

Power and Democracy in Northern Nigeria: Understanding Political Change

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Elizabeth Donnelly

Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to this Chatham House event on power and democracy in northern Nigeria. This event launches this research paper by Leena Koni Hoffmann, who was an ERANDA research fellow with the Africa Programme in 2013. My name is Lizzy Donnelly, I'm assistant head of the Africa Programme.

I would just like to welcome our speakers. As I said, Leena was a researcher with us last year. She's currently the Marie Curie Fellow at the Centre for Population, Poverty and Public Policy Studies in Luxembourg. She is the author of this paper. Her research focuses on Nigerian political history, neo-patrimonialism, cross-border trade in West Africa, post-colonial perspectives on African politics, and democratic politics and elections in Africa more broadly. She was a postgraduate teaching assistant at the Centre for West African Studies at the University of Birmingham between 2005 and 2007. Between 2001 and 2003, she was assistant superintendent of investigations for the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission in Abuja.

We are also joined today by Dr Abdul Raufu Mustapha. He is a lecturer in African politics at the University of Oxford. He is also a member of the editorial advisory group for the *Review of African Political Economy* and the board of trustees of the Development, Research and Project Centre in Kano, Nigeria. Raufu is the lead researcher on the Islam Research Project, funded by the Dutch Foreign Ministry. He previously also worked for the Working Group on Ethnic Minorities, the UN Commission on Human Rights, and the Project on Ethnic Structure and Public Sector Governance for the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development in Geneva.

Leena is going to talk for about 15 minutes, discussing the findings of her research and this report. Then Raufu, as respondent, will speak for another eight to ten minutes. Just a quick reminder, this meeting is on the record. Thank you. Over to you.

Leena Koni Hoffmann

Thank you, Lizzy. Thank you for coming. Early last year, I started working with Chatham House on a project that was focused on looking at the implications of changing politics and power relations in northern Nigeria on national unity and regional stability. Out of that has come this paper, which looks at the effects of democratization and pacted politics on northern Nigeria and the wider governance challenges of the region.

The intention of this paper was to provide some background and some context for the transformations we have been seeing in the north of Nigeria over the past decade and a half. For a region that has never really attracted this scale of interest, particularly the current focus on insurgency violence in the north of the country, we think it's particularly necessary to put the cacophony of demands rising out of the region and the mesh of contentions for influence, inclusion, opportunity and representation within a suitable frame. This is particularly important because we have in the past few months and weeks even seen a breathtaking surge in the violence in the north. This has only added to anxieties over the condition Nigeria will be in when it holds its next election in about seven months.

Many of the frustrations and the fractures in regional and religious relations that were manifested in riots and protests across the north after the last presidential election in 2011 still remain, and seem to have

deepened and widened over the past three years. There is still widespread frustration in the north with the lack of democratic dividends, especially as living conditions for most northerners have worsened quite dramatically. There is a general sense that with each electoral cycle, the government has seemed to move further and further away from the people. So in this report, we highlight the fact that 16 out of the 19 northern states have seen their rates of poverty double since the 1980s. Despite Nigeria's new status as the biggest economy in Africa, the gap between Nigeria's economic growth and social welfare indicators has widened considerably, especially for northerners.

This report argues that despite the north's big development challenges and worsening security, the region's political leaders have conflated demands for more economic opportunities and better democratic representation with demands for presidential power to be returned to the north. So in place of a consolidation of democracy, Nigeria has experienced more of a consolidation of the issue of power rotation. The failure of northern leaders to control presidential power for even a single term since Nigeria returned to democracy has caused frustrations in their political strategies and strongly defined Nigeria's political discourses and experiences for the past 15 years.

Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 is an important departure point for this report because the shift of presidential power from northern to southern Nigeria altered Nigeria's regional relations in quite significant ways. For much of Nigeria's political history, northern-dominated political networks have been more successful at controlling national power. This success was a product of a very practical kind of politics that was demonstrated in a greater willingness to bargain and accommodate the interests and agendas of influential people from the middle belt and from the south of the country. However, the greater influence that northern leaders have had on national affairs in Nigeria has historically caused tensions between the north and the south, and was a foremost issue when Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999.

