

Nigeria - Boko Haram, a toxic and deadly mix of religion, politics and 'exclusion'

Boko Haram plans to overthrow secular Nigerian government and establish a 'pure' Islamic state in northern Nigeria. Is the threat real or over-blown media hype?

ABUJA, FCT, NIGERIA, May 9, 2014 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A little known Islamic youth movement from the north-eastern part of Nigeria started advocating against social injustice and political corruption in 2002, but today it is claimed the group now has aspirations to destabilise and overthrow the secular government, establish a 'pure' Islamic state ruled by sharia law in northern Nigeria and remove western influences in the region. Is the threat from Boko Haram against the 'Nigerian state' real or over-blown media hype?



Michelle Obama in support of the #bringbackourgirls campaign to find over 230 girls abducted in Nigeria

Nigeria has an estimated population of 170 million with a religious composition of an equal ratio of Christians and Muslims; most Christians live in the southern part of the country whilst the Muslims mainly live in the north. Although Nigeria is a secular state, religion has and continues to play a dominant role in Nigerian politics; the clearest evidence of this occurred when the former President of Nigeria Olusegun Obasanjo legitimatised the implementation of sharia law as a basis of the executive and judicial branches of government in twelve of the nineteen states in the northern part of Nigeria in 1999-2000.

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Ken Uwotu

Religious extremism is an ideology considered to be far outside the mainstream attitudes of society. Umar Mamodu, a scholar and Boko Haram historian talks about the year Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad ("People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad") now popularly called Boko Haram was formed by its

leader, Mohammed Yusuf. Umar Mamodu recounts frequent ideological clashes between the moderate Islamic teachings of the prominent Sheikh Jafaar Adam and his disciple, Mohammed Yusuf at the Mahammadu Ndimi Mosque in Maiduguri, Borno State; the disputes were frequently over Mohammed Yusuf 's stricter interpretation of the Qur'an. It is also public knowledge Mohammed Yusuf was expelled from two mosques in Maiduguri by Muslim clerics for propagating what was widely regarded as 'radical' views. Despite the Boko Haram leader's extreme views, he was regarded as a

charismatic figure and acclaimed to be very successful in attracting unemployed local youths by speaking out against social injustice and political corruption in his religious preaching; his messages resonated among the locals and united the people to the groups' cause.

In the early years of the insurgency, the uprising was perceived by many as a religious conflict; Muslims against Christians, with the burning of churches, killing of Christian preachers however as time went by, it became apparent the insurgency's ruthless tactics of killing and maiming extended its reach to virtually anyone who opposed its extreme religious views including well respected Muslim Imams and clerics. The assassination attempts on the Emir of Kano Al Hajj Ado Bayero and the Sultan of Sokoto Alhaji Saad Abubakar III are clear examples of the group's intent. The conflict ravaging parts of north-east Nigeria has its roots in religion but today the insurgency is seen as a 'toxic mix' of Islamic militants, criminal elements and disgruntled politicians; the Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima describes the brand 'Boko Haram' as "a franchise that anyone can buy into; it's something like a Bermuda Triangle".

The Nigerian president Dr. Goodluck Jonathan in January 2012 claimed Boko Haram 'sympathisers' may have infiltrated the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of government as well as the police and armed forces, this pronouncement strengthens the argument of those who believe the insurgency has a political element.

A comprehensive solution to end the insurgency must include the political will and commitment from the government to address the socio-economic issues affecting the region. Economic data from the National Bureau of Statistic (NBS), 2012/2013 show the average poverty rate in the North-west geopolitical zone ranks highest in the country at 71.4 per cent followed by North-east, 69.1 per cent and North-central, 60.7 per cent while poverty is least prevalent in the South-west, with an average of 49.8 per cent. NBS data highlights a poverty rate of 69.1 per cent in the region where the insurgency is most active; further analysis reveals the North-west and North-central geopolitical zones should be 'red-flagged' by the government as potentially fertile grounds for insurgent activities because of the 'very high' unemployment rates in these zones.

The government has made great strides in recent times in its attempt to contain and deal with the issues fueling the conflict; the government's decision to enter into an agreement with Niger Republic to jointly patrol portions of the 930 mile long border stretch demonstrates a commitment to secure the nation's borders. In order to effectively police the borders in the affected area of insurgent activities, the government must place greater emphasis on intelligence cooperation with the neighbouring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger and forge partnerships with countries who have specific expertise in the use of aerial satellite imagery and communication technology to assist security forces identify suspicious movements and other intelligence related activities on the ground, this action will compliment the border policing efforts.

The Minister of Finance Dr. Mrs Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, recently announced plans by the government to implement a special development plan for the northeast region of the country, this is a welcomed development but some might argue the government's response in attempting to deal with the 'inclusive issue' in the region is coming late as key economic data has shown for some time now that the north east region has a higher poverty rate than the nation's average; others might say the slow response from the government in dealing with the socio-economic issues in the affected region may have contributed in some ways to insurgency today.

Most Nigerians would like to see the government move towards adopting a more 'pre-emptive' approach in responding to potential issues of national importance. The writer affirms Nigeria's rich and diverse cultures, the sense of 'oneness' every Nigerian currently enjoys today and the very fabrics of Nigerian society will be under threat if the people allow religious extremism either in the

form of Christianity, Islam or traditional religion to prevail.

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