a means of creating security forces under their direct control, thereby enhancing their power with respect to the federal government. This set in motion a process of political hijack which can be traced through a series of events narrated below. These events highlight the vulnerability of African civil organisations to political capture in a context of institutional breakdown, economic deprivation and political opportunism, but also demonstrate their capacity for resistance and their commitment to values that challenge rather than reinforce opportunism and parochialism.

Political capture in Abia State

In line with their commitment to public accountability, the Bakassi Boys originally displayed a disinterest in political patronage. A frequently told story among Aba residents was that the notoriously shady governor of Abia State, the businessman/politician Orji Uzor Kalu, had attempted to bring the group under his influence soon after coming to power in May 1999. The Bakassi Boys are reported to have said that Governor Kalu was a thief, and if he came to see them, they would execute him like any other thief. This set the stage for a more strategic process of political capture that appears to have begun shortly afterwards in the town of Umuahia.

The first incident in the political capture of the Bakassi Boys involved the killing of two young men in a restaurant in Umuahia on 9 July 1999. There is no evidence that these young men had any involvement in crime, making this the first case of completely unjustified killing publicly associated with the Bakassi Boys in eight months of operation. The HRW/CLEEN report (2002: 27–8) notes that the circumstances surrounding the incident were peculiar, and reports that initial police investigations into the incident were obstructed by the Abia State government, requiring the transfer of the investigation to Lagos. The findings from this investigation revealed that officials of the Abia State government, including the secretary to the state government and the protocol officer, called the Bakassi Boys to Umuahia on 9 July 1999, following a decision by the governor and deputy governor to invite the group. About ten members of the Bakassi Boys came to Umuahia, including their chairman, Ezeji Oguike. The Bakassi delegation first went to Government House, where discussions were held between the Bakassi chairman and the secretary to the state government. The latter then led the Bakassi delegation to a restaurant where the two young men were killed.

Discussions with officials and active members of the shoe producers' associations suggest that the protocol officer directed the Bakassi Boys to the young men and identified them as known armed robbers. The young men were then summarily executed. The police arrived immediately and arrested six of the Bakassi Boys, which was unusual in cases of Bakassi executions. According to HRW/CLEEN (2002: 27), a directive was sent to the police that the suspects should be brought to Government House, where they were released. Four of them, including the chairman, were rearrested a few days later, charged and sent to trial. The trial was not concluded until 2006, and the suspects were held in prison throughout. Members of the Bakassi executive and informants among the shoe

producers have privately expressed the opinion that the whole incident was a set-up to remove the Bakassi chairman, who was felt to be too intransigent (Shoe Plaza small producer 2000 int; AME Chairman 2000 int.; Powerline President 2000 int).

A second key incident in the political capture of the Bakassi Boys relates to the Aba riots of 28 and 29 February 2000, in which the Bakassi Boys led attacks on the Hausa community in retaliation against the killing of Igbos in anti-Shari'a riots in the northern Nigerian city of Kaduna (*Vanguard* 4.3.2000: 1; *Weekly Trust* 10-16.3.2000: 5). Over 300 adult men from northern Nigerian and Nigerien ethnic groups were slaughtered, and thousands more lost homes and businesses, and were forced to flee to the police station for refuge. This was the only incident of ethnically motivated killings associated with the Bakassi Boys.³ The central puzzle of the Aba riots was that they violated the formative objectives of the Bakassi Boys: maintaining security and making Aba safe for traders from other areas. By participating in attacks against northern Nigerians, the Bakassi Boys, who were still largely made up of shoe producers, acted against their own economic interests. The Aba riots took place just a few weeks before a major Muslim festival, which was a key sales period for shoe producers, and depended heavily on traders coming down from northern Nigeria. The riots frightened away northern Nigerian traders, depressing shoe sales for almost a year afterward (Meagher 2004: 281–2). One is left wondering why the Bakassi Boys betrayed so starkly the practices of impartiality and the protection of law and order to which they had adhered strictly for over a year, and in the process undermined their own economic interests.

