

Youth Unemployment and Armed Insurrection in Post-Military Nigeria: The Contending Issues

Dele Babalola¹

University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom

Caleb Ayuba²

Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), Abuja, Nigeria

This article provides an overview of the internal conflicts within Nigeria, doing so primarily through explaining the role of Nigeria's youth in either igniting or sustaining the types of insurgency that have plagued the country in the post-military era. In pursuing this, the paper focuses on the activities of the Niger Delta militants, which dominated the start of the current democratic dispensation, and those of the Boko Haram insurgents in the north. The paper suggests socio-economic empowerment of the youths as an antidote to youth unemployment, and, by extension, as a way to avert future armed insurrection and other forms of violent conflicts that have become synonymous with Nigerian youths.

Key Words: Insurrection in Nigeria; Niger Delta; Boko Haram; Nigerian youth; Violence; Frustration; Recent Nigerian history.

Introduction

The challenges currently confronting the Nigerian state transcend the previously simple case of boundary disputes and communal clashes to become something much more complex like armed insurrection. Insecurity posed by different forms of insurgency is now the most conspicuous feature of the country. Besides wreaking all

¹ Corresponding author: Dr Dele Babalola is an Assistant Lecturer, School of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom. Email: delebabs@yahoo.com

² Caleb Ayuba is a PhD candidate, Bayero University, Kano, Nigeria, and a Research Officer, Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR), Abuja, Nigeria.

sorts of havoc on the country and its population, insurgency has attached to the Nigerian state the labels 'dysfunctional state', 'weak state' and 'failed state'. The murderous activities of Boko Haram, an Islamist terrorist group, have particularly constituted a serious threat to the security of the country, as well as its existence as a legitimate entity. There is no denying that the spate of insurgency that permeates post-military Nigeria is traceable partly to the air of freedom enjoyed by the citizens. However, as shall be demonstrated in relation to the reign of terror orchestrated by the dreaded Boko Haram in the north and the series of militant activities in Nigeria's oil-rich region, the excruciating pangs of poverty, deeply rooted in the unemployment profile of the country, are a major explanatory factor of why many young men partake in armed conflict against their country.

Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 after fifteen years of military dictatorship provides the aggrieved in the country with an avenue to voice their grievances in a manner that was considered unimaginable during the military era. For instance, the people of the Niger Delta who had considered certain government policies inimical to their local interest seized the opportunity presented by democratic governance to intensify their quest for an equitable distribution of Nigeria's wealth. This campaign, however, took the form of armed struggle, with the youths taking a leading role. The ongoing campaign of terror in the northern part of Nigeria is a different type of expression of resentment, which also has never before been experienced in the history of the country. The question, therefore, is: what drives these young men to join armed groups? This is the fundamental question we aim to address in this paper.

This paper posits that the emergence of armed groups in the country's nascent democracy is firmly rooted in a myriad of socio-economic factors. However, for reasons of expediency, we have decided to focus on youth unemployment. Our central argument is that the swelling ranks of unemployed youths have fed the growth of insurrection in Nigeria. Unemployed youths are driven to violence

by those conditions that give rise to frustration and hopelessness. This assertion gains currency amongst Nigerians, who believe that Boko Haram leadership takes advantage of the unemployment situation in the country to recruit young men, in particular into their ranks. Having been radicalised by controversial Islamic clerics who cajole them into believing that their efforts will result in an Islamic state devoid of corruption, as well as earn them a place in paradise, jobless youths, especially those in the north, become willing tools in the hands of terrorists.

This article will, above all, provide an overview of the recent history of Nigeria and of the principal contributors to its internal conflicts. This overview will become apparent as we discuss certain elements in particular – the widespread youth unemployment and poverty that give rise to frustration and aggression.

Theoretical Explanations of Insurrection

Scholars of conflict studies have, to varying degrees, postulated that conflict is a dependent variable in the sense that it is usually caused by other variables. Some have particularly linked societal conflicts to failure of the state (Rotberg, 2003; Zartman, 1995), while others maintain that aggression, caused by frustration, is at the heart of most conflicts (Dollard et al., 1939; Gurr, 1970, 1993). The state-failure thesis contends that the absence of a responsive state capable of delivering needed services sometimes propels nonstate actors, such as religious and community leaders, to intervene in ameliorating the plight of the poor and aggrieved members of society, who in turn reward the leaders with utmost loyalty (Maiangwa et al., 2012: 43). The frustration–aggression theory, on the other hand, holds that “the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression” (Dollard et al., 1939: 1).

