

UNDERSTANDING THE BOKO HARAM CRISIS IN NIGERIA: A LENTICULAR PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Nigeria has come under serious security challenge in the last couples of years. The security dilemma is epitomized by the *Jamatu'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'wati wal-Jihad*, (People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teaching and Jihad) or its faction, Ansaru- all generically known as the Boko Haram (Western civilization is forbidden). Since July 2009 when the sect had open confrontation with the Nigerian State in the war of vengeance, first, over the killing of its members by the security forces attempting to implement a helmet legislation for motorbike riders in Bornu state, North-east of Nigeria and later over the death in the hands of the police of its leader Ustaz Yusuf Mohamed, there is little doubt left that the Boko Haram sect has successfully replaced sundry criminal activities such as armed robbery and kidnapping as a more formidable security challenge to both state and society in Nigeria. Especially with the current militant Islamic revival in some parts of Africa, from the North African Maghreb, East Africa and down to the Sahel and West African regions, and being spear-headed by al Qaeda affiliates such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Somali-based al- Shabaab, popular notion about the Boko Haram sect regard it within the general framework of global political Islam- the unprecedented irruption of Islamic religion into the secular domain of politics (Hirschkind: <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer205/what-political-islam>). The Boko Haram sect is thus viewed as a local cell of the global Jihadist movement; more so, with its declared manifesto to abolish the democratic structures in existence in Nigeria and impose the Islamic Sharia system, initially on Nigeria, but which it later modified to the North of the country only.

While the general notion of an Islamist organization is not completely irrelevant in understanding the sect and its violence, however, this article attempts to examine the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria by situating it within the specific context in which the sect evolved as well as the extant political milieu in which it has metamorphosed into the monster it current constitutes. The paper will therefore adopt a three-dimensional approach in the explanation of the sect and its violence, namely a brief but critical analysis of its religious origin, its evolution as a local political militia in the North and Maiduguri specifically, and appropriation to the national political stage in the post-2011 presidential election period.

Boko Haram: The Origin

The literature on the Boko Haram insurgents is robust with narratives on whom the founder is and the date in which it arose in history, and therefore need not be regurgitated all over here (see Lengmang, 2011; Okereke, 2011; Adibe, 2012; Alozieuwa, 2012). Important however is that from the outset, the Boko Haram arose as a religious group in the North-east of Nigeria. Indeed, the region has hosted extremist religious groups in the past, and has experienced sectarian religious violence that usually pits the Moslems against the Christians. Extremist religious sects which have emerged from the region include the Maitatsine and Darul Islam. The 1980s for instance witnessed the Maitatsine riots in several Northern cities, namely, Kano (1980), Kaduna (1982), Bulum-Ketu (1982), Jimeta (1984), and Gombe (1985). The list excludes religious riots that occasionally occur in parts of the region, such as the inter-ethnic violence in Kano in 1996 sparked off by the beheading of an Igbo Christian, Gideon Akaluka by Moslem youths for allegedly profaning the Quran; the 2006 Danish cartoon riots by Moslem in many parts of the North, especially in Maiduguri and Katsina. The ethno-religious crisis Jos, Plateau state, North-central Nigeria has raged since 2004.

The reservoir from which previous extremist religious elements in Northern Nigeria such as the Maitatsine recruited their membership remains the same for the Boko Haram sect, namely, the teeming number of destitute and other street urchins including the almajirais, school drop-out and unemployed and disillusioned youths and tertiary institutions graduates (Lengmang, 2011; Okereke, 2011). The gravitation to extremist religious groups by these elements thus owe largely to failure of the government in basic social provisioning and is fostered generally by the feeling among many in the North that the modern secular system is incapable of stimulating meaningful development and prosperity in the region (Lengmang, 2011). While the Boko Haram sect may therefore have existed prior to the outset of the current democratic dispensation, its philosophical and spiritual underpinnings however feed into the disillusionment that accompanied the manner in which the Sharia reintroduced since 1999 across 12 northern states was implemented. That disillusionment provided the profound dissatisfaction, which the Boko Haram sect tapped into to promote the idea that an Islamic state would eliminate the inconsistencies (<http://www.cfr.org/nigeria/boko-haram/p25739>).

Boko Haram as a local Political Militia

Nigeria has a prevalent political culture whereby politicians found armed thugs which they use for criminal political activities during elections in the struggle for political power. Most of the elements that constitute the militias are pooled from the army of unemployed youths and never-do-wells of the society. As political militias, these hordes are however usually dumped in the post-election periods. Political militia however dates back to pre-independence era and not a new phenomenon.