A closer look at this incident is instructive with regard to the role of culture and political opportunism in vigilante violence. The arrival of Igbo bodies from the Kaduna riots, which was reported to have triggered the violence in Aba, had taken place several days earlier. In the interim, the evangelist Reinhard Bonnke was holding a crusade in Aba, and President Obasanjo was scheduled to pay a visit to Aba on the same weekend. Both the timing and the target of the riot appear to have been influenced by cultural norms of Igbo warfare, which call for a suspension of hostilities during religious festivals, as well as prohibiting the killing of women and children (Isichei 1976: 80). Hostilities in Aba did not begin until the morning after Bonnke's four-day crusade, and, despite the reckless violence of the Aba riot, not a single woman or child was killed, despite the retaliatory outrage of Igbos over the killing of women and children in violence against Igbos in northern Nigeria (*Vanguard* 4.3.2000: 2). At the political level, the Abia State governor was keen to make a good

impression on President Obasanjo, beefing up security in Aba during his visit. After the president left Abia State, the governor made a public call for retaliation against the killing of Igbos in the north, and the riot erupted on the following day amid explanations that there was not enough security to control the rioters (Harnischfeger 2003: 44). Interviews with Bakassi Boys after the riot were full of rhetoric of ethnic retaliation and the marginalisation of the Igbo in national institutions. These issues were not previously a part of Bakassi discourse, suggesting that a measure of political penetration of the group had begun to take place (*Vanguard* 4.3.2000: 2). Politics rather than culture appears to have been the primary force for disorder in this situation.

The final incident in the hijacking of the Bakassi Boys in Abia State involved an internal dispute within the vigilante executive which resulted in the killing of the acting chairman's bodyguard in late July 2000. The acting chairman had taken over as leader of the group after the arrest of the original chairman, Oguike, in July 1999. However, he had started to violate the Bakassi code of conduct by taking the property of executed thieves rather than destroying it, causing growing concern among some members of the Bakassi leadership. When the acting chairman seized the Mercedes Benz of an executed suspect, the other members decided to suspend him, and in the process his bodyguard was shot.⁴ This caused an open split in the Bakassi leadership, and the disgruntled faction called in the police (Umuehilegbu Chairman 2000, 2001 int.; Shoe Plaza small producer 2000 int.). The vigilante group were driven out of their original office in the Bakassi shoe production zone, and came under the control of the Abia State government, which decided to 'organise' Bakassi into a vigilante group to curb crime in the state. They were renamed the 'Abia State Vigilante Service', moved to a new office outside the shoe production cluster, and placed under the control of a committee chaired by a state appointee, who claimed that the vigilante group was now 'constitutional'. The state government provided the group with a fleet of cars and buses, placed the vigilantes on the state payroll, and supplied the chairman of the Bakassi Boys with a Mercedes Benz (*Weekly Trust* 6.8.2000; Shoe Plaza Zone 3 Chairman 7.8.2000 int.). Activities were expanded, and new recruits brought in under the new leadership. The character of the vigilante group began to degenerate after this point, owing to the increasing interference of the Abia State governor. As the new chairman of the Abia State Vigilante Services explained, 'We always obey him because he who pays the piper calls the tune. He pays us and we always try to obey him' (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 12).

Political capture in Anambra State

In April 2000, four months before the takeover of the Bakassi Boys by the Abia State government, the group was invited by the chairman of Nnewi North Local Government in neighbouring Anambra State to flush out armed robbers in the town (Smith 2004: 443; *Vanguard* 5.5.2000). In under a month, the vigilante group restored security to the town, to significant popular acclaim. In June of that year, the governor of Anambra State, Chinwoke Mbadinuju, invited the group to extend their services to the whole of Anambra State (*Vanguard* 30.6.2000).

This was not, however, Governor Mbadinuju's first attempt to promote vigilantism in Anambra State. In September 1999, before the creation of the Bakassi Boys, Mbadinuju had armed a vigilante group known as the Onitsha Traders Association (OTA) to combat armed robbery in the crime-ridden market town of Onitsha (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 9–10). Mbadinuju is quoted as saying 'where the arrangement for guns fails, the government will arm them with knives and matchets. It does not matter if an armed robber is shot or matcheted' (*Vanguard* 26.10.1999). Public outrage at the atrocities of the OTA led to calls for the dissolution of the group. In July 2000, Onitsha traders also called on the governor to disband the OTA. It was in this context that the invitation was issued to the Bakassi Boys, who arrived in Onitsha in July 2000. Despite their negative experiences with previous vigilante groups, the people of Onitsha welcomed the arrival of the Bakassi Boys owing to their reputation for integrity and effectiveness.