The frustration–aggression theory simply attempts to explain why some people, or groups of people, become aggressive and violent in certain situations. The theory suggests that social movements and protest groups, for instance, emerge when individuals or groups of individuals become frustrated due to, in most cases, certain societal

ills such as unemployment and poverty. In other words, frustration tends to turn into aggression, which may then result in the frustrated person engaging in acts of violence. Not being in gainful employment, for example, especially in a country like Nigeria where the welfare system is non-existent, could be very frustrating and may result in aggressive behaviour. However, a fear of punishment means that aggression does not always develop into violence (Dollard et al., 1939: 32–4).

Scholars predisposed to the frustration–aggression thesis as an explanatory factor in the ignition and sustenance of conflict are of the view that a group’s shared grievances about marginalisation, for instance, tend to give rise to violent responses against the source of their marginalisation (Gurr, 1970, 1993). These scholars see frustration as the tension that results when someone or a group of people perceive that they are being prevented from achieving their goal. This theory is significant in explaining the petro-violence that pervaded the Niger Delta region, and the Boko Haram reign of terror in which the aggrieved youths chose to target the Nigerian state, believing that the state is responsible for their woes. As shall be demonstrated later, frustration, precipitated by such socio-economic problems as unemployment and poverty, has caused certain individuals and groups to be aggressive towards the Nigerian state. Therefore, in this article, our discussion of armed insurrection, especially in regards to post-military Nigeria, will be situated within the context of the frustration–aggression theory, but this is not suggesting that the state-failure thesis will not be given the attention it deserves.

Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

In general, unemployment has become a major macro-economic challenge facing both the developed and the underdeveloped economies, especially since the global economic crisis of 2007, which deepened the level of poverty across the world. The *African Economic Outlook* estimates that 53 million of Africa’s 200 million young men between ages 15 and 24 are in unstable employment and 40 million

are out of work, while 18 million of these are looking for a job and 22 million have already given up (AfDB et al., 2012). Despite the country’s impressive economic growth between 2010 and 2012, unemployment remains very high and more than 60 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line (AfDB et al., 2012: 2).

Table 1: Nigeria’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), 1998–2014

Year	Number of Countries Surveyed	Country Rank	CPI Score (Out of 10) ³
1998	85	81	1.9
1999	99	98	1.6
2000	90	90	1.2
2001	91	90	1.0
2002	102	101	1.6
2003	133	132	1.4
2004	145	144	1.6
2005	158	152	1.9
2006	163	142	2.2
2007	179	147	2.2
2008	180	121	2.7
2009	180	130	2.5
2010	178	134	2.4
2011	183	143	2.4
2012	176	139	2.7
2013	177	144	2.5
2014	175	136	2.7

Source: Babalola, 2015: 63

The causes of youth unemployment are multifaceted, but in Nigeria, the impact of elite corruption cannot be overemphasised. Corruption is not limited to any particular country, but is widespread in oil-rich Nigeria, which is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Table 1 above shows Nigeria’s corruption rating in the post-

³ This scale ranges from 0 (highly corrupt) to 10 (very clean).

military era as provided by Transparency International.

The lack of public scrutiny that characterised public spending during the military era was reverted to at all levels of government in the post-1999 period, with political elites sharing the spoils of office with impunity (Mustapha, 2009: 76). In Nigeria, access to the state is synonymous with access to state resources, which is in turn synonymous with the economic advancement of the individual. With the absence of checks on office holders, public funds that could have been invested in infrastructure with potential for creating jobs are systematically siphoned by the elites through misappropriation.

A low level of education, which has in turn created a considerable skills gap among youth at working age, has also contributed to the rise in youth unemployment in Nigeria. Poverty and lack of financial support from governments have limited most young men and women's accessibility to higher education, which would have provided them with the necessary educational qualifications and knowledge required in the modern job market. For example, it is not uncommon for multinational oil companies to resist the acquisition of oil expertise by nationals principally because of their belief that only the oil giants possess the technical know-how of oil exploration, while the local people lack the required skills (Turner, 1980). At the other extreme, the increasing number of university and polytechnic graduates leads to an increase in the supply of educated manpower relative to demand. Nigeria has about a hundred universities and a similar number of polytechnics, all of which produce tens of thousands of graduates each year. Also, more often than not, there is a mismatch between the graduates' skills and what is required for available employment opportunities.

