

Religion and Violence in Nigeria: 1980-2012

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Abstract: Nigeria's recent history is replete with religious violence. Religious clashes with attendant loss of life and property are a reoccurring phenomenon. Mainstream conventional religious groups seek to change society according to their interpretation of religion. Religious violence in Nigeria is mostly between adherents of the two major religions in the country, Christianity and Islam. Heightened social identity, competition for resources and political power are underlying factors, so are pervasive poverty, corruption, and the long winded route to development of the nation. In recent times the religious group, Boko Haram group has been at the centre of acts of violence. The Boko Haram is an Islamic group engaged in violent conflict with the Nigerian authorities. The group uses violence, assassinations, urban warfare, kidnap and bombings as instruments of advancing its interests. The group initially engaged in peaceful proselytising and non-violence, metamorphosed into a Jihadi faction with the aim of establishing a theocratic Sharia state. Some of these acts of violence can be traced to the failure of the leadership to engender balanced development in all regions of the nation and cater for the growing needs for economic and social justice among all sections of the Nigerian society.

Keywords: Nigeria, Islam, Sharia, Violence, Boko Haram

Introduction

Nigeria is a multi ethnic and multi religious society, the mosaic of cultures and religions gives the nation a peculiar character in terms of political and social relations. Inter-group rivalry along ethnic, religious and other lines is a common phenomenon, and over the decades, especially from the 1908s, has given rise to violent clashes between these groups. Religious violence in Nigeria cannot be said to be entirely religious, that is because most have ethnic, economic, or political underpinnings. A crises could begin as either as an ethnic or political conflict and metamorphose into a religious crises, or vice versa. Religious conflicts have occurred at different times and places in Nigeria; however, the period under study is 1980 to 2012.

Going back to May 1980, clashes occurred between Muslims and Christians in: Zaria city of Kaduna. The genesis of the violence could only be traced to the sour relation between adherents of the two religions. No lives were reportedly lost but Christians suffered substantial set back as many properties belonging were destroyed. One of the widely reported religious crises with substantial loss in life and property occurred in Yan-Awaki area of Kano, a predominantly Muslim city. The crises is attributed to the *Maitatsine* religious sect, it is estimated that 4,177 people died directly as a consequence of the attacks by members of the sect on non-sect members and police men during the crises (Danjibo, 2010). In another part of the country, clashes between the *Maitatsine* sect, the public, and law enforcement officers resulted in extensive destruction of properties, and loss of 118 lives. The sect was also at the centre of the violence that engulfed the cities of Jimeta and Yola in March 1984. The *Maitatsine* sect unleashed violence resulting in wanton destruction of properties in April, 1985. In 1986, there was an inter-religious clash between Muslims and Christians in Gombe. Similarly, in May, 1986 adherents of the two religions clashed on the grounds of the first established ivory tower, University of Ibadan. One of the hot

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beds of religious crises in Nigeria is Kaduna State; in March, 1987, there were clashes between Muslims and Christians in the College of Education, Kafanchan; the crises has left a lingering acrimonious relationship between adherents of the two faiths that has lasted to date. The burning of Mosques by Christian Kajes and retaliatory attacks by Muslims had far reaching effects; neighbouring towns like Katsina, Funtua, Zaria, Gusau were engulfed by a wave of religious riots. Many lives were lost, as had become the norm for such occurrences.

Like clerics, young people and students are not left out of religious violence, in Kaduna Polytechnic in Kaduna State it is was common for intra and inter religious riots to break out every while. In some cases of religious violence, sects have been the source of violence, for instance, the Shi'ite sect under the auspices of Islamic Movement of Nigeria embarked on peaceful protests against what it called an offensive and blasphemous publication by a magazine; the march was subverted by street urchins consequently ending in violence (Adesoji, 2010; CSMN). Others are the acrimonious, nationwide debate on Sharia (Islamic law) at the Constituent Assembly in October/November 1988, the Bayero University crisis of 1989, the Bauchi/Katsina riots of March, 1991, the Zangon-Kataf riot of May 1992, the Kano civil disturbance of December 1991 and the Jos crisis of April 1994 (Imo 1995: 21-23; Ibrahim 1997: 512-516; Enwerem 1999: 124). Similarly, between 1999 and 2008, 28 other conflicts were reported, the most prominent being the Shagamu conflict of July 1999 and the recurrent Jos crises of 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2008 (Akaeze 2009). The intractable Jos Ethno-religious crisis has recurred severally between 2008 and January 2010; it remains a potentially explosive issue till date.

