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NIGERIA: THE GENERIC CONTEXT OF THE BOKO HARAM VIOLENCE

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Introduction

A series of major attacks in Nigeria in April are presumed to be the work of militants from the Boko Haram movement. There is little sign that extensive and rigorous police and army action against Boko Haram has had any effect in curbing the movement. Indeed, it may be stimulating further support, leading in turn to increased international concerns over the longer-term prospects for stability in Africa's most populous country.

With much written about the movement over the past year, this briefing will focus on the role of economic and political marginalisation in fostering violence. For over a decade, Oxford Research Group has sought to analyse what may be termed "revolts from the margins", and there may be a sense in which Boko Haram relates to this concept.

Origins and Development

Radical Islam is not unknown in northern Nigeria, which was forcibly linked by the British to the Christian majority in the south and merged into the British Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914. Following independence in 1960, the rise of the radical Maitatsine movement in the 1970's, which engaged unemployed urban youth, led to clashes with the police in Kano in 1980, leaving many hundreds dead. Violence continued for several years. In recent years, there has emerged in north-east Nigeria an element with a stronger political agenda, not unlike elements of the al-Qaida movement although, without the same intellectual origins.

The Boko Haram movement, as it's commonly known, means in Hausa: "Western education is a sin." It calls itself "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad." The group's first leader, Mohammed Yusuf, a charismatic preacher, told the BBC in 2009: "Western-style education is mixed with issues that run contrary to our beliefs in Islam." Boko Haram first emerged publically around 2002 in north-east Nigeria, causing increasing concern to the authorities. In summer 2009, major violence erupted. The authorities, after some hesitation, responded with massive force. In July 2009, the mosque headquarters of Mohammed Yusuf, in the city of Maiduguri, was destroyed in an all-out assault by the military. Many hundreds were killed. Mohammed Yusuf was seized and shot while in captivity. The prosecution of those responsible for his killing is one of the group's demands, which also include the release of all Boko Haram prisoners and the full implementation of Shari'a law in the twelve northern states of Nigeria.

There was some expectation that the movement would be curbed by Yusuf's death, but instead it grew rapidly in strength and effect, mounting a dramatic prison escape in 2010 and large scale attacks in 2011 and early 2012. It appeared to move to a strategy of spectacular attacks under its new leader, Abubakar Mohammed Shekau (pictured left). Among these, the worst was a series of attacks in Kano in January killing over 185 people. Two attacks in mid-2011 were also significant. Both were suicide car bombings in



the capital city of Abuja, one on the UN offices, and the other on the police headquarters. The movement said that the UN attack was due to the UN's support for the Federal Government in persecuting Muslims across the country, calling the UN "the forum of all the global evil". The second attack had an added significance in that reliable reports indicated that the explosive device used involved shaped charges, thus supporting the views of some analysts that the movement may have access to external technical expertise.

Current Status

Easter Sunday's attack in the central city of Kaduna also involved a car bomb. It was intercepted by security officials en route to a church, and the vehicle exploded at a busy intersection, killing many taxi drivers and traders. Over 40 people were killed and many more were injured. The following day, there were attacks in several towns in north-eastern Nigeria - including the shooting of a politician and a police officer in the border town of Dikwa. In late April, there were further attacks, on offices of three Nigerian newspapers and on two church services. 450 people have been killed this year, according to the Associated Press news agency.

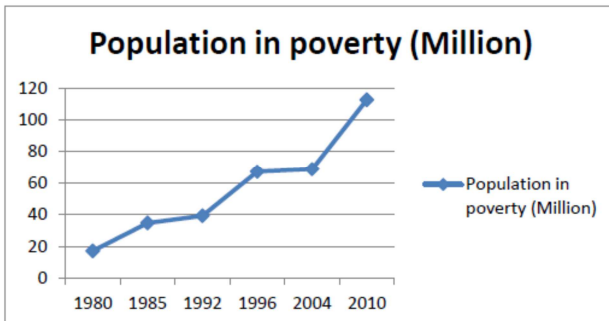
The attacks confirm that the movement remains active and may even be growing in support, in spite of repeated and singularly violent actions by police, army and other security forces to try to control it. On 11 April, the Chief of the Defence Staff said again that the Nigerian Army should deal ruthlessly with the group. This resort to force may be proving counterproductive because of the large numbers of civilians getting killed and injured.

