

Insurgency in Nigeria: Boko Haram Phenomenon and the Poverty Debate

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is to unravel who Boko Haram members are, what brought about the rebellion against the Nigerian state by the group and the platform on which the sect operates. The paper further seeks to examine the raging debate that poverty is principally responsible for the emergence of Boko Haram insurgency. The paper made use of content analysis such as the use of newspapers, books, published articles, internet library sources available. The conduct of this research involves structured and semi-structured interviews used to interview respondent such as academics in the field of strategic studies and political science. The research found out that there are factors that motivate terrorism other than poverty and unemployment. Such factors are seen to be religion, ethnicity and political interest.

Keywords: Nigeria, Boko Haram, Insurgency, Poverty and Unemployment.

Introduction

Boko Haram phenomenon is a domestically inspired religious-terrorist group with their stronghold in Borno, North-eastern Nigeria. The sect is today globally recognised as a terrorist group having link with other terrorist network such as Al- Qaeda, Al- Shaabab, and ISIS. The group emerged from a tiny assemblage of Islamist militants in 2002 who challenged the Nigerian security apparatus around 2003 to 2004. At the initial stage of their violent campaign, their attacks were often not successful against the Nigerian security power as their activities were not organised enough for such surprises against a state of Nigeria's status (Mohammed, 2014).

The origin of the group remains unclear and the debate still rages on as to when exactly it all started but it is popular among the locals that the group came into existence in 2002 and was founded by Mohammed Yusuf. However, others contend that the group was actually formed by Lawan Abubakar who afterwards left for Saudi Arabia for further studies at the University of Medina (Madike, 2011). Boko Haram was just a loose nickname given to the movement by the local Borno people based on their puritanical Islamic stance and rejection of western education and the fiery anti-western preaching of their leader Mohammed Yusuf. The sect named itself in Arabic as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda' awati Wal-Jihad* which mean 'People committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad' (Jacob & Akpan, 2015; Mohammed, 2015).

The word Boko Haram is a combination of two words of different origin and is transliterated as 'Western education is sinful or forbidden'. The broader meaning is that western principles such as democracy, civil law, civilization, influences and education are forbidden and are sacrilegious in Islam (Adibe, 2013). Mallam Mohammed Yusuf as leader of the sect was not committed to full violence until 2009. Boko Haram has increasingly advanced in their attacks against the Nigerian state by targeting her ethno-religious fragile fault lines. Their main target is to discredit the democratic process of governance in order to turn the governed to believe in the ability of the group to give them the needed leadership as well as to turn the people against their legitimate government who the sect claim are corrupt and self-serving.

Objectives of the Paper

The focus of this paper is to unravel who Boko Haram members are, what brought about the rebellion against the Nigerian state by the group and the platform on which the sect operates. The paper further seeks to examine the raging debate that poverty is principally responsible for the emergence of Boko Haram insurgency.

Research Method

The paper made use of content analysis such as the use of newspapers, books, published articles, internet library sources available. The conduct of this research involves structured and semi-structured interviews used to interview respondent such as academics in the field of strategic studies and political science. This was to enable the researcher have deeper grasp of whether poverty is principally responsible for the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria or not.

Leadership of the Group

There is virtually no documented report about Mohammed Yusuf's growing up days except for the oral reports that he was born in Girgir, Jakusko Area, Yobe state in the 1970s. Yusuf was said to have acquired only basic western-styled education in Nigeria after which he proceeded for Quranic education in Chad and Niger. He was before the 1990s associated with the Islamic Movement of Nigeria led by Ibraheem el-Zakzakky, which he later left (Wadek & Jayasekara, 2011). Yusuf's rise to the leadership of the dreaded Boko Haram sect was also not documented but was known for his active participation in Islamic discourse and fiery preaching as well as teachings on Radio and Television. His leadership style was not in doubt as he used his oratory capability to draw on the weaknesses of governments in providing for the basic needs of the less-privileged in the society. As leader of the movement, before he met his death in 2009, Yusuf was arrested in 2006 and 2008 and was charged for inciting violence and supporting terrorism but was released without being convicted. Yusuf died under controversial circumstances in Police detention due to heavy security clampdown on the movement. The attack led to the death of over 800 people which were mostly members of the sect (Wadek & Jayasekara, 2011; Adibe, 2013).

