

NOREF Article

Violent Islamic uprising in northern Nigeria: from the "Taleban" to Boko Haram II

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Executive summary

There is a tradition of Islamic radicalism in northern Nigeria, but this has mainly been non-worldly, advocating a purer way of Islamic life. This changed at the turn of the millennium with the emergence of the so-called "Taleban" groups, which were not only more coherent in their worldview, arguing for the establishment of an Islamic government in Nigeria, but were willing to use violence to further their objectives. These groups were crushed by the Nigerian state in 2004, but Boko Haram, which had been established in 2002, continued to exist, as initially it was seen by the government as an unthreatening religious organisation. However, when it turned violent, its original leader, Mohammed Yusuf, was arrested and killed in 2009. At the time this was seen as putting an end to the organisation, but this was not the

case. Boko Haram has re-emerged from the ashes of the death of its original leader as an avant-garde organisation embracing the strategy of hyper-violent, spectacular and deadly terrorist attacks. The question is how this could happen. The marginalisation of the north and the inequality between the north and south of Nigeria and how this may have alienated some of the inhabitants of the north is one factor that must be taken into consideration. However, this article attempts to place Boko Haram into a broader context by exploring not only the historical factors leading to its emergence, but also issues concerning internal collusion between Boko Haram activists and well-connected Nigerian "Big Men", as well as the question of external support for the organisation through emerging African jihadist networks.

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Introduction

There is a long tradition of Islamic radicalism in northern Nigeria, but organised armed struggle against the state is new. It first appeared around 2002, and the 2011 Christmas Day and January 20th 2012 Kano bombing attacks suggest that this struggle has entered a new phase. This article will therefore attempt to put Boko Haram into context and lay out the evolutionary process from the first so-called "Taleban" groups that emerged in northern Nigeria at the turn of the millennium to the latter two distinct phases of Boko Haram. The first phase ended in 2009 with the arrest and extra-judicial killing of Boko Haram leader Mohammed Yusuf. The current phase (which I call Boko Haram II) started with a well-planned attack on the Maiduguri prison in September 2010 that freed hundreds of prisoners and has so far culminated in the multiple bomb attacks on Christmas Day 2011 against churches and Christian worshippers, and the January 2012 bomb attacks on police stations and other government buildings in Kano. It should also be noted that the most recent Boko Haram attacks have taken place in a Nigeria characterised by social protests and turmoil over the government's attempt to remove the fuel subsidy (resulting in dramatic increases in the price of fuel). This was clearly not popular and caused considerable social tension. However, this was tension between the people and the state, and not between different groups of people of the kind that Boko Haram tries to set in motion, i.e. the protests against rising oil prices were a social event that unified Nigerians across religious and ethnic divisions.

Boko Haram reborn?

The Boko Haram that has re-emerged from the ashes of the death of its original leader is better organised than its predecessors, but also more of an avant-garde organisation than the original Taleban groups and Yusuf's Boko Haram. Whereas the Taleban groups and the original Boko Haram focused on a combination of preaching, recruitment and violent resistance against the state, the strategy of Boko Haram II is the spectacular drama of hyper-violence. The aim is to create a situation where its high-profile

attacks provoke a combination of repression against Muslims and reprisal attacks against Muslims from the Christian population at large. The motivating belief for this approach is that as religious violence brings the Nigerian state to brink of anarchy, Boko Haram will emerge as the leadership of the Muslim masses.

Boko Haram II is clearly dangerous, but an even greater cause for concern is the emerging rumours of collusion between Boko Haram and various so-called "Big Men" in politics and the state apparatus. This is not evidence of key players embracing Boko Haram's ideology, but rather yet another sign of the extreme measures that some Nigerians are willing to use to gain power, position and wealth.

Northern Nigeria: traditional authority, religion and the state

When Nigeria achieved independence in 1960, the north was described by the outgoing British colonial administration as "The Giant in the Sun of immense potentialities", if only roads, bridges and power stations were built; young men were educated and trained; and factories were established. This may still be the case, but developments that have taken place since the turn of the millennium also suggest that this giant is awakening in a way not foreseen by the agents of British rule.

Indirect rule – the colonial legacy

When the architect of "indirect rule", Lord Lugard, gained full control of northern Nigeria after the fall of the Sokoto caliphate in 1903, his system of governance relied on alliances made with the representatives of the various emirates that existed there. These people and their children therefore came to represent the local elite, initially under British rule, but this did not change with the end of colonialism. Thus, despite its oil resources, Nigeria is ranked by the United Nations as one of the most unequal countries in the world, and nowhere is this more evident than in the north. There is a stark contrast between the north and south, but also within the north. Here there is a small, but rich

and well-connected elite, while the majority of the population lives in poverty, and most pathways to social mobility and progress are effectively blocked.

