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Is Nigeria a Hotbed of Islamic Extremism?

Summary

- Recent incidences of ethno-religious violence in northern Nigeria have alarmed the international community to the point where Nigeria is now perceived as a potential breeding ground for transnational terrorism and violent religious extremism.
- According to Nigeria expert John Paden, this characterization is false. If anything, Nigeria is a hotbed of Islamic moderation.
- Religious violence in Nigeria must be understood as part of a complicated political context in a country striving to maintain national unity amongst an ethnically diverse population split evenly between Christians and Muslims.
- Islam has a long history in Nigeria and has largely maintained a decidedly “West African” character, and less dependent on outside influences from the Arab world.
- While religion has been and remains an inseparable and contentious component of politics in Nigeria, there have been a variety of mechanisms used successfully on state and local levels to manage religious conflict for the sake of national unity and promotion of religious tolerance.
- Each of the three most recent instances of violent ethno-religious extremism does not necessarily signal a growing trend in a religious extremism. Rather, they reflect a complex set of contentious political and social issues, such as constitutional questions over the rights of “settlers” and “indigenes,” and grassroots frustration with respect to governance and corruption, which manifest in ethno-religious violence.
- The most successful way to combat religious violence in Nigeria, according to Paden, is by working with Nigerian moderates to push for national and local level reforms, empower traditional leaders and promote interfaith dialogue.

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Hotbed of Extremism?

In January and March of 2010, ethno-religious riots in and around the city of Jos, Nigeria killed more than 500 people. Initially, Christians killed Muslims, followed by Muslim reprisal killings. Houses, mosques and churches were burnt down.

On December 25, 2009, 23-year-old Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab infamously tried to blow up a plane en route from Amsterdam to Detroit.

In July and August 2009, hundreds of people were killed in the city of Maiduguri (Borno state) when an Islamist group called Boko Haram attacked police stations, and the police responded with a heavy hand.

Given these violent incidences, the U.S. became alarmed, and following the Christmas incident in Detroit, imposed a number of travel restrictions against Nigeria. Such restrictions seem to imply that the United States and international community see Nigeria as a potential breeding ground for international terrorism. Is this increased scrutiny well-placed? Is Nigeria really a hotbed of Islamic extremism, or are these recent events the exception rather than the rule?

To address these questions and delve deeper into the history of religious conflict in Nigeria, the U.S. Institute of Peace held a public event on March 15, 2010 featuring John Paden, the Clarence Robinson Professor of International Studies at George Mason University. Paden, author of “Faith and Politics in Nigeria” and numerous other publications, has been studying Islam in Nigeria for more than 30 years and is one of the foremost experts on Nigerian religious affairs.

According to Paden, Nigeria is not a hotbed of Islamic extremism. If anything, Nigeria is a hotbed of Islamic moderation. Religious violence in Nigeria must be understood as part of a complicated political context in a country striving to maintain national unity amongst an ethnically diverse population split evenly between Christians and Muslims.

Mapping Islam in Nigeria

Nigeria is a key player in the Muslim world. With an estimated 150 million people, the country is approximately half Muslim and half Christian. Since the 19th century, Islam in the northern regions of Nigeria has been dominated by the Sokoto caliphate, an institution which remains the backbone of Nigerian Islam to this day. However, the balance of power between the Borno-dominated areas in the Northeast and the Sokoto caliphate domains has also been a constant challenge in Nigerian politics.

While much of West African Islam has been influenced by Sufism, the Sokoto Caliphate has maintained a decidedly West African version of Islam, less dependent on outside influences in the Arab world. However, in the 20th century there has been a revival in the Sufi brotherhoods in Nigeria in part due to links with Senegalese Sufis. Today, the most prevalent is the Tijaniyya—by far the largest Sufi brotherhood in Nigeria, and probably in all of West Africa.

A countervailing group to the Sufis in the north and throughout Nigeria is the Izala movement, originally led by Abubakar Gumi, which formed in reaction to the perceived “innovation” practiced by the Sufi brotherhoods. The Izala instead practice a strict interpretation of the Koran and Hadith.

Muslim organizations are also quite prevalent among women and youth. Muslim student societies are important fixtures at all Nigerian universities, and the National Council on Muslim Youth Organizations (NACOMYO), along with the Muslim women’s umbrella group, the Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), play significant roles in civic life and politics.

