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## **NIGERIA'S BLOODY VALENTINE: BOKO HARAM'S ELECTORAL OPPORTUNITY**

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### **Summary**

Nigeria is scheduled to go to the polls for the fifth time since its 1998-99 transition to civilian rule on 14 February. Hailed as the closest race in those sixteen years, the election nevertheless looks likely to secure a new term for President Goodluck Jonathan and his People's Democratic Party (PDP), which has dominated Nigerian politics since the transition. Contrary to government losses on the battlefield, the disastrous war with local jihadist group Boko Haram that Jonathan's regime has waged since 2009 may be a significant contributory factor to the incumbent's chances of electoral victory. That may be just how Boko Haram wants it as Nigeria and its neighbours slide towards a wider conflict. To reverse its collapsing authority in the northeast, the next Nigerian government will need to be far more ambitious about its relationship with the whole of Nigerian society, spreading the gains of its new middle income status to all citizens as well as reforming its hollow armed forces.

### **Conflict dynamics**

Nearly two years since Jonathan declared a state of emergency in Nigeria's three north-eastern states (Borno, Yobe and Adamawa), the insurgency has laid waste to much of Borno and now controls 20 of the state's 27 local government areas, including several large towns and most of the countryside. Working from the casualty (military, militant and civilian) estimates of [Nigeria Watch](#), a casualty-recording NGO, some 18,000 lives have been claimed by the conflict since July 2009, including 15,000 since the May 2013 emergency. Since last March, this number has averaged well over 1,000 per month. According to the [Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre](#), an estimated 1.65 million Nigerians have been displaced by the conflict, most of them to regional urban centres like Maiduguri, which remain acutely vulnerable to attack. A similar number of civilians may now be living under Boko Haram's rule.

Essentially an urban guerrilla force in 2009-2013, conducting improvised bombings and assassinations from the back of motorbikes, Boko Haram has developed rapidly to field potent guerrilla and conventional forces capable of seizing and holding territory, launching mass attacks deep into well-guarded cities, and abducting hundreds of civilians in single raids. Estimates of its manpower extend into the tens of thousands. Its arsenal ranges from armoured vehicles and heavy artillery captured from the Nigerian military to schoolgirls strapped with explosives. Evidence from the battlefield shows a sophisticated use of psychological operations, terror tactics and high mobility warfare.

The Nigerian military, by contrast, is demoralised and often outgunned by the insurgents. Lower ranks complain of the 'editing' of their pay and benefits by officers and the failure of the defence ministry to provide them with sufficient ammunition, air support, armoured vehicles,

protective equipment, communications or warning of attack. In most cases where Boko Haram has captured towns and territory, the Nigerian army has fled combat. At least 71 servicemen, mostly from the Special Forces battalion, have been [sentenced to death for mutiny](#) since 2014, with hundreds more awaiting court martial. Vigilante militia crudely armed and organised as a [Civilian Joint Task Force](#) have often proven more effective in resisting Boko Haram's advance. Indeed, the brutal actions of the Nigerian security forces are often cited as a major accelerant of the conflict, targeting civilians, destroying farms and businesses, detaining wives and children of militants, and conducting extra-judicial executions. Murdering Boko Haram's founder, [Mohammed Yusuf](#), in custody in 2009 was particularly aggravating to his supporters.

Since the end of the 2014 rainy season, Boko's strategy has clearly been to control territory around the periphery of Borno, tightening a siege on Maiduguri, the regional capital of up to two million people. Boko Haram advances since August have secured control of three of the four main roads into Maiduguri and the fourth – the western link through Damaturu – has come under repeated attack since December. Twice since 25 January, Boko Haram has attempted a final assault on Maiduguri. It appears that the group's objective is to capture all of Borno ahead of the general election.

## **Boko Brings Back Jonathan?**

If Boko Haram's campaign has escalated in the six months ahead of the polls, it should not be assumed that the group is seeking to prevent the election from going ahead. Far from it, although polling does present the group with a breadth of targets on which to vent its contempt for democratic practice. The election, and the conflict-induced disruption of society in the northeast, presents an ideal opportunity for the group to stoke grievances that the Islamic north of Nigeria is being marginalised by southern political and business elites.