One month later, in August 2000, a law was passed by the Anambra State House of Assembly, officially establishing the Bakassi Boys under the name of the Anambra Vigilante Services, at about the same time as the vigilante group in Aba was being brought under the control of the Abia State government. As in Abia State, the Anambra branch of the group was placed under the control of a committee dominated by appointees of the governor. In September 2000, Governor Mbadinuju approved the collection of security levies for the upkeep of the Bakassi Boys, though he later rescinded the order in response to political pressure from above, claiming he had signed it in his sleep (*Vanguard* 21.9.2000). The state government provided the Anambra-based Bakassi Boys with weapons, vehicles and salaries (HRW/CLEEN 2002: 10; *Punch* 9.9.2000). As a source of enormous popularity and leverage against political opponents, the Bakassi Boys became a critical plank in the governor's 2003 re-election strategy. A close aide of the governor later declared that 'The issue of Bakassi has come to stay in Anambra State. Remember, there is a law

backing them. It is legal, not an illegal outfit. It is very popular with the people. In fact, it is Mbadinuju's joker' (*Vanguard* 29.1.2001).

However, managerial control and patronage resources were not enough to ensure the power of the Anambra governor over the local branches of the Bakassi Boys. The chairmen of the Ariaria shoemakers' associations in Aba were still influential in the organisation, and played a central role in supplying recruits and leadership for the new branches of Bakassi in Anambra State. The chairman of one of the Ariaria shoe production areas was selected to head the new Bakassi branch in Nnewi (Meagher 2004: 282). The ongoing commitment of the Aba operatives to the original mandate of impartial crime control made them more effective as vigilantes, but more difficult to bend to political objectives. The HRW/CLEEN report (2002: 10) noted that among the different factions of Bakassi, 'those from Aba seemed more committed to their original crime-fighting function'. In order to bend the Bakassi Boys to his will, the Anambra State governor began to squeeze out the more carefully selected Aba operatives in favour of recruits made up of disaffected and criminal elements. According to a prominent Anambra politician, the rank and file as well as the leadership of the Anambra branch of the Bakassi Boys were gradually replaced by more compliant local recruits, including former members of the discredited OTA. He explained that 'As for now, there is no single original *Bakassi Boys* in Anambra State. Those boys in Anambra State were nothing but thugs trained by Mbadinuju and his agents to be used against his perceived opponents' (*Newswatch* 4.11.2002: 18; HRW/CLEEN 2002: 10).

This process was clearly illustrated by the murder of Chief Okonkwo, chairman of the opposition All People's Party in Nnewi South Local Government in Anambra State, and victim of one of the most notorious incidents of unjustified killing perpetrated by the Bakassi Boys. Chief Okonkwo was denounced by political opponents as a criminal and patron of armed robbers, and was arrested by the Nnewi branch of the Bakassi Boys in July 2000, and again in December 2000. Both times, no evidence was found against him, and he was released by the vigilante group. In February 2001, the more compliant Onitsha branch of Bakassi was called in to arrest Chief Okonkwo for the third time, and he was taken to Onitsha and killed. The chairman of the Nnewi branch – a former chairman of one of the Aba shoemakers' associations – was removed from office along with the men under him. As a relative of Chief Okonkwo explained:

On 26 February we went to the Bakassi headquarters at Aba ... We discovered that when the [Anambra] state government had taken over the Bakassi, they had

sacked many of the original Bakassi Boys from Aba. We saw the Bakassi who had screened Chief Okonkwo twice, who were now back in Aba, including their local chief known as 'Boss'. They told us they had refused to be party to his assassination and had refused to carry out the governor's instructions. (HRW 2002: 21)

The penetration of the Bakassi Boys by operatives loyal to the Anambra State government went hand in hand with an increase in mayhem and politically motivated killings, as noted in the HRW/CLEEN report (2002: 13): 'The involvement of government authorities was particularly striking in Anambra State. Human Rights Watch and CLEEN interviewed many people who described the Bakassi Boys as the private army of the governor of Anambra State, Chinwoke Mbadinuju.'