The nucleus of the membership of the Boko Haram sect emerged out of a political militia group known as Ecomog, used specifically by a former governor of Bornu state, Ali Modu Sheriff to dislodge his predecessor, Mala Kachalla, whom he sponsored to office in 1999. Acting Minister of Defense, Labaran Maku, was thus right when he blamed politicians from the North-east for the “insecurity [which] is not religious but the after-effect of violent local politics,” (Newsdairy, online, December 31, 2013). With the disillusionment over the implementation of Sharia in the north generally, Boko Haram’s dead leader, Yusuf apparently presumed that in releasing his members to help Sheriff come to power, the latter would be stricter in enforcing the Sharia, which Kachalla introduced in Bornu in 2000. Kachalla had exempted the Christians from the Sharia. Sheriff indisposition to do just that led to the resignation of Buji Foi, a Boko Haram top member and the commissioner for religious affairs in Sheriff’s cabinet, who allegedly was one of Yusuf’s major financiers. He was killed alongside Yusuf.

Boko Haram Emerges at the National Stage: The Post-2011 Election in Nigeria

Nigeria has an informal political arrangement whereby central power is rotated between the North and South. In the arrangement, power resides in each of the divides for 8 years. It started with President Olusegun Obasanjo from the South-West region, (1999-2007). Yar’Adua from the North-West succeeded Obasanjo in 2007 and could have been in office till 2015. He died in 2010- the third year into his first four-year tenure. Yar’Adua’s deputy Goodluck Jonathan, took over in accordance with the country’s constitution. A Christian, Jonathan is an Ijaw, a minority ethnic nationality in the Niger Delta, South-South of Nigeria.

Towards the 2011 general elections, some political tendencies in the North felt President Jonathan should merely complete Yar’Adua’s tenure and give way for a Northerner to do the region’s remaining four years. In a political environment where the power of incumbency entails using apparatuses of State to swing the electoral process to one’s favour, Jonathan’s ethnic Ijaw minority however saw an opportunity for the region to cut its teeth into the big political pie. The oil-rich Niger Delta had also been scene of violent militant agitation that targeted Nigeria’s oil infrastructure and impacted the country’s oil-dependent economy negatively. The people of the region suffered long years of despoliation of their environment and conspiratorial neglect by successive Nigerian governments and the multinational oil companies. In the absence of total control of the oil resources in their domain, which constituted the major theme of the militant agitation, a shot at the presidency could do. The region had the sympathy of many Nigerians, especially from the South- if having the presidency could stem the wave of militancy in the region which had degenerated into kidnapping for ransom, among other sundry criminal activities and also led to increasing loss of oil revenues. Minority ethnic groups in the North were also sympathetic to the Ijaw cause in a display of fellow minority feeling.

The April 2011 presidential poll in Nigeria was conducted against this backdrop and thus was preceded by bitter power struggles between some political forces in the North and South of Nigeria. Threats of making Nigeria ungovernable should Jonathan defy the zoning arrangement of his political party, the People’s Democratic Party, PDP, and vie for the presidency had preceded the election and resonated from some prominent Northern figures. In December 2010, two bombs were detonated by the Boko Haram at the Mummy Market, a mixed free zone at Mogadishu Barracks, a walking distance to the seat of power, the Aso Rock Presidential Villa, in

order according to a Nigerian news magazine *Tell*, “to pass the message that if it could happen inside the lion’s den, it could happen anywhere else in Nigeria and that nobody is safe,” (*Tell*, January 17, 2011). Ex-army private Habib Bama, a Kanuri from Bama in Bornu state was the mastermind, including that of the United Nations’ House in August 2011, (<http://sundayriskyakpan.blogspot.com/2012/06/jtf-confirms-boko-haram-leaders-arrest.html>).

Just as was appropriated in Bornu for power struggle in the state, therefore, the Boko Haram is thus viewed by many as having been appropriated by some influential political forces that seeks to make good the pre- 2011 election threats. It is generally regarded as a political militia of the Northern/Hausa-Fulani hegemony, and in the specific context of the Kanuri ethnic group sense of marginalization from central power, the political militia of that ethnic group in the North (Alozieuwa, 2012). Nobel Laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka of Nigeria argues strongly that the hordes are available to highly placed, highly disgruntled and highly motivated individuals who, having lost out in the power stakes have sown to bring the Nigerian society to its knees, create a situation of anarchy either by breaking up the country or bringing back the military- “not merely to Islamize the nation but to bring it under a specific kind of fundamentalist strain,” (*Newsweek*, January 16, 2012). According to General Jeremiah Useni, a Northerner and former deputy national chairman of Sheriff’s All Nigeria’s People’s party, ANPP, “The Boko Haram issue ...started like a Borno affair but now it is becoming a national problem,” (*Vanguard*, online, July 13, 2011).

