Contending Theories on the Era of Boko Haram Insurgency

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Abstract

The current challenge posed by the Boko Haram sect in Nigeria is not only about the viciousness of its terrorist campaigns, nor the sect’s avowed mission to impose Islamic law on the country, it is also about confusion regarding the exact cause(s) of the violence. Several theories have emerged to explain the problem, broadly revolving around socio-economic, political, and religious themes, all of which are treated in detail in this study. This paper argues that while none of the perspectives may exclusively explain the problem, analyses that consider the political context deserve particular attention, especially in relation to President Jonathan’s contestation of the 2011 presidential election and the coming election in 2015.

Introduction

One of the outcomes of the security challenge imposed by the Boko Haram insurgency on Nigerian society has been the emergent preponderance of theories that attempt to explain the motive of the Islamic group. Unlike the Niger Delta militancy which preceded it, and which predicated its desire for a separate state from Nigeria on decades of conspiratorial neglect by the Nigerian state and multinational oil prospecting companies in the Niger Delta region, Boko Haram has refrained from articulating and formally presenting its grievances, apart from its declared desire for the strict interpretation of Islamic law in Nigeria. The confusion also grows out of the changing dynamics in the operations of the sect. For instance, its terrorist campaign, which initially targeted security formations and personnel, has expanded to include civilians and non-government targets, and the Nigerian public generally.

The theories are divided into two broad spectrums. One views the problem essentially as internal. The other blames external forces. The former looks at socio-economic factors, as well as deep-seated political, religious differences in the Nigerian society. It also includes vengeance over the death of the sect’s leader, Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf. The external forces argument has two planks: one characterizes the problem as part of global Islamic jihad and focuses on the sect’s links with international terrorist groups such as al Qaeda or its affiliates as al Shabab or the al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, (AQIM); the other views it as conspiratorial – a grand strategy to achieve the predicted disintegration of Nigeria by 2015, (See “Africa in 2020 Panel” Report). Within the conspiratorial thesis is the sub-theme that Nigeria is being targeted by envious and troubled neighbours. This aspect also links it to the now “unemployed” war-hardened returnees from the Libyan crisis and the scattered local armed groups (Madike 2011).

How relevant these theories are to the explanation of the current crisis is the question to which this paper addresses itself. Is Nigeria merely convulsing from her many internal contradictions that successive leadership has been unable to manage or resolve, or are external forces actually at work to undermine Nigeria; if so, how and for what purpose? While each of the competing perspectives indeed may offer some valid approximation of the real cause(s) of Nigeria’s security challenge, the multiplicity has tended to frustrate a clear understanding of the problem and articulation of appropriate response to it. This paper set out to examine the entire gamut of the theories with a view to clearing, rather than adding to the confusion. But we can expect that, as the Boko Haram challenge persists, more theories will continue to evolve.

An Explanatory Note on the Origin and Activities of Boko Haram

The apparent confusion generated by the plethora of theories attempting to explain the Boko Haram challenge also characterizes the origin of the sect. The confusion not only reflects in the narratives about the exact date, and who the actual founder was, but also to the true source of these expositions. For instance, Adibe (2012), has observed that while the popular belief is that it was founded, sometime between 2001 or 2002, Madike, he notes, traces the date back as far back as 1985, and argues that, one Lawan Abubakar, who later left for further studies at the University of Maiduguri, Saudi Arabia, actually founded the Boko Haram sect. Under Abubakar, the sect was known as Sahaba, (Madike 2011 cited in Adibe, 2012: 50). Elsewhere, these expositions are credited to Shehu Sani, a civil right activist in northern Nigeria, who helped broker the first peace deal with the sect with these revelations, which failed (Businessday, online, February 1, 2012). While Uzodike and Maiangwa on the other hand acknowledge the Lawan Abubakar angle, they attribute their source to Ujah et al. (see Uzodike and Maiangwa, 2012: 100). They also acknowledge the 1995 version which traced the sect to an evangelical group formed by Muslim students at the University of Maiduguri, Borno state, who reportedly felt dissatisfied with Western education (Uzodike and Maiangwa, 2012: 100).

Muhammed Yusuf, to whom the formation is now generally ascribed, according to the competing narratives only assumed leadership after Abubakar’s departure and “indoorcted the sect with his own teachings, which he claimed were based on purity” (Adibe, 2012: 50). Yusuf’s notion of “purity” and teachings were inspired by the works of Ibn Taymiyya, a fourteenth century legal scholar who preached Islamic fundamentalism and is considered a “major theorist” for radical groups in the Middle East (Johnson, 2011), after whom Yusuf named his mosque in Maiduguri (The Nation, May 23, 2012). But just as the sect itself may be less concerned about whom to credit for its formation than waging its war against the Nigerian state, the state too may be less concerned with the origin than it is with the threat that the group now poses to society.