After the death of Yusuf, Mallam Sanni Umaru a closed associate of Yusuf initially appeared to have assumed leadership of the sect. Issuing a statement in the media as the "acting leader" of the group and vowed to continue the fight until there is full Islamic revolution and sharia fully implemented in Nigeria. Abu Muhammad Abubakar bin Muhammad Shekau, who was Yusuf's deputy took over the mantle of leadership of the movement as their new leader (Suleiman & Karim, 2015). The change in leadership of the group as a result of Mohammed Yusuf's death was a game changer and within a space of a year, Boko Haram became a known global terrorist sect. The group went lull for about a period of one year as a result of high-handedness and heavy security crackdown that led to the death of Yusuf and many of his followers. Within that period that the sect went underground, they re-strategised, and resurfaced more ferocious and stronger in their organisation and attacks. Since October, 2010, Boko Haram has been carrying out suicide bombings, assassinations, ambushes kidnappings, hostage taking and drive-by shootings. They have also deployed deadly weapons such as improvised explosive devices (IEDs), Rocket propelled grenade (RPG), General purpose machine gun (GPMG), surface to air weapons, Grenades as well as other lethal wares. Their prime targets are Mosques, Churches, Marketplaces, Motor parks, Barracks, Government institutions.

Abubakar Shekau assumed command and control of the leadership of Boko Haram after Yusuf was killed. Zenn (2011) posits that with Shekau less knowledgeable and more aggressive than the late Yusuf, it only made the movement to be more radical and deadlier. Boko Haram began suicide bombing when Shekau started leading the movement. The sect bombed the Nigeria police national headquarters, Abuja, in June 2011. A car loaded with explosives trailed the convoy of the then Inspector General of Police into the compound of Louis Edet House, a well-fortified place in terms of security in Abuja's government zone. Their target was the Inspector General of police who due to some smartness on the part of the security guards, insisted the car go to the car park within the compound where the suicide bomber detonated the bomb. This was the first recorded suicide bomb in Nigeria particularly on June 16, 2011. Two months later in August 2011, a suicide bomber drove a car laden with bombs into the United Nations building in Abuja and detonated the bomb, killing at least twenty three people and wounding many. These attacks announced Boko Haram on the global stage of terrorism (Anyadike, 2013).

Religious Background of the Sect

History of religious invasion and 'militant religiosity' in northern Nigeria as posited by Agbiboa (2013) is traceable to the 18th century jihad launched successfully against the Hausa state by Sheik Uthman Dan Fodio (1754-1817). The conquest of the Hausa state by Sheik Uthman Dan Fodio led to the establishment of the Caliphate in Sokoto that was strictly governed by the sharia legal system. He launched his jihad against the backdrop of the prevailing corruption among the Hausa ruling class and the worship of idols in the area at the said time. This jihadist empire spread so powerfully southward but was greatly resisted by what is today known as North-central or the middle-belt which comprises areas such as Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Kogi, Niger, Nasarawa, Taraba and part of Adamawa (Agbiboa,

2013). To have a better grasp of the present Boko Haram uprising in north-eastern Nigeria, the radical Maitatsine religious violence of the 1980s which took place in major northern cities of Kano, Kaduna, Maiduguri and Yolais of significance. In the words of Hickey (1984):

The violent confrontation which took place between a sect of Muslim fanatics and the Nigeria Police Force in Maiduguri in October 1982 did not come as a surprise to those who understand the complexity of the religious situation in northern Nigeria. It had its roots in the deeply conservative practice of Islam which is dominant in the region. This goes back to the highly successful jihad that Sheik Uthman Dan Fodio of Sokoto launched in the first decade of the nineteenth century(pp. 251).

Membership of Boko Haram

Mohammed Yusuf and his lieutenants were engaged in aggressive preaching and mass recruitment of members especially of youths in their twenties mainly of the Kanuri ethnic extraction in Borno state. Members were also drawn from the Hausa-Fulani communities of the neighbouring states and countries. Through his blistering fearless preaching, Yusuf before 2009 launched aggressive verbal assaults on traditional, secular authority and all democratic institutions. This made the proselytization of many possible and the sect was able to draw its membership also from different fields such as those drawn from the political class, the military, bankers, lecturers and other members of the university communities, even from among unemployed graduates and other jobless youth within the northern part of Nigerian (Agbiboa, 2013). As expressed by scholars, before the death of Yusuf, Boko Haram had over 500,000 members not only drawn from the unemployed illiterate youth but also of some wealthy members of the northern society who are mostly shadowy in position (Adibe, 2013; Jacob & Akpan, 2015).

Boko Haram Phenomenon Explained

The arguments and counter-arguments are numerous when it comes to when Boko Haram emerged and what were responsible for the emergence of the sect. Myriad views by scholars have been expressed on this. Some thinkers see Boko Haram as a clear symptom that Nigeria has become either a failing or failed state. Chomsky in his Book "Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy" expresses a twist by asking a rhetorical question 'what is a failed state?' He responded that a state fails when "it cannot provide security for the population to guarantee rights at home or abroad, maintain functioning (not merely formal) democratic institutions" (Freedland, 2006). Others blame it on poor governance and poverty while still some attribute its emergence to the frustration-aggression analysis. A society with so much resource yet has rampant inequality in terms of distribution of economic and social goods is bound to experience discontent. In Nigeria, the social and economic gap between the rich and the poor is clear-cut. Larger members of the sect are in their twenties and were not meaningfully engaged before being recruited or radicalised. Sect members are so frustrated and disappointed with the political and economic situation in Nigeria especially with northern Muslim politicians who use religion as a means of actualising their selfish political ends (Suleiman & Karim, 2015; Adibe, 2012). Others see the Boko Haram insurgency as one of the nation-building challenges facing Nigeria (Igwara, 2001; Adibe, 2011; Apamshan, Ismail & Zengeni, 2017). Boko Haram is more of a symptom of the crisis in Nigeria's nation-building.

The Poverty Debate

Nigeria in 1999 emerged from sixteen long years of military dictatorship and the general expectations were high that the new democratic era would address the economic and other socio-political challenges confronting the nation (Terwase, Abdul-Talib & Zengeni, 2015). As at today, after sixteen years into the democratic era of the fourth republic, those social, ethnic, religious as well as economic issues are still ever as pervasive as were before Nigeria's return to democratic governance. Issues such as unemployment and poverty remain more endemic in Africa with Nigeria having half her total population which are mainly youths of age (14 to 50) below the global poverty line (Ayegba,

2015). Unemployment and poverty are today twin grave economic vices facing the Nigerian state especially with the large number of graduates being chunked out yearly from the Universities roaming the streets of major cities of the country.

Piazza (2006) in his work could not agree less with the postulation that terrorism is linked to inequality, poverty and poor economic fortunes within a given state. He however, stressed that terrorism is more of an ethno-religious and political problem caused primarily by such factors as religious diversity, ethnic and social cleavages, party politics and population. George W. Bush, former US President in a Monterey Development Summit states that the fight against terror is a fight against poverty since hope is an answer to terror (Piazza, 2006; Ayegba, 2015). In his views, Wright (2006) argues that “Radicalism prospers in the gap between rising expectations and declining opportunities...especially when the population is young and very vibrant and idle without the theatre, music, movies...” that could keep the young energetic youth busy and in checks. Many Nigerian graduates roam the streets of major cities searching for white collar job that are not forthcoming any time soon. These unemployed graduates face what is known as unemployment-induced poverty (Ucha, 2010). The unemployment driven type of poverty as prevalent in Nigeria adds to the rate of crime and violence. Terrorism in Nigeria is said to have been caused by extreme poverty and the alarming rate of unemployment in the country, especially in the troubled regions where the country experiences insurgency and militancy. Those regions ravaged by insurgency in Nigeria today such as the north-eastern part of the country which has been held down by the Boko Haram insurgency was first of all overtaken by abject poverty.

