

# **Boko Haram's violence flags the world on Nigeria's critical state of affairs**

✘ *Boko Haram's violence plays into the hands of Nigerian elites ahead of elections*

The Islamist group Boko Haram, which has recently become infamous for having used ten year old girls to detonate bombs in the middle of a crowded market in northern Nigeria, killing hundreds, is one of the most dramatic signs of Nigeria's critical situation. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, with a population density greater than that of France. By sub-Saharan African standards, it is a rich country and its GDP is second only to that of South Africa, but it is also a 'container' of ethnic, social and religious conflicts, exacerbated by uneven development. It is not going to be easy to defeat Boko Haram or put the Nigerian 'humpty-dumpty' together again; there are political, regional and economic realities impediments that negate the Nigerian military's efforts while playing into the hands of those who would rather see Nigeria divided into separate States.

The widespread violence practiced by Boko Haram is almost entirely confined to the State of Borno (Nigeria is a Federal Union) and it is but one – even if the most violent – of similar conflicts that have occurred in various parts of Nigeria over the past decade. Boko Haram is a jihadist movement whose main goal, as indicated by its very name meaning “western culture is heresy”, is to challenge Western culture, which the movement's leaders accuse of having corrupted Nigerian society. Its activity is characterized by attacks on civilians – most of whom are Muslim – and mass kidnappings; its favorite targets have been schools and universities, but in 2014, the group increasingly targeted

mosques and public markets. With an 'army' of several thousand militiamen strong, Boko Haram is also one of the largest groups in the context of armed Islamism.

Boko Haram is actually fighting a more social than religious conflict and, unlike other Islamist movements, Boko Haram's ambitions and targets are purely local. The group did establish links with the al-Qaida related fundamentalists who occupied much of northern Mali and may even have contacts with ISIS in the Iraq and Syria. Unlike ISIS, Boko Haram has not targeted western interests within or beyond Nigeria's borders. What it does share with most Islamist groups, and with ISIS in particular, is its professed goal of achieving an Islamic State complete with the imposition of Sharia law and all the accoutrements this entails from the enforcement of veils on women to the ban on alcohol. Nevertheless, Boko Haram is less ideological than ISIS and the typical Islamist accessories are masking a much more social than religious struggle. With an economy tied to oil extraction at the expense of agriculture, Nigeria has experienced the malaise that is typical of societies transitioning from a rural or agricultural economy to a more resource or industrial economy. The transition has been aggravated by political instability, by coups and by a paradoxical economic position: despite considerable oil resources, only a small elite has benefited from the wealth it has generated.

Nigeria's oil economy has generated rapid growth...of urbanization and corruption. Wanton urbanization, as hundreds of thousands of people moved from the countryside to the cities has created a host of social problems. Urbanization has grown dramatically, and with it the social problems. Meanwhile, in the rural areas, antiquated agricultural systems suffered from an ever smaller workforce exposing the damage of disorganized and corrupt administrations. This has fueled inequality both across economic sectors and geographic location. The main business, oil and industrial centers such

as Lagos and Port Harcourt are located on the coast while the economy of the interior (the northern areas) relies on the cultivation of cereals and the extraction of raw materials such as tin, coal and iron, which are then 'exported' to the south to feed the factories of the most industrialized areas. It is in the agricultural and mining areas that Boko Haram has thrived in the past few years. A few years ago, the main militant groups in Nigeria were made up far more by Christians such as those in the Niger Delta region, the best known of which is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). MEND kidnapped western oil company workers, launched attacks against oil installations and fought against the Nigerian army.

Oil exploitation, is not very labor intensive and only few have benefited from it in the regions where it is produced. At the same time, oil has also hurt the livelihoods of the local made up by various ethnic groups such as the Igbo. In the 1960's, Nigeria fought a conflict, not unlike that against Boko Haram, against militant Igbo separatists, known as the Biafran war. Thousands were killed and a famine ensued but the ultimate cause of that conflict, as well as the current one against Boko Haram, is better explained in the context of uneven and limited development. Such underdevelopment, because of its regional and economic nature, has given it its ethnic and sectarian character. This is actually the case for much of the violence in sub-Saharan Africa. Nevertheless, the solutions to Nigeria's problems and Boko Haram need not be imported from abroad nor do they need to be military. Africa's economy, including that of Nigeria, is changing and as reported in the most recent edition of 'The Economist'; it is slowly changing away from resource dependency, generating ever more wealth from services. Moreover, oil revenues, if better distributed and invested, would make a substantial contribution to the strengthening of the national economy, encouraging a skilled labor market and, therefore, the demand for education among the population – the very kind of

education Boko Haram rejects. The main problem is that only a small minority is enjoying the country's rapidly increasing prosperity.

The religious and ethnic conflicts are a symptom and a cause of the deep inequalities in the distribution of wealth; the violence, regardless of whether it has religious or ethnic roots, helps to distract the people involved from their expectations and political interests. As for politics, local governments have long complained of having been abandoned by the central government and accused the army of not doing enough to counter Boko Haram. There is also an argument that the neglect, which has allowed northern Nigeria to be overrun by violence, has a deliberate political logic. Next February, Nigerians will head to the polls to vote for a new Parliament and a new President. By African standards, the elections are deemed fair; however, this very perception of fairness means that the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south, fears losing to the challenger Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the North. The Nigerian press believes that President Jonathan, has lost consensus because of the ineffectiveness of the security forces in the face of fierce challenge posed by Boko Haram. The press has, in fact, derided the latest counteroffensive launched by the army against the militants, who have occupied the city of Baga, in Borno where they have killed thousands of people and forced many to flee. Buhari, the challenger, meanwhile has gathered support even among the predominantly Christian south of the country (largely unaffected by Boko Haram).

The Nigerian army is not as well armed as the militias and often soldiers flee. This is by design: in the last twenty years, after the last military president, Nigerian leaders have tried in every way to weaken the army to ward off the threat of a military coup – a frequent fixture of Nigerian politics until the mid-1990's. At the same time, politicians have allowed the military brass to steal funds from the

budget, allowing them to become rich with impunity as a way to buy their "loyalty". The army has been shown to be effective only against civilians and the populations of the north now fear the raid of the armed forces almost as much as those by Boko haram. This means that soldiers are unlikely to be trusted by the people, who refuse to cooperate even as militants may have accomplices in the army. In a scenario familiar to observers of organized crime, civilians who collaborate with the military are likely to be reported to Boko Haram and, consequently, to be killed. To turn the situation the army counted on the support of the United States. Washington, however, is not rushing to the aid of Goodluck Jonathan's army, dissuaded by corruption scandals in Abuja – and the United States, which used to import large quantities of Nigerian oil, no longer needs it because of its own production.

Boko Haram, therefore, has the opportunity to extend its influence in a wider area of northern Nigeria, where it can establish its "caliphate" and begin to administer it as ISIS has done in northern Iraq and Syria with Abubakar Shekau, who appears as an exalted and rather nutty warlord in videos, as the Caliph. The attacks increase as elections approach; nonetheless, a stronger Boko Haram in the north plays into Jonathan's campaign. The areas currently controlled by Boko haram are opposition strongholds – the All Progressives Congress (APC) party – but the people will be prevented from voting, leaving fewer votes for Jonathan's opponent Buhari, a Muslim from the north. In turn, the President can use the insurgency to rally the Christians around him, allowing them to believe that Buhari, a Muslim, would impose sharia law across the country. In the southern regions, people often regard the militant Islamic insurgency of the north with indifference, as if it were another country altogether with a 'what happens there does not concern us' attitude. So long as it's business as usual in Lagos – meaning no attacks – it's all right.

The politicians of the north (Jonathan's predecessors were from the North) are seen as having nurtured and funded radical Islam and many southerners look to the establishment of a Boko Haram "caliphate" as tool to achieve their ultimate dream of splitting Nigeria in two – not unlike the largely Christian South Sudan split from the Muslim northern Sudan in 2011. The drop in oil prices has contributed to fueling tensions. When the price of a barrel of crude oil was 120 dollars, the inhabitants of the south agreed to share the wealth, but now that oil has dropped to less than USD\$ 50, there is less 'cake' to be shared and too little for a country of 170 million people. Finally, Boko Haram's insurgency has allowed the Government to avoid having to confront the corruption of the ruling class, maintaining the focus on security issues rather than embarrassing questions on the management of public funds.

The presidential elections of 2011 caused the deaths of 800 people, before and after the vote, highlighting the contrasts between the Muslim north and the Christian south. The Boko Haram caliphate threats may exacerbate tensions as the southern elites want to maintain control of the wealth while those of the north want at all costs to regain political power. This suggests that electoral fraud claims could abound, leading to more violence. In this mess, whoever wins, will be too busy to look after the economic spoils to worry about Boko Haram, which has, rather, acted as a convenient political scapegoat.