The obscurity surrounding its true origin perhaps informs why initially, the sect “had no specific name as its members attributed several descriptions where they operated based on the perception of the local population” (Okenere, 201: 450). Such names include Taliban and the Yusufiyiyah. The sect soon became formally identified as Ahlusanna wal’jama’ah Hijra – ‘Congregation of Followers of the Prophet Involved in the Call to Islam and Religious Struggle.’ The name Boko Haram, to which it is now commonly referred derives from the sect’s anti-Western posturing, literally meaning ‘Western education (book) civilization is sin’.

In the early stages, the Boko Haram sect was widely acknowledged for its membership, which was supported by its members from within Nigeria. School drop-outs and unemployed university and polytechnic graduates, most of who tore up their certificates; students withdrew from school. Okenere posits that “these recruits were indoctrinated by Yusuf to believe that their state of hopelessness was caused by government which imposed Western education on them and failed to manage the resources of the country to their benefits” (ibid). Although from the outset, the sect’s war was preaching peacefully, but not without attracting attention among other Islamic preachers who saw the preaching and interpretation of the Quran as a recipe for violence and an affront to constituted authority (ibid:457). Although incidents of violence have earlier been recorded against the sect, (Uzodike and Maiangwa, 2012: 102), serious concerns over its violent tendencies grew only after the open confrontation between the sect and the government in July 2009 following the death of Yusuf while in police custody, as well as his father in-law and sect financier, Ustaz Buji Foi, and the incarceration of members by state authorities.

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clients in the cursus honorum that is the race for preferment – ‘the image of personal rule’” (see Jackson and Rosberg, 1998:17).

The inherent complexities in the states forged by European imperialism made less feasible the prospects of the new states modelled after the Western types (Roth, cited in Jackson and Rosberg, p. 36). Although the African states have come a long way down the road of nation-building process, with many heterogeneous or multinational states having to resort to varying ways of resolving their inter-group relations (Elaiguw, 1997:58), many of the states still convulse from one shock after another resulting from those sociological and political divergences; so much so also because “the African state is hardly ever coextensive with a common society” (Eke, 1989:5) and “the society in which it [the African state] exists is typically segmented into small rival political communities, often with strong localized identities, competing to capture and exploit state power” (Ake, 1999:42).

According to Professor Peter Ekeh, “The political history of Africa has become a tale of drift and instability…. Standing above, and set aside and apart from society, the African state has turned out to be, although it operates outside societal rules” (Eke, 1989:5). The arbitrariness of the African state has conferred on African political culture, attributes of negativism, so that “African political culture has become characterized by a vast array of negative elements such as corruption, violence and mistrust” (ibid).

With the tendency to blame every of the continent’s woes on the incidence of colonialism, it remains debatable, however, whether it was the nature of the state inherited at the end of formal colonialism or the neo-patrimonial and particularistic orientation of the competing power elites who inherited the post-colonial state that is the problem. Whichever, the African state remains characterized by a lack of connection with the social system.

Those negative elements identified by Ekeh, and much more, have all combined to make the African state irrelevant to the citizenry, thus eroding its legitimacy. Additionally, the state becomes prone to economic dislocation and political instability – all which are indices of state failure (Rotberg 2002: 86 cited in Uzodike and Maingwa).

However, Rotberg’s articulation of the characteristics of a failed state in economic and political terms is illuminating. According to him, the economic sphere is characterized by deteriorated standards of living, a lack of public goods and services, the flourishing of corruption and rent-seeking, and a pervasive economic stagnation (ibid, p.96). In the political sphere, some leaders and their allies readily work to subvert political norms by corruption, with the frequent use of judicial institutions to stifle the emergence of civil society or space, and abusing security and defence forces for parochial ends. Moreover, the political system is dotted with ethnic discrimination and resultant discord. Governments that once appeared to operate for the benefit of all the nation’s citizens are perceived to have become pariah. Corrupt ruling elites invest their ill-gotten gains overseas, building lavish residences and palaces with state funds (ibid. pp.96- 97).

Rotberg further argues that in the last phase of failure, the state’s legitimacy will collapse:

“Once the state’s capacity to secure itself or to perform in an expected manner recedes, there is every reason to expect disloyalty to the state on the part of the disenchanged and aggrieved citizens. Logically, many transfer their allegiances to their clan and group leaders, some of whom gravitate towards terrorism as they strive to secure communal mandate. Mobilizing support from both external and local supporters, the terrorists seek out havens in the more remote and marginalized corners of failed states where they blend in, more comfortably in the prevailing chaos associated with state failure (ibid).”

The various theoretical constructs that attempt to mirror the Nigerian state point to a deep gulf between state and society or in Eke’s (op.cit) term “the difficult relations between state and society” – from Wole Olatun’s ‘Hanging State’, Hamza Alawi’s ‘Over-developed State’, to Terisa Turner’s ‘Entrepot State’, Gunnar Myrdal’s ‘Soft State’ and Claude Ake’s ‘Irrelevant State’.

