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Nigeria: Oodua People's Congress (OPC); leadership, membership, activities, and treatment by authorities (January 2005 - February 2006)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Most of the reports used in this Response refer to the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) in general, although some specifically identify the factions led by either Dr. Frederick Fasehun or Gani Adams. Where reports refer to a specific faction, that faction will be identified.

Oodua People's Congress (OPC)

The Oodua People's Congress was formed in August 1994 (COAV 30 May 2005, 248; HRW Feb. 2003, 4) by Dr. Frederick Fasehun (*WAR* 2002, 5; *Journal of Modern African Studies* 2005, 339), to protect and promote the interests of the Yoruba people (HRW Feb. 2003, 4). Its creation has been linked to the annulment of the June 1993 elections by the country's military government (*ibid.*; *Journal of Modern African Studies* 2005, 343), and the 1994 arrest of Moshood Abiola, a Yoruba candidate widely thought to have won the cancelled elections (*ibid.*; HRW Feb. 2003, 4).

The primary objectives of Dr. Fasehun's OPC are outlined in its constitution, as follows:

To gather all the descendants of Oduduwa all over the earth especially in Africa, the Caribbean, South America and North America for a most profound, all embracing and absolutely unflinching UNITY;

To identify with our historical and cultural origin with a view of re-living the glory of our past for the purpose of posterity;

To educate and mobilise the descendants of Oduduwa for the purpose of the above;

To integrate the aspirations and values of all the descendants of Oduduwa into a collective platform of an Oodua entity;

To monitor the various interests of descendants of Oduduwa, by whatever name called, anywhere on the face of the earth and struggle for the protection of these interests;

To ensure maximum self-determination of the people of Oodua;

To further the progress of Oodua civilisation by protecting and promoting our values, mores and the inter-generational transmission of same;

To locate a bearing for an Oodua worldview and establish its place in the world;

To mobilise the people of Oodua for the National Cause (OPC Constitution and Bill of Right(s), Fasehun faction, n.d. in CDCMS 2003, 34).

In the years following its establishment, a division emerged in the group between "moderates," willing to work with "mainstream" politicians (HRW Feb. 2003, 5), and a more "militant" group (ibid; *Journal of Modern African Studies* 2005, 347) less willing to do so. As a result of this division, the OPC split into two factions in 1999, with the "moderate" faction led by founder Dr. Frederick Fasehun, and the "militant" faction led by Gani Adams (HRW Feb. 2003, 5).

The goals of the Adams faction include

self-determination and social emancipation for the Yoruba, regional autonomy, self-government and self-management, economic reconstruction and control, reconstructed, reconstituted and genuinely federal Nigerian union, reunion of all Yoruba in Kwara and Kogi states (in the north) with their kith and kin in the southwest, an independent army, police and judiciary, and Sovereign National Conference (*Journal of Modern African Studies* 2005, 344).

The Oodua People's Congress (OPC) is active in the southwest region of Nigeria in the states of Lagos, Ogun, Osun, Kwara, Ondo, Oyo, and Ekiti (Nigeriaworld 14 Jan. 2005; SAS May 2005, 330). According to Nigeriaworld (14 Jan. 2005), the OPC is also active in Kogi, although research conducted by the Small Arms Survey (SAS) in 2005 indicates that the group has not been active in this state (May 2005, 330).

Leadership

The "moderate" faction of the Oodua People's Congress is led by founder Dr. Frederick Fasehun (HRW Feb. 2003, 5), a medical doctor and "pro-democracy activist" (*Journal of Modern African Studies* 2005, 339). The "militant" faction of the OPC is led by Gani Adams (HRW Feb. 2003, 5; *WAR* 2002, 6), a carpenter by trade (*Journal of Modern African Studies* 2005, 344).

The structure and chain of command of the OPC have been described as "hierarchical" (HRW Feb. 2003, 7). According to a 2003 Human Rights Watch report,

[the OPC] has structures and executive committees at national and state levels, with the Annual National Conference a[s] its supreme decision-making body, and the National Executive Council as its governing body. At the local level, every member is required to belong to a branch and the branches are grouped into zones, which are in turn grouped into sub-regions. There are different wings, including a women's wing, and sections responsible for different activities (ibid.).