Since 1999, Nigerian 'democracy' has rested on an implicit bargain within the PDP that the presidency would alternate every other term (i.e. eight years) between Christian and Muslim candidates. This worked up until May 2010, when Muslim President Umaru Yar'Adua died three years into his term. Constitutional succession by his deputy, a Christian Ijaw from the Niger Delta state of Bayelsa, was relatively uncontroversial but many northerners felt that Goodluck Jonathan should not have sought re-election in 2011, let alone in 2015. Jonathan's presidency has alienated most of the PDP's dwindling northern support base and led dozens of PDP MPs to defect to the opposition since late 2013.

While the main opposition parties have consolidated into the All Progressives Congress (APC) since 2013, they face an uphill struggle against the presidential incumbent. APC candidate Maj-Gen Muhammadu Buhari is a northerner (a Muslim Fulani from Katsina state) with a reputation for imposing discipline and opposing corruption from his 1983-85 term as military president. He is also a serial runner-up of presidential elections in 2003, 2007 and 2011, never exceeding 32% support.

Buhari's great challenge in 2015 is not so much to rally the northern vote – Jonathan is already highly unpopular there – as to secure the vote there and in the mixed Muslim-Christian Middle Belt states. About 2% of all Nigerians are currently displaced and most will not have the opportunity to vote. These are overwhelmingly from the northeast and eastern Middle Belt, although not all are Muslims. Millions more potential voters in Borno and across the north run

the risk of attack by Boko Haram if they do go to polling stations on 14 February, if those polling stations even open. Those in territory controlled by Boko Haram will have no say. With the state still struggling in early February to distribute new biometric voter identification cards across Nigeria, millions more could be disenfranchised, or the polls postponed.

All this points to [a disputed and violent electoral period](#) and, most likely, another four years for President Jonathan. The precedent of 2011, when Buhari refused to recognise his own defeat and hundreds died in protests, rioting and inter-communal violence, is not encouraging for a close race in 2015. Such a result is likely to polarise further the divisions between north and south of Nigeria, stoking the violent grievances on which Boko Haram feeds. At worst, this could be the opportunity for Boko Haram to break out of the relatively remote Kanuri-populated northeast and generalise its campaign among the far more populous Hausa-Fulani north and northwest.

## Nigeria's Withering Military

Part of the dissatisfaction in northern Nigeria with the post-transition balance of power stems from the particular nature of the Nigerian Armed Forces as a political and economic actor. The Yoruba-dominated South-West, particularly the coastal megacity of Lagos, is the industrial, service and agricultural dynamo of the economy, while oil production from the Niger Delta funds 70% of the federal budget and the Igbo-dominated South-East region is Nigeria's internal trading hub. The 2004-14 oil price boom, inward investment and the growth of Lagos have hugely consolidated wealth and economic growth in the south, which is now on average (with large variations) three times richer than the north.

Between 1966 and 1999, northern consolation came from the political domination of the army, increasingly under the sway of northern senior officers. The nature of Nigerian petro-federalism, and a high degree of institutional corruption, meant that the military-in-power was a vector for redistribution of oil wealth to northern elites. The post-1999 settlement has thus seen southern Nigeria consolidate control of the Nigerian polity as well as the economy, while the position of the army and the northern military elite has gradually waned. While Jonathan belatedly brought a number of northern Muslims, including defence minister Lt Gen (retd.) Aliyu Gusau, into his cabinet in 2014, and Chief of Defence Staff ACM Alex Badeh is from the Boko Haram-raided north of Adamawa state, none of the current service chiefs are Muslims.

One of the perverse consequences of Nigeria's history of military rule has been the starving of the armed forces – by military as much as civilian rulers – of funding, ammunition and equipment, lest they use them against the state. As one Nigerian Air Force officer put it, “Yes, we have fighter jets, but it would be irresponsible to base them near the presidential palace.” Often seen abroad as a militarised society, Nigeria in fact has a small military (estimates, never official, range below 100,000) relative to its huge population of over 170 million and a [military budget](#) usually well under 1% of GDP. The oft-quoted figure of \$6 billion in security spending for 2014 is misleading. Only about one-third of this (under 0.4% of GDP) actually goes to the armed forces; most goes to the much larger police and security services. In 2014, the Bonn International Centre for Conversion's [Global Militarisation Index](#) ranked Nigeria 133 of 151 countries in terms of militarisation, making it easily the world's least militarised large state.

Put simply, Nigeria deliberately spends too little on its armed forces for them to operate credibly. And what it does spend is often squandered through corruption – arguably a

deliberate policy to secure the allegiance of senior officers – and the prioritisation of procurement and training to fight the country’s last war, the c.2004-2009 Niger Delta insurgency. The best trained and equipped troops are deployed abroad on UN-funded peacekeeping operations or in the Delta, ostensibly protecting oil production, where at least the temptation to collude with oil smugglers (‘bunkering’) must be as strong for officers as for politicians. The Navy continues to take delivery of sophisticated new ships while army and air force assets rot. Little is invested in maintaining high-tech equipment or training troops to respect or protect civilians. In consequence, the command is continually surprised by highly visible Boko Haram column movements and troops prefer to use burnt earth tactics to destroy territory and livelihoods rather than to protect them.

Equally remarkable is what meagre resources the Nigerian state mobilises overall. Over 20% of total expenditure may be on the security sector, but this percentage is high because the federal budget is so small. The [2014 budget](#) is only about 6% of national income, of which about two-thirds comes from oil revenues. The West African average is three or four times higher; European states typically control about half of their economic output. This points to two factors that exacerbate alienation. First, Nigerians pay almost nothing in tax to their government; the government is thus not dependent on their goodwill. Second, the state would spend very little on its citizens’ welfare, even if corruption did not intervene; the people depend on the government for very little. Thus, Nigeria’s social contract is extraordinarily weak. In 2015 the plunge in oil prices and revenues will further undermine this relationship and the state’s ability to fund development, not least in the north.

## Whither Chad?

Not surprisingly, the Nigerian military has been grasping for new weapons and allies as the insurgency has spiralled beyond its control. This has been a humiliating experience for a country that sees itself as a major exporter of security through its UN, African Union and regional peacekeeping commitments and whose economy was only confirmed in April as the continent’s largest. Bringing 2,500 UN peacekeepers home from Liberia and Darfur is one [mooted option](#). As in August 2013, when Nigeria rapidly redeployed its peacekeepers and aircraft from Mali, this would be a headache for the UN, especially in Liberia, where Nigeria’s two battalions represent one-third of UNMIL’s strength.

Securing new weapons has also been frustrating. Reasonably citing concerns about targeting civilians and Nigeria’s ability to operate and maintain sophisticated weapons systems, the United States has [forbidden re-export from Israel](#) of Bell AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters. Continental rival South Africa has intercepted multi-million dollar cash consignments from Nigeria ostensibly for ammunition. China and Russia are now Nigeria’s major suppliers, with Israel, Pakistan, Italy, Singapore and various Soviet-surplus suppliers. China or Pakistan appear to have helped Nigeria become Africa’s first operator of armed drones. What looks like a [crashed CASC CH-3](#) (or its Pakistani equivalent, the NESCOM Burraq) armed with guided missiles was photographed outside Maiduguri in late January. Israel supplied unarmed Aerostar drones in 2007, all of which are reportedly now inoperable. Almost one-quarter of Nigeria’s few, aged attack aircraft and helicopters have been lost to mechanical or pilot error since mid-2013.

After decades of neglect, Nigeria is thus probably over-optimistic of its ability to bring new equipment into effective service in the short term. Retraining its forces – [suspended with US Special Operations Forces](#), [continuing with Russians](#) – will also take time. Running out of options, it has been persuaded by the African Union to seek the more active military assistance of its neighbours, Chad, Cameroon, Niger and Benin in a Multinational Joint Task Force. The latter two neighbours have little realistic to offer Nigeria and Cameroon's French-trained forces are occupied (relatively effectively) in combating Boko Haram on their own territory. Chad, then, is the pivotal new player, with relatively large armed forces equipped and experienced in combating mobile insurgents in arid Sahelian conditions. Indeed, in the 1980s it was the Chadian army that invented the Toyota 'technical' battle wagon that now defines modern insurgency. Its army and air force began attacking Boko Haram-held territory in northern Borno state from Niger and Cameroon on 28 January.

Many questions have been asked in Nigeria about the Chadian desire to confront Boko Haram. A swathe of Chadian territory, including its capital N'djamena, is within 50km of the Boko-held Borno-Cameroon border. Despite frequent reports of Chadian and Nigerien citizens fighting for Boko Haram in Nigeria, why has the group not targeted Chad or Niger? Indeed, how has Chad managed to avoid attack by Saharan jihadist groups destabilising Mali, Niger and Libya? To what extent is Boko Haram plugged into the trafficking economy of the Nigeria/Cameroon/Chad borderlands? How and why did Chadian President Idriss Déby negotiate a [phantom ceasefire](#) in October with an impostor Boko Haram commander? To what extent is the Chadian military independent of the French military, whose regional influence Nigeria traditionally opposes? France has a potent permanent air base in N'djamena, [reinforced in 2014](#) by attack and reconnaissance aircraft from the UK and US. If France has defence agreements with Cameroon, Chad and Niger, to what extent is it, too, at war with Boko Haram? Would an attack across the Chari River (Cameroon-Chad border) cross a French red line?

## Negotiating with Boko Haram

Part of the answer to some of these questions lies in the nature of Boko Haram and its (fairly inarticulate) political agenda. Comparisons to the Islamic State or al-Qaida are unhelpful. Boko Haram is a distinctly Nigerian group with seemingly limited ambitions even in its Kanuri-populated Lake Chad basin neighbours. Its current ideology – as espoused by post-2009 leader Abubakar Shekau, who differs greatly from the reformist preaching of founder Yusuf – is more apocalyptic than Salafist. While Shekau speaks of establishing a Caliphate, he is clear that this is not an exclave of the Levantine Islamic State and that he has no intention of subordinating himself to Arab leadership. Unlike Arab jihadist groups, Boko Haram has no strong agenda around the corruption of Gulf monarchies or the occupation of Palestine. It is rhetorically but not actively anti-western, as witnessed by its apparent indifference (so far) to French and other potential targets in Chad and Niger. Kidnappings of Europeans and Chinese appear to have been purely for ransom payments.

Thus far, Boko Haram has used its presence in Cameroon, Niger and Chad essentially to avoid and outflank the Nigerian security forces and raise funds, attacking Cameroonian government targets only when that state tried to push it out late last year. It seems to want to control Borno state, but how far do its ambitions extend? The historic boundaries of the Kanuri-speaking Kanem-Borno Empire around Lake Chad? All of northern Nigeria? All of Nigeria? A wider

caliphate of the Islamic Sahel? Its response to the Valentine's Day elections and the Chadian intervention may provide greater insight.

For now, Boko Haram is not making any political demands and it is hard to imagine negotiations with Shekau. He seems driven by revenge in response to Yusuf's murder and the imprisonment of his own family and a violent desire to purge society for its corruption and complicity. As such, his targets are very much Nigerian. Shekau's bloodlust makes for excellent political theatre, but it is not clear to what extent he does control Boko Haram ideologically or militarily nor whether the group's Shura council harbours more measured strategists. There is certainly a deep well of social, economic and political discontent that fuels the recruitment and radicalisation of many young men and women in its ranks that could be tackled if other voices were heard.

Aware of its military shortcomings, Abuja is not entirely deaf to such opportunities, as witnessed by its enthusiastic reaction to the bogus ceasefire negotiations in Chad last year. Jonathan's new National Security Advisor Col (ret'd) Sambo Dasuki – a close relation of Nigeria's most senior Islamic leader, the Sultan of Sokoto – [launched a nuanced counter-terrorism strategy](#) in March 2014, incorporating an all-of-government approach to providing development, jobs and deradicalisation programmes in the north. Escalation of the military conflict and the campaign exigencies of the 2015 elections have ensured that Dasuki's 'soft' strategy has been steadily squeezed out over the ensuing year.

Countering the challenge of Boko Haram will take far more than military means, whether Nigerian, Chadian or French. Indeed, the military weakness of the state, as well as its disregard for human rights and life, is symptomatic of the defining crisis of state-society relations in Nigeria. In order to win back the northeast, physically and psychologically, the next Nigerian government will need to be far more ambitious in its relations with its people, including in redistributing wealth and opportunity from south to north. This will not be easy in a climate of austerity and a culture of individualism but the threat to Africa's would-be-superpower is increasingly real and existential.

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