In the realm of theory, such disconnect is not only capable of eroding legitimacy but also inducing state failure and the subsequent repercussions that emanate from it such as violent conflicts or terrorism as Rotberg’s postulate suggests. Empirically, Uzodike and Maingwa have articulated the various conditions and features of a failed state as pertaining to Nigeria, ranging from the Failed States index in which the country ranked 14 in 2011, Terrorism and Political Mapping (2010-2011), which ranked her fifth and the Human Development Index Trends 2000-2011, Nigeria emerged 156 out of 185 countries. On these grounds, they assert that the chaotic and anarchic situation in the Nigeria of 2012 exemplifies the characteristics of a failing or weak state that is degenerating into full failure (Uzodike and Maingwa, op.cit. p. 97).

The Boko Haram challenge in the final analysis seeks to reflect the deepening crisis-devolving Nigerian state, the various features, to which we shall presently focus on attempt to explain. Adibe (2012) captures the depth of the challenge when he argues that:

“[…] the Nigerian state, contrary to the media hype, is regarded as the enemy, not just by Boko Haram, but by several Nigerians and groups, each attacking it with as much ferocity as Boko Haram’s bombs, using whatever means they have at their disposal: politicians entrusted to protect our common patrimony steal the country blind, law enforcement officers see or hear no evil at a slight inducement, government workers drag their feet and refuse to give their best while reveling in moonlighting, organized labour, inducing university lecturers in public institutions go on indefinite strikes on a whim while journalists accept ‘brown envelopes’ to turn truth on its head or become uncritical champions of a selected anti-Nigerian state identity. What all these groups have in common with Boko Haram is that they believe that the premise on which they act is justifiable and that the Nigerian state is unfair to them, if not an outright enemy (cited in Uzodike and Maingwa, op.cit. p. 98).”

Methodology

In examining the various perspectives that have attempted to capture the causes of the Boko Haram insurgency since the outset of the problem, we looked at general theoretical frameworks that have been employed universally to explain similar crisis. In this regard, we made reference to foreign and local (Nigerian) sources. At the same time, we paid critical attention to the diverse views provided by the broad spectrum of the Nigerian society. In doing so, adequate consideration was given to all the shades of opinions representative of the various divides of the Nigerian society. This was in view of the complexity of the Nigerian society, the tenacious relationship among its disparate groups and the implication of the Boko Haram insurgency on the continuing existence of Nigeria as a single corporate entity. The idea is that resolving the Boko Haram challenge and forestalling a resurgence of the sort in the future may to a large extent depend on a national consensus on what the problem really is and how it will be tackled as was the challenge posed by the Niger Delta militancy. Apart from the dangers it constitutes to Nigeria’s immediate neighbours, Nigeria’s position as a strategic country in global consideration also warrants that even non-Nigerians share concerns over what may have gone wrong. The paper documented such views. We also considered perspectives provided by persons with security backgrounds. Indeed the contemporaneity of the problem is such that as the violence escalates and the State intensifies efforts towards finding solution, fresh perspectives emerge, and the media relay these developments. Reliance on these media sources is a function of this contemporaneity. Generally, the historical-descriptive method of inquiry was adopted in the study.

The Relational/Vengeance Theory

Relational theory attempts to provide explanation for violent conflicts between groups by exploring sociological, political, economic, (religious) and historical relationships between such groups. The belief is that cultural and value differences as well as group interests all influence relationships between individuals and groups in different ways. Thus, a number of conflicts grow out of a past history of conflict between groups that has led to the development of negative stereotypes, racial intolerance and discrimination, (Faleti, 2006:54-55). The differences in value involve so-called “Us” and “Others” dichotomy; “The fact that ‘others’ are perceived as different makes us feel they are entitled to less or are inferior by reason of […] values. This disrupts the flow of communication between us and them and to that extent, twists perceptions that we have about each other” (ibid.p.55). Okereke notes that set members “attracted several descriptions where they operated based on the perceptions of the local population […] In some communities, where it existed, the set and its members were described as terrorists and persons with psychiatric challenges” (ibid.p.450).

The state and other members of Nigerian society who are targets of Boko Haram’s violence may indeed find it difficult to understand the sect’s penchant for blood-letting. On the one hand, the former group becomes in this context the “We” and all efforts are being to secure it from savagery of the “Others”, the Boko Haram members. On the other hand, the latter group bond either by the common purpose of fighting the “unbelievers” for Allah, or feeling of deprivation or both sees the remaining members of the Nigerian society as the “Others.” In the circumstance mutual antagonism exists and can be violently expressed. On the part of Boko Haram, killing of members by government security forces- the “Others” attracts reprimal from it, the “We”. The retaliatory attacks against Muslims in the Gomina Gora area of Kaduna state by an irate mob following the multiple suicide attacks on churches in the state on Sunday June 17, 2012, also highlights the vengeance threat of the “We” and “Others” psychology. In this instance, the avengers, presumably Christians now constituted the “We”, while Muslims became the “Others.” The establishment of Alfurqan Islamic School, solely dedicated to the teaching of ethics opposed to Western civilization in Jalingo, capital of Taraba, a North Eastern state in}


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members’ widows by living members, all sustain the same threat. But the reported killing of those who decline suicide missions on the orders of Shekau, the killing in September 2011 of Babakura Fugu, an in-law to Yussuf, for allegedly accepting blood money from the government (Thisday, September 19, 2011) which signifies existence of faction within the group, all widen the sect’s targets, blur the line between the “We” and “Others”, and so challenge this perspective.

