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 impose 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 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 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 reunited arms stream to and from that tumult.

How relevant these theories are to the explanation of the current crisis is the question to which which this paper addresses itself. Is Nigeria merely convulsing from her many internal contradictions that successive leaderships have 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 around 2002 or 2003, Madike, he notes, traces the date as far back 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 Sahaba, (Madike 2012 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. They have 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).

Muhammad Yusuf, to whom the formation is now generally ascribed, according to the competing narratives only assumed leadership after Abubakar’s departure and “indocctrinated 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 taught 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 attached several descriptions where they operated based on the perception of the local population” (Okenke, 201:450). Such names include Taliban and the Yusefisyyah. The sect soon began formally ascribed to lawan abubakar – “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 posture, literally meaning Western education (book) civilization is sin.

In the early stages, the Boko Haram sect was widely known as an organization that managed its membership from within and without, school drop-outs and unemployed university and polytechnic graduates, most of who tore up their certificates; student members withdrew from school. Okenke 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 teaching was peaceful, 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: 100), 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.

By the death of Yusufiyyah. Although Yusuf allegedly drew inspiration from radical Islamist, Ibn Taymiyya, he reportedly resisted some of followers relentless advocate that “an Islamic state was realizable through preaching and mobilization of the people to reject secularism, by way of taking up arms and fighting to conquer the unbelievers”; “Yusuf was said to be against any form of violence, saying it was against the teaching of Islam” (Suleiman cited in Uzodike and Maiangwa, 2012: 101). It is, therefore, yet uncertain whether the sect’s current level of radicalization is a function of the deaths of its initial leadership and subsequent clumpdown by the State or the accession to its leadership of the taciturn psychopath, Abubakar Shekau, a Kamni native, who boasts that “I enjoy killing anyone that God commands me to kill – the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams,” (BBB, online, June 22, 2012). Along with two other top leadership, Abubakar Adam Kambar and Khalid al-Barnawi, Shekau in June 2012 recently made the United States’ list of international terrorists.

Until the June 16, 2011, bombing of the Nigeria 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 begin them. The sect followed up that attack with the bombing on August 26 of the United Nations house, also in Abuja, a place Shekau 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 somewhat different, even many different traditional societies, each with distinctive institutions to which members of other traditional societies are not only dissatisfied 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 the European colonial powers, a colony was not arbitrary.
The sect’s resolve to avenge its members through the terror campaigns (Daily Sun, online, January 23, 2012). Jail-break operations to rescue incarcerated members and marrying of dead population are allegedly unhappy with the compromise of state-level shari’a coexisting side by side with a secular federal system (Lengmang, 2011:101).

Nigeria (ACSRT Journal, 2(1), December 2011), exemplifies an effort to institutionalize the “We” and “Others” dichotomy. In parts of the North, some segments of the northern Muslim it, the “We”. The retaliatory attacks against Muslims in the Gonin Gora area of Kaduna state by an irate mob following the multiple suicide attacks on churches in the state on Sunday June...

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 Olatun’s ‘Hanging State’, Hamza Alavi’s ‘Over-developed State’, to Tessa 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 Trend (2011), where Nigeria emerged 156 out of 186 countries. On these basis 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 deeper crisis bedeviling the Nigerian state, which the various theories, to which we shall presently focus on attempt to explain. Adibe (2012) captures the depth of the challenge when he argues that:

[...]

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 firmly to their clan and group leaders, some of whom go on to become terrorist 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).
members’ widows by living members, all sustain the state. The reported killing of members who decline suicide missions on the orders of Shekau, the killing in September 2011 of Babakure 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 target, blur the line between the “We” and “Others”, and so challenge this perspective.