In the 1980s, there was an effort to bring all the disparate Islamic movements in Nigeria under one umbrella, the National Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), which is now considered the leading Islamic organization for Nigeria. By tradition, the Sultan of Sokoto is the president of the NSCIA, the Shehu of Borno is the vice president, and a distinguished Yoruba legal scholar is the general-secretary.

In addition, there are a number of “anti-establishment” Shiite networks gaining strength in Nigeria. While there is no public evidence that there is a “Taliban” movement, as we know it in Afghanistan, there is a Sunni sect called the Boko Haram whose leader died in police custody after he and his followers launched a campaign to challenge the police and the government. While the Boko Haram gained notoriety after the incident, they are a relatively small movement in Nigeria.

Church, Mosque and State

According to Paden, religion has been and remains an inseparable component of politics in Nigeria. For example, during the British colonial period northern Nigeria was ruled by Sharia law. However, when Nigeria gained independence, criminal jurisdiction was transferred to the national level. In 1999-2000, however, the 12 far northern states re-established Sharia in the criminal domain, with reference to Muslims only. Each state began to interpret criminal law in a slightly different way. In the central states, particularly in Kaduna, many initially feared that Sharia would be applied to Christians. This fear led to demonstrations in which Christian protestors took over the governor's office, setting off a wave of killings and reprisals.

While the tensions between Christians and Muslims over the role of Sharia in government had the potential to split the country politically, the national elections in 2003 forced those running for election to create national coalitions to support their candidacies. Candidates were therefore unable to incite heated debate over Sharia without losing their coalitions. By the 2007 elections, the issue was no longer on the political radar.

While the tension over the role of Sharia law has tempered at the national level, other issues related to religion—such as balancing ethno-religious representation in political parties and establishing non-preferentialism for religion in politics—remain a concern in local and national politics.

Efforts at Interfaith Dialogue

There are a variety of efforts on both the national and grassroots levels to promote interfaith dialogue and communication between Muslims and Christians to prevent future outbreaks of violence and promote ethno-religious tolerance and federal cohesion. On the national level, the leaders of NSCIA and the Christian umbrella group, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), have stated their commitment to interfaith dialogue and some form of peacebuilding between the two communities. The government of Nigeria has also used a variety of mechanisms in the past to manage religious conflict for the sake of national unity. For instance, in the 1990s the government moved the federal capital from Lagos, in the southwest, to Abuja, a city with a symbolically neutral location in the center of the country, and which became home to both a national mosque and a Christian ecumenical center.

On a local level, leaders like Pastor James Wuye and Imam Mohammed Ashafa—whom USIP has helped sponsor to mediate religious conflicts in places like Kaduna, Jos and Bauchi—have been effective in working with communities to mitigate conflict, promote tolerance and coexistence, and address the root causes of conflict.

Incidences of Presumed Extremism

While the majority of the Nigerian population (both Muslim and Christian) are moderate, what catches the attention of the West are the instances of violent extremism. However, according to Paden, it is important not to treat these cases as the norm, nor simply as instances of religious extremism, as religious conflict in Nigeria tends to be only one layer in a complex set of contentious issues. Rather, it is useful to analyze the triggers that incite the conflict, the demographics of those who participate in the violence, and the efficacy of government responses, so as to gather lessons that can be used to help prevent such outbreaks in the future.

In the Far North

The violent anti-government campaign of Boko Haram made headlines in August 2009 after the group attacked police stations near the town of Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state, setting off

days of fighting and hundreds of deaths (mostly of Boko Haram members). In this case, shock over the group's actions was superseded by the harsh critique of the excessive use of violence by the police to subdue the uprising, and their alleged extra-judicial killing of the Boko Haram leader, Mohammed Yusuf.

The Boko Haram—which literally means “Western education is forbidden”—was mostly comprised of disaffected young people and unemployed university students and graduates. According to Paden, this is a reflection of a general frustration at the grassroots level, especially among semi-educated youth, with respect to governance and corruption.