Imo and Ebonyi States: imperfect capture and 'fake' Bakassi

The political capture of the Bakassi Boys in Abia and Anambra States prompted the spread of the Bakassi Boys to other Igbo states. In December 2000, the Imo State House of Assembly passed a bill establishing a new branch of the Bakassi Boys known as the Imo Vigilante Services. However, the coming of the Bakassi Boys to Imo State was accompanied by conflicts within the state government. The speaker of the House was the main proponent of the bill, but the Imo State governor resisted pressures to sign it into law, owing to wider factional struggles within the ruling PDP party. In neighbouring Ebonyi State as well, a bill was passed to establish a local branch of the Bakassi Boys, but there too the governor dragged his feet about signing it into law. By June 2002, the governors of both states had still not signed these bills (AI 2002b; HRW/CLEEN 2002).

The Imo branch of Bakassi went into operation despite its lack of full legal recognition, but was dogged by suspicions about its authenticity. Many considered that the Imo branch did not constitute a genuine Bakassi unit, but was merely a puppet of local politicians. When a contingent of 'original Bakassi' from Abia State was sent to deal with the Imo pretenders, the Imo State Parliament countered with a launching ceremony in the state capital in June 2001 to inaugurate their vigilante group. This sparked popular protests over the promotion of 'fake Bakassi' in Imo State, and demands that the Imo Bakassi demonstrate their supernatural imperviousness to bullets and knives (Harnishfeger 2003: 35; Smith 2004: 441). While this has been taken by some as an indication of the credulity and bizarre values of the Nigerian populace, the significance of occult powers in disputes about 'original' and 'fake' Bakassi was more symbolic

than literal, indicating misgivings about the legitimacy and honesty of a particular Bakassi unit rather than a superstitious belief in their supernatural abilities.

In November 2001, clashes between 'original' and 'fake' Bakassi also erupted in Aba, leaving 16 people dead and property and vehicles burnt. The tendency to attribute these clashes to factional disputes within the group ignores the more fundamental political issues involved. In the Aba case, the conflict arose when new Bakassi units loyal to the governor of Abia State attacked a shoemaker in Ariaria market for non-payment of rent. The shoemakers explained that they were tired of watching hoodlums parade themselves as members of the Bakassi Boys, which was formed to prevent crime rather than to meddle in petty disputes. They felt that people of questionable character had infiltrated the Bakassi Boys since they had come under the supervision of the state government, leading to involvement in petty disputes and political matters (*Vanguard* 4.11.2001). Far from representing a descent into factionalism, disputes between 'original' and 'fake' Bakassi represented ongoing popular struggles for accountability, which persisted despite the temptation of patronage resources and concerted efforts at political capture. While the group's activities across the Igbo states became increasingly bound up with thuggery, extortion and political killings, there was a clear distinction in the popular imagination between what the vigilante group was formed to do, and what it came to represent.

The role of the federal government

The descent of the Bakassi Boys into political thuggery involved more than patronage and political opportunism on the part of the state governments. An equally important factor was the persistent failure of the federal government to check the activities of the vigilantes or their political patrons. In an update on violent vigilantism in south-eastern Nigeria, Amnesty International (2002b) laid the blame on the federal government:

The federal authorities have acted with ambiguity toward armed vigilante groups operating throughout the country for years, failing to compel those state governments who officially or tacitly endorse them to discontinue their support and to effectively direct the police to take on these groups and put an end to the human rights abuses and violations they commit on a daily basis.

As Baker (2002) and Ukiwo (2002: 48ff.) point out, the apparent inaction of the federal government was a mark, not of weakness, but of political

manoeuvres in which the Bakassi Boys became pawns in power struggles between the federal and state governments.

While the state governments found the vigilante group a useful source of cheap popularity amidst their failure to provide basic social services, and a welcome trump card in their power struggles with the federal government over control of state-level security, they were also an effective political tool in the run-up to the 2003 elections. Amid electoral calculations and factional splits, the federal government was circumspect about antagonising the governors of the two most powerful Igbo states by banning such a popular group. Although the federal government was fully cognisant of the unorthodox operations of the Bakassi Boys from early 1999, no action was taken to rein them in. The ambiguous stance adopted by the federal government contributed to bolstering the legitimacy of the Bakassi Boys, and the sense of impunity accompanying their increasingly political deployment. In July 2000, when the Bakassi Boys had just begun operations in the city of Onitsha in Anambra State, the Federal Executive issued an instruction to the Nigerian police to halt the activities of the Bakassi Boys in Onitsha. But popular protests and political lobbying by the Anambra State governor overturned the decision, prompting the governor to announce the 'presidential approval of Bakassi Boys' in the following month (*Guardian* 28.8.2000; Harnischfeger 2003: 30). Four months later, during a visit to Anambra State in November 2000, a presidential directive that the Bakassi Boys should work within the law was accompanied by a public statement by the first lady commending the efforts of the Bakassi Boys in the maintenance of peace and security (Baker 2002: 228, 243 fn.2). In early 2001, Anambra State was even awarded first prize for security in the Abuja-based Annual Press Awards. At the federal level, concerns about the excesses of the Bakassi boys were embedded in an environment of tacit approval.