Most Nigerian youths that are not gainfully engaged, according to Ucha (2010) indulge in fraudulent activities such as internet fraud, robbery, kidnapping for ransom which hardly meet their basic needs. Those graduates that are qualified for employment yet denied the opportunity by the governments turn their God given talents and ability into doing activities that are inimical and violent to the people. Instead of remaining idle, they hire out their skills to politicians for crimes such as political thuggery and mercenaries. They become cheaply and easily ready for violence. Criminal activities in Nigeria today such as the Biafra ethnic struggle for secession, the violent militancy in the creeks of the Niger Delta and the Boko Haram insurgency in the north-eastern part of the country all point to the extreme level of poverty and frustration among the youth (Terwase, Abdul-Talib, Zengeni, & Terwase, 2015; Yerima, Ibrahim, Terwase, & Abdul-Talib, 2016).

The question is does poverty cause terrorism? Is it the economic reality in Nigeria's north that is responsible for the current insurgency sweeping through the region? It is saddening and remains a paradox that the north which has produced nine out of Nigeria's fifteen past leaders since her independence remains the poorest part of the country. If poverty and unemployment are the root causes of the Boko Haram terrorism in the north that has produced more of the Heads of government in Nigeria, who then is to be blamed? A research carried out among informants reveals that the reoccurrence of violent insurgency by the Boko Haram group in the northern part of Nigeria is mainly triggered by corruption in the arms and tiers of government which creates poverty and unemployment in the region (Suleiman & Karim, 2015).

Studies such as Zaidi (2010), National Bureau of Statistics (2012), Ayegba (2015) Suleiman & Karim (2015) have established how unemployment and persistent poverty escalate terrorism. These scholars assert that a reduction in poverty and improvement in the socio-economic life of the citizenry especially the youths could sharply reduce terrorism. On the other hand, Scholars such as Krueger & Maleckova (2002), Agbiboa (2013), Jacob & Akpan (2015) see such debate that poverty is the root cause of terrorism as being overly simplistic. Poverty no doubt is a scourge that needs to be wiped out or killed in all its manifestations due to the socio-economic debate in the human needs theory echoed in the frustration-aggression theory. The socio-economic relationship between poverty and terrorism as explained above is not sufficient enough and remains less clear if poverty is the root cause of terrorism. Krueger and Maleckova (2002) puts it thus:

“...a careful review of the evidence provides little reason for optimism that a reduction in poverty or an increase in educational attainment would, by themselves, meaningfully reduce international terrorism. Any connection between poverty, education, and terrorism is indirect, complicated, and probably quite weak. Instead of viewing terrorism as a direct response to low market opportunities or lack of education, we suggest it is more accurately viewed as a response to political conditions and long-standing feelings of indignity and frustrations (perceived or real) that have little to do with economics...a deeper knowledge of the causes of terrorism is important if a better strategy is to be evolved in combating the scourge” (2002: 27).

Conclusion

Poverty and unemployment as socio-economic phenomena which have been blamed and linked to terrorism as the root causes. These twin evils are capable of causing discontent and social change within the populace. The relationship between poverty and terrorism as explained in the paper is not sufficient enough and remains unclear. However, there are factors that motivate terrorism such as religion, ethnicity and political interest which are capable of brain-washing the unemployed youths who become tools in the hands of the actors.

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