


 Comments on Africa

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Boko Haram and anti-state violence in northern Nigeria: In search of a *raison d'être*

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The story so far

On Sunday, 22 July 2009, an Islamic fundamentalist sect (*Boko Haram*) launched an attack against the state which spread across four states in Northern Nigeria. Faceoff between the sect and government forces culminated in a surprise attack on a mosque housing members of the sect in Maiduguri, Borno state on 29 July, and the killing of over 100 of its members. *Boko Haram* in Hausa language literally translates to “Western education is sin”. *Boko Haram*’s sole mission and goal was unambiguous: the imposition of strict Sharia law throughout a federation whose constitution endorses pluralist religious practice. Its preferred targets were police stations, prisons and government buildings. Save for sophisticated weapons captured from some police armouries during the attack, its arsenal comprised of homemade hunting rifles, bows and arrows, and machetes. Although, intelligence and security services had monitored activities of the sect members, *Boko Haram*’s strategy was unanticipated: diffuse guerrilla warfare to give leverage to its ragtag militia’s strength *vis-à-vis* the government forces; and synchronized attacks across four different states to scale-up effect and forestall rapid response. It took the superior firepower of government forces to bring the situation under control.

Uneasy calm has returned to the region since the sect leader, Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf, was reportedly killed

on 30 July. In an attempt to curb the crisis, suspected members of the sect have been arrested in Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Kaduna, Kano, Yobe, and other states in Northern Nigeria including Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory. As at 2 August, the death toll in Maiduguri alone was over 700 persons, including two soldiers and thirteen police officers. In the unfolding drama, the Borno state Police Commissioner was redeployed on 4 August for alleged complicity in the extra-judicial killing of the *Boko Haram* leader whom the army arrested and handed over to the police. The police alleged that the leader had died in crossfire while trying to escape custody. Mohammed Yusuf’s death may have hampered investigations into the roots of the sect and prosecution. But the question that remains is: will *Boko Haram*—or any other reincarnation of its *raison d'être*—rise again from its still smouldering ashes?

How did we get here?

Save for the contestation of her territorial sovereignty during the thirty-month-long Nigeria-Biafra civil war, the Nigerian state—evidently an uneasy and precarious alignment—continues to survive populist disaffection. However, the country’s ethno-religious fault line has caved in since her return to democracy in 1999. Barely three months after ex-President Olusegun Obasanjo was sworn into office, some northern states—led by Zamfara state—started clamouring for the imposition and strict implementation of the Sharia religious code. Though this clamour was seen by those loyal to the government of the day as a politically motivated attempt to destabilize the nascent democracy, the government demonstrated a clear lack of political will to nip the budding issue. The administration’s response to the trend was a press statement by Obasanjo that the clamour will “fizzle out”. This was a test case for Section 10 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 which states that:


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“The Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State religion”. The distinction being drawn by some Islamist scholars that Sharia is only a system of laws and not a religion borders on a grey area as Sharia law is in fact rooted in the Islamic faith. Today, Sharia law is being implemented in 12 northern states. Re-enactments of sectarian violence in Nigeria have claimed over 10,000 lives since 1999.

Boko Haram, which was formed in 2002 has now taken the clamour for Sharia law a little too far, directing its attacks at the state and its agencies. This sets the latest re-enactment apart from other sectarian conflicts whose direction has been mainly against other ethno-religious groups. It is instructive that leaders of the Muslim community in Nigeria are against *Boko Haram*'s stated mission and actions. In fact, the sect's xenophobic tendency has seen it distance itself from the community purportedly to avoid the “contamination” of Western education (read: civilization) and to concentrate on its creed.

Ideology behind *Boko Haram*'s stated mission

The direction of the late July attacks suggests that there is more to *Boko Haram* than religion. The clamour for strict implementation of Sharia law was premised on an alternate vision for a failing (Westphalian) state ripped asunder by social injustice, endemic corruption, oppression, moral decadence, and governance deficit. Today, even the proponents of Sharia law could see that it was not a well-thought-through remedy after all. It is ironical that *Boko Haram*'s attack was launched in four northern states all of which adopted Sharia law. Sharia-based government was not yielding any better dividends than Western-style government. Short of delving into the wider constitutional debate, the issue seems not to be any deficiency in Sharia law—or in Western education for that matter. *Boko Haram*'s mission (the imposition of Sharia) seems wrongly conceived to the extent that its problem definition (Western education) focuses outwardly rather than inwardly. Thus, the declared hostility to Western education in its entirety is only misplaced aggression.

The crisis of state which has rocked Nigeria since 1999 is essentially self-inflicted, and now being perpetuated by political leaders who have turned a blind eye to the social, economic and political problems inherited from twenty-eight years of military misrule. Today, a failure of governance is manifest in the decaying education system, intractable youth unemployment, endemic poverty, unaccountable government, infrastructural collapse, and abuse of human rights by state security agencies. Quite logically, the combined effect of these ills is disaffection against the state. Where legitimate avenues for voicing disaffection against state policies (such as periodic elections) are plugged, then illegitimate exit strategies become an attractive option. Regrettably, a large

section of the Nigerian electorate suffers ballot fatigue due to the fact that the electoral process is marred by irregularities and violence. Not infrequently, the political élite have attempted to gloss over some of these grave irregularities by tagging it Nigeria's unique brand of democracy!

Another chance

More like Nigeria's attainment of independence in 1960 and the end of the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in 1970, the country's triumphant return to democracy in 1999 is fast turning into another missed opportunity to set the country on the path of lasting peace and progress. President Umaru Yar'adua's militarist engagement with anti-state violence—both in episode one in the Niger Delta and in episode 2 in northern Nigeria—may be a heavy-handed stopgap in the quest for “victory for the state” against enemies of the state. However, facts being uncovered in the wake of the *Boko Haram* violence suggest that real victory for the state will come by changing the rules of engagement to address the real causes of anti-state violence, rather than focusing on fleeting and recurring symptoms. As always, the missing element is people-oriented governance—encompassing security, political, and natural resource governance. Governance is the glue that will hold together the still wobbly components of the Nigerian state. Even as the country warms up for the 2011 general elections, the well-conceived electoral reform process is being tampered with by the government. This may well turn out to be an invocation of the spirit of *Boko Haram* to rise from its ashes. ■

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