Similarly, to the “Others”, the sect’s, the opponent to the “prohibited name”, Boko Haram, (Western education is sin), whereas to the sect itself, the “We”, “our name is Jama’atu Ahlus Sunnah Lidda Awaiti Wal Jihad” (Saharareporters, online, January 22, 2012). Beside its pejorative connotation, in the sect’s perspective, the name does not capture its objective and has been a motive that Southern evangelists, clergymen, Muslim scholars, and Fulanis, without regard for the sect’s targeting of the Nigerian media (Saharareporters, online, May 1, 2012). Somali’s Al-Shabaab also exhibits this tendency (BIC Somali, online, June 21, 2009).

The Human Needs/Socio-Economic Perspective

The socio-economic perspective of the Boko Haram challenge in Nigeria, essentially attempts to de-emphasise the interpretation of this being a particularly Muslim or northern crisis (Kukah, 2012). The perspective which blames social conditions for the violence is anchored on the human needs theory of social conflicts. Its central thesis is that all humans have basic needs which they seek to fulfill and failure caused by other individuals or groups to meet these needs could lead to conflict (Rosati et al, 1990 cited in Faleti, p. 51). The theory is similar to the frustration-aggression theory of violence, which posits that aggression is always a consequence of frustration (Dougherty and Pfaltzgrafe Jr, 1990: 266). According to the theory, relative deprivation and disparity between social groups and the expectation of value and capability and that the lack of a need satisfaction - defined as a gap between aspirations and achievement generally – relies on the psychological state of frustration and aggressive attitudes emanating from it (Midlarsky, 1975:29).

Unlike the relational/vengeance theory, the perspective goes beyond the trigger to focus on the underlying factor(s) that could have bred such groups. It has its largest proponents from the intelligentsia, and is particularly viewed by some foreign governments such as those of the United States and Britain as explanations for the problem. Nigeria’s socio-economic indexes seem to validate the assumption of human needs theory. The Human Development Index Trend, for instance, ranked Nigeria 156 out of 186 in 2011. The socio-economic factors being adduced as the root causes of violence in Nigeria include unemployment, especially among the youth, poverty and a deteriorating standard of living, especially in the north. But perhaps its relevance in the context of the Boko Haram challenge is that this has perpetuated the myth in perpetuating the myth of the monolithic political north. A few examples deserve attention. On January 15, 1966, led by a Southern army officer, Major Chukwuma

The Political Feud Perspective

The crux of the problem is the overpoliticisation of social life […] We are intoxicated with politics: the premium on political power is so high that we are prone to take the most extreme measures to win and to maintain political power – Claude Ake

In political terms, the Boko Haram phenomenon is perhaps more interesting because of the specific historical context in which it is occurring. First, while other Muslims may want to disassociate themselves from its activities, Boko Haram remains an Islamic movement. It is also occurring in a multi-religious political setting in which religion itself is a major factor in determining the distribution of political power (Kukah, 1993: x). Second, its emergence was preceded by intense political bickering between some, mainly Muslim political actors in the country. It was this internal struggle that resulted in the success of a coalition government in 1999, one that was described as a “power-sharing arrangement” which rotated central power on an eight-year sojourn in the south, where the north grudgingly ceded it to in 1999 following the tumult that resulted from the annulled 1993 presidential election, which Moshood Abiola, a southerner was acclaimed to have won. Through ingenious political engineering by the Nigerian power elite, a power-sharing arrangement was devised which rotates central power to the extent that Southerners erroneously refer to all Northerners as Hausas and Fulanis, without regard for the other minority tribes that have been eclipsed by the Hausa-Fulani majority.

The Human Needs/Socio-Economic Perspective

Sub-Saharan African urban settings similarly challenge the relevance of the theory of the “revolution of rising expectation” (Midlarsky 1975: 30).

This perspective has encountered severe criticisms recently, even from the north. Senate President David Mark argues that poverty and unemployment no longer offer a cogent explanation for the insurgency as these adverse socio-economic conditions are not exclusive to the north, (Peoples Daily, online, June 26, 2012). While socio-economic deprivation could be most severe in the north, except for the north-east where it originated, no such violent group as Boko Haram is known to have sprung up in states in the north-west and north-central. Hordes of beggars who line Katun streets reflect the poverty in that north-western state, yet it has neither bred nor harboured such a violent group. Evidence pertaining to Latin American and Sub-Saharan African urban settings similarly challenge the relevance of the theory of the “revolution of rising expectation” (Midlarsky 1975: 30).

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symbol of northern solidarity. Known as the Leaders of Thought, the group comprised of [sic] Alhaji Aliyu Makaman Bida (leader of the defunct NPC), Alhaji Aminu Kano (NEPU) and Mr. Joseph Tarka (UMBC) (pp.39-40).