In Nigeria, as in the rest of Africa, rural–urban migration also causes youth unemployment, as it is common for youths in search of greener pastures to migrate to urban areas. As Rosenthal (2012) observed, around 50 per cent of Nigerians are urban dwellers, and the country's unemployment rate is nearly 50 per cent for people in urban areas aged 15 to 24. There is usually the assumption that it is not difficult to find

lucrative jobs in the cities because of the high concentration of industries. The availability of social amenities also makes the cities more attractive. These factors combined result in the population saturation that usually characterises urban centres, which consequently creates a scenario in which too many young people are busy chasing too few jobs.

Also, Nigeria's appalling security situation, especially during the post-military era, has combined with factors such as poor energy supply to render the investment climate non-conducive. Nigerian and foreign investors alike have either refused to invest in the country or have moved their investments to neighbouring countries where security and energy supply are relatively guaranteed, thus resulting in capital flight. It is logical to expect low investment to result in low demand for labour.

Having provided an overview of the key factors responsible for youth unemployment in Nigeria, it then becomes imperative to highlight some of its consequences before proceeding to critically examine how the menace has contributed to the emergence of armed groups in the country. Economically, unemployment represents a significant waste of national economic resources. It also tends to reduce a country's aggregate demand, giving rise to low consumption, and, with it, low income tax receipts. For the unemployed, one obvious consequence is low income, which eventually translates to a low standard of living that may, in extreme cases, lead to poverty. Unemployment contributes to poverty and poverty may also create unemployment, as people may be too poor to equip themselves or their children for the job market.

In contextualising the grievous quandary of unemployment in Nigeria, we make reference to the recruitment exercise conducted by the Nigerian Immigration Service (NIS) in 2014. The NIS advertised about four thousand positions, but over half a million young graduates showed interest. On the day of the aptitude test, which took place in a very small field, over twenty people were smothered or trampled to death, including four pregnant women, whilst several hundred were injured (<http://www.punchng.com/news/18-die-in-immigration-recruitment-exercise/>; <http://leadership.ng/news/355764/immigration-recruitment-tragedy-23-feared-dead>). The case was worsened by the fact that the sum

of one thousand naira was collected from each applicant, most of whom had been jobless for a considerable period of time. This situation is increasingly becoming the norm each time government establishments advertise vacancies.

Niger Delta Youths and the Violent Struggle for Equitable Revenue Allocation

In Nigeria, a classic case of youth activism in the pursuit of a political cause and the effects on the generation of violence may be found in the Niger Delta youth movements, whose activities since the country's return to democratic rule have caused every government untold stress. Nigeria's oil-centred economy transformed the Niger Delta region into the goose that lays the golden egg for the country, as the bulk of the country's oil is derived from the region, making it the most central to Nigeria's economic prosperity. Paradoxically, the national oil economy profoundly impacts the domestic economy of the region, as environmental degradation affects the economic life of the people. Niger Delta inhabitants are predominantly engaged in farming and fishing for their livelihood, but the oil economy has dislocated their socio-economic life, with farmers losing farmlands to either installation of oil infrastructure or to oil spills and in most cases with no adequate compensation. The negative effects of oil spillage, water pollution and gas flaring on the environment, as well as on the local inhabitants, have been well documented and therefore need no rehashing here (see Ejobowah, 2000; Frynas, 2001; Obi and Rustad, 2011). Decades of oil exploration in the Niger Delta region have resulted in colossal environmental degradation, and this is one of the premises upon which the struggle for an equitable revenue distribution system was based.

The emergence of an oil-centric economy, particularly since the oil boom of 1973, which opened the country's larger economy to a massive inflow of petro-dollars, resulted in mass youth unemployment in the oil-rich region. Most youths became unemployed following the destruction of their farmlands and the pollution of available rivers. Unfortunately, these young men found it difficult to get jobs in the oil industry due to its capital-intensive nature. The oil economy not only weakens the mainstay of the traditional economic activities of this region, which previously

thrived on agriculture, but also created a huge population of unemployed youths. This scenario is aptly captured by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which described the region as “suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor, and endemic conflict” (UNDP, 2006: 9). It may therefore be argued that the violent clamour for a fairer revenue allocation system was borne out of the widespread feeling of deprivation.