THE DISBANDING AND REVIVAL OF THE BAKASSI BOYS

Amid increasing brutality and declining popularity, the Bakassi Boys operated for nearly two years after popular control of the organisation had been lost, and were responsible for an estimated 2,000 extra-judicial killings (AI 2000). Far from 'crowding out' alternative forms of civil society as Reno (2002: 845) claims, the activities of the Bakassi Boys prompted mounting protests from a range of local civil organisations, including the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), the Centre for Law Enforcement Education (CLEEN), and the Nigerian Bar Association (HRW/CLEEN 2002). Yet no serious moves were made to disband the Bakassi Boys until

late 2002. A bill banning ethnic militias, put forward in April 2002, was rebuffed by the governors of the south-eastern states. Governor Kalu of Abia State maintained that 'Any plan by the Federal Government to ban Bakassi under whatever guise would amount to undue interference' (HRW 2002). Finally, in the face of mounting pressure from local and international civil organisations and some particularly horrific political killings, the federal government ordered the disbanding of the Bakassi Boys. Bakassi vigilantes were arrested and their bases closed down in police raids carried out in early August 2002 in Abia State, and on 24 September 2002 in Anambra State – almost four years after the vigilante group first went into action (*Newswatch* 2.11.2002).

But this was not the end of the story. Amid protests about 'federal invasions' and 'undue interference', the Abia and Anambra State governments immediately embarked on arrangements to revive the Bakassi Boys (*Guardian* 2.11.2002; *Newswatch* 2.11.2002: 19; *Vanguard* 27.9.2002). Barely a month after they had been disbanded, a bill to legalise the Bakassi Boys was passed in Abia State, although the governor bided his time until early 2006 before signing it into law. The Anambra State governor embarked on open consultations with traders' associations, hometown unions and other popular associations with a view to re-establishing the Bakassi Boys there as well. Officials in both states claimed that they would 'fine-tune' operations to ensure that the mistakes associated with the first incarnation of the vigilante group were not repeated. These moves were backed by protests from market traders' associations in both Abia and Anambra States, who clamoured for the immediate return of Bakassi to protect their lives and property (*Vanguard* 27.9.2002; *Newswatch* 4.11.2002).

Meanwhile, federally controlled military policemen were sent into Anambra State, ostensibly to restore security in the aftermath of the Bakassi Boys. However, news reports indicate that police forces were more interested in mounting illegal checkpoints and extorting bribes from civilians than in maintaining law and order. In less than a month, a commercial bus driver in Onitsha was shot by police for refusing to pay a bribe, and public protests forced the new police commissioner of Anambra State, Adanaya Gaya, to arrest some police officers for extortion and involvement in illegal check points (*Newswatch* 4.11.2002: 19). The formal institutions of law enforcement were back to business as usual.

But the idea of vigilantism has lived on. While Mbadinuju lost the 2003 election in Anambra State, the Bakassi Boys have been quietly re-constituted in Abia State. Shoemakers and other Aba residents claim that Bakassi units have been operating since November 2004 under the

auspices of the state government, with units based in all the major markets in the town. In discussions with Aba residents and small producers, cautious popular support was still expressed as long as the new Bakassi adhered to their crime-fighting mandate (Small-scale garment producers 2005 int.). But this does not look likely. In August 2005, more than 20 people were killed by Bakassi Boys operating near Ariaria market during a botched attempt to extort bribes from women returning from a late Church meeting (*This Day* 5.8.2005). In the reconstituted Bakassi Boys, all vestiges of popular institutional control had disappeared – all that remained of the original idea were the name and the brutal methods, this time embedded in a clandestine relationship with the Abia State governor, who was mobilising to run for president in the 2007 elections.