However, there are some signs that there are voices in the Nigerian government still looking for alternatives. The Easter surge in violence comes after "preliminary talks" between intermediaries for the Government and Boko Haram were leaked to the press on 16 March, leading to the collapse of the tentative dialogue - for the second time in six months. In September 2011, talks involving former president Olusegun Obasanjo and Boko Haram family members collapsed after they were made public. The mediator has since said he believes that the two efforts failed, because there were some government elements that felt that the use of force could solve the problem.

The concern expressed in Europe and especially in the United States, is that Boko Haram is another manifestation of the al-Qaida movement given the persistence of the Islamist outlook embodied by al-Qaida off-shoots in Somalia, Yemen, Iraq and North Africa, as well as the ongoing issue of radicalised individuals in Western Europe, most recently in France. Two incidents provoked particular concern in Washington and London: One is the arrest of the so-called Christmas day bomber in 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year-old Nigerian, who attempted to detonate 80g of plastic explosive on board a flight to Detroit. The other is the killing in March 2012 of an Italian and British hostage after a failed rescue raid engaging British and Nigerian special forces. Some reports suggest the kidnapping was carried out by a splinter group.

However, care should be taken in seeing Boko Haram as directly related to the al-Qaida movement. Some similarity of ideas, methods and outlook may certainly be there, but Boko Haram's support also stems from three specific aspects of the Nigerian situation: the relative economic neglect of the Moslem north, a country-wide issue of very serious divisions of wealth and poverty (in spite of the oil wealth of the Delta), and an endemic problem of corruption, especially within the political system.

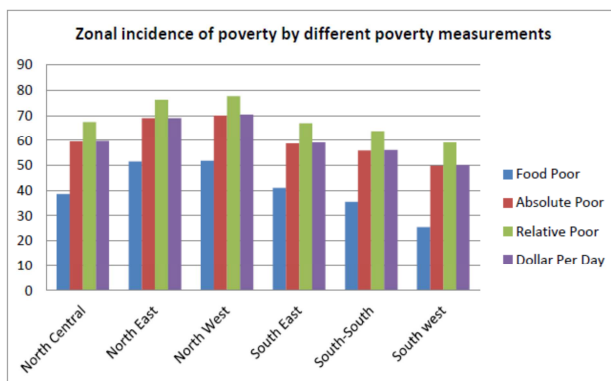
Boko Haram does appear to be developing into a substantive and coherent movement, and is now tending to be active away from its original heartland in the north into central and possibly even southern states of Nigeria. The economic context is dramatic.



What is particularly relevant is that the relatively high levels of economic growth in Nigeria in recent years – the country has the third fastest rate in the world – have not involved an improved sharing of the fruits of that growth. Indeed, the evidence actually suggests a greater concentration of wealth in fewer hands, at a time of a growing cohort of young people with minimal employment prospects – some 40 million

18-25 year olds are unemployed - resulting in disempowerment, resentment and anger. This has been powerfully captured in the 2012 Poverty Survey by the National Statistical Bureau (NSB), which shows that 69% of Nigerians are defined as poor - 112 million people – a huge increase from just 17 million in 1980. These figures are serious enough, but the future population trends are alarming. The current population of 163 million is expected to rise, on current trends, to 389 million by 2050 and over 700 million by 2100, according to UN estimates.

At present, as many as 71% of Nigerians are said to be in relative poverty – an increase of 17% in 6 years. Nigerians’ own perceptions of their poverty are higher still. The NSB report states that: “In 2009/2010, the perception index of households living in poverty had risen to 92.5 %.” The effect of poverty on health and education in Borno State, where Boko Haram had its origins, is startling. Alain Vickery, in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (April 2012) reports: “Only 2% of children under 25 months have been vaccinated; 83% of young people are illiterate; 48.5% of children do not go to school.”