Gowon’s nine years in power (1966-1975) remains the longest any one ruler has occupied Nigeria’s presidency. Again, although General Ibrahim Babangida, a Gwari who ruled Nigeria from 1985 to 1993, hails from the Minority Middle-Belt as Gowon, his eight-year rule was marked by robust obsequious to the Sokoto Sultanate which symbolizes (Muslim) spiritual and (northern) political authority. Babangida’s choice of Sambo Dasuki, (Nigeria’s new NSA) as haside de camp after his successful coup against General Muhammadu Buhari, a Fulani, could be seen not only in the light of forestalling a backlash from the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy, which installed the latter to power (Okohs, 1993) but also as an appeasement gesture towards it.

Beneath the façade of northern hegemony, however, the resentment against Hausa-Fulani hegemony over the rest of the north among other northern political blocs persists. Perhaps the boldest expression of this resentment was the expulsion of the five northerners and predominantly Hausa-Fulani Nigerian states from Nigeria by army major Gideon Orkar in the coup against General Babangida in 1993. Major Orkar in 1990, the TVC minority group of northern Nigeria, had accused the Hausa-Fulani of seeking to perpetuate their rule at the expense of the predominantly Christian peoples of Nigeria’s Middle-Belt. The age-old resentments of the old Kanem-Borno Empire towards the over-arching influence of the Sokoto Caliphate in the north also remains. When the late General Sani Abacha, a Kanuri, assumed the leadership of Nigeria in 1993, he retired several top military officers, many of whom were regarded as ‘IBB Boys’ and were mainly Hausa-Fulani. Abacha’s later deposition of the Sultanate of Sokoto, Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki, and concomitant prominence accorded the Shehu of Borno by his regime, was perhaps the climax of a revived age-old rivalry between old Kanem-Borno and Sokoto Caliphate. That interlude, however, did not redeem the perenniality of the Kanem-Borno axis in the northern domination of Nigeria’s political power trajectory. It is against this backdrop that the political feud theory has generated more interest than any of the perspectives that attempt to explain the Boko Haram phenomenon as it also further exposes the deep division among Nigeria’s disparate social groups. Professor Wole Soyinka view on the problem perhaps captures this scenario most succinctly:

Much play is given, and rightly so, to economic factors – unemployment, misgovernment, wasted resources, social marginalisation, massive corruption – in the nurturing of the current political upheavals. But there are other factors that intermingle in the equation. For instance, intellectuals and like-minded individuals are engaged in a debate, in the context of the theory of northern loss of power, for the Nigerian political system, notorious for its prebendalism, patronage system, and cronism, the stakes for the control of political power can be quite high, and loss of central power could prompt a “highly placed, highly disgruntled, and thus highly motivated individuals” or group towards bringing the country “under a specific kind of fundamentalist strain” (Herskovits, 2012).

The political feud perspective is premised primarily on the argument that while the extra-judicial killing of the leadership of the Boko Haram in 2009 could have triggered a violent confrontation with the state, the severity that the violence has now assumed is the fallout of a fierce political battle in 2011, which we have already referred to. The outcry that this then repression around forcing Jonathan to give up his 2011 presidential ambition to allow for a return of power to the north and lost pitted some formidable political forces in the north against similar forces in the south – especially from Jonathan’s minority ethnic Ijaw nationality of the south-south of Nigeria who saw in Jonathan’s ambition an opportunity to placate the restive region over perceived decades of political and economic marginalization in the Nigerian Union. The post-2011 election violence in parts of the north, therefore, did not only symbolize a rejection of the polls result and/or Goodluck Jonathan’s Christian southerner’s presidency, but was also a precursor to the current mayhem.

Midlarsky (1975: 28) defines an act of political violence “as an attempted or actual injury (ordinarily not sanctioned by law or custom) perpetrated on persons or property with the actual or intended effect of influencing or effecting transformation in society.” In the general context of the theory of northern loss of power, for the Nigerian political system, notorious for its prebendalism, patronage system, and cronism, the stakes for the control of political power can be quite high, and loss of central power could prompt a “highly placed, highly disgruntled, and thus highly motivated individuals” or group towards bringing the country “under a specific kind of fundamentalist strain,” even if illegally (Joseph, 1991; Sklar, 1998).

Very significant in the campaign of violence by the Boko Haram is the corresponding intensity which marked the post-2011 election Nigeria. Apart from anger against Jonathan for violating his party’s power rotation arrangement, there is an emerging school of thought that the tension between the security and economic forces, while not a new phenomenon, is a direct result of the loss of elections in 2011, to which Jonathan lost out. This has led to the apparent atrophy of the political and military structures in the north, that political violence has now come to be seen as a direct result of the loss of elections.

The political feud perspective has acquired more dimensions as it also reveals emergent dynamics in Nigeria’s power relations. Jonathan’s Ijaw ethnic group claims Boko Haram is a northern attempt to undermine the president’s power. At the same time, there is an emergent school of thought that the specific focus of the terror campaign is the 2015 presidential election, an attempt to ensure that power returns to the north by 2015, especially amidst speculations that Jonathan may yet contest the presidency at that time. Senator Uche Chukwumerije, who has resided in the north, did note (Herskovits, 2012), that the terror attacks on a military base and the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association have been interpreted by the northern attempt to undermine the West-Liberty’s majority by allowing a return of power to the north. Whatever the interests, in doing so, we have referred to the Nigerian army as an un-classical and unusual case of ethnic militia does not mean that it was made up of only one nationality. Since 1999, certain fundamental changes have taken place in the command structure of the Nigerian military-security institutions to the extent that certain offices, hitherto the exclusive preserve of the north or the Hausa-Fulani, are now occupied by personnel outside of these areas. For example, for the first time in post-war Nigeria, Anigbok was the chief of army staff in 1999, General Azubuike Ibekwe, who has served as the northern security advisor (NSA) (pp.39-40).