Over the course of Nigeria's 15 years of democratizing, the report highlights the succession of elite pacts that have been used to manage the balance of power between Nigeria's regions, and questions their long-term effectiveness. It argues that although the retention of presidential power in the south of the country has integrated a greater number of southern elites into national networks of power, it has failed to produce an effective and a popular framework for how political power, national resources and revenue ought to be distributed between Nigeria's diverse regions. So in quite significant and tangible ways, Nigeria's return to civilian rule complicated rather than resolved many of the sticking points in its politics.

A significant issue that remains unresolved is the different paces at which the north and south are developing – and you can add to that now, democratizing. So now Nigeria's political processes are being dominated by debates over the rightness of power rotation and not by important issues of strengthening democratic institutions or improving the decision-making processes of political parties. We have south-south elites arguing that it's their turn to hold on to power for at least two presidential terms, the way the southwest did, and northern elites saying they haven't had a proper go yet.

At the regional level, this report looks at how northern leaders have reacted to their loss of power at the centre. It argues that some northern actors attach their political agendas and strategies to demands for a greater role for shari'a law, and these demands have remained under the surface of northern society for many decades. However, the adoption of shari'a criminal law in 12 northern states fell below the popular expectations of many of those who welcomed its return. There was a sense that the issue of expanding shari'a law was politically manipulated. This was not only in the way the law was implemented but in the degree of caution that was shown by the then Obasanjo government in challenging its constitutionality and conformity with international human rights law.

Yet after shari'a was expanded from Zamfara to Borno, as poverty, social injustice and unemployment got worse, people's confidence in the political leadership and in the quality of representation they were getting weakened. Growing distrust towards governments, a lack of government presence and severe underdevelopment opened up the north's social space for extreme religious ideologies to be seeded and for older ones to be revived. So this report argues that it is this context that has contributed to the resilience of the Boko Haram threat.

This report also stresses that the Boko Haram insurgency is a home-grown problem, despite its regional and international dimensions. It will be an uphill task for the federal government to contain the insurgency without addressing its own significant competency and legitimacy gap at the local level. Nigeria's security forces cannot go around the need to prioritize local expectations of justice.

This report also highlights the substantial capacity of state governors to make concrete and visible changes at the state level. Although the federal allocations being given to northern governors are about 50 per cent of what goes to the oil-rich Niger Delta, the federal revenue that has gone to the north in the past 15 years is the most the region has ever received. So this makes for very big expectations of northern governors to make substantive investments in infrastructure, in education and job creation. This report argues that many in the north feel that the poor performance of state and local governments in these areas has contributed to democracy's weak consolidation in the region.

In this report, we also say that northern leaders have again invested too much of their energies over the past 15 years in challenging the fairness of the current formula of revenue allocation, which gives 13 per cent of oil revenues to the oil-producing states, according to the derivation principle. There has been less of a concentration of effort on the part of the northern governors on real initiatives to revive the region's economy and encourage new sources of income.

So in terms of governance challenges, the north's political leadership have failed to adjust their priorities in a way that reflects an understanding of their capacities and the importance of meeting the needs of their populations. Too much of the very little political leverage the north had when Nigeria returned to democracy was expended on wrangling with southern elites over oil revenues and on regaining the presidency. Precious little has been spent on addressing the region's actual development challenges.

In this discussion of the role of state governors, this report points to the 19 northern governors who will be inaugurated in May of next year as the key state actors that will have a longer-term role in addressing the region's development challenges. Only seven of the current governors are eligible for re-election next year so this will be the biggest turnover of governors the region has had since 1999. So the new and second-term governors will be responsible for implementing the kind of ambitious and long-term solutions the region needs.

In the report we also highlight the various state and regional-level alliances that, if properly focused, can work more productively with the federal government, and coordinate and implement solutions to the region's common problems with unemployment, low literacy and poor health and social services.

Probably a few more points that I would have wished we had greater breadth to look at in the report – I'll just mention these as I conclude – are the points about the north's really immense capacity to move itself away from the current status quo. This capacity is in the region's agricultural potential, human capital potential and the mineral resources in the region, as well as a foundational sense of cohesion that if brought together can form the basis of a revived economy for the region.

I want to just highlight these by showing a few photos. I think the first slide is titled 'Faces and Places in Northern Nigeria'. I took these early this year at the National Archives in Kaduna. I think a lot of you will be familiar with this place. They're just on the corridor.

The next one is titled 'Made in Nigeria'. I think these were produced sometime between 1963 and 1966, when it was then the Northern Region and you had Sir Ahmadu Bello as the premier of the region. I really found these very interesting and very moving, because besides you've got pictures of – I think there's a brewery somewhere, a perfume factory, and I think you've got the Kaduna textile mill. Apparently at the time the mill was producing about 350 million yards of fabric a year. So you see huge capacity. It was a region that seemed to be transforming on its own terms, probably not at the same pace as the south but definitely transforming on its own terms.

I think the next slide is titled 'Rapid Social Development in Northern Nigeria'. You've got some home-ec women doing a course at the agricultural school, and the nurses training school in Kaduna somewhere there. An interesting fact that I found out from one of the photos there is that Africa's first flying doctor service was opened in Northern Nigeria. I didn't know that.

I'll just read a bit of the text from – it's the same text as repeated through all the posters. I think it captures something of the sense of, as much as this was an aspirational time for the region as well but you do see development. You see a region who had a certain understanding of its capacity. This is some of the text from the posters: 'In Northern Nigeria, the system of modern parliamentary democracy is strengthened by the oldest and most efficient local government system in Africa. This ensures a high degree of order and stability, for which the region is noted and which makes it so safe for foreign investors. It has made possible rapid strides taken in economic expansion in recent years, as the confidence which the outside world has in Northern Nigeria finds concrete expression in the form of private investments, grants, loans and various forms of economic help and cooperation'.

After a big description about the topography, it goes on to say this: 'Here live the Hausa, the Fulani, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv, Yoruba and a host of smaller tribes – all different and yet united as one people with a common purpose and a common destiny. A warm and a friendly people in a warm and a friendly land'.

Thank you for listening.

Elizabeth Donnelly

Thank you very much indeed, Leena, and congratulations on your publication. Thank you for a really good summary and actually laying out the frustrations on the one hand of the elite, the politicians, in their efforts to balance power, but certainly each with their own view of how that should work and what their interests are. And then on the other hand, frustrations that you see in the social space and what that is doing in terms of providing opportunities for these radical ideologies to take root.

One of the things that really drew us to this project and that drove us to apply for this ERANDA Foundation funding for it was that we saw that increasingly decision-makers were grappling with complex crises emanating from the north. It was really an effort to bring more nuanced information to discussions, particularly around security, and provide a broader view of the northern Nigerian context in light of discussions, particularly within Nigeria, that you see – especially this year, as Nigeria celebrates its centenary of national unity.

Raufu, I'd like for you to respond now, please, to Leena's report. Thank you.

Abdul Raufu Mustapha

Thank you very much, Leena. Your little slideshow, I couldn't see it, but from what you read, it's almost an alternative Nigeria that has disappeared for a long time. This kind of nostalgia helps us to even see more clearly the dilemma we are in now.

Leena's report, I found very interesting. I completely agree with the political judgment that she has to exercise all along. So I think the politics of it is very good. I think also the style is very engaging, very direct. So those are the two main things I liked about the report. I think it does give us a good handle to try to understand some of the dilemmas facing the politicians and the public policy people in northern Nigeria, and Nigeria more generally. So in that sense I think it's a very useful contribution to grappling with these very challenging times we have.

The issues I'd like to raise, in a sense they are somewhat outside of the remit of what she set out to do. But they are nevertheless related to it and I think they help us to better appreciate what you are trying to do.

The first is to try to tie up all the individual issues that were raised and the judgment that was correctly passed on them into a trend. I think that sense of trend is missing. That actually is very important because it tells you – you tell us northern politicians feel threatened and marginalized but we don't quite know why and where it's coming from. The impression one gets is that somehow that comes from 1999. Actually it goes well before then. So that's the whole purpose of – if you put a kind of trend analysis into what you've done, we will begin to appreciate that 1999 was just another chapter in a long-run process. We will begin to understand Boko Haram and religious extremism not just in terms of rising poverty, which is true, but also another long-run process of religious reform.

