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 terror 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 precipitated 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 terror 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 Muhammed 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 terror groups such as al-Qaeda or its affiliates as al-Shabaab 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 Panet” 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 assorted arms stream to and from that tumult.

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, between 2001 and 2002, Madikie, he notes, traces the date all the way back as far as 1995, and argued 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 Saha. (Madikie 2011 cited in Adibe, 2012: 50). Elsewhere, these expositions are credited to Shu Sani, a civil rights activist in northern Nigeria, who helped broker the first peace deal with the sect in 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 origin 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 “indoctrinated 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 attracted several descriptions where they operated based on the perception of the local population” (Okereke, 201: 450). Such names include Talibain and the Yussufiyyah. The sect soon began formally identified as Ahlanana wa jama’ah Hizb – ‘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 mislabeled as a militant group, with its membership and members, school children, school drop-outs and unemployed university and polytechnic graduates, most of who tore up their certificates; student members withdrew from school. Okereke 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 leadership was teaching 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 Buiji Foi, and the incarceration of members by state authorities.

Until the June 16, 2011, bombing of the Nigerian Police Headquarters in Abuja, the sect had restricted its terror campaign mostly to the North East part of Nigeria. Remarkably, the attack on the Police Headquarters came barely after then Inspector-General of Police, IGP, Hafiz Ringim returned from a duty tour of Maiduguri where the sect had just carried out some terror campaign and stated he would soon bomb them out. The sect followed up that attack with the bombing on August 26 of the United Nations’ building, also in Abuja, a place Skauen described as a “forum of all the global evil, (Thisday, September 19, 2011). Since then, Boko Haram has either claimed responsibility for or has been credited with most terror activities in the north of the country. Its operations have also grown in scale and sophistication.

Theoretical Considerations: Deeply Divided Society, State Failure and Violent Conflicts in Nigeria.

Sociologically, most African countries are multiethnic societies with populations that are sharply divided along racial, cultural, linguistic, religious, and similar cleavages. Most are composed of several and some, of many different traditional societies, each with distinctive institutions to which members of other traditional societies are not only detached but also disinclined, if not actually opposed (Jackson and Rosberg, 1998:36). Politically, from the perspective of the European colonial powers, a colony was not arbitrary. But from the perspective of subject groups, a colony was formed or imposed by alien and unfamiliar rules and regulations in disregard, often in ignorance, of indigenous sentiments. Guenther Roth (1968) sees the divided plural society as an impediment to the realization of modern, rational-legal institutions (cited in Jackson and Rosberg, 1998:36). Therefore, the African state rather than being a public force tends to be privatized, that is, appropriated to the service of private interests by the dominant faction of the elite (Ake, 1996: 42). Thus according to Chabal and Daloz (1999), “its formal (rational-legal) structure ill-manages to conceal the patrimonial and particularistic nature of power” (cited in Uzodike and Maiangwa, 2012:96). In the words of former Senegalese leader, Leopold Sedar Senghor, politics no longer is “a question of the art of governing the state for the public welfare in the general framework of laws and regulations. It is a question of politician politics – not even ideological tendencies – to place oneself, one’s relatives, and one’s
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 (Elagwui, 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” (Ekeh, 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 expand state power or least prevent it from oppressing them” (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 a symbol, as it operates outside societal rules” (Ekeh, 1989:5). The arbitrariness of the African state has conferred on African political culture, attributes of negativity, 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 existence 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 with the concept of “state and society”. 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 (Rothberg 2002: 86 cited in Uzodike and Maingwa). Here, Rothberg’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 the democratic norms by corruptly manipulating judicial institutions, stifling the emergence of civil society or space, and abusing security and defence forces for parochial ends. Moreover, the political sphere 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 partisan. Corrupt ruling elites invite their ill-gotten gains overseas, building lavish residences and palaces with state funds (ibid. pp.96-97).

Rothberg 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 disenchanted 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 Ekeh’s (op.cit) term “the difficult relations between state and society” – from Wale Olatan’s ‘Hanging State’, Hamza Alalwi’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 Rothberg’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 Trend Report of 2012 that Nigeria emerged 156 out of 187 countries. On the other hand, 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 seems to reflect the deep crisis bedeviling the 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 envelops’ to turn truth on its head or become uncritical of the selected anti-Nigerian state characters. 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 various sources provided through the wide spectrum of the Nigerian society. In doing this, adequate consideration was given to all the shades of opinion representative of the various divides of the Nigerian society. This was in view of the complexity of the Nigerian society, the tenuous relationship among its disparate social 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 accommodated 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 values involved such as the ‘We’ 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 sect members “attracted the attention of the Nigerian society. This was in view of the complexity of the Nigerian society, the tenuous relationship among its disparate social 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 accommodated 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.