The incident also ignited debate over whether state governments should help prevent religious violence by issuing licenses to preachers, thereby establishing norms that religious leaders, like Mohammed Yusuf, would have to adhere to in order to lead a congregation. While this may seem to many Westerners like an infringement on free speech or an intrusion of the state into religious affairs, Paden notes that there is a history of such licenses in Nigeria, based on the argument that when a preacher “cries fire in a crowded (religious) theater,” their rights to “free speech” are no longer protected. Many northern governors are now setting up mechanisms to monitor preaching in order to have a better idea of when conflicts like this may occur.

In the Middle Belt

The recent violence in Jos, in Plateau state, in March of 2010 appears to be a case of extremist Muslims fighting against Christians. However, the conflict in Jos reflects a long history and a complexity of issues -- at the core of which is a constitutional question about which ethnic groups are defined as “indigenes” of Jos and which are “settlers.” These repeated cycles of “religious violence” occur in Jos because on a local level the constitutional question as to whether Jos's Muslim migrant settlers should have equal rights as the indigenous Christians remains unanswered. These cycles are amplified further by uncertainty at the national level over the balance of power between Christians and Muslims, as we see with the tensions surrounding the mysterious illness of current President Umaru Yar'Adua, a Muslim, and the transfer of power to Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, as acting president. Therefore, events like the 2008 local government election have catalyzed violence and reprisals, leading to hundreds of deaths in a matter of days.

Exporting extremism

Finally, we have the instance of Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab “exporting extremism”—a Nigerian man, trained in Yemen by al-Qaida, who attempted to blow up a plane bound for the United States on Christmas Day. However, as Paden notes, Abdulmuttab does not necessarily represent a growing threat of Islamic extremism in Nigeria. In fact, one reason we know so much about Abdulmutallab is because he comes from a moderate Muslim family, and his father notified the U.S. embassy that his son was linking up with extremist groups in Yemen. Abdulmutallab's father also helped establish the first Islamic University in Nigeria as a way for young people to engage with a West African, moderate form of Islam and to protect against the extremist influences of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

Recommendations

If religious violence is going to be resolved in Nigeria, according to Paden, it must be the moderate majority that takes on the responsibility to do so. And, they must engage at all levels, especially at the grassroots.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

On March 15th, 2010 USIP held a public event to address the recent incidences of ethno-religious violence in northern Nigeria and the increased scrutiny of Nigeria as hotbed of violent extremism. The event featured John Paden, Clarence Robinson professor of International Studies at George Mason University. Paden, author of "Faith and Politics in Nigeria" and many other books, has been studying Muslims in Nigeria for more than 30 years. The event was moderated by David Smock, vice president of the Institute's Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution and associate vice president of USIP's Religion and Peacemaking program, one of the Institute's Centers of Innovation. Stephanie Schwartz, who wrote this Peace Brief, is a program specialist in USIP's Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution and the author of "Youth in Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Agents of Change," published by USIP Press in May 2010.



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At the national level, Paden notes that leadership is crucial. The question over whether a Christian or Muslim is president has clear consequences at the local level, as seen in Jos. In addition, the extensive increase in airport security and profiling of Nigerian airline passengers has the unintended consequences of breeding more frustration and anti-Western sentiment. According to Paden the international community should work with Nigerian leadership to improve airport security in a culturally sensitive manner.

At the grassroots level, Paden suggested a number of reforms that could be put in place to stem the cycle of violence:

- Resolve the "settlers" and "indigenes" distinction at a constitutional level.
- Institute police reform so that police are accountable at the local level, well trained and in touch with realities on the ground in order to proactively prevent violence, rather than react in the aftermath.
- Expand the role of local universities and nongovernmental organizations to train communities in conflict prevention and resolution.
- Enact electoral reform that establishes a level playing field and provides a non-violent method for citizens to express their frustration with corruption and abuse of power and vote for accountability and transparency.
- Empower traditional leaders, who are currently underutilized, to play a constructive role in interfaith dialogue and conflict mitigation. While traditional leaders were stripped of their political power long ago, they remain a major institution that has eyes and ears on the ground.

At the end of the day, while Paden believes that Nigeria is not a "hotbed of Islamic extremism," he believes that the most successful way to combat religious violence in Nigeria is by working with Nigerian moderates to push for national and local level reforms and promote interfaith dialogue. Without such efforts, flare-ups may continue not just in Jos, but throughout the country.