Then we can understand also – you seem to place a lot of expectation on northern governors as a solution. I don't think that's going to be quite an appropriate strategy. So trying to understand the trends, it seems to me to be important in pointing us in the direction we need to go by way of solutions.

That means we must understand, for instance, why northern elites put so much stock on political power. It's not just a cultural thing coming from the caliphate system and the exercise and the learning the mechanics of power in that context. It's also, if you like, almost a rational response to a federation in which they were going to be at a disadvantage unless they found a lever that they could control. They didn't have the educated people to run the bureaucracies, they didn't have the economic power, they didn't have the infrastructure – but they had the population. It was logical in the 1940s and 1950s to try to convert that population size into political power, which was what they did.

For most of the history of the north in that period, the political elite was conscious of the need to use that power to better the region. But after the coup in 1966 there was a disjuncture in the north. The political elite kept on trying to hold on to that power but no longer for a collective common good, but for a narrower class of individuals. That's where the problem comes, essentially.

So if northerners today feel marginalized and alienated from political power, it's partly because the one thing they could conceivably hold on to in that federation is slipping away. It's slipping away in the context in which you have 7 per cent growth over 10 years, you have all sorts of foreign direct investment,

and all of it concentrated in one part of the country, as you very rightly pointed out. So economic power, infrastructure, everything that matters – and political power now will move that way. I think that is the context in which some of the sense of anxiety comes. I think you need to put it in that historical trend context to be able to appreciate it. It's not just that people are being hungry for power – no doubt some of them are, but there is a deeply felt sense of lacking nothing in a context in which these groups still matter.

That brings me also to the issue of the trends in extreme religious. You tie it very correctly to poverty, current poverty, and I think that's true. Poverty has escalated massively in the north, particularly among the youth, along with unemployment. But the fact is that religious extremism has been there in the north at least since the 1970s. People try to outbid each other in terms of their religious credentials, trying to not just say they stand for a particular idea – which is fair enough, because there is religious freedom presumably – but somehow it's not enough to say that my religious ideas are important: I have to destroy your own. It's that sense of intolerance which I think predates 1999 and has been there.

What this means, for instance, is that poverty alleviation alone is not going to solve the problem of religious extremism in the north. There has to be an internal debate amongst Muslims about religion, about civics, about civic rights of people. I think we lose that if we focus too much on the poverty.

When you talk about the northern governors, all the important levers of Nigerian society, they don't control them. They control a lot of money, they can make a difference, but issues of security, electricity, transport infrastructure, agriculture, tariffs – all the key things. So we cannot expect too much from these governors. They will be able to do some things.

What we need is a much more comprehensive strategy, including the federal government, the international partners, the northern governments, the communities, to try and shift those northern communities away from the path in which they are set now. With respect to the issue of religious extremism, I think it's slightly a domestic debate amongst Muslims that needs to be encouraged.

So my major thing that I would have liked to see is this trend, historical analysis, to join up the dots that you so well articulate in different potted plants, as it were.

I have two very quick things to point out by way of conclusion. You pointed out that the agricultural transformation agenda – agriculture is growing in Nigeria. They are taking a number of innovative approaches to agricultural issues. You seem to be complaining that not enough resources have been put into agriculture. Actually, that's a problem, yes. The more important problem from the point of view of the north, in my view, is that the strategy of agricultural development that has been promoted is premised on disengaging the peasantry from agricultural resources and concentrating these resources in the hands of those they think – they say agriculture is no longer a way of life, it's a business. So foreign interests, domestic interests, there are about 20 or 25 of them (I don't have the list here) who have massive investments in agriculture. It basically means taking the peasants away from the land and turning this land over, which means this current agricultural strategy is actually likely to lead to more problems, not less, in the north.

Finally, a lot has been going on in the National Conference which relates directly to what you are trying to say. I don't know when you did the paper but clearly I think this is an opportunity missed, in terms of what's happening at the National Conference. It's just more of the same. There could have been an opportunity where some of these things could have been addressed. Thank you.

Elizabeth Donnelly

Thank you very much, Raufu. I'll now open it up for questions.