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The cogency of the relational/vengeance perspective is such that for a long time, it remained the plausible explanation for the terror campaign by Boko Haram as the death of Yussuf in the police custody, and the hunting and incarceration of the members by the “others”. The state failure and the Nigerian state’s security forces were seen to have fired the “We” and “Others” psychology, and have been a major factor in the sect’s resolve to avenge its members through the terror campaigns (Daily Sun, online, January 23, 2011). Jail-break operations to rescue incarcerated members and marrying of dead
members’ widows by living members, all sustain the same truth. But the reported killing of members 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 sets the “pronounced name,” Boke Haram, (Western education is sin), whereas to the sect itself, the “We,” “our name is Jama’a ahsus Sanna Lidda Awwatul 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 motif that Southerners, or any other group, without regard for Abu'ja or the Nigerian elite, have been quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically. The northern ruling class was quick to sense the dangers that loomed towards its interests, and it acted decisively and pragmatically.
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 hidade 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 (Oluokhi, 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 Buhari in 1993. Major Gideon Orkar, who represented the Borno ethnic 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 resentment of the old Kanem-Borno Empire towards the over-arching influence of the Sokoto Caliphate in the north also remains. While 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 Sulatana 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 peripheralism 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, misgovernance, wasted resources, social marginalization, massive corruption – in the nurturing of the current upsurge in militancy. But the political 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 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” (Newsweek, January 16, 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 violence has now assumed is the fallout of a fierce political battle in 2011, which we have already referred to. The outcry at that time resonated around forcing Jonathan to give up his 2011 presidential ambition to allow for a return of power to the north and or pitted some formidable political forces in the north against similar forces in the most of 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 power 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.[22]

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 affecting transformations of political authority or within economic and/or social system.” 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 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 sharing arrangement, while international observers viewed the April 2011 general polls in which Jonathan emerged victorious as credible, “many Nigerians, especially in the north, did not” (Herskovits, 2012). To interpret the terror attacks as orchestrated attempts to undermine Jonathan thus qualifies them as political violence intended for the “transformations either within structures of political authority or within economic and/or social system” (Midlarsky, 1975). With the ultimate issue issued by the Boko Haram sect in early January 2012 to southern Nigerians residing in the north to return to their region, the contention that “Boko Haram[s] out to end 1914 amalgamation,” (Saturday Sun, online, January 21, 2012) of the northern and southern protectors, which formally created the political entity known as Nigeria,正如Soyinka’s thesis that the perpetrators are indeed anarchists who, having lost power, are bent on dismembering Nigeria.

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 canvassed this view, links Jonathan’s accession to power from the vice-president in 2007 to the elected president in 2011, to the Niger Delta militancy spear-headed by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, MEND from the late 1990s. Obasanjo’s emergence as Nigeria’s president in 1999 to him also owed to the militancy by the Yoruba ethnic militia, the Oodua People’s Congress, OPC as an aftermath of the 1993 presidential election attainment. Thus his suggestion to his ethnic Igboland nationalism to mobilize its own militia, Movement for the Sovereign State of Abia, MASSOIL, to “devise a means of constructive engagement with the youth” (Vanguard, online, 29 September 2011) towards 2015, Chukwumerije’s call for the mobilization of the Igbo militia should be seen within the context of ethnic political militia for political ascendency in Nigeria, which forms the central thesis of our essay in a forthcoming volume.

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. Since 1999, certain fundamental changes have been placed 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-civil war Nigeria, an Igbo became the chief of staff army in the person of Lt. General Azubuike Ihejirika. Similarly, a southerner became the national security adviser (NSA) in the person of General Andrew Azipari. The appropriation of the Nigerian military as northern and or Hausa-Fulani militia was perpetuated by that monopolization. Thus, the loss of such monopoly has obviously removed the threat posed by the Nigerian army as the ethnic militia by the north and/or Hausa-Fulani. Significantly, in 1999, retired army captain and former military intelligence operative, Sagir Mohammed, formed a northern militia, the Arewa People’s Congress, (APC) “to protect and safeguard the interest of the North wherever it is” (Obasi, 2002:43). Outside of the north, the APC is perceived by some as “the maintenance of [northern] hegemonic control in national politics” (ibid). As Akinyemi (2003: 22) has argued: “Unlike the other ethnic militias which seek change, the Arewa People’s Congress seeks the maintenance of the status quo, irrespective of its crises of marginalization”. Although the APC appears to have now disappeared from the map of Northern political actors, Boko Haram may conceivably be of a resurgent Northern ethnic militia or in the specific context of the Kanuri sense of marginalization, an emergent militia for that ethnic group.