Many of the OPC's leaders are well-educated persons and professionals (ibid., 6).

Membership and Recruitment

The Oodua People's Congress has a large membership claimed to be in the millions (GlobalSecurity.org 27 Apr. 2005; CDCMS 2003, 36), estimated at between 3.5 million (ibid.) and more than 5 million (HRW Feb. 2003, 6). Most of the group's members are located in Yorubaland, including Lagos, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, Oyo, Ekiti, Kwara, and Kogi (ibid.). There are also allegedly members located in other African countries, including Benin, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, as well as countries outside of Africa, such as Brazil, Germany, Jamaica, the United Kingdom, and the United States (ibid.).

According to a 2003 Centre for Development and Conflict Management publication, the Fasehun and Adams factions of the Oodua People's Congress both claim that every Yoruba man and woman is a member of the OPC (2003, 36).

However, a 2003 Human Rights Watch report indicated that there are only about one million registered card-carrying members of the OPC, but a larger number of sympathisers who participate in select activities of the organization (HRW Feb. 2003, 7). Card-carrying members reportedly pay membership fees (CDCMS 2003, 37). It is unclear whether card-carrying members must follow a certain type of training prior to obtaining their membership card (HRW Feb. 2003, 8).

The age of OPC members varies (HRW Feb. 2003, 6); however, research conducted by the group Children and Youth in Organised Armed Violence (COAV) in 2005 showed that the Gani Adams faction had a high number of adolescent members under the age of seventeen (COAV May 2005, 251).

The OPC has drawn much support from the less educated population through its use of myths and fetishes (HRW Feb. 2003, 7): there is the belief that OPC members are protected against gunfire through magic and that this has "provided the OPC with an easy way to mobilize people and to give new recruits a sense of courage and confidence ... with which to fight their cause" (ibid.).

One way in which members are recruited into the OPC is by completing application forms that are distributed by ethnic associations and traditional rulers (COAV May 2005, 255). Recognized local politicians also "recommend prospective members" (ibid.).

Initiation of members into the Fasehun faction of the OPC reportedly involves taking an oath in Yoruba, in accordance with the OPC Constitution and Bill of Rights, paying the required membership fees and receiving an identity card (CDCMS 2003, 37). The Adams faction, however, has more "elaborate" initiation rituals (ibid.). The initiates of this faction must swear an oath of allegiance to the group through one of the major Yoruba gods (ibid.; *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 354-355). New members of the group are

armed with charms believed to prevent bullet, cutlass or knife wounds, a handkerchief soaked in a concoction deemed to prevent gun wounds, a small gourd with black powdery substance, native rings which have also been soaked. ... Incisions are made on the body of the new member to prevent harm from befalling him or her (ibid., 355).

Most new members are initiated into the "Eso," or guard, rank (ibid., 354). Members take "higher" oaths as they climb higher within the organization. (ibid., 355).

Discipline is maintained in the OPC through the "suspension or expulsion [of members] for breaking the rules" (COAV May 2005, 255; HRW Feb. 2003, 7-8). One source also reported that "physical torture" was also used for such offences as armed robbery or stealing (COAV May 2005, 255).

A 2003 Human Rights Watch report noted that members of the OPC on vigilante duty dress in OPC-inscribed white t-shirts and wear red cloth on their heads (HRW Feb. 2003, 9).

Activities

Despite being outlawed by the Nigerian Federal Government (BBC 15 Feb. 2005) in 1999 (*Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World* 2004, 361), the OPC

continues to operate (ibid.; SAS May 2005, 330 - 331). Its activities involve political activism for the autonomy of the Yoruba people (HRW Feb. 2003, 1), as well as violent activities, such as clashes with other ethnic groups (ibid.; Denmark Jan. 2005, 15), vigilante activities and crime fighting (HRW Feb. 2003, 1; SAS May 2005, 330; *Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World* 2004, 361). The activities of the organization have allegedly resulted in "numerous human rights abuses" (HRW Feb. 2003, 1) and injury or death to "hundreds" of people (ibid., 10).