Similarly, to the “Others,” the sect’s reference to the “prohibited name,” Boko Haram, (Western education is sin), whereas to the sect itself, the “We,” “our name is Jama’atu ahsus Sunnah Lidda Awaat Wal Jihad” (Sahareporters, online, January 22, 2012). Beside its pejorative connotation, in the sect’s perspective, the name does not capture its objective and has been a means of distancing itself from the established information, Abu Ouwa offered this, in particular, as reason for the sect’s targeting of the Nigerian media (Sahareporters, online, May 1, 2012). someway’s Al-Shaabab 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 caused by economic needs (Dougherty and Pfaltzgrafe Jr, 1990: 266). According to the theory, relative deprivation and disparity between the perception and expectation of an individual and their achievement generally – relies on the psychological state of frustration and aggressive attitudes emanating from it (Midlarsky 1975:29).

Unlike the relational/vengence 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 intelligensia, 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 interpretation of the Boko Haram phenomenon lies in this. It emphasizes that in the Nigerian context, individual poverty and hopelessness are directly related to the nation as a whole. Hence for Professor Jean Herskovits of the State University of New York, to whom “it was clear in 2009 when the insurgency began that the root cause of violence and anger in both the north and south of Nigeria is endemic poverty and hopelessness,” the government must address socio-economic deprivation, which is most severe in the north (Hershovits, 2012).

The very high incidence of poverty in Nigeria is generally seen as a northern phenomenon. A study by Professor Charles Soludo, shows the three northern regions having an average poverty incidence of 70.1% compared to 34.9% of the south’s three. Ten states in Nigeria with the highest incidence of poverty also are all northern states, whereas the ten lowest states with the lowest incidence of poverty are all southern states, (Lukman, n.d.). Thus, “70% of the people living in the north live below $1 per day, which is equivalent to N129 per day” (ibid).
The high concentration of the population and the developing areas could indeed be a function of frustration caused by economic deprivation, (Dougherty and Pfaltzgrafe, Jr, 1990: 266). Frustration-aggression tendencies often also manifest misplaced aggression. This trend has featured in the series of violence inflicted upon the ordinary citizens of Nigeria, most of who have no direct connection with political and economic elites where the maiming of the country’s resources engenders the unemployment, poverty and deprivation that breed frustration and foster violence. As Dougherty and Pfaltzgrafe Jr. have rightly noted, hostilities in such instances, are directed “toward someone or something not responsible for the original frustration” (ibid).

A more profound exploration of the north’s socio-economic crisis lies in a perspective that sees a nexus between its depleting patronimic economic system, which dis-empowers the youth, and the dysfunctional state system that places distribution above production (Aregbesola, 2012). The governor of the south-western state of Osun, Rauf Aregbesola, a Muslim, who is credited with the idea, argues that while the economic disempowerment does not itself lead to violence, it means that the empowerment and reduction of deprivation of the north does not. This perception may have been reinforced by Kukah’s observation that the ascription of leadership qualities by British colonialism to the Fulanis, later taken root in the latter’s minds and made them unresponsive to the quest of other citizens for a place in the power ladder in Nigeria (Kukah, 1999: 98). Added to this was the role played by a northern hegemony. This perception may have been reinforced by Kukah’s observation that the ascription of leadership qualities by British colonialism to the Fulanis, later taken root in the latter’s minds and made them unresponsive to the quest of other citizens for a place in the power ladder in Nigeria (Kukah, 1999: 98). Added to this was the role played by a northern hegemony. This perception may have been reinforced by Kukah’s observation that the ascription of leadership qualities by British colonialism to the Fulanis, later taken root in the latter’s minds and made them unresponsive to the quest of other citizens for a place in the power ladder in Nigeria (Kukah, 1999: 98). Added to this was the role played by a northern hegemony. This perception may have been reinforced by Kukah’s observation that the ascription of leadership qualities by British colonialism to the Fulanis, later taken root in the latter’s minds and made them unresponsive to the quest of other citizens for a place in the power ladder in Nigeria (Kukah, 1999: 98). Added to this was the role played by a northern hegemony. This perception may have been reinforced by Kukah’s observation that the ascription of leadership qualities by British colonialism to the Fulanis, later taken root in the latter’s minds and made them unresponsive to the quest of other citizens for a place in the power ladder in Nigeria (Kukah, 1999: 98). Added to this was the role played by a northern hegemony.
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 in 1993, the year before Babangida, was from the Tiwi ethnic minority group of northern Nigeria, had accused the Hausa-Fulanis 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 Salute 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 peripherality 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 marginalization, massive corruption – in the nurturing of the current crop of political opportunists and criminal leaders desperate to stave off the day of reckoning. Most are highly placed, highly disgruntled, and thus highly motivated individuals – who, having lost out in the power stakes, resort to the manipulation of these products of warped fervor. Their aim is to bring society to its knees, to create a situation of total anarchy that will either break up the nation or bring back the military, which ruled Nigeria in a succession of coups between the mid-1960s and the late 90s. [...] Again and again they have declared their blunt manifesto—not merely to Islamise the nation but to bring it under a specific kind of fundamentalist strain (Newsweek, January 16, 2012).

The political feud perspective is primarily premised 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 of which has now assumed the fallout of a fierce political battle in 2011, which we have already referred to. The outcry that time resonated around forcing Jonathan to give up his 2011 presidential ambition to allow for a return of power to the north and pitted some formidable political forces in the north against similar forces in the south – especially from Jonathan’s minority ethnic igbo 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 inflicting transforming governmental authority.” 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 relation campaign, 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 ultimatum 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 protectorates, which formally created the political entity known as Nigeria, ascribes 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 igbo 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 announcement. Thus his suggestion to his ethnic igbo nationality to mobilize its own militia, Movement for the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOIB, to “devises 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 militias 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 an-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, 2007: 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-civil war Nigeria, an Igbo became the chief of army staff in the person of L. General Abaraka Beijinka. Similarly, a southerner became the national security adviser (NSA) in the person of General Andrew Aziizi. 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 appropriation of 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 another 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 who 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 scene of Northern political apartheid, Boko Haram may be conceived of as 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 assure to some extent the north-west and Hausa-Fulani over the loss of Yar’Adua.[]

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. That rivalry is the fact that the Kanuri claim that the 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, 1989:8), 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” (Tribune, online, June 27, 2012). Outside of its core old Borno versus Fulani
context, a statement by Ishiaki Mohammed Bawathe 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 Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina 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 Arazzi, Nigeria’s first ever non-national security adviser, with Col. Sanbo 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 its telephones and the like (Xinhua online, July 10, 2012), does not project a disposition to emulate the previous caliph in Borno’s gestures.

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 ethno-religious conflicts in Jos, Plateau state which has pitted Hausa-Fulani Muslims particularly 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 religious legitimacy ‘by the charisma of their prophet’ towards the 1913 president ‘by the charisma of God’.” Government policy in the north, was consistently to project an image of the Middle Belt as part of the “Northern Nigeria.” Towards the 2011 presidential election, the Middle Belt, was represented as catching up with the rest of the country. 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 allegiance of the north in 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 of many a northern 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 overarch of the current government (Kufur system) and the enforcement of an Islamic theocratic state. Perhaps its reported rejection of President Jonathan’s invitation for dialogue and demand that he converts to Islam before his meeting with 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 discussed. According to the Nigerian essayist Ocheme Nana, “the suicide fighters need their ‘inspiration’; and the disclosure of their identity is a statement in courage and defiance” (Vanguard online, September 1, 2011, 1). The following examples are wide support to the argument: the al-Qaeda Movement in the Islamic Maghreb, (AQIM) is founded/led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar in Algeria after a delink with Hassan Hattab’s, Salaafist Group for Call and Combat, (SGPC); The Somali Al Shabaab militia, an affiliate of al Qaeda, is led by Sheikh Muktar Robow and Hassan Dahar Aweys, with Mukhtar Abu Zubev, leading a faction of foreign fighters. Ayman Zawahiri, former al Qaeda number two, Osama 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, has been to 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 allegiance of the north in 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 of many a northern 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).

New standards were now set and a new discourse gained currency that targeted the “enemies of Islam” through revolutionary, militant, and martyr-oriented strategies. Life became readily expendable, especially if it hindered the advancement of Islamic agendas. Islam thus became a means and an end for the frustrated masses, giving rise to leaps of Islamic consciousness among young Muslims. The Islamic Theocratic State Theory (Western Civilization is sin) that hinder the promotion of their own millenarian beliefs (Mozayyan, 2009: 242).

Despite its debt to the Islamist regime in Iran for the Islamic awakening, the current radical or jihadi Islamist movement, was founded by the late Osama bin Laden and has its origin in the anti-Soviet resistance in Afghanistan. There, the “links among individual and different national groups were forged” (Crenshaw, 2009:403). It is most unlikely that any of the Boko Haram’s operatives in Nigeria ever fought in Afghanistan. But the triumph of the jihadists in Afghanistan has had a bolstering universal effect on jihadists across the globe, so that as Crenshaw rightly observes, “other men [and women] who were too young to have fought in Afghanistan […] emulated what they saw as the jihadist model,” (ibid: 404). Lengmang reports further that as a way of identifying with the Taliban, during one of its violent attacks on a police station in Kaduna, Yobe State, members of Boko Haram briefly flew the black Taliban flag, a gesture symbolizing commonality of cause (Lengmang, 2011: 98).

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 Mujahedeen 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 Improved 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 Mujahedeen 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 action by 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 operatives undoubtedly are imbued with the mind-set elucidated by Mozayyan: it believes it can defeat the Nigerian state notwithstanding the stripping and quantity of weapons at the latter’s disposal. Successful attacks on security formations across the north tend to bolster this feeling.

Reinares’ idea of political influence could also extend to the development in Sudan and could be an incentive to the Boko Haram sect. In July 2011, after prolonged bitter conflict that included over two decades of guerrilla warfare, Sudan was split into two countries, essentially along religious lines. What the Sudan’s is to the US is what the Muslim is to the West. What the Sudanese want to achieve is what the Muslims want to achieve in their own countries. That is the only way to reconcile the Nigerian Muslim with the Nigerian nationalism. The Boko Haram sect may have focused on this model, just as its ambition may have been bolstered by the Islamist rebels declaration of northern Mali as the AZWAD republic.

But the Aristotelian counsel may suffice here. In his Politics, Aristotle warns that in framing our ideals, we may assume what we wish, but must avoid impossibilities. Nigeria’s geography 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 Muslims, a large segment of the population of the north central and to a some extent, the north east areas of Adamawa, Gombe, Bauchi and even Borno, are Christians. Former military President Ibrahim Babangida, a Muslim, puts this aspect in perspective thus:

There are […] no such phrases like Muslim North and Christian South. Wherever 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).
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 their religious affiliation; or do other differences make the satellite states as far apart as the moon and sun? One has to wonder about the sincerity of his words.

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 Mujahideen are focused on Islam’s days of glory or great piety, which to them assure the true believer of spiritual salvation and an eternal exemplary 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 “futile 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 such a society. It is a society 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 that, while the Boko Haram Mujahideen may not care about the earthly economy, the northern political elites do. Allegations of complicity by northern political elites of the Boko Haram Mujahideen 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 cum economic elites 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 see. If you see, you 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 federalizing units and the capitalist orientation of the economy. Babangida 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, being of the opposite political persuasion, and therefore, would want to thwart its rise to power. The second hypothesis suggests that Boko Haram is in a battle by hitting 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 (private discussion with a northern source, January 4, 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, there is a case that Boko Haram is the new weapon used by various interest groups to cause violence, mislead and confuse Nigerians in order to achieve their selfish agenda” (Adibe, 2012:58). 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 greatest 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 resentful Islam has compounded 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 Islamic 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, “When they come ostensibly for security reasons, they have their own 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 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 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 in the eyes of many: marginalized others. Whether of tension or worse. 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 segment of the 21st century. • loses 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 religious and ethnic fault-lines – appears designed to enact the 2025 scenario described above. Hundreds of deaths of members of the Igbo ethnic group, as a result of suspected twin attacks in the northeastern part of the country. The actions of Boko Haram may predispose the government 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).

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Conclusion: Any Hope for Optimism?

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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 to be paid to professor Eke’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, 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.

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A Publication of:

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