There remains a need, however, to examine the Boko Haram crisis in terms of its implications for the 2015 presidential election in specific historical and contemporary context, including the changing dynamics in northern politics. Beginning with the north-west and north-east blocks, after becoming president on May 5, 2010, following Yar’Adua’s death, Jonathan had chosen Namadi Sambo as his deputy, a Muslim and then governor of north-west Kaduna state. In the 2011 presidential poll, Jonathan also nominated Sambo as his running-mate, who went on to become the vice-president. By those choices, Jonathan was able to assuage to some extent the north-west and Hausa-Fulani over the loss of Yar’Adua.[21]

We have earlier mentioned the Kanuri resentment of the Boko Haram-Fulani hegemony. That resentment grew from the historical rivalry between the North-West and the Fulani and the old Borno Emirate. That rivalry is based on the fact that the northern soldier noted that the desert 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” (Trade, 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 state that but for the General Abacha period 1993-1998, the Kanuri ethnicity had maintained, a marginal quotient in the Northern domination of central power in Nigeria. While Southerners, therefore, may erroneously refer to all northerners as Hausans and Fulanis (Uche, 1989:9), to the Kanuri, both Atiku who contested against Jonathan in the January 2011 PDP 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” (Trade, online, June 27, 2012). Outside of its core Borno versus Fulani

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context, a statement by Ishiai Mohammed Bawathef 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. Known as the Jaamat Ansarul Muslimin fi Biladin Sudan meaning the ‘group that dedicates itself to helping Muslims in Africa,’ and led by someone who goes by the pseudonym Abu Usamah Ansar, it states its mission as ‘to correct the concept, meaning and purpose of Jihad in Islam.’ The group claims it will neither attack innocent persons, including security personnel nor non-Muslims because “Islam forbids killing of innocent people including non-Muslims” (“Desert Herald, online, June 2, 2012). The replacement of General Aruzi, Nigeria’s first ever non-national security adviser, with Col. Sambo Dasuki, a scion of the Caliphate, whatever purpose it supposes to serve, raises the question of the likelihood of the appointment worsening the old animosities between the Sokoto Caliphate and old Borno Empire, which may affect the war on terror itself. The sect’s rebuttal of Dasuki’s claims to have secured his telephone numbers (Xinhua online, July 10, 2012), does not project a disposition to Bankole’s (People and Politics, June, 2012, p. 26) gesture of reconciliation.

In the north-central, or Middle-Belt area generally, two developments have combined to change whatever cohesion which existed in the northern region. One, although religious extremism in Nigeria has been a northern phenomenon, re-occurring ethnic-religious conflicts in Jos, Plateau state which has hitherto Hausa-Fulani Muslims primarily against the predominantly Christian indigenous population has helped to bolster common consciousness among the minority Christian ethnic groups in the region. This common consciousness is defined by shared Hausa-Fulani hegemonic burden, and re-enforces the resentment towards that hegemony. Two, Kukah (1993:xiii) has noted that “the Middle Belt, with its clusters of Christians and traditional religious worshipers, remain central to the geopolitical-political calculation of both the ruling class in the North, and those of the South, with each laying claims on a different basis. While the Muslims in the North lay claim to the area on the premise of ‘Sorou,’ the Arabic north on the basis of ‘Suqiran’ towards the 2013 presidential election.” The inclination was exploited to mobilize support for Jonathan. The patrocinium accruing to this region emanating from that support towards Jonathan’s electoral success, and the increasingly Christian brotherhood consciousness fostered by the ethno-religious conflict in Jos, have combined to rally strong support for the Jonathan administration within the region. Although the Plateau has been a site of violence of late, Boko Haram’s terror campaign in the area has spiralled in recent times including those of July 7 and 8, 2012 in the Barkin Ladi area of the state, in which over one hundred people online, June 17, 2012. With the prospect of support Jonathan’s speculated 2015 presidential bid (People and Politics, June, 2012, p. 26), targeting the area may just be a strategy to discourage Jonathan’s support ahead of 2015.