It is worth noting that after 1999, oil-producing states in the Niger Delta had their share of national oil-generated revenue increased by 13 per cent (FGN, 1999: 66). This was a constitutional requirement, but the move was also aimed to redress the deep-seated deprivation that has characterised the region. However, the supposed benefits of extra revenue are constantly eroded by corruption (Babalola, 2014). Prior to this period, the country’s revenue-sharing practice revolved largely around the principle of derivation in which the source states obtained 50 per cent of the revenue derived from their areas, but this was de-emphasised during the military era. This change of fortune notwithstanding, Niger Delta elites continuously insist that the systematic downgrading of the derivation principle was a form of internal oppression of the ethnic minorities who populated the region. For them, reverting to the fiscal arrangement that pays considerable attention to derivation was the only viable solution to the conflict in the area.

Nigeria is an oil-rich country, but its economic story has been characterised by a lack of appreciable growth and increasing poverty, a phenomenon Terry Lynn Karl (1997, 1999) describe as oil’s “paradox of plenty”. The massive inflow of oil rents into the country’s economy, especially since the boom period, has not provided the necessary impetus for economic development, as oil revenues are not ploughed back into productive economic activities. Mustapha (2009: 77) poignantly pointed out that the rise in the international price of crude oil from around \$12 a barrel in May 1999, when Nigeria returned to civilian rule, to \$67 in January 2008, and hovering around

\$100 for years thereafter, has resulted in a massive windfall for all levels of government, yet the gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' in the country continues to widen.

The scenario of 'want in the midst of plenty' was evidently the driving force behind the petro-violence that became the conspicuous feature of the Niger Delta region in the post-1999 period. As highlighted by Babalola (2014: 120), successive governments at the centre have, since the country's independence in 1960, put in place certain palliative measures aimed at solving the problem of the underdevelopment that has become a feature of the oil-producing region. Some of these measures include the establishment of such agencies as the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1960, the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (NDBDA) in 1976, the Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992 and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000. However, this top-down developmentalist approach, as remarked by Mustapha (2009), has not adequately addressed the socio-economic issues raised by the different interest groups in the area. Agencies established to solve problems have themselves become part of the problem, as they are turned into conduits through which a few individuals within the region enrich themselves (see, for example, Babalola, 2014, Omotola, 2007). The failure of these agencies explains why in 2008, the late Umar Yar'Adua-led Federal Government established the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs ostensibly to support the developmental efforts of the central government and those of the myriad of multinational oil companies (MOCs) operating in the region.

Oil giants like Shell, MOBIL and Chevron make huge profits from their exploitation of oil in the Niger Delta, but their contributions towards the social and economic development of the area have been negligible. Oil companies operating in Nigeria are constantly criticised for putting profit ahead of fighting poverty, for instance, especially in the communities they operate in (Frynas, 2001; Okonta and Douglas, 2003). Successive governments at the national level have likewise been perceived to be more

interested in the maximisation of oil revenue than the well-being of the Nigerian people. The Nigerian state would not want to jeopardise its symbiotic relationship with the MOCs, which is predicated upon the dependence of the country on the oil giants for its share of the rents from the oil produced from its territory, while at the same time, the oil companies need the oil from Nigeria for their home markets and the profit calculations of their shareholders (Obi, 2006: 35).

It is indeed fair to contend that frustration drove the army of unemployed youths into armed confrontations with state security forces. The level of insurgency in this area was too overwhelming to be recounted here; nonetheless, it is important to mention a few instances.⁴ Shortly after the inauguration of a new civilian government in 1999, a group of youths under the auspices of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), said to be particularly angry with MOBIL oil for renegeing on their promise couched in what was referred to as a 'Memorandum of Understanding', barricaded MOBIL offices in the Niger Delta area for three days (*This Day*, 6 July 1999: 10). MOBIL had entered into an agreement with the community the previous year on various aspects of its relationship with the community, including an agreement to employ more people from the area. Likewise, in January 2005 militant youths numbering about three hundred from the Owaza community in Abia State stormed and forcefully shut down oil-flow stations operated by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SHDC) on the ground that Shell had not been living up to its corporate social responsibilities. This action led to the loss of 35,000 barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil production (*Punch*, 21 January 2005).