Conclusion

Early 2012, Professor Jean Herskovits, an American professor of history and expert on Nigerian politics, had urged the US to resist been drawn into a Nigerian ‘war on terror’ that would make the US appear biased toward a Christian president. Getting involved in an escalating sectarian conflict that threatens Nigeria’s unity, Herskovits had argued, could turn Nigerian Muslims against America without addressing any of the underlying problems fueling instability and sectarian strife in Nigeria. Late last year, however, both Ahl as-Sunnah lid-da‘wa wal-Jihād, and Ansaru made the United States’ list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs). The designations, no doubt, demonstrate the US strong support for Nigeria’s fight against terrorism and its efforts to address security challenges in the north. By implication, the US did not heed Professor Herskovits counsel. Nevertheless, Herskovits has a theory on the Boko Haram sect which to me remains valid. According to him,

[T]here is no proof that a well-organized, ideologically coherent terrorist group called Boko Haram even exists today. Evidence suggests instead 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. Boko Haram has evolved into a franchise that includes criminal groups claiming its identity.

The core Islamist elements that remains, as I have argued elsewhere (Alozieuwa, 2012), are a fringe group that also antagonizes mainstream Northern Muslims. For a number of reasons, these elements cannot achieve their ambition of Islamizing either the whole of Nigeria or Northern Nigeria based on certain factors. One, the likelihood of evolving a coalition which will embrace mainstream northern Muslim and its political elite corps is zero. This owes to the fact that while the sect may be focused on Islam’s days of glory or great piety, which to them assures the true

believer of spiritual salvation and an eternally joyful existence in the world beyond (Mozayyan, 2009:241), the average Nigerian Muslim political elite is however most likely uninterested in that 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). And there is a reason for this: none of the oil which most Nigeria’s political elites rely on for primitive accumulation can be found in the North. Second, Nigeria’s geography does not also support a clear-cut distinction between a Muslim North and Christian South. Again, discovery of items as used condoms, at the sect’s Bama camp in Borno in 2013 by Nigerian soldiers on the sect’s pursuit does not project the sect as serious devotees committed to returning Islam to its glorious days of great piety but as a bunch of disgruntled bandits operating under the banner of religion to camouflage its sense of deprivation. Condoms and their like should ordinarily be a haram (sin) to a true religious sect. Acts of violence perpetrated by the Boko Haram sect towards the end of 2013 in parts of the North-east like ambushing and slaughtering motorists and commuters on the highways, attacking a wedding party, as well as defenseless tertiary institution students, therefore, might suggest a chaos strategy to prove to the citizenry, its vulnerability amidst increasing military clamp-down on the sect. But it also betrays desperation by a sect that has realized the futility of its Islamization agenda on complex heterogeneous country as Nigeria.

On the other hand, for the elements that have been appropriated as a political militia, the foray to the national stage has been grossly hampered especially with tight intelligence and security cordons around Abuja, the country’s capital and its environs. Both the declaration of the sect and its faction, Ansaru as FTOs and Nigeria’s anti-Terrorism legislation combine as great disincentives to any politician to want to jeopardize not only his personal freedom for support to the insurgents but also risk loss of his financial wherewithal. The trial of some Lebanese businessmen in Nigeria, the conviction of one of them with linkage to the Hezbollah terrorist organization, as well as Boko Haram field operative Kabiru Sokoto on terrorism charge in late 2013 serve a notice that the State takes the War on Terror (WoT) seriously, and would brook no nonsense from any person that may want to associate himself with acts of terrorism in Nigeria. Unrealistic therefore will be the idea of perpetrating the violence in order to stop Jonathan from contesting the 2015 presidential election, which as I have postulated in my earlier work under reference essentially informs the Boko Haram violence at the national level. Confronted by this reality, the sect has been forced to retreat to its original enclave, the North-east, and few adjoining North-west states. As 2015 approaches, the chaos strategy will further help to rob the sect’s Islamization agenda of its appeal. The remnant of the horde of the political militia elements across the North will gravitate towards the North-east and will focus their attention on the local politics in that region.

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