The statistics as a whole bear out the well-known relative poverty of the north. However, what is perhaps most remarkable is the evidence of rising widespread poverty across the whole country – and how it has increased in recent years across most of the country. This goes some way to explaining the huge nationwide protests at the proposed reduction in fuel subsidies in January. One of the key findings of a World Bank report in 2000 of dialogue with Nigeria’s poor is

that they see poverty not just in material terms but as an overwhelming denial of the right to a quality of life which is enabling and empowering. The level of resentment at endemic corruption and the massive misappropriation of the nation’s wealth cannot be underestimated.

The Research Director of the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), Dr Sope Williams Elegbe, who we consulted on the poverty statistics, says that:

“The increasing poverty in Nigeria is accompanied by increasing unemployment. Unemployment is higher in the north than in the south. Mix this situation with radical Islam, which promises a better life for martyrs, and you can understand the growing violence in the north. Government statistics show that the northern states have the highest proportion of uneducated persons. If you link a lack of education and attendant lack of opportunities to a high male youth population, you can imagine that some areas are actually a breeding ground for terrorism.”

This is increasingly accepted internationally and pressure is being put on President Goodluck Johnson. In a speech marking one year since the democratic elections, US Assistant Secretary, Johnnie Carson, said on April 9:

“The government must also win over the population by addressing the social and economic problems that have created the environment in which Boko Haram can effectively thrive.”

A Wider Context

In an assessment, written in 1999, Oxford Research Group suggested that:

“What should be expected is that new social movements will develop that are essentially anti-elite in nature and draw their support from people, especially men, on the margins. In different contexts and circumstances they may have their roots in political ideologies, religious beliefs, ethnic, nationalist or cultural identities, or a complex combination of several of these. They may be focussed on individuals or groups but the most common feature is an opposition to existing centres of power (...). What can be said is that, on present trends, anti-elite action will be a core feature of the next thirty years - not so much a clash of civilisations, more an age of insurgencies.”

Boko Haram may well fit this pattern and one of the key questions is whether the Islamist element is the most important aspect or whether the socio-economic context should be given far more emphasis. Recent experience elsewhere in the world suggests that the latter is highly relevant, one example being the entrenched and partially successful Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Even more relevant is the experience of two major states currently achieving economic growth rates even higher than that of Nigeria – China and India. China is experiencing widespread and serious problems of public disorder, including numerous strikes and even riots, much of it sparsely reported. India has far less of a centrally planned economy, but does have booming growth and a seriously marginalised majority. From within that majority has arisen the neo-Maoist Naxalite rebellion which affects a chain of states from the Nepalese border to the far south of the country. The rebellion is acknowledged to be the most serious internal security threat to India, and while extensive counter-insurgency efforts are underway, it is also acknowledged by some circles in New Delhi that the rebellion will not be curbed unless the underlying problems of poverty and marginalisation are dealt with.

Relevance to Africa

A number of countries across sub-Saharan Africa are now achieving impressive rates of economic growth. Much of this is a result of the exploitation of fuel and non-fuel minerals and

it is in an environment of a broadly free-market approach to economic management, with lower levels of state intervention than in the immediate post-colonial era. This stems partly from the long term impact of the “Washington consensus” but parallels the overall trend towards a free market approach that has developed in much of the world since the early 1980s. While such a system has clearly been successful in delivering growth, its record of socio-economic emancipation is far weaker, with a tendency towards greater marginalisation, even if levels of abject poverty may not be increasing. What is particularly significant is the combination of welcome improvements in education, literacy and communications with poor job prospects, a circumstance that has done much to aid the development of Boko Haram.

Conclusion

While it is necessary to express caution at making too strong a connection between marginalisation and radicalisation, it is also a serious mistake to dismiss it as irrelevant. Experience in India, China and elsewhere does suggest that if sub-Saharan Africa does experience persistent economic growth without accompanying emancipation and a generalised improvement in economic prospects, then radical movements may arise in other states.

This should in no way diminish efforts to resolve the Nigerian conflict, and there is every reason to support efforts at mediation. At the same time, if there is little recognition of the key underlying socio-economic factors, not only will attempts to resolve the Boko Haram issue be limited, but responding to other radical movements, should they evolve, will encounter similar problems.

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