Similarly, in February 2006 MEND members clashed with men of the Joint Task Force – a Federal Government's security outfit – guarding some oil installations in the region (Babalola, 2014). The group also attacked an oil rig in November 2010, claiming that this attack and other similar ones were a reminder to the Nigerian government of the futility of

⁴ For a comprehensive account of petro-violence in the Niger Delta region after 1999, see Frynas, 2001; Obi, 2006; Obi and Rustad, 2011; Okonta and Douglas, 2003.

wasting the nation's resources in combating militancy without addressing the underlying causes of agitation, such as youth unemployment and lack of infrastructure, in the oil-producing region (<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/11/23/nigeria.mend.claim/index.html>). MEND had about two weeks earlier claimed responsibility for an attack on an oil rig and the kidnapping of seven people in the region. The group in a statement claimed that "all the abducted expatriates are well and in our safe custody" (<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/11/09/nigeria.oil.rig.kidnappings/>). MEND and other militant groups in the area had insisted that the causes of their members' agitation included the government's failure at both federal and state levels to provide them with job opportunities.

Hostage-taking was also an avenue through which the aggrieved youths expressed their anger and frustration towards the Nigerian state, but it was also used as a means, especially by the unemployed, to make a living. Foreign and Nigerian oil workers, workers of foreign construction firms and family members of Nigerian political office holders, as well as wealthy Nigerians, were kidnapped for ransom. Hostages were said to be classified according to their values, with foreign citizens commanding very high value because foreign currency was used to pay the ransom. When hostage-taking was started by MEND in mid-2005, it was principally for the purpose of drawing official attention both in and outside Nigeria to the grave environmental degradation, and socio-economic marginalisation prevalent in the oil-rich region, and its emphasis was on foreign oil workers operating in the area. This explains why the activities of the militant youths became a source of stress to the Nigerian state, as well as to the importers of the country's oil. Protests, kidnapping, outright vandalism and incessant clashes with state security agencies caused enormous destruction of properties, impacting on Nigeria's oil-earning capacity as well as on the international oil market.

The Role of Youths in the Islamist Insurgency in Northern Nigeria

The northern part of Nigeria is no stranger to ethnic, religious and other forms of violence. As a region, it has witnessed a series of convulsions, especially caused by Islamist armed movements such as

Maitatsine in the 1980s and Boko Haram, whose current reign of terror has continued to elicit national and international concern. But let us begin with Maitatsine, a dreaded sect that terrorised northern cities of Kano (1980), Kaduna (1982), Yola (1984) and Gombe (1985). This sect was led by the late controversial Islamic preacher Mohammed Marwa. Though based in Kano, Maitatsine's ceaseless confrontations with the Nigerian security forces and its violent clashes with those considered to be non-believers, including Christians and mainstream Muslims worsened Nigeria's security environment between 1980 and 1985. The killing of its notorious leader alongside about four hundred of his followers in December 1980 by the Nigerian Army signalled the beginning of the end for the movement (Isichei, 1987; Lubeck, 1985). Remnants of the sect continued with their murderous activities until 1985 when they suffered another military onslaught that eventually led to the extermination of the group.

Mohammed Marwa migrated from Marwa, in Cameroon, in 1945 and became a prominent Islamic preacher in Kano. By 1962, having been labelled a dissident preacher, Marwa was deported, but returned to the country some years later (Isichei, 1987). He was very charismatic and well-liked by many of his followers, who were mostly homeless and jobless young men, most of whom had come from the rural areas in the north, as well as from neighbouring countries like Chad, Cameroon and the Niger Republic either in search of job opportunities or to learn the Quran.

As observed by Hiskett (1987) and Isichei (1987), the Matatsine was significantly aided by the *almajiri* system, whereby parents entrust their sons, usually aged between 8 and 15 years, to an Islamic teacher (*malam*), who often takes them far from their homes. These young boys (*almajiris*) are usually sent to the streets to solicit money, food and clothes from members of the public. The *malams* are trusted to instil the discipline necessary for success in Islamic scholarship. Marwa, one of such *malams*, convinced of his calling, declared himself a prophet and distanced his movement from orthodox Islam (Isichei, 1987: 195; Lubeck, 1985: 370). Although Lubeck (1985: 370) had observed that as a social movement,

Matatsine falls into “the Mahdist-millenarian tradition, one that is associated with violent social protest during periods of social crisis” in sub-Saharan Africa, the precise brand of Islam practised by members of the movement is in doubt. What is certain, however, is that the main strand of Marwa’s teaching was his rejection of affluence, and his multitude of followers was attracted to such populist teaching.

