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Radical Islam and ethno-religious conflict in Nigeria: from independence to Boko Haram

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Boko Haram challenges Nigeria's security as well as secularism

Nigeria is one of a number of African countries where security appears to have been an issue of concern for as long as most of us can remember. Although we can debate whether this is actually the case if coming from an internal Nigerian perspective, numerous and ongoing clashes between the Nigerian military and the radical Islamic group, Boko Haram (originally known as *Jama'atu Ahlissunnah lidda'awati wal Jihad*) are frequently reported to be taking place in the country. Indeed, for thousands of Nigerians in the city of Jos and surrounding Plateau State, attacks have become regular occurrence. Thousands of people in this part of Nigeria have been killed or forced out in ethnic and religious clashes that continue to challenge the country's secular order.

Further, Boko Haram's intensifying terror campaign in key regions of Nigeria continues to exacerbate already palpable ethno-religious tensions between the religious communities of the country. Even prior to the country gaining its independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, these tensions have continued to be framed in an asymmetrical Muslim versus Christian narrative. Initially manipulated by Nigeria's colonial masters and later exploited by the post-independence military authorities, such tensions have inevitably led communities and ethnic groups alike facing off against each other.

The understanding of the chain of events that have allowed Boko Haram to thrive within the Nigerian ethno-religious context is complex but essential if we are to position Boko Haram in the current Nigerian political Nigerian narrative. It is especially true in a country that comprises over four hundred ethnic groups, belonging to several religious communities and which carries the inheritance of years of colonial indirect rule that has done little to live up to Nigeria's motto of 'Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress'. The complexity of the ethnic and the religious constructs, often taking communal forms, is argued to have had a devastating effect on Nigeria's capacities to avoid political and socio-economic collapse from within.

Instead, it has created a fertile ground for radicalism to exploit Africa's second largest Muslim population after Egypt. It is against the backdrop of uncertainties and ethno-religious tensions that Boko Haram enters the fray of Nigerian affairs in which secularism is all but certain. The recent example of Mali is one indicator that under the right conditions, Boko Haram-like cells can quickly outgrow the state's capacity to effectively deal (or ignore the warnings of history) with the presence of these cells on their territory. Boko Haram taken within a continuum of historical events that have shaped Nigeria presents an effective manner to gauge the current state of play of Islam as a focal point for future debate.

The radicalization of Islam in Nigeria – how did it come about ?

Historically, two key events are central pillars of the role of Islam in the Nigerian northern communities, and in contemporary Nigeria in particular. The first one finds its roots in the *jihad* waged by 'Uthman Dan Fodio (c1754-1817), an Islamic scholar, whose reformist goal resulted in the creation in 1804 of the Sokoto (or Fulani) Caliphate, now the actual northern Nigeria. A quintessential characteristic of the First Caliphate was the application of *al-Shari'a* as a departure point from earlier 'Muslim and pagan' practices. It certainly does not mean that Islam was not present in those regions, but Uthman Dan Fodio pushed for a return to what he considered a pure form of Islam. The result was that by 1812 the remaining Hausa states (made up of several city-states) had now religiously but also politically united under the Islam probed by the Sokoto Caliphate.

The second event took place in 1903 after the Sokoto Caliphate was incorporated by the British into the colony of Nigeria. From a strictly Muslim perspective, the British colonial presence was significant in its effect on *shari'a* and traditional Islam through several colonial reforms, notably in the judiciary. As early as 1958, author James Coleman had already showed concerns for the danger of these reforms which he saw in the ethos of Indirect Rule of the British as having complicated the task of welding diverse elements into a Nigerian nation. Simply termed, a form of division to rule better set up by the British

would be replicated in the decades following independence in which population and regions would be compartmentalized along these "diverse elements" that form the rich historical ethno-religious structure of modern Nigeria. Moreover, it is commonly accepted that during the colonial period, the introduction of western style education with the adoption of English as *lingua franc*a in government and the use of Roman alphabet heralded the downfall of the *ulama* (Islamic scholars - plural of *al-alim* literally meaning 'man of knowledge'). The colonial policies meant that the *ulama* became marginalized and alienated from their once respected place in government, politics and *ipso facto* from having any input in the independence process.