Islamic radicalism

There is a long tradition of Islamic radicalism in northern Nigeria, but this has traditionally been un-worldly, advocating a purer way of Islamic life. Young men inspired by charismatic preachers would withdraw into a communal existence of studying the Koran in isolation from society. Sometimes these groups would take to the streets in violent protests, but these were short-lived and never evolved into an organised armed struggle against the state and its local allies.

From the Taleban to Boko Haram II

This changed with the emergence of the Taleban groups. These were better organised and more coherent in their worldview, arguing for the establishment of an Islamic government in Nigeria, and were also mainly recruited among young men who had received some education, but could not fulfil their aspirations of finding a job. Even the name Boko Haram speaks to such experiences: in the local Hausa language it means "Western education is forbidden". Education in the Western sense is *haram* because it does not deliver anything that makes sense, and it represents a state and its traditional allies that only prey upon the Muslim masses of the north. As such, the emergence of these groups should be read as a reaction against a double betrayal by the state and traditional Muslim leaders of the youth of the north.

The initial Taleban groups were crushed by the Nigerian state in 2004, but Boko Haram, which had been established in Maiduguri in 2002, continued to exist. Its initial manifestation was mainly in the form of a religious complex, which included a mosque and an Islamic school, making it appear relatively harmless to the state. This continued until the group suddenly started

to carry out a series of attacks on police stations and government buildings in Maiduguri, leading to many deaths and eventually a response by the Nigerian government that ended with the capture and extrajudicial killing of the Boko Haram leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Most observers concluded that this was the end of the Boko Haram saga, as the initial movement had never shown any interest in aligning itself with other forces of resistance against the Nigerian state.

This was obviously not the case, and the question is how a movement declared dead could make such a spectacular comeback. There is still a lot that we do not know, but two competing stories are emerging. One suggests that it is caused by internal factors, whereas the second asserts that it is a consequence of external support and linkages.

Internal collusion: Boko Haram and Nigerian Big Men?

The first argument suggest that the re-emergence of Boko Haram is connected to one of the main fault lines in Nigerian politics — the north-south divide – and the bitter conflict over positions, power and money that this cleavage creates. This is not in essence a religious conflict, as it evolves around everything from access to land and political positions to the distribution of oil revenues. However, it also exists within state institutions (the police and the military included) and within political parties, including President Goodluck Jonathan's own party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In fact, Jonathan himself has warned against the presence of Boko Haram supporters in his government and the country's security agencies. The question is what these Big Men stand to gain from assisting Boko Haram. Nigeria is, however, a country where Big Men have long tried to manipulate violent discontent for their own selfish purposes. This happened during the struggles in the Niger Delta, and it cannot be ruled out that certain individuals and groups who felt that they lost a power struggle when Jonathan became the PDP flag bearer have an interest in undermining the legitimacy

of his presidency to make certain that he will not be allowed by the party to seek a second term. Thus, Boko Haram's spectacular comeback could be entirely home grown.

Boko Haram: externally supported?

The opposing argument places Boko Haram in a regional context, insisting that a network must be in place that facilitates the flow of finance, arms and training between Boko Haram, al-Shabaab of Somalia and al-Qaeda in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This cannot be ruled out, but certain critical questions should be asked in this regard. Firstly, there is little credible evidence that AQIM has managed to move so far south of the Sahara. Secondly, there are indeed rumours about Boko Haram activists travelling to al-Shabaab camps in Somalia to learn how to make bombs and other terrorist tactics, and some may have actually made this long and difficult journey. However, why travel across the continent to learn these things when there are plenty of former combatants in the Niger Delta who are increasingly disillusioned by the amnesty and rehabilitation packages

they have received and consequently may have few scruples about whom they share their expertise with as long as they get paid, even if they may have no appetite for Boko Haram's ideology?

Concluding remarks

Nigeria has not been brought to the brink of anarchy by Boko Haram, but it has clearly been shaken by recent events. The major question is how the Nigerian state should respond to the challenge this organisation and its activities represent. The state must react firmly, but also even-handedly. Targeting youth in the north as suspects will only strengthen Boko Haram. Ultimately, this organisation will only lose credibility if the state gains some, which means that any long-term solution to the problem must involve a developmental effort that reduces the inequality experienced by the youth of the north, and thus also their sense of alienation. Such an effort does not need to make people wealthy, but it must make it possible for them to believe that social progress within the framework of the Nigerian state is possible.