Subsequently, moves by the Abia State governor to legalise vigilante operations suggested that he was ready to go public with the resuscitation of the Bakassi Boys as the elections drew near, though he indicated an intention to drop the ‘Bakassi’ brandname in order to slip the vigilante group past state- and federal-level opposition (*This Day* 10.2.2006). Indeed, in February 2006, just two weeks after the decision to resurrect the group was signed into law, ties with the old Bakassi Boys were cut as the Abia State High Court sentenced the first Bakassi chairman to death along with three of his fellow vigilantes for the controversial murder of the two young men in Umuahia in 1999. The judge in the case dismissed the contention that the vigilantes had acted on the orders of the state government, claiming that no government would support such barbarism (*Guardian* 3.2.2006). Meanwhile, armed robbery and associated killings were on the upsurge in Aba through much of 2006, intensifying popular insecurity while helping to bolster the Governor’s bid to reinstate vigilante activities. The federal government finally took charge by sending in military patrols to assist the police in Aba (*Sun* 28.6.2006), and at the end of June 2006, declared the Bakassi Boys a ‘terrorist organisation’ (*Vanguard* 1.7.2006). While this appears to have spelled the end of the Bakassi Boys, it was hardly a victory for democratic governance in Nigeria.

CONCLUSIONS: VIGILANTISM AND AFRICAN CIVIL SOCIETY

The story of the Bakassi Boys raises questions about the implications of violent vigilantism for the contemporary understanding of African civil society. Do African cultural institutions encourage a propensity to brutality and ethnic conflict? Does the contemporary context of predatory states and social disorder breed civil organisations that reinforce rather than challenge the institutional environment of corruption, predation and

violence? Does the proliferation of ethnic militias and vigilantes point to the bankruptcy of African civil society, or does it reflect the increasingly desperate assertion of African civil impulses under intolerable economic and political pressures? Looking beyond the brutality and exoticism of most contemporary accounts of African vigilantism, the inside story of the Bakassi Boys reveals the tenacity of popular struggles for accountability amidst the ravages of social chaos and political manipulation. It also highlights the need for new analytical tools capable of identifying genuine civil impulses in the fluid and fractious institutional environment of contemporary Africa.

By tracing the political metamorphosis of the Bakassi Boys, this account has highlighted strengths as well as weaknesses in African civil society. Although the Bakassi Boys were turned into a brutal tool in the game of identity politics, they arose from a very different political impetus based on popular struggles for justice and accountability. Deciphering the institutional meaning of these struggles depends, not just on whether they draw on pre-colonial or contemporary institutional repertoires, but on a more precise analysis of the institutional orientation of the practices and social groups involved. Indigenous 'idioms of accountability' are not simply about the defence of parochial interests, but can provide a moral framework for public protection and resistance to corruption. While practices drawn from secret societies and occultism were later used to legitimate parochialism and violence, they initially provided effective blueprints for informal systems of law enforcement and legitimate authority across community lines. In certain instances, culturally embedded practices served to limit extreme violence, as was noted with regard to the role of Igbo norms of warfare in preventing attacks on Hausa women and children during the Aba riots. Moreover, the use of some pre-colonial practices did not preclude the incorporation of contemporary organisational models based on executive committees, where these were felt to be more effective in the running of the vigilante group.

The Bakassi story also highlights the ways in which civil organisations are shaped by social as well as cultural identities. The integrity of the original Bakassi Boys is related to their origin among informal shoe producers concerned with basic security, rather than among traders with more wealth and connections, and an accompanying eye to political advantage. The commitment to an anti-crime mandate was also influenced by the social origins of recruits, vetted in the original Bakassi to ensure they were tough young men without criminal backgrounds, while later recruitment processes under a politically appointed leadership were less selective, and more disposed to admit criminal elements who would carry

out immoral orders. The civic orientation of the original Bakassi Boys was shaped by the specific framework of cultural practices, social identities and moral norms within which they emerged, and their derailment resulted from their being pried loose from these social moorings by more opportunistic political forces. From this perspective, it becomes clear that the key weakness of African civil societies lies, not in their cultural or instrumental orientation, but in their extreme vulnerability to political manipulation in the face of mounting deprivation and crumbling formal institutions.