The decades following independence became watershed years in Nigeria and for Islam in particular. During the 1960s and 1970s, the western educated Nigerian elite driven by modernizer sentiments became attracted to the secular ideas of the time (taking example on their Saudi and Egyptian counterparts) which by extension meant a challenge to the traditional society; as represented by the *ulama*. The colonial inheritance came to be symbolized by a deep ethnic and religious pluralism within its new parliamentary government. It is this pluralism that would be the foundation for the early signs of ethno-religious cleavages. Soon after independence and driven by ethno-religious confrontation, the country was unable to manage its ethnic groups and opted to divide the country in three regions representing the three main ethnic groups; Christian Ibos and Yorubas in the south-east and

south-west and the Muslim Fulanis-Hausas in the north.

Throughout the 1970s with the Second Republic and the 1980s with the Kaduna religious violence, political turmoil and regional violence coupled with military dictatorships served to push for the exacerbation of ethno-religious separatism sentiments and pushed religion at the forefront of political mobilization of public grievances. In a strictly forward looking way, the ethno-religious antagonism that has been built since independence underlines two key points that help create a parallel to contemporary Nigeria. The authors Falola and Iduh are very clear on these two points noting that (1) Political instability and the failure of the "military governments to institutionalize military rule or provide stable and functioning democracy" have [enhanced] the credibility of religious leaders", thus signaling the reemergence of the *ulama* as spiritual and traditional religious authority. (2) Nigerian federalism through state creation was a balancing act between the North and the South in which the idea of the state as the welding of cohesion in terms of national integration had failed.

The Christian-Muslim tensions of 1991 and 1992 that spanned across Bauchi, Kano and Katsnia states are telling examples of a situation in which Nigerian elites had manipulated religion in order to increase political gain but had failed to bring unity to the hundreds of ethnicities and major faiths in Nigeria. As a result, a fragile religious balance was challenged by a resurgence of post-independence grass-roots

fundamentalism, notably in a revival of a purely Nigerian Islam. In her book, Frans Wijsen insists that from independence until 1999 the peaceful cohabitation between Muslims and Christians had slowly disintegrated into a system of "religious confrontations [as being] just a cloak for political and economic grievances" in which the "political and military power was in the hands of the Hausa-Fulani leadership; economic and educational powers was in the hands of the Ibo and the Yoruba." It is with such backdrop that the dawn of the new millennium would see a complete overhaul of Islam within the Nigerian state apparatus.

In May 1999, Nigeria elected a former military, Olusegun Obasabjo (1999-2007), as its new President. The Fourth Republic was to usher the return to religious dialog but more importantly a return to peace. Obasanjo's aim was simple yet challenging. He proceeded to instate several measures aimed at ridding Nigeria's high-ranking military of politics-patronage and corruption in a system that for years had been led in majority by northern Muslims. while Islam as a political force has had an importance in Nigerian society and politics, it never attained the "Islam precipitated by the activities of such leading Islamic movements as the Muslim brotherhoods of Egypt, Sudan and Jordan." The impetus for these movements is described as having "eventually stimulated protests and the call for an alternative" which heralded the revival of political Islam in Nigeria