It is pertinent to point out here that the Maitatsine uprising took place amidst the widespread deprivation that characterised Nigeria’s Second Republic (1979–83). In 1973 oil-exporting countries, including Nigeria, witnessed a boom in oil revenue, but this was halted in 1982 when the price of oil crashed in the international market. This development led to a decline in Nigeria’s foreign exchange earnings, which also resulted in a serious fiscal problem for the then civilian administration, which had to contend with increased poverty and general worsening of the citizens’ standard of living (Bangura et al., 1986). The parlous state of the economy, manifesting in scarcity, high prices, retrenchment and unemployment, notwithstanding, members of the then ruling party, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN), continued to live a life of affluence. This explains why Marwa’s constant attack on material comfort and Western materialism enjoyed by the privileged few easily appealed to the unemployed and poverty-stricken young men who saw the prevailing distribution of wealth as being lopsided. These young men needed no further justification to declare war on a society they believed was responsible for their privation.

An important development that threatened the security of Nigeria in the post-military era was the adoption of Sharia law in the Muslim-dominated north of the country.⁵ In October 1999 the northern state of Zamfara extended Sharia to cover both civil and criminal matters, and eleven other states followed suit.⁶ As might be expected in a multi-

⁵ Sharia is the Islamic legal system, and is based on the Quran, the Islamic holy book, and the Hadith, a narration of Prophet Mohammed’s (the Prophet of Islam) life, his teachings and what he approved.

⁶ In total, twelve states—Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Kebbi, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara—adopted Sharia.

religious society like Nigeria, the idea was roundly condemned, mostly by non-Muslims residing in the affected states who argued that the move was an abuse of their human rights, as well as a politically motivated attempt by the Muslims to lord themselves over non-Muslims. The bone of contention was that while northern Muslims were in support of the full implementation of Sharia as a matter of their fundamental human rights, the Christians were against its adoption on the grounds that Nigeria is a secular state and that their interests as Christians would be jeopardised.

Critics outside the northern region also argued that the move was an aberration, as it was an attempt by these states to adopt Islam as state religion, thereby contravening Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, which states that “the Government of the Federation or of a State shall not adopt any religion as State religion” (FGN, 1999: 8). Adamolekun (2005: 395) indeed argued that implementing Sharia in its fullest form contradicted the established practice, which only allowed customary or Sharia courts to deal with civil matters. These arguments are predicated on the secularity of the country. Nigeria’s federal arrangement recognises the inherent cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity that characterises the country and also provides the necessary institutional framework for reconciling this multiplicity with unity (see FGN, 1999; Mustapha, 2009; Suberu, 2009).

The apprehension showed by non-Muslims is understandable given the history of religious turbulence in the northern part of the country (see, for example, Hiskett, 1987; Ibrahim, 1989, 1991; Isichei, 1987; Lubeck, 1985; Suberu, 2009). However, it is important to mention that Sharia was not new in the north, although it was limited to civil matters and practised only by Muslims. According to Mustapha (2009: 75), shortly before the country’s independence in 1960 northern regional leaders, Muslims and Christians alike reached a compromise that culminated in the 1958 Penal Code that restricted Sharia to civil matters (see also Akande, 1991). And contrary to the views expressed in certain quarters, particularly in the south, the extension of the Islamic legal system to the realm of criminal matters was in response to the overwhelming demands of the Muslim electorate in those states (Suberu, 2009). The then governor of Zamfara

state, Ahmed Yerima, had promised during his campaign to introduce Sharia to address widespread societal decadence, arguing that, under Sharia law, “[t]here will be no stealing or corruption and people’s mental and spiritual wellbeing is going to be encouraged” (quoted in Abah, 2006: 3). Thus, the adoption of Sharia was a dividend of democracy in Nigeria’s nascent democracy and it enjoyed popular support within the Islamic populations of these states, who had hoped that the legal system would help to rid the society of corruption that was prevalent during the military era.

