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Is Nigeria a Failed State? A Commentary on the Boko Haram Insurgency

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Abstract- This paper examined the Boko Haram violence in northern Nigeria using the analytical lens of state failure through state-level analysis. It also stressed that the socioeconomic and political grievances in the North-Eastern region of Nigeria do not only contribute to the operational success of Boko Haram but also to the continuing inability of the Nigerian state to deal with the challenge to ensure national prosperity effectively. Having established that the current "sectarian" conflict in Nigeria is a factor of Nigeria state failure the government therefore needs to actively respond to the plight of its people. Increasing rates of poverty and unemployment should be seriously addressed and more attention needs to be accorded to security issues in the country. The government also needs to ensure adequate protection of domestic cultures and economies in the age of neo-liberal globalisation.

I. Introduction

With over 250 ethnic groups and a large Christian and Islamic presence, post-independence Nigeria has remained culturally, religiously and ethnically heterogeneous. This high level of diversity amongst its total population of over 190 million people (World Population Prospects, 2017), colonial history and its postcolonial social, economic and political problems and challenges have contributed to the conflicts and violence in parts of the mainly Muslim northern region. Thus, it seems that "the mention of Nigeria anywhere in the world increasingly stirs up images of poverty, crime, ethnoreligious violence, and terrorism." (Maiangwa & Uzodike, 2012:2). Undeniably, these ascriptions, especially present Boko Haram conflict, serve as a stratum that perpetually threatens to tear at the basic of Nigeria's stability, unity and prosperity as a nation. One of these conflicts, which this essay examines, is the Boko Haram-Nigeria conflict. Since 2009, Boko Haram has spearheaded many violent attacks in Nigeria. The attacks, which show evidence of increasing sophistication and coordination, are strategically targeted at Nigeria's ethno-religious fault lines as well as national security forces in a bid to hurt the nation's stability (Onuah&Eboh 2011:9). In particular, a wave of attacks against churches from December 2011 through July 2012 suggests a strategy of provocation through which the sect seeks to spark a large scale of sectarian conflict that will weaken the country's stability (Forest 2012: 15). It is in this light that this paper explains the terrorism of the Boko Haram group at the state level by establishing a linkage between it and the present condition of the Nigerian state – characterised by deficiencies and failures.

a) *Boko Haram: A Conceptualization*

The name Boko Haram is taken from a combination of the Hausa word "Boko" meaning book, and the Arabic word "Haram" meaning forbidden. Put together, Boko Haram literally means "Western education is forbidden" (Agbiboa, 2013:145). However, the sect has rejected this description in preference for "Western culture is forbidden." The variance, as one of the senior members of Boko Haram noted, is that "while the first suggest that we are against the formal education coming from the West . . . which is not true, the second assert our belief in the supremacy of Islamic culture (not education), for culture, is wider, it includes education but not resolute by Western education" (Onuoha 2012: 1–2). Boko Haram formally calls itself "Jama" atul Alhul Sunnah Lidda" watiwal Jihad" meaning "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad" (US Department of State June 21, 2012).

Muhammad Isa (2010:322) noted, "The term Boko Haram implies a sense of rejection and resistance to the imposition of Western education and its system of colonial social organisation, which replaced and degraded the earlier Islamic order of the jihadist state." Boko Haram's ideology is rooted in the profound tradition of Islamism and is but one of several variants of fundamental Islamism to have emerged in northern Nigeria. The sect is reportedly induced by the Koranic verse (TMQ 5: 44): "Anyone who is not governed by what Allah has revealed is among the transgressors" (cited in Thurston 2011). Boko Haram is strappingly against what it sees as a Western-based incursion that threatens traditional values, beliefs, and customs among Muslim communities in northern Nigeria. The Boko Haram group was led by Mohammed Yusuf until he was killed by Nigerian security forces just after the sectarian violence in Nigeria in July 2009, which caused over 1,000 deaths, now the present leader is Abubakar Shekau (Umar 2011:3).