A new role for the Shari'a in Nigeria

The revival of the *ulama* took place in October 1999 when the Zamfara State Government introduced reforms by expanding the jurisdiction of the *shari'a.* The impetus for *shari'a* stemmed from pressure at the grassroots level rather than from the elites. In the days and months following the decision, the *shari'a* quickly spread to twelve Northern states in which the *ulama* acted as the population's legitimate religious voice and addressed the people's wishes to the elected officials. The reintroduction of the *shari'a* helped the *ulama* to regain public influence but most notably a once precious political influence by being able to join institutions in charge of implementing the *shari'a*. The resurgence of the *ulama* in the democratic arena was a strong indicator of the changes that were underway in Nigeria since 1999. In 2003, the effect of the new jurisdiction had brought the *ulama* and the Muslim organizations closer together and the *ulama*'s role was now slowly extending in the political spheres. Four years later in 2007, the *shari'a* debate appeared just a distant memory, but the secular nature of Nigeria was showing the marks that the country was indeed made up of two main religious camps that somehow would have to find a way to coexist peacefully.

The extension of *shari'a* in post-1999 Nigeria presents two issues that had a direct impact on Islam within Nigerian secularism:

(1) Religious identity and political Islam: The *shari'a* has for a long time been the alternate model of governance that preceded the arrival of the British. In the Nigerian Fourth Republic narrative, its use stemmed as a reaction toward the feeling of political distrust and the belief that under *shari'a*, authorities would be less corrupt, and restore the political and moral order. Throughout the decade following 1999, Nigerian Islam became embedded in politics, thus creating the ground for political Islam to flourish in the Northern states which due to the federal system of Nigeria had repercussions in the whole of the country. The nature of the Nigerian federal system and the fact that Northern states had adopted *shari'a* added fuel to the political-Islamic debate in states where religious distributions were often not in favor of certain ethnic groups.

(2) Challenging state secularism: The introduction of the *shari'a* has shaken the foundation of Nigerian secularism. In the post 1999 Nigeria, the ethno-religious conflict salience has been reframed in a Muslim and Christian narrative. Christians who for the great majority had been living in these regions for generations were now religious minorities and were the first to suffer from the religious character that was imbued in the application of the *shari'a*.

The role of Boko Haram in reviving the ideology of extremism

How does Boko Haram's ideology fit into the Islamic revival in Nigeria? The conditions inherited from colonial history were ripe for socio-economic uprisings. The previous attempts at imposing religious ideology in secular Nigeria had occurred before. The years of severe military dictatorships had done little to silence these movements were set on an orthodox Islamic renewal that have remained all but inexistent. The first reports of the Boko Haram are traced to 1995 when the group, then named *Ahlulsunna wal'jama'ah hijra,* was under the leadership of Abubakar Lawan who wanted to raise awareness to the social and economic hardships of Nigerians. In 2002, the group was renamed Boko Haram by its new leader Muhammad Yusuf, a radical Islamist cleric, whose aim was to establish an Islamic state in Nigeria. Strengthened by the dire socio-economic situations of widespread poverty, unemployment corrupted political leaders, etc. Yusuf established an Islamic school with the promise of educating the lower class. The school became a breeding ground for the education of young jihadists recruits (Onuoha) into Boko Haram but also a fortress against the secular order of Nigeria that was to be built upon a strict respect of *shari'a*.

It is not until early to mid-2000s that Boko Haram's ideology would be put in the spotlight when in December 2003 it launched an attack on several government officials in Yobe and Borno as well as attacks on government buildings in Kannama which helped the sect gain the moniker of 'Nigerian Taliban'. The sect continued its terror campaign and in 2009 during a large scale attack on Bauchi which led to the death of Yusuf. For many in Nigeria, these attacks followed a pattern built on ethno-religious tensions that were exacerbated by years of military rule which had cleared the path for Islamic movements to gain visibility with the Fourth Republic under civil rule. From an organizational point of view, the cell-like command structure of Boko Haram much like its leadership structure remains somewhat unclear. Mallam Abubakar Shekau is said to have succeeded to Yusuf after his death. While the sect has continued its activities often without much state repression, the August 2011 attack on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja signaled to the international community that Boko Haram had embarked in new methods clearly geared toward blindless terror.

Is Boko Haram protected by the Nigerian state ?