Professor Bolaji Akinyemi’s conceptualization of the Nigerian military from July 1966 to 1999 as an ethnic militia is quite functional in understanding our argument in the essay under reference. In doing so, he has argued that referring to the Nigerian army as an un-classical and unusual case of ethnic militia does not mean that it was made up of only one nationality. Instead, while it is composed of representatives of many of the nationalities of Nigeria, it is only the northern Hausa-Fulani military representatives who have a sense of collective interests to advance and protect (Akinyemi, 2003: 21). Since 1999, certain fundamental changes have taken place in the command structure of the Nigerian military-security institutions to the extent that certain offices, hitherto the exclusive preserve of the north or the Hausa-Fulani, are now occupied by personnel outside of these areas. For example, for the first time in post-war Nigeria, Anigbok was the chief of army staff in 1999, General Azubuike Ibekwe, who has served as the northern security advisor (NSA) (pp.39-40).

We have earlier mentioned the Kanuri resentment of the Hausa-Fulani hegemony. That resentment grew from the historical rivalry between the North-West and the Fulani and the old Borno Empire. The list of grievances is endless. One of the most prominent among them is the fact that they see the North as the only areas covering the old Borno Empire “do not only take pride in this but also the fact that they contacted Islam much earlier than what is today’s North-West geo-political region on Nigeria” (Tribune, online, June 27, 2012). These areas are largely made up of Borno and Yobe States in Nigeria and the parts of Niger, Cameroon and Chad Republics. Interestingly, nationals of those neighbouring countries account for foreigner elements among the Boko Haram operatives. We did also state that but for the General Abacha period 1993-1998, the Kanuri ethnic nationality had maintained, a marginal quotient in the Northern domination of central power in Nigeria.

While Southerners, therefore, may erroneously refer to all northerners as Hausas and Fulanis (Uche, 1989:9), to the Kanuri, both Atiku who contested against Jonathan in the January 2011 presidential primary and General Muhammadu Buhari who contested against him in the subsequent presidential election under the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) are Fulanis. Their electoral victory would invariably perpetuate the Fulani hegemony. A closer examination of the Boko Haram terror movement thus reveals it clearly as a Kanuri revolt – it is “dominated by Kanuri boys, despite the recruitment of volunteers from areas outside Borno and Yobe States” (Tribune, online, June 27, 2012). Outside of its core old Borno versus Fulani
context, a statement by Ishiaki Mohammed Bawathie, Chief Whip of the House of Representatives of the Nigerian National Assembly and leader of the north-east caucus in the House, further underscores a general north-east angst. According to him, “We felt that over the years, the North-Eastern region has been marginalized in all aspects of life in this country, and marginalization is responsible for insecurity in North-East” (Sunday Trust, online, February 12, 2012).

In the context of the age-long rivalry between the Caliphate and old Borno Empire, a group has emerged, which is believed to be the Caliphate response to Boko Haram, according to the 2010 Annual Report. Although the Shari’a is yet to be imposed in the Sudan, Islam remains a unifying spiritual symbol to the Sudanese people. The government has imposed a ban on Boko Haram in 2010, and the group has been declared a terrorist organization.

Boko Haram sect's refusal to reveal its identity and table its grievances actually erodes the relevance of the previous theories in the explanation of the crisis in favour of the political feud perspective. In the context of the age-long rivalry between the Caliphate and old Borno Empire, a group has emerged, which is believed to be the Caliphate response to Boko Haram, a terrorist organization.

President Ibrahim Babangida, a Muslim, puts this aspect in perspective thus: “does not make a clear-cut distinction between a Muslim north and Christian south. Apart from the fact that a great number of the indigenous population of the south-west region are predominantly African Traditional religion and minority Christian populations. The Boko Haram sect may have focused on this model, just as its ambition may have been bolstered by the Muslim Brotherhood.”

But the Aristotelian counsel may suffice here. In his conclusion, “we should consider the ideals of the state, not the means. The ends must be the means, not the means to an end. The end is what we are striving for. The means are the tools we use to achieve the end.”

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The idea is also bewildering to Christians in the north. For instance, Bolariwa Yusuf, a Christian from Kogi, a state in the north central wonders where the Boko Haram sect wants him to go. He stressed that he had been born a northerner, like his forefathers, and has no apologies to any one for being a Christian (interview, January 24, 2012). The sect’s position, therefore, raises the following questions: are the south-west Nigerian Muslims no longer part of the global Islamic family, are the northern Nigerian Christians no longer northerners simply for assuming the religion of another tribe, or are they too isolated from the national community as bars have been erected to prevent them from—because they are Christians or Muslims—intelligible inscriptions all over the country.