While the weaknesses of African civil society have been exacerbated by the contemporary environment of political opportunism and neo-liberal economic reforms, its underlying strengths are still in evidence for those who care to look. Rather than revealing the bankruptcy of African civil society, the case of the Bakassi Boys demonstrates its remarkable resilience in the face of neglect and abuse by elite forces and international policy agendas. Ravaged by years of savage economic reforms, African popular forces have been left to struggle for basic services and physical security, amid intensifying poverty and institutional chaos. While intense livelihood pressures have led to the increasing vulnerability of civil initiatives to hijack by elite political forces, there is also evidence of a strong popular commitment to norms of accountability in the face of deprivation and insecurity. The 'original' faction of the Bakassi Boys demonstrated a fierce resistance to corruption, holding out against political capture for three years despite lavish patronage and intense political pressure.

A closer look at the underlying forces at work in the Bakassi case challenges the prevailing tendency to blame African social institutions for the failures of neo-liberal reforms and weak states. While the Bakassi Boys represent an undesirable outcome of popular demands for security, the problem does not lie in the perversity of African civil impulses, but in the chaos of the formal institutional environment in which African populations are forced to live. What is at issue is not the capacity of African civil society, but the role of the state and the formal institutional context in providing a proper regulatory framework for the maintenance of law and order. Indeed, Chukwuma (2001) argues that the reform of security systems in Nigeria requires an effort to harness the energy and integrity of successful popular security initiatives by bringing vigilante arrangements under the control of the formal legal framework, rather than leaving them to spin out of control or be derailed by opportunistic politicians.

Failing formal institutional support, African popular security systems are forced to rely on local institutional forms and displays of force to

endow their law enforcement initiatives with some measure of legitimacy and authority. It is their comparative powerlessness and lack of institutional access, rather than dysfunctional civic values, that leaves these grassroots organisations inherently vulnerable to loss of direction or political capture. By branding the civil initiatives of the powerless 'shadow structures' or 'secret governances', without careful analysis of the popular struggles embedded in them, current literature on African vigilantism threatens to delegitimise the only institutional resources to which most ordinary Africans still have access. Just like the opportunistic politicians they criticise, proponents of 'uncivil society' approaches are in danger of hijacking civil society away from African popular forces.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork on the Aba shoe producers was carried out between October 1999 and September 2000, with return visits in June 2001 and April 2005. Because the fortunes of Aba's shoe producers were intertwined with the operations of the Bakassi Boys vigilante group, investigations into the organisation of the vigilante group were conducted throughout the period.

2. The official name of this section of the market is Umuehilegbu (Meagher 2004). Shoemakers and members of the Bakassi executive explained that this part of the market was nicknamed 'Bakassi' because military police were used to force reluctant shoemakers to occupy the site after its conversion into a poorly serviced shoe production area in 1994, evoking a mischievous connection with ongoing military action by Nigeria over the Bakassi peninsula (*ibid.*: 279). An article in the *Weekly Trust* (6.8.2000) offers an alternative but equally plausible explanation of the name of the vigilante group. Agreeing that the vigilante group was named after the part of Ariaria market in which it was based, the article attributes the nickname of this section of the market to the bitter jurisdictional disputes between Ariaria market and two neighbouring local governments during the construction of the new shoe production site, again evoking a wry parallel with Nigeria's international dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula.

3. Indeed, Ukiwo (2002: 51 fn.79) reports that in the aftermath of riots in the city of Jos in 2002, the Bakassi Boys cooperated with police in Aba and Onitsha to check revenge attacks on northerners.

4. While the *Weekly Trust* (6.8.2000) reports this as a struggle over spoils, shoe producers and sources within the Bakassi leadership maintain that the dispute was about adherence to the Bakassi code of destroying rather than sharing property (Shoe Plaza small producer 2000 int.; AME Chairman 2000 int.).

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- Chairman, Umuehilegbo Industrial Shoe Makers Union, Umuehilegbo Shoe Production Zone (aka Bakassi), 14.8.2000; May 2001.

Chairman, Zone 3, Aba North Shoe Plaza Industrial Union, Shoe Plaza Production Zone, Ariaria Market, Aba, 7.8.2000.

President, Performing Shoe Manufacturers' Association of Nigeria, Powerline Shoe Production Zone, Aba, 23.8.2000, May 2001.

Shoe producer and former candidate for Chairman, Shoe Plaza, Ariaria Market, Aba, 7.8.2000.

Small businessman, personal communication, Ogbor Hill, Aba, August 2000.

Small-scale garment producers, Garment cluster south of Ngwa Road, Aba, 25.4.2005; 27.4.2005.