In Nigeria, the ethno-religious components that were inherited form the core basis for the role of historicity in the rise of Boko Haram. The Nigerian researcher, Eric Guttschuss, wrote that Boko Haram "is essentially the fallout of frustration with corruption and the attendant social malaise of poverty and unemployment [where Nigeria's resources] are squandered by a small bunch of self-serving elite which breeds animosity and frustration". From its inception, the sect did not adopt a particular political

agenda. Thus it excluded the idea of radicalization and of violent overthrow of the government. However, violence toward Boko Haram helped the sect to meet a wave of successes among certain layers of the Nigerian Muslim population. A form of self-fulfilling prophecy was in place in which attraction on poorer Muslims reinforced Boko Haram's legitimacy and vice versa. The popular success of the sect is nowhere more evident than in northern Nigeria where the sect has gained strength by tapping into the growing number of Nigerian Muslims who feel disenchanted by the ways the *shari'a* has translated in little significant changes in their daily life.

Radicalism in Nigeria is not only the work of Boko Haram or the Maitatsine riots. Between the 1970s and 1980s several sects often formed by educated elite engaged in violence throughout Nigeria; the *Jama't Izalat al Bid'ah Wa Iqamat as Sunnah* is one example. Furthermore, various Shiites sects that formed the Islamic Society of Nigeria were engaged in the establishment of *shari'a* in an Islamic state, and many were also active in repressing Muslim groups which they saw as too liberal. A more troublesome question remains. If radicalism in Nigeria was already known in the 1970s and 1980s, why has Boko Haram been left free to operate in Nigeria? On this matter, it is reported that in the case of the Maitatsine uprisings the Nigerian Security Organization (present State Security Service) had warned about the threat posed by the group months before the riots erupted across Kano State. Yet nothing was done at the Federal level to intervene. The situation repeated itself in 2005 after police and military raids led to the arrests of

several fundamentalists belonging to Boko Haram, including its founder Yusuf Mohammed. Reports that followed their arrests indicated the first evidence of a Boko Haram's network extending beyond Nigeria with links to al-Qaeda (AQ). This has left many to wonder if Boko Haram had not benefited from protection at many levels of the Nigerian state apparatus.

Evidence of Boko Haram linkages to regional terror groups emerging

The primary response to Boko Haram has come from an increased pressure at the Nigerian level, while regional as well as continental authorities have grown wary of the ramifications of the sect beyond Nigeria's borders, notably with the links to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Shabaab in Somalia. Evidences of the international concern were expressed in January 2012 security summit held on 23-24 January 2012 in Mauritania's capital of Nouakchott. The summit regrouped foreign ministers of the countries of the Sahel region (Algeria, Niger, Mali and Mauritania) as well as Nigeria. The involvement of Nigeria is telling of the necessity for coordinated and concerted efforts between these countries if they are to even remotely conceive of addressing a response to the endemic instability across the Sahel. The fears in the Sahel are real and the countries face the hard task to cut off any links between these cells before they spread to point of being uncontrollable. The task is rendered even

tougher as many states do not have the logistics or financial capacities to scout the vast desert areas.

More evidence of the possible links between Boko Haram and others groups in the region were presented at in a report titled 'International Cooperation in Combating Terrorism: Review of 2011 and Outlook for 2012' released by the Inter-University Center for Terrorism Studies. In the latter, it notes a shift in Boko Haram's tactics as with the use of car bombings and the growing size of the insurgency as being reminiscent of AQ style of tactics. Furthermore, a United Nations (UN) report also published in January linked a large smuggling of arms and weapons from Libya into the Sahel region with the fear that they may be sold to AQIM, Boko Harm and other criminal organizations. Reports from Niger also indicate Boko Haram is already spreading its ideology to the youths and had succeeded in closing down several public schools in south Niger.