Background to the Boko Haram

One of the major challenges faced by the nation in recent times is the outbreak of violent uprising by a religious group locally called *Boko Haram*. The multi ethnic and religious nature of Nigerian society, the high sensitivity to religious issues by Nigerians coupled with the long military rule are factors identified as having militarized the psyche of most Nigerians (Adesoji, 2010). But poignant and alarming issue is the attempt by adherents of various religions to forcefully impose a religious ideology on others. These attempts manifest a growing religious sensitivity as one of the most religious countries in the world, and the failure to effect deterrent measures in the past. The effects of heightened religious consciousness have had adverse social, political and economic consequences on the nation. Apart from the carnage and destruction of property, the growing distrust and animosities among Nigerians of different faiths and tribes, the issue of religious violence poses a threat to national security and continued existence of the nation (IISS, 2011).

The Boko Haram, prior to 2010, was largely an unknown group. They kept to themselves, a sort of micro state within the larger Nigerian state. Adesoji (2010:3), views the Boko Haram insurgency as another forceful attempt to Islamise Nigeria. He maintains that it "was not the first forceful attempt to impose a religious ideology on a secular Nigerian society"; but the Boko Haram group like the rest of Nigerians advocates for change and responsible governance. The Boko Haram

approaches the issue of national development from the perspective of violent change. The group has taken the *jihadi* stance to dealing with the challenges faced by the nation. This in no way justifies the groups approach to issues, but its agenda can be contextualised in the continued underdeveloped state of the society in spite of the potential it holds in terms of human and mineral resources. Herskovits (2012), pertinently points out that “It was clear in 2009, as it is now (2012), that the root cause of violence and anger in both the north and south of Nigeria is endemic poverty and hopelessness”; Bill Clinton adduced poverty as the main reason behind the violence (Abubakar and Wakili, 2012). The Boko Haram uprising is significant, not only because it challenges the legitimacy of the state through promoting Islamic revivalism, but its actions are an indictment of a nation that is fast being acknowledged to be a failed state. Government ineptitude has become apparent with regular outbreaks of violence of many kinds despite its continuous promises to bring them under control.

Virtually all the religious crises that have occurred in Nigeria ended in some form of violence, either to persons or property. They have been explained or justified by one reason or the other depending on the narrative of the group. Some acts of religious violence have underpinnings in intergroup rivalry for recognition by the state or access to political power and state resources (Albert 1999a: 285-286; Ladan 1999: 101). For instance, several lives have been lost in Jos, Plateau State over the perceived threat posed by non-Christian and non-indigenous people like Hausa and Fulani who have settled in the state over the decades by the local ethnic group. The same argument applies to the Zangon-Kataf riots (Williams 1999; Ibrahim 1998: 39-66). Although almost all the crises have been subsumed under religion and explained by even some authors as religious factors, it is apparent that other extraneous and underlying factors like social identity, economic disequilibrium, poverty, and political power have all played a role (Ibrahim 1997: 521-524; Sulaiman 2008: 20-26). Ibrahim (1998) asserts that most, if not all ethno-religious crises have behind them a perceived domination by external or illegitimate groups.

It should be noted that the northern zone of Nigeria has a high rate of poverty. Indicators of development show a region that needs high investment to improve standards of living; a combination of factors like economic dislocation, deprivation, and income inequalities, as well as poverty continue to pose challenges to the region. However, Boko Haram, spokesmen have warned that their fight is an ideological one and not for worldly comforts, they admonish that the group cannot be induced by material rewards like the Niger Delta militants. The group aligns itself with the Sunni sect of Islam but prominent Sunni Scholars and intellectuals have challenged the group’s ideology and methods. The approach and methods of the Boko Haram has been likened to that of the Maitatsine sect.

The Boko Haram

The group popularly known as Boko Haram officially calls itself *Jama’tu Ahlus Sunna Lidawati Wal Jihad*. It was identified to have metamorphosed over the decades and at one time was

referred to as *Ahlusunna wal' Jamma Hijra*; the Nigerian Taliban. It is also called the *Yusufiyya* named after the leader (Fasure 2009: 2; Omipidan 2009b: 48; Sunday Tribune 2009). There are indications that the late leader Yusuf and maybe some elements may have belonged to the Shiite group under the leadership of Ibrahim El-Zakzakky, before a crisis that fissured it into two ideological camps. The splinter group was Kano-based *Jama'atul Tajdidi Islam* (JTI) headed by a former Zakzakky stalwart, Abubakar Mujahid; that was in the early 1990s. Yusuf ostensibly also became a member of the JTI faction and was even appointed the *amir* (leader) for Borno State (Suleiman 2009: 19-23).

The Shiites, officially known as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, emerged in Nigeria in the late 1970s under the leadership of Ibrahim El-Zakzakky, then an economics student of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The major objective of the Shiite is to establish an Islamic government or state governed modelled after Iran; the source of its leaders inspiration and ideology. Sharia was to be established through preaching and subtle influence on society. The sect shares certain similarities to Iran in its sympathies for Palestinians, and hold Israel and the United States of America as aggressors. The Shiite sect has been in violent confrontation with the state and has no regard for its apparatuses like the police and the judiciary which it considers as instruments of oppression (Olugboji 1995:6). Even though the sect gives the impression of embracing peaceful means to further its ideology, there is a latent aspect that condones violence: apart from revolutionary rhetoric's, members of the group are known to have engaged in violent street protests, clashing with anti-riot policemen, and could resort to the use of arms if given an opportunity. On several occasions, members of the Shiite sect have engaged non-shia groups in violent confrontation around the country; they see their fallen brethren as martyrs (Albert 1999a: 286-288).

It could be said that the Boko Haram revolutionary transformation is borne out of genuine aspiration to reform society. The leader of the group Mohammed Yusuf, once a member of the Shiite sect radicalized the group under his leadership. According to Oyegbile and Lawal (2009: 68), the group assumed a hard-line position after one of its leader had left for studies in Saudi Arabia leaving Yusuf at the helms of affairs. Another version has it that Yusuf was a member of another group called Nigerian Taliban but because of its extremism, he continued to work towards making Nigeria an independent and just State. It would appear that Yusuf prepared himself for the leadership role that he later played in the Boko Haram sect with his membership in other fundamentalist groups. It is also not impossible that the Boko Haram sect was just one facet of the multifaceted and well-linked fundamentalist movement, the true extent of which can hardly be determined. The reason that Yusuf decided to sever his ties with the Taliban – if in fact, he actually did – could have been informed not by his opposition to their extremist tendencies but rather by his desire to realize his long-term dream of reform, which, perhaps, was slowed down by others who were not as committed as he was.

It seems that the group did not explicitly give the name “Boko Haram” to itself; rather the name could come from the external view of its basic beliefs: “Boko Haram” is derived from a combination of the Hausa word *Boko* meaning “book” and the Arabic word *haram* which means something forbidden, ungodly or sinful. Literally, it means “book is sinful”, but could mean Western education is sinful, sacrilegious or ungodly and should therefore be forbidden. A common refrain by scholars and commentators on the Boko Haram is what is erroneously believed to be the groups jettisoning of Western education, Western culture, science and technology (Adesoji, 2010). However, some arrested members of the group were discovered to be graduate of tertiary institutions, some even had masters degrees. The group uses phones and the internet for communication and dissemination of information. It uses modern cars and bombs in its attacks. According to Madunagu, *et al*, (2009), the group even sent its members abroad for medical training and others fields of knowledge to provide ancillary services when the group embarks on attacks. This is misleading because many Islamic activists, Boko Haram or otherwise have encouraged members to embrace both Islamic and Western education if they are to live fulfilled lives and cast off Western hegemony. Alongside this line of thinking was the group’s advocacy for the propagation of, and strict adherence to Islam by all and sundry regardless of personal inclinations. The membership of Boko Haram cuts across a broad spectrum of Nigerian society, but as would be expected a large number of members come from poor, lower class backgrounds. Some members were identified to be former university lecturers, students, bankers, a former commissioner, and others are officers of Borno State government. The group may have included people of questionable character like rehabilitated drug addicts, street urchins and similar under class people (Olu 2009: 9).

The conditions under which the Boko Haram have emerged shares similarities to the socio-economic conditions that have fostered similar movements elsewhere. Since the mid 1980s living conditions have grown worse: mass poverty; inequality in educational, political and employment opportunities; pervasive illiteracy because of limited educational opportunities; growing unemployment; and corruption in high places, and the misuse of resources have become common place; many people are appalled by standards of living (Usman, 1987: 2). These problems swelled the army of vulnerable people whose disillusionment and impoverishment made them easy prey in the hands of people who promise to bring change for the better. In particular, the corruption among the political elite who have failed to utilise the country’s vast wealth to improve the lives of citizens has been a cause of disenchantment. This, coupled with stolen election mandates, has led to growing disillusion with the Western system of governance, among unemployed young men (McConnell, 2009). The Boko Haram phenomenon is often blamed on the northern states, for being Muslims, adherents of Islam “a religion of violence”. These views disregard the socio-economic conditions that spawned such movements (Ibelema 2009:18; Makinde 2009: 6).

The Insurgency

The violent approach to issues of the Boko Haram came to the limelight in the 2009; with the insurgency at its peak between the beginning and end of July. The violence occurred in four northern states: Bauchi, Kano, Yobe and Borno. Borno state witnessed the highest casualties maybe because it was the leader, Mohammed Yusuf's, and the movement's home base. The immediate cause of the riot was the attack on the group's settlement at the Dutsen Tanshi area of Bauchi on 26 July 2009 by security men. Members of the group were allegedly arrested for being in possession of bomb making materials which were ostensibly seized by the police. This led to reprisal attacks by the sect members on police formations in Bauchi and eventually in three other states (Hines, 2009; McConnell 2009; Bakare, Adedeji and Shobiye 2009).

The violence was contained after the capture and killing of the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf, under police custody. The establishment had claimed he was killed in the conflict; however, images recorded on phones and posted on the internet disputed that. It is estimated that over 700 people, mostly sect members, were killed, and public buildings like police stations, prisons, government offices, schools and churches were destroyed (Nwankwo and Falola 2009: 2; Oyegbile and Lawal 2009: 67-71).

The death of the group's leader, Mohammed Yusuf did not end matters, the scattered members rallied round a new figure in the name of Abubakar Muhammed Shekau. The new leader raised the level of the groups attacks and brought it to international limelight. There are no known connections between the group and other jihadist groups outside the country but the mode of operation is very similar thereby raising suspicion of links to Taliban, al-Qaida, al-Qaida in the Magreb and other jihadi groups in Afghanistan, Algeria, Pakistan, Kashmir and elsewhere. The Boko Haram leaves its signature of unbridled violence in targets it has hit, the group has assassinated perceived enemies from various walks of life; traditional title holders, teachers, journalists, people believed to be spying and informing on them, most especially military and paramilitary personnel. Unconfirmed reports allege that the group has attacked and robbed banks as institutions of *riba*, (interest) but more importantly to fund the activities of the group. There has been speculation that the group receives financial support within Nigeria from its supporters. For instance, a former Commissioner in Borno State is recognized as one of its sponsors. There might be other sponsors, such as businessmen and high ranking government functionaries. The incentive to donate to the group could be innocuous deriving from desire to promote religion for heavenly rewards. It cannot be ruled out that disciples, admirers, partners or associates of the group leader donated to it out of religious zeal without thought of promoting violence.

Patrimonialism is very pervasive in Nigeria, and prebendal politics has almost become the norm. Politics and undue emphasis on acquisition of power primarily for access to resources and wealth plays a role in the emergence of the Boko Haram as a *jihadi* group. The unabashed contest for political patronage by various social groups gives the impetus to engage in acts that are inimical

to the interests of other contestants and groups. Politicians aggrandise wealth in office with the aim, amongst other things, of “settling” members of their “constituency”. Therefore, funds designated for various public works are embezzled, leaving infrastructure to decay to the stage they become un-repairable and contracts have to be awarded at highly inflated prices to enable contractors pay kick-backs. Schools hospital, roads are in such a state of disrepair that everyday life has become hectic for the common citizen. The hope of redemption by religious men becomes an attractive alternative and any call to change the course of decay and reformation is keenly heeded to, as many believe the “prophets” who shall raise the nation to greater heights have come at last. It is in this context that we should view the agitation for Sharia law in some northern states.

The Muslim population of the northern states rallied round the call for the introduction of Sharia law, as it was believed to usher in a new and religious approach to public administration, allocation, just distribution and use of resources. However, it turned out to be a forlorn hope, some state governors who had advocated and introduced Sharia as the state penal code were more interested in using religious sentiment to mobilise support for themselves but failed to deliver the services expected of them. Consequently, the northern region continued to deteriorate economically with standards of living plummeting. The Boko Haram might have observed this decadence and sought to reverse the trend. In the groups thinking, the major culprits were leaders who had been trained in Western oriented schools. Western education was therefore a corrupter of morals, encourages greed, laziness and could not be relied on to lift the nation to greater heights ‘nor souls to enter paradise’. Religion is important in life and a secular state could bring about needed development as evidenced in Saudi Arabia, Iran and some other semi-Islamic theocratic states. Based on this thinking, the Boko Haram called for the withdrawal of the national constitution as a condition for negotiating peace with the establishment.

The Boko Haram continues to be an issue of national priority. The general disappointment with the political elite could have been the basis for the yearning for change through violence. The group is not alone in this as the violent protests after the 2011 elections have shown. Mass rampages, burning and killing followed the announcement of election results. The ruling party was believed to have once more rigged election, frustrating people’s desire for a change in the manner the states and country was being run. Most proponents of Sharia, other than Boko Haram view the introduction of Sharia law as the best option out the morass the nation had descended to.

The Violence Continues

The group has escalated attacks on targets within the nation, one of them being the United Nations building bombing and the other, an attack on the Inspector General’s convoy. Boko Haram has since the killing of its leader promised revenge. In respect of a court ruling in favour of the group, the Borno state government has paid the sum of 100 million naira as compensation to the families of members killed by the police. Notwithstanding these palliatives by government, the

group went on to carry out attacks in churches and schools killing dozens of people; these attacks occurred in Madala, Niger state; Jos, Plateau state, Gombe State University, and Bayero University Kano (Agbese *et al*, 2012:1-5). According to the group's spokesman, Abu Qaqa, the attacks were in revenge for Muslims killed in Jos, Plateau state. Around 200 people were killed in Kano in multiple coordinated attacks. The violence has not abated and more attacks have followed the ones mentioned earlier.

The office of the newspaper, *This Day* in Abuja was attacked by a suicide bomber killing two people. Similarly the Kaduna office of the same newspaper was targeted killing three. The group is also blamed for the attack on the Convoy of the Police Commissioner of Taraba state which killed eleven people; all of these happened in one week (Igidi, 2012: 1-5). Since the beginning of the year 2012, there have been attacks on primary schools in Maidugri. Schools were bombed or burnt by unknown assailants suspected to Boko Haram, but it could have been elements hiding behind the Boko Haram crises to create fear and disenchantment among the population as is mentioned below.

Some disgruntled elements hide under the shadow of Boko Haram to carry out acts of violence in parts of the nation considered to have a high density of Christian population. For instance, in Bauchi a Christian had attempted to detonate a bomb in a village church (Mohammed, 2012:1-5). Similarly, in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state a Christian man attempted to blow up a church after disguising himself in a caftan and turban, apparels commonly worn by Muslims (Abubakar and Eguyanga, 2011:1-5). Herskovits (2012) notes that, "Boko Haram has evolved into a franchise that includes criminal groups claiming its identity". This aptly describes the actions of some criminal gangs colluding with bank officials to stage robberies in the wake of Boko Haram crises. Christians have in some cases carried out retaliatory attacks as evidenced by a bomb attack on an Islamic school in Sapele, Delta state (Abubakar and Eguyanga, 2011:1-5). Indeed the activities of Boko Haram has led to heightened tension between Muslims and Christians with calls for a sovereign national conference to discuss the continued existence of Nigeria as it is, or split. The nation is divided against itself and tensions continue to run high after every incident. Military check points and sandbags give the impression of war; news of the seizure of large shipments of arms adds to the atmosphere of fear.

Northern Nigeria developmentally is lagging behind the southern states, the bustling city of Kano and commercial centre of the north has become a shadow of its former self after violence erupted on 20th January, 2012. Boko Haram fighters had planted bombs in cars in several locations around the city, while others attacked several government buildings, virtually shooting anybody in sight. It is estimated that over two hundred people were killed on that fateful Friday, a holy day for Muslims (Johnson, 2012:14).

Conclusion

It has become evident that the most likely option for peace with the group is through dialogue. Elders in Borno state have called for this approach from the beginning. Attempts by the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs were frustrated by government after the initial talks were leaked to the press. This might be due to calls by some groups and individuals for government to treat Boko Haram as a terrorist group and not engage it in dialogue. The Group followed up the breakdown in talks with an escalation in attacks. There have been calls by northern leaders to resume dialogue with the group as the current military approach has not been effective enough in curbing the group (Abbah *et al* 2012; Adebayo, 2012). The problem of religious violence has become more entrenched over the decades and government lackadaisical manner of handling such issues leaves a huge backlog of grievances unaddressed. Religious violence poses a grave danger to national and regional security. The issue needs to be approached holistically as the recurrent nature of intra and inter-ethnic and religious crises will likely end in anarchy or the disintegration of the country.

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