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b) State Level Analysis: The Case Of Nigeria

A Nigerian poet, Chinua Achebe wrote that Nigeria "is an example of a country that has fallen down; it has collapsed" (Achebe, 1983:1). Whereas the Nigerian project has continued and has not really collapsed, such views are strengthened by certain problems in the country which reflect a form of state failure. Nigeria typifies a perfect example of a failing and a weak state that is fast gravitating towards a failed or collapsed state like Somalia and others. The existing works on state failure and its groups seem useful in this regard. According to Robert Rotberg, "nation-states fail because they can no longer deliver positive political goods to their people", and he listed these political goods to include education, healthcare, security, social infrastructure, employment opportunities, and the legal framework for law and order. As a result of this, the government loses its legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens. The state is therefore characterised by an intense and enduring violence, which is usually directed against the existing government (Rotberg 2002:85, 87). Nigeria obviously fits into this explicit narrative. Presently, Nigeria is ranked 14th on the Fragile State Index published annually by Foreign Policy (Foreign Policy, 2018). State failure in Nigeria has an unswerving connection with the state's high level of corruption, as Rotberg has rightly argued: "state failure is man-made and not merely accidental" (Rotberg 2002:93). Corruption seems to have a position in Nigeria as a political culture. State resources are commonly syphoned by political elites. Governments are irresponsible and irresponsive to the demands of the people. There are increasing rates of poverty and unemployment in the country. 54.7% of the nation's population lives in abject poverty according to the World Bank index (Forest, 2012). Therefore, there is general dissatisfaction in the country from a mass of unemployed youths. Non-state actors including religious and ethnic-tribal leaders often interfere to ameliorate the miseries of the people and thus enjoy total allegiance from them. These actors easily engage the masses, especially the youths, to promote their personal, political and economic benefits. They further exploit the porosity of the state's borders and general security deficiencies in the country to smuggle all manner of arms and ammunitions to cause chaos in the state for the promotion of their individual interests. This has driven Nigeria back to the Hobbesian state of nature in which life is "poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012, 32). Lately, Nigeria has become a theatre of war resulting from a series of ethnoreligious, ethnic-tribal and political conflicts that have left thousands of people dead – particularly in the Niger Delta and northern region of the country.

Furthermore, Ayegba cited in David, Asuelime, et al (2015:91) has argued that poverty and unemployment are the driving forces behind the insurgency in Nigeria. Further, in the study, Ayegba claimed that the high rate of youth unemployment has resulted in poverty and insecurity in the country (David, Asuelime, et al 2015:96). David et al. argued, "socio-economic indices such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, economic underdevelopment, low education, inter alia, underlie the emergence and persistence of Boko Haram terrorism."(David, Asuelime, et al, 2015:83).The theory of relative deprivation explains that when people feel deprived of something they are expected to have, they become discontent, hence could use violence to express their grievances (Parida, 2015:130-131). Ted Gurr (1970) in his book "Why Men Rebel" argues that people become dissatisfied if they feel they have less than they should and could have. Over time, such dissatisfaction leads to frustration and then rebellion against the (real or perceived) source of their deprivation. Outlining in his studies of relative deprivation and conflict in Northern Ireland, Barrel (1972: 317) contends that group tensions develop from a discrepancy between the "ought" and the "is" of collective value satisfaction. Likewise, Davies (1962) maintains that the occasion of political violence is due to the insupportable gap between what people want and what they get; the difference between expectations and gratifications: "this discrepancy is a frustrating experience that is sufficiently intense and focused to result in either rebellion or revolution" (Davies 1962: 5) and these group dissatisfaction can be ascribe to state failure. It is within this perspective that the Boko Haram terrorism can be accurately understood from the state level analysis.

It must be noted that the menace of Boko Haram thrives in the northern part of Nigeria, which has the highest rates of poverty and illiteracy in the country. Facts from the national office of statistics indicate that the North constantly topped the list of poverty rate at a regional level in the country between 1980 - 2010. Indeed, Charles Soludo, the former governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, raised the alarm that the steadily high rate of poverty in the country is a "northern phenomenon" and a "national crisis" that needed crucial attention. Supporting his argument with statistical facts, he maintained that eight out of the ten states with the highest rate of poverty in the country in 2008 were from the northern regions and that poverty in some of the northern states was as high as 95% (Soludo cited in Business Tribune 2008:7). Majority of members of the Boko Haram sect are motivated by monetary benefits, drawing from the fact that most of its members are unemployed youths (Onapajo & Uzodike 2012:31). The factor of widespread poverty and unemployment was also especially highlighted in the final report submitted by the Presidential Committee on the menace of the group to the government in September 2011. (Ikuomola, 2011).

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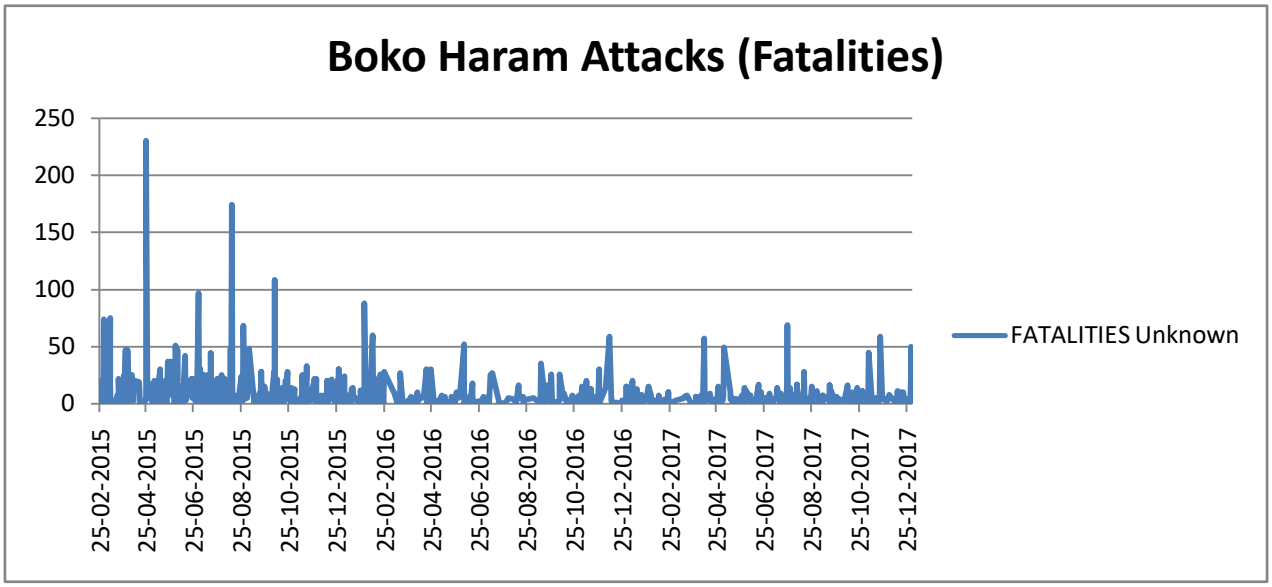
Also, Apart from poverty and inadequate security, the negligence of security officers and general impunity in the country are clearly significant factors that aid the activities of the sect. It was reported that there were a series of warnings and reports to the police and government of the imminent danger of the group by imams within its areas of operation, but there was no response to these warnings until the sect's major clash with security operatives in July 2009. Likewise, reports indicate that Mamman Nur, the mastermind behind the August 2011 attack on the UN building, and others in the sect were earlier arrested and released by the country's State Security Service (SSS) (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012:32).



Source: Global Terrorism Dataset, University of Maryland

Also, the Presidential Panel tasked to investigate the menace of Boko Haram admitted that "there was no effective and co-ordinated intelligence gathering and deployment to forestall crime" following the most recent attacks by the group (Ikuomola cited in Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012:32). The permeability of Nigeria's borders has also assisted in easy access to arms and ammunition used by the sect. An Islamic scholar, Sheik Mohammad Auwal Al-Bani, familiar with the operations of the group said that its members "load weapons on top of camel[s] in the name of grazing and enter Nigeria" from neighbouring countries including Chad and the Niger Republic (cited in Onapajo & Uzodike, 2012:33). In addition, thriving illegal bomb manufacturing in the country has also facilitated terrorism. For example, in September 2011 in Chechnya village, in a secluded part of the Tafa Local Government Area of Niger State, the SSS invaded a bomb-making factory that had a substantial connection with the group (Adisa&Usigbe, 2011:7). Also, a bomb-making industry was discovered in Rafi n Guza area of Kaduna state in April 2011 (Ibrahim, 2011:4). This is also coupled with the fact that the Nigerian legal system is slow in its prosecution of suspected terrorists and general criminal cases. It has been reported that more than 200 arrested members of the group are still being held in various prisons in the country, without trial. This is also somewhat informed by the general insecurity in the country. Overall, the Boko Haram attacks have become essential symbols of Nigeria's structural weakness and susceptibility. The sect has actually intensified and extended its activities to states outside of its operational base including Kano, Kaduna, Plateau, Bauchi, Gombe, and Abuja; the federal capital territory.

II. Conclusion

This paper has analysed the Boko Haram violence in northern Nigeria using the analytical lens of state failure through state-level analysis and also liked northern socioeconomic and political grievances not only to the operational success of Boko Haram but also to the continuing inability of the Nigerian state to deal with the challenge to ensure national prosperity effectively. Having established that the current "sectarian" conflict in Nigeria is a factor of Nigeria state failure thus the government needs to actively respond to the plight of its people. Increasing rates of poverty and unemployment should be seriously addressed. Some gravity also needs to be accorded to security issues in the country. The government also needs to ensure adequate protection of domestic cultures and economies in the age of neo-liberal globalisation.

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