International response not yet decisive

The United States State Department has yet to render its verdict on Boko Haram as the sect has not been accepted on the government's Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Many argue that if the US took that decision it would force the Nigerian government to take the Boko Haram threat more seriously. At this point, the US has only designated three Boko Haram members as terrorists.

The current EU strategy in the Sahel is outlined in the EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel which focuses primarily on security risks in Mali, Niger, Mauritania and Chad but completely leaves out the cross border capacities of Boko Haram as determinant in the security policies. The recent update Council conclusion of Sahel, dated 22-23 March 2012 does very little to show that Boko Haram is entering the debate but instead reinforces the reliance on the African Union (AU) and the UN for regional cooperation. With the events in Mali, the reality on the ground has taken a very different turn.

The surge in activity in the Sahel comes at a time when US and EU interests can be qualified of isolationism which in the long term will not benefit any parties interested in safeguarding whatever is left of state control in many areas of the Sahel. Faced with a costly economic crisis, both the US and the EU have been cutting back on their military spending and one may only ponder how everything will pan out in the months to come. The international response continues to be delayed as many Western states are reluctant to allocate more troops in a conflict that given the size of the area could turn into another lengthy and costly campaign.

Boko Haram's attacks since 2010 have continued to pose a challenge for President Goodluck Jonathan who, despite several reforms, has been unsuccessful in appeasing current ethno-religious resentment. To the contrary, several reports and accusations of

government officials secretly funding Boko Haram in order to destabilize the Goodluck government have surfaced. They continue to fuel the politicization of Islam as a tool of political destabilization that until they are resolved will continue to weaken Nigeria's authority. These allegations follow a similar pattern that had previously linked tribal leaders in the Sahel to al-Qaeda, with Mali being the latest example.

It may become more decisive when offshoots of Boko Haram begin to appear

Tensions in Nigeria are part of an impetus of power-sharing rivalries and politics that for decades of military dictatorship and bad governance have been reframed in ethno-religious terms. Furthermore, countless reports of corruption, police brutality, election fraud, and human rights abuses have done nothing to raise the socio-economic standards of Nigerians of all faiths. It is against such a background blemished by a growing disenchantment that many Muslims have called for the return to the traditional ways of the Koran. The debate of the *shari'a* and the increased role of the *ulama* reflect such changes in a country where poverty, structural problems and violence go hand in hand and often serve to legitimize the message of sects like Boko Haram.

In terms of state cohesion, the debate on federalism in Nigeria has posed itself as the creator of exclusion on which political powers have crafted ethno-religious

paradigms that have done very little to facilitate policies of political and social integration. With or without Boko Haram, religion will continue to work as a force in Nigerian political discourse and a challenge to Nigeria's ability and willingness to respond to a fragile social, economic, ethnic and religious fabric. The use of Islam within an ethno-religious debate is indicative of the changes that are underway not only in Nigeria but across the entire Sahel which may have given new impetus to independence movements across that region.

The 'Arab Spring', along with the Touareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) in Mali (which was supported then hijacked by AQIM), has opened a 'Pandora's Box' of Islamic extremism that spans from the vast desert of Mali and Niger, whilst also reaching the Northern regions of Nigeria as well as Somalia in east Africa. Much like Boko Haram in Nigeria, they are indicative of the fact that a conscientious effort to understand the history of these movements is needed at the continental, the regional and at the international levels. Accordingly, these elements seen through a post-9/11 discourse have too often been molded in a one-size-fits-all 'AQ style violence' that dismisses any relevance to the complex historical schisms and discourses that have shaped the contemporary nature of these countries.

African states in the Sahel remain prone to financial, political and military risks and threats of all kinds that hinder their capacities or willingness to intervene against domestic and regional terrorism. In the case of

Nigeria, it can be argued that ethno-religious tensions present at many levels of the state apparatus have negatively impacted upon the state's capacity to prevent terror. Such inaction would leave immense geographical areas under control of various kinds of radical movements and could lead to the creation of offshoots of Boko Haram in neighboring countries.