Boko Haram’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 feuad perspective, whether in terms of Herskovits suggestion that while the original core of the group remains active, criminal gangs have adopted the name Boko Haram to claim responsibility for attacks when it suits them (Herskovits, 2012), or Soyinka’s hijack thesis (Soyinka, op.cit). Indeed the importance of Islamic militant groups, especially those linked to al Qaeda or their affiliates, making known their leaders has lucidly been explained. According to the Nigerian essayist Ochomere Naana, “the suicide fighters need their ‘inspiration’; and the disclosure of their identity is a statement in courage and defiance” (“Vanguard online, September 1, 2011). The following examples of position to support the argument: the al-Qaeda Movement in the Islamic Maghreb, (AQIM) is founded/led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Algeria after a delink with Hassan Hattabh’s, Salafist Group for Call and Combat, (SGPC); The Somal Al Shabaab militia, an affiliate of al Qaeda, is led by Sheikh Muktar Robow and Hassan Dahir Aweys, with Mukhtar Abu Zubev, leading a faction of foreign fighters. Ayman Zawahiri, former al Qaeda number two, has been in Osmania bin Laden after the latter was killed on May 2, 2011 by the US Navy Seals. For the Nigeria’s Boko Haram, except for shadowy individuals making claims on its behalf, there has been formally identifiable leader/successor since the death of Yussuf. Leadership has only been ascribed to Shekau.

The Islamic Theocratic State Theory

The Boko Haram sect has hardly masked its intention to bring down the Nigerian government, the Kufur system, and ultimately Islamize Nigeria. Lengmang (2011: 101) notes the allegations that the northern Muslim population may be unhappy with the compromise of state-level shari’a coexisting side by side with a secular federal system. Hence, although this segment may arguably be small, “they are increasingly becoming radicalized and more willing to periodically express themselves through violence (ibid). Lengmang attributes resentment to the shari’a coexistence with secular federal system by the view to many northerners that western education is incapable of stimulating meaningful development and prosperity in the region, and so shares the fallacy of western education being incompatible with Islam (ibid: 99).

However tangential its link with al Qaeda or its affiliates, the Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria holds the vision of global political Islam, which is the overthrow of the secular world government (Kufur system) and the enthronement of an Islamic theocratic state. Perhaps its reported rejection of President Jonathan’s invitation for dialogue and demand that he converts to Islam before the leaders of the south would nudge the lines. Minister Minus has traced the rise of the radical Islamic to three variables. One was the 1979 Iran Revolution that ushered a widespread rejectionist philosophy, changing the Muslims’ view of themselves and their position in the world, as well as their approaches to daily life and politics. The second was the anti-western feelings in the Middle East traceable to the effect of European colonization. The third and most recent is the American presence in the Middle East with claims that it brought a corrupting influence (Mozayyan, 2009: 241). In a related way, corrupt and ineffective local political leadership espousing Western ideologies and failing to bring about significant social changes to the Muslim population world is led to widespread Islamic resurgence. Thus,

New standards were now set and a new discourse gained currency that targeted the “enemies of Islam” through revolutionary, militant, and martyred-oriented strategies. Life became readily expandable, especially if it hindered the advancement of Islamic agendas. Islam thus became a means and an end for the frustrated masses, giving rise to the characteristic features of Islamic communities and contributing to the claims of national leadership to establish the Islamic state and the enthronement of an Islamic theocracy (Peoples Daily, online, January 27, 2012). Eventually, the Islamists’ gaining and holding power in Iran produced the wake-up call throughout the Middle East with claims that it brought a corrupting influence (Mozayyan, 2009: 241). In a related way, corrupt and ineffective local political leadership espousing Western ideologies and failing to bring about significant social changes to the Muslim population world is led to widespread Islamic resurgence. Thus,

Professor Fernando Reinares has also argued that political influences such as events in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Middle East generally, Chechnya, Bosnia, etc. could motivate the jihadists (BBC, online, April 29, 2006). For the Boko Haram sect, the inspiration derived from Afghanistan, for instance, may not be limited only to the victory of the Mujahideen over the Soviet, but rather symbolizes the triumph of Islam over secularity. It derives essentially from the fact that the victory was scored with the primitive and improvised arms (Mozayyan, 2009: 242) as compared to the modern weapons of the Soviets. Boko Haram started its campaign of terror in Nigeria with comparatively primitive weapons, but it has moved to Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and the chaos in Libya has been of great value in terms of weapons and training, (Reuters, January 26, 2012). There is yet a sense in which the Nigerian Mujahideen can feel up-beat. Mozayyan invokes a religious imagery:

Presently, the war is cast in religious terms, where the likes of David and Goliath are evoked, and true believers are directed into believing of being reminded of the unexpected outcome of that lopsided confrontation. David had contributed his faith, devotion, courage and selflessness, just as Muslims are called to do. God did, and will do the rest. In such instances, it is critical that God be seen “as a personal participant in the fighting process.” It is God that grants victory so that “truth” may “nullify falsehood.” Similarly, when Muslims won […] it was not you who slew them, but Allah (Mozayyan, 2009:244).

Boko Haram has invoked the name of Allah severally to explain why it carried out its terror campaigns to media sources. The 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 feuad perspective, whether in terms of Herskovits suggestion that while the original core of the group remains active, criminal gangs have adopted the name Boko Haram to claim responsibility for attacks when it suits them (Herskovits, 2012), or Soyinka’s hijack thesis (Soyinka, op.cit). Indeed the importance of Islamic militant groups, especially those linked to al Qaeda or their affiliates, making known their leaders has lucidly been explained. According to the Nigerian essayist Ochomere Naana, “the suicide fighters need their ‘inspiration’; and the disclosure of their identity is a statement in courage and defiance” (“Vanguard online, September 1, 2011). The following examples of position to support the argument: the al-Qaeda Movement in the Islamic Maghreb, (AQIM) is founded/led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Algeria after a delink with Hassan Hattabh’s, Salafist Group for Call and Combat, (SGPC); The Somal Al Shabaab militia, an affiliate of al Qaeda, is led by Sheikh Muktar Robow and Hassan Dahir Aweys, with Mukhtar Abu Zubev, leading a faction of foreign fighters. Ayman Zawahiri, former al Qaeda number two, has been in Osmania bin Laden after the latter was killed on May 2, 2011 by the US Navy Seals. For the Nigeria’s Boko Haram, except for shadowy individuals making claims on its behalf, there has been formally identifiable leader/successor since the death of Yussuf. Leadership has only been ascribed to Shekau.

There [are …] no such phrases like Muslim North and Christian South. Where ever you go in this country, you will find out that there are Muslims and Christians living peacefully together. You will find out there are Christians in the North and it is the same in the South (Daily Trust, online, January 27, 2012).

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The idea is also bewildering to Christians in the north. For instance, Bolarinwa Yusuff, 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 professing different religions; are the northerners northerners as long as they too are extorted to repents and convert. On the other hand, if they are extorted to do so, then how can they be regarded as northerners? 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 (Mozayyan, 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 Mozayyan, be more interested in a “future that guarantees independent thought, social liberty, modernity and economic remuneration 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 the youth in northern Nigeria. For instance, an Estimated seventy-five per cent 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 here is that, while the Boko Haram Mujahedeen may not care about the earthly economy, the northern political elites do. Allegations of complicity in the atrocities committed by the Boko Haram sect 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. Babangida words perhaps, sum up what could pass for the feelings of the Northern Muslim political elite to 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 say 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, Babangida 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. Babangida was a veteran of the Nigeria civil war fought to keep Nigeria as one Order (Turner, 1980: 74).

Conspiracy Theories

The conspiracy theories attempt explaining 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, as they too are bent on bringing down northern leadership (in order to effect the political transition), and therefore they too are seeking ways to weaken northern leadership and thereby to dominate political institutions in the country. Babangida himself perhaps draws from instances where elections are not held by hitherto Nigerian political elites where there are attempts at 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 paradoxed 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, and cruel and confuse Nigerians in order to achieve their selfish agenda” (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 which most have spent the greater parts of their lives and built multi-million 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 Christian Muslims 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 energies 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 secure the oil-rich Niger Delta or the south from the far north in order to insulate the former from the emerging Islamist 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 fledgolds.

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 “When they come ostensibly for security they have hidden 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 country, 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 tend to validate these musings. According to Professor Michael 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 weaken 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 (LIFG). “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 as most significant, that of ethnicity. It is often associated with other differences such as language, religion, or regionalism, and may be more intense backlash of Christian activism. Nigeria, Ethiopia, and other places in Africa will remain battlegrounds in this sectarian struggle. In 2025, notions of multiethnic peace and Conflict · Volume 7 Issue 1 · Year 2012 · Page 6
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 its 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 Aziz 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, 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.


[5] 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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