As mentioned earlier, the full implementation of Sharia resulted from a multiparty electoral process which has allowed Nigerian citizens to make demands on the federal political system. One feature of the Sharia adopted by these states is that it was practised within the framework of a democratic federal system and was implemented by democratically elected leaders (Mustapha, 2009; Suberu, 2009). It must also be pointed out that the establishment of a Sharia court in any state is at the discretion of the state, and parties to a dispute must agree that the matter be determined in accordance with Islamic law. Most importantly, the country’s apex court, that is, the Supreme Court of Nigeria, can overturn judgments passed by Sharia courts. As a matter of fact, what was experienced during this period in the northern part of the country was an assertion of the autonomy of these states in the legal and religious spheres within Nigeria’s federal system. In other words, the adoption of Sharia is not unconstitutional and does not undermine the country’s federal principle; nonetheless, it was a potential recipe for religious conflict.

There was little or no surprise when the issue developed into major sectarian violence in which the unemployed youth constituency was very active. The religious riots that plagued the northern states of Kaduna and Kano, in particular between 2000 and 2004, were reminiscent of the events that preceded the civil war in 1967. However, Sharia did not achieve its widely publicised objective of ridding the society of corruption as envisaged by northern Muslims; rather, it deepened the religious polarisation in the country (Mustapha, 2009: 76). The then President, Olusegun Obasanjo, repeatedly claimed that the Sharia adopted in the

Muslim-dominated states was a “political Sharia” that would fade away, and, as predicted, the legal system faded away in no time. At the end of his administration in 2007, Obasanjo told a congregation of Christians at an annual event that he warned the Sharia actors in the north that if the Sharia they sought to implement was indeed from God, it would survive, but that if it were politically motivated, it would fizzle out (*Punch News*, 12 August 2007).

Boko Haram’s reign of terror, especially from 2009 when the group clashed with state security agencies, has particularly seen the country’s security threat alert raised to an unprecedented level. The group was formed in 2002 in the northern city of Maiduguri as an Islamic religious outfit, but attracted worldwide attention in 2009 (Maiangwa et al., 2012; Onuoha, 2014). Since then, it has carried out a series of attacks and abductions, including the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in April 2014. Central to the notorious sect’s objective is the enthronement of an Islamic society in which Sharia law will be the overarching principle. Boko Haram members are of the view that the prevailing social decadence and deprivation in the country are caused by the elite’s adherence to Western laws, customs and traditions. This explains the group’s disparagement for Western education; hence the name *Boko Haram*, which literally means that Western education (*boko*) is a sin (*haram*). Just like with the Maitatsine, the youths also readily buy into the preaching of Boko Haram leaders, who maintain that the corrupt attitudes of *yan boko*—the educated elite who occupy various state offices—have been responsible for the socio-economic woes, including unemployment and poverty, that have befallen the country, particularly northern Nigeria (Onuoha, 2014).

Nigeria, already the world’s most populous nations with about 170 million people continues to witness rapid population growth that has outstripped its economic expansion. Government at all levels build infrastructure, but these are inadequate to match the rapidly growing population, a situation that has forced government agencies to recommend that citizens limit themselves to smaller families as a key to economic salvation (Rosenthal, 2012). Nigeria’s population explosion has been

attributed to high fertility rates and a relative decline in infant mortality rates resulting from general healthcare awareness. Also, the impact of religion on the country's rising population cannot be ignored, as both Christianity and Islam, the two dominant religions in the country, detest all forms of population control. Although it may be difficult to argue that there is a direct correlation between population growth rate and youth unemployment, as explained earlier, the rising number of young people in the urban areas may explain the country's youth unemployment and poverty situation.

Boko Haram takes advantage of the unemployment and poverty situations in the northern part of the country to co-opt disaffected and frustrated youths, most of whom are economically inactive high-school leavers, to pursue its radical religious and ideological objectives. Pervasive poverty in the area has contributed to a situation in which a considerable number of school-age children (*almajiris*) are not enrolled in school and, more often than not, these children are left to fend for themselves, roaming the streets begging for alms. They are, without a doubt, readily disposed to recruitment into groups willing to provide for them. So, it is fair to posit that certain frustrating conditions of life have combined to render these youths highly vulnerable to being used to perpetrate violence.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the presence of socio-economic factