

ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA AND THE BOKO HARAM MENACE

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Publication date: 29 March 2015)

Elections have always been high-stakes affairs in Nigeria but the build-up to the 2015 elections has been accompanied by unprecedented levels of tension and anxiety. Two closely matched parties—the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) of President Goodluck Jonathan and the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) led by General Muhammadu Buhari—appear confident of securing victory.¹ The national elections in 2011 accelerated the general northern alienation from the Abuja government that feeds Boko Haram.

The upcoming national elections on March 28 are a rematch between Jonathan and Buhari. As in 2011, it is widely expected that the north will support Muhammadu Buhari against incumbent president Goodluck Jonathan. The two leading candidates were the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, and Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim.² Supporters of these presidential candidates overly employed religious rhetoric and ethnic identity appeals in their campaigns. Inflammatory rhetoric and violence are already poisoning the campaign period. Both main parties appear to believe that the only way they can be denied victory is through fraudulent means.

Moreover, one of the main problems of the elections is the response and the containment of Boko Haram. Several conspiracy theories are commonly used to explain the Boko Haram and Ansaru phenomena. Among them one of the most popular include that *Northern politicians sponsor Boko Haram to make the country “ungovernable” for President Goodluck Jonathan*. This theory is very popular among commentators and leading politicians from the southern part of the country.³

¹Adibe, Jideofor (2011) ‘Beyond Boko Haram’ (Abuja, Daily Trust), September 1, 2011 (back page).

²Adoyi, A. 2013. “Nigeria is Bleeding” – Obasanjo accuses Jonathan of destroying the country, PDP.” Daily Post, December 11.

³Leena Koni, *Who Speaks for the North? Politics and Influence in Northern Nigeria*, Chatham House, London (2014).

Nevertheless, the challenges associated with these elections are deeply embedded in the country's political history—an elite-based culture of winner-takes-all competition that has more to do with alliances and personalities than policy issues or party platforms. Shifting this political culture and changing the zero-sum mindset of political elites and their followers is perhaps Nigeria's greatest political challenge.⁴ The challenges of conducting a credible, successful election in a large, diverse country of more than 170 million people are compounded by the fragile security situation in parts of Nigeria. Special contingencies will be required to organize polling in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa states, where Boko Haram occupies scores of Local Government Areas and has vowed to violently disrupt the elections.

Boko Haram may be loosely translated to mean "Western education is forbidden." That is an outsider term that they themselves never use. Instead, they call themselves "the people committed to the removal of innovation and jihad." The group's stated goal is to establish God's kingdom on earth and, through the rigid implementation of Islamic law, or sharia, deliver justice for the poor. Boko Haram's rhetorical focus on providing for the poor highlights that it is, among other things, an insurrection of the poor against the rich within an Islamic context.⁵

But it has published no concrete plan for economic development or poverty alleviation. The group has claimed responsibility for a series of attacks but the most serious event is the kidnapping of over 200 schoolgirls in Borno State in mid 2014. While these events have had devastating impacts, Boko Haram's activities in Nigeria, and those of its splinter group Ansaru, are hardly new. Under a radical Islamic agenda, these militants have perpetuated violence across northern Nigeria since roughly 2009, aiming to rid the country of any "Western influence." An issue under serious debate is how much popular support does Boko Haram have. The government line is that they have none. Nevertheless, estimates of Boko Haram fighters range from 5,000 to 50,000, and the persistence of the jihadist insurgency since 2009 indicates to me that it has some popular support.⁶

But what is the outlook of the elections concerning and containing the Boko Haram menace?

First, the elections could be held with minimum turnout in the north and much Boko Haram violence against those who do try to vote. Recent local elections in Yobe, an area of Boko Haram activity, had a turnout of less than 8 percent. The risk is such elections would have little credibility in the north.⁷ Second, in the meantime, the Abuja government's military approach to Boko Haram is changing. After the Nigerian elections

⁴ Pérouse de Montclos, Marc-Antoine, 'Du Nigeria au Sahel et à l'Afrique centrale: la secte Boko Haram', *Questions Internationales*, No. 58, November 2012, pp. 30–33.

⁵ Adibe, J. 2013. "Did America Really Predict that Nigeria will Break-Up in 2015?" *Daily Trust*, September 5

⁶ Tishdall, Simon 2015, Boko Haram-Isis alliance is nothing but superficial propaganda, *Guardian*, 8 March

⁷ *Ibid*,

were postponed in February, the Nigerian military launched a new offensive and has reclaimed several towns in what was considered Boko Haram territory.

There are now many actors on the ground, including military forces from Cameroon, Chad, and Niger, who are fighting against Boko Haram incursions into their own territories. Third, the atrocities associated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, as well as Boko Haram in northern Nigeria, have focused renewed attention on the relationship—if any—between terrorism and Islam, the faith of some 1.6 billion people, perhaps a quarter of the earth's population. Both ISIS and Boko Haram are coalitions that consist of many different elements.⁸

A religious vision is only one dimension. Others include alienated youth, economic depression, bad governance, and predatory states. There are criminal dimensions to both, and political figures use both to advance their particular agendas. But belief colors, if it does not always determine, the direction in which Boko Haram and ISIS move.

Under these circumstances, if Boko Haram is a peasants' revolt in an Islamic context against a corrupt government dominated by Christians that refuses to address human rights abuses, what policy options are available to the United States? Up to now, the Obama administration, and the West generally, has been concerned to support the electoral process, seeing free, fair, and credible elections that are accepted by most Nigerians as crucial to moving forward.

The United States also implemented a small counterterrorism training mission with a new Nigerian military unit that has not been credibly accused of human rights abuses. However, the Jonathan government abruptly and unilaterally ended it in December. Since then, U.S. military training has been focused on Niger and Cameroon, not Nigeria.

Abuja appears unwilling to accept the accountability and transparency required by a U.S. military relationship. However, there is a humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria, with huge numbers of refugees and displaced persons. There is a food security emergency. In some areas, there has been no plowing or harvesting for almost four years.

⁸ Ibid,