The Boko Haram sect remains a fringe group and antagonizes mainstream northern Nigerian Muslims. It must, therefore, evolve in its campaign, a broad coalition that will accommodate not only a large chunk of those mainstream northern Muslims but also its elite corps. Whereas the Mujahedeen are focused on Islam’s days of glory or great piety, which to them assure the true believer of spiritual salvation and an eternally joyful existence in the world beyond (Moazayyan, 2009:241), however, the average Nigerian Muslim political elite is most likely uninterested in Boko Haram’s version of Islam. He may, in the words of Moazayyan, be more interested in a “future that guarantees independent thought, social liberty, modernity and economic renunciation in this world” (ibid. p. 243) – progressive Islam. Nigeria’s oil wealth (upon which the Nigerian elites rely for primitive accumulation) is a major disincentive to the evolution of a moreelligent coalition that will involve mainstream northern Muslims. For instance, an Estimated seventy-five percent of oil reserves in former Sudan went to the South after July 2011 (cited in Haile, 2012). All of Nigeria’s oil reserves are located in the south. Despite talks about the north being capable of surviving without southern oil, efforts to find oil in the north have intensified over the years. The point is this, is that while the Boko Haram Mujahedeen may not care about the earthly economy, the northern political elites do. Allegations of complicity by the political elite in the Boko Haram attacks have been rife (Daily Sun, January 23, 2012), but governors of the North’s 19 states, out of which only four are Christians, denied the charge off any collusion with the sect or any plots to disintegrate Nigeria. Bambangida words perhaps, sum up what could pass for the feelings of the Northern Muslim political elite toward the threat to Nigeria’s corporate existence:

You see in this country we fought the war for almost three years for the benefit of living together. I have a bullet in my body, so nobody will talk to me about secession or breaking away. If you cut me, I would always say yes, get my tailor to take my measurement, get on my khaki and I go back to fight a war to keep this country together (Daily Trust, January 27, 2012).

In the same report, Bambangida named what he called the ‘Doctrine of Nigeria’s Settled Issues,’ which according to him cannot be compromised. They include, the country’s unity, her republican constitution, the states as federating units and the capitalist orientation of the economy. Bambangida was a veteran of the Nigerian civil war fought to keep Nigeria as one Order (Turner, 1980: 74).

Conspiracy Theories

The conspiracy theories attempting to explain the Boko Haram crisis can be marked into two broad categories: one focusing on machinations of internal actors, the other on external actors. Internal actors may include the disgruntled northern power elite who, having lost power, are bent on bringing down Nigeria under a southern leadership, as well as the Jonathan administration itself, which may be sponsoring the crisis in order to rally southern support behind his administration, and therefore, by extension, his political ambitions. Jonathan has cooperated closely with the Nigerian security forces, and his government, especially the police, have been accused of complicity in the attacks (The Nation, online, January 29, 2012). He has also, in recent weeks, used the military to quell the discontent in the north, especially in Kano, a northern state with a significant Muslim population (The Guardian, online, January 29, 2012). It is, however, not clear how effective this has been (The Nation, January 27, 2012). The other hypothesis perhaps draws from instances where attempts or actual attacks on Southern and Christian targets both in the north and south, which were blamed on Boko Haram, but were traced to Christian southerners (Blueprint, Tuesday January 31, 2012). Similarly, in November 2011, the State Security Services (SSS), also paraded a syndicate that circulated terror messages, which prompted some foreign diplomatic missions to issue warnings that emptied Abuja’s high-brow hotels. The group was comprised southern Christians and not Muslims nor northerners. From a northern perspective, these cases “suggest that Boko Haram is now the new weapon used by various interest groups to cause violence, mislead and confuse Nigerians in order to achieve their selfish agendas” (ibid). It is difficult to comprehend how Christians who continue to fall victims of attacks on their places of worship and Southerners who are being asked to flee to part of the country, from where most have spent the greatest parts of their lives and built multi-million dollar naira businesses, and who have asked Jonathan to quit if he cannot lead (Leadership online, May 1, 2012) will rally behind a government which has proved incapable of protecting them.

Although the United States continues to predict Nigeria’s disintegration by 2015 – pointing out that a private agency, not the US government carried out the survey upon which the report is predicated – those who emphasize this aspect of the external conspiracy theory point to a 2008 war game conducted by the US army which was designed to test its response ability to probable state failure in Nigeria in relation to US energy needs. The oil-rich Middle East has historically been unstable, and resurgent Islam has complicated the problem. Nigeria’s far north is contiguous to the troubled Sahel and Maghreb regions, which also are contiguous to the some Middle East states in the grip of Islamism. The US interest in Nigeria’s oil does not predispose it to be comfortable with such proximity to this potentially Islamist enclave. At a one-day symposium on ‘international conspiracy: towards Nigeria’s disintegration,’ in Kaduna, North-West Nigeria, the Association of Muslim Brotherhood of Nigeria (AMBON) noted that “there were reasons to believe that the peace and security of Nigeria were being threatened by the western world powers for their economic gains; that the western world threatens the peace of the country in order to protect their economic interest in Nigeria’s oil region” (Daily Trust, February 3, 2012). In the opinion of one member of Nigeria’s National Intelligence Agency (NIA), the US might be aiming to severe the oil-rich Niger Delta or the south from the far north in order to insulate the former from the emerging Islamistic activism in the north with the ultimate goal of securing the vital oil resources in the south (private discussion with source, January 4, 2012). It would be preposterous to assume, however, that the US military could guarantee America’s energy interest in Nigeria within the context of a failed Nigeria balkanized into several fiefdoms.

Sentiments such as these have led to reservations over state efforts to collaborate with foreign powers to combat the Boko Haram. According to Professor Tam David West, Nigeria’s former minister of petroleum “Whenever they come ostensibly for security reasons, they have an agenda to penetrate and subjugate the sovereignty of the country; not only that, they become a powerful force within the country to dictate the political direction” (The Nation, online, January 29, 2012). A member of Nigeria’s security forces, Uche Nwogu, shares this concern. Without naming any particular source, she notes that “by the time these people come in the name of helping us fight Boko Haram, they would have understood their modus operandi and would themselves start bombing us while we assume it is still Boko Haram” (Discussion with source on the subject, Monday January 30, 2012).

The scenario in the Arab states tends to validate these musings. According to Professor Michel Chossudovsky et al., in the Global Research Online Interactive Reader Series (GRIS), Western powers used “Political Islam” – including the Muslim Brotherhood and Al Qaeda-affiliated groups – to pursue their hegemonic objectives. Covert operations, they note, were launched to unleash the secular state, foment sectarian violence, and create social divisions throughout the Arab World. In Libya, they contend, “the pro-democracy rebels were led by Al Qaeda affiliated paramilitary brigades under the supervision of NATO Special Forces. The much-vaunted "Liberation" of Tripoli was carried out by former members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIGF). “Destabilization of sovereign states,” the authors contend, “is closely coordinated with military planning” (GRIS Book no.1, online, November 2011).

The 2005 report was followed by a February 2011 version prepared by US military experts which stated as follows: “Although inherited and chosen layers of identity will be as “authentic” as conventional categories of citizenship and nationality, one category possibly will continue to stand out against the other: the Middle Eastern identity. While this identity does not play a role in the ethnic or national struggle, it is a key aspect of tension or power. Thus, the challenge of Islamic activism could produce a more intense backlash of Christian activism. Nigeria, Ethiopia, and other places in Africa will remain battlegrounds in this sectarian struggle. In 2025, terms of multiethnic integration and the value of “diversity” could face a combination of challenges from nationalists [and] religious zealots.

A pattern in Boko Haram’s insurgency – targeting ethnic and religious fault lines – appears designed to enact the 2025 scenario described above. Hundreds of deaths of members of the LIFG. “Destabilization of sovereign states,” the authors contend, “is closely coordinated with military planning” (GRIS Book no.1, online, November 2011).
This study has examined various theories attempting to explain the driving forces behind the Boko Haram phenomenon. Our position is that each of the perspectives offers some degree of insight into the problem, as well as the general patterns of political tension and social violence in Nigeria, which Boko Haram merely epitomizes.

In any case, it is clear that Boko Haram has metamorphosed from a strictly religious movement to one espousing a political agenda. While acknowledging the difficulties in getting to the root cause of the problem, the government must at least address the issues related to Jonathan’s decision to contest the 2011 presidential elections against the power rotation principle designed by his political party, the PDP, and his speculated 2015 presidential ambition. Irrespective of the constitutional provisions on individual political rights and aspirations, solemn attention needs be paid to professor Ekeh’s postulate that, “The historical condition in which the Nigerian state emerged has precluded its integration into a composite society” (1989:8).

Any efforts at effecting enduring stability in Nigeria, therefore, must recognize her complex plurality, respect the sensitivity of the component parts, and refrain from acts of political impunity.

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Footnotes
[1] At a public function shortly before he was removed as National Security Adviser, General Andrew Aziza in reference to the acrimony over Jonathan’s decision to go against his party’s zoning policy that could have prevented him from contesting the 2011 presidential election, referred to Boko Haram was a creation of some disgruntled members of the President Jonathan ruling party, who angered by his emergence, appropriated the group to destabilize his government. Many believe Azizi owed his sack to that statement.


[3] The voting pattern in the 2011 presidential primary of the ruling PDP made certain significant statements: whereas the Hausa- Fulani appeared to have been appeased by choice of Sambo as Jonathan’s running mate, he lost Sokoto state, the seat of the Caliphate as well Zamfara and Kebbi states, which were carved out of former Sokoto state to former Vice-President, Atiku Abubakar, a Fulani. Atiku also won in Niger, the home state of former military president General Babangida, who not only like Atiku was a member of the Northern coalition that opposed Jonathan’s 2011 presidential ambition but is known to defer so much to the Hausa-Fulani. Atiku however lost Borno state, the home stead of the Kanuris to Jonathan.

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