Although the number of OPC "affronts" has declined since 2001 (*This Day* 4 Nov. 2005), there were reports in 2005 of OPC activities resulting in casualties (Xinhua News Agency 16 Feb. 2005; Dow Jones International News 18 June 2005; *This Day* 3 Nov. 2005; ibid. 9 Nov. 2005). In February 2005, a clash between the two factions of the OPC in Lagos resulted in the death of five persons and the severe injury of five police officers (Xinhua News Agency 16 Feb. 2005). In June 2005, members of the OPC allegedly killed between ten and fifty students from a university in southwestern Nigeria, who were protesting against "alleged killings and torture by the group" (Dow Jones International News 18 June 2005). In October 2005, "bloody violence" broke out between members of the two OPC factions in Lagos (*This Day* 3 Nov. 2005). One month later suspected OPC members "went on [a] rampage" in Oshodi, Lagos, thought to have resulted in the deaths of three persons (ibid. 9 Nov. 2005).

According to research conducted in 2005, some community members feel "threatened" and "uncomfortable" with the presence of OPC members in their community: there is the perception that the group is interested in supporting the rights of only the Yoruba, and is "hostile towards other tribes" (COAV May 2005, 250).

Funding for the activities of the OPC is obtained through "local levies" collected by its members from local governments, businesses, and residents (ibid.), as well as bus drivers who request the services of the OPC to protect them from thieves (SAS May 2005, 330). The organization also receives funds through its membership fees (ibid.), and from "influential sympathizers" (Nigeriaworld.com 14 Jan. 2005).

Treatment by Authorities

The activities of members of the Oodua People's Congress have resulted in "violent" confrontations with the Nigerian Police Force (*Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World* 2004, 361). The Nigerian police were allegedly given orders by the Federal Government to "deal with the organization ruthlessly," following its ban in 1999 (ibid.). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), members of the OPC have been "harassed" (HRW Feb. 2003, 39), arbitrarily arrested (ibid., 38), tortured (ibid., 41) and extrajudicially killed by the Nigerian police (ibid. 43).

According to *Country Reports 2004*, in 2004, members of the OPC "continued to be arrested and detained without trial. ... Some members were charged as armed robbers and tried accordingly" (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 1.d). In 2005, there were several reports of arrests of members of the OPC for their involvement in violent activities (Xinhua News Agency 16 Feb. 2005; *This Day* 9 Nov. 2005; ibid. 3 Nov. 2005). In December 2005, three OPC members were each sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment for the 2000 murder of a Nigerian police officer (*Vanguard* 15 Dec. 2005).

Nonetheless, *Country Reports 2004* indicated that the OPC continued to operate "freely," and that there was an improvement in relations between the OPC and the Nigerian police (28 Feb. 2005, Sec. 1.d). The OPC also reportedly enjoys "close relations" with the government authorities of some of the states in which it operates, which may provide the group a certain "level of protection" (*Revolutionary and Dissident Movements of the World* 2004, 361).

In November 2005, however, the leaders of both factions of the OPC were arrested by the Nigerian police (*Daily Trust* 16 Jan. 2006; *Daily Champion* 10 Nov. 2005; Xinhua News Agency 1 Dec. 2005; Global Insight Daily Analysis 25 Oct. 2005) for their alleged involvement in the killing of fifteen people in Lagos (*Daily Trust* 16 Jan. 2006). On 13 February 2006, Dr. Frederick Fasehun and Gani Adams remained in custody (*Vanguard* 14 Feb. 2006), facing charges of treason, the illegal possession of prohibited firearms, and belonging to an "unlawful society" (*Daily Trust* 2 Feb. 2006). Four other leaders of the OPC were also facing these charges (ibid.).

Internal Flight Alternative (IFA)

According to the *Joint British-Danish Fact-Finding Mission to Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria*, internal flight alternative (IFA) for a person facing problems with the OPC depends on the individual circumstances of the person concerned (Denmark Jan. 2005, 16). The report goes on to state, however, that

[a] person who has a serious problem with the OPC cannot return to Lagos or the southwest in safety because of the inability of the authorities to provide adequate protection against the OPC. However, a person in those circumstance[s] could, depending on the nature of the problem with the OPC, in most cases relocate to, and be safe in, for example, Abuja" (ibid.).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Oral Sources: The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response. A professor from the Department of International Affairs, Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria provided the Research Directorate with published documents.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International, European Country of Origin Information (ECOI) Network, Freedom House, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), United Kingdom (UK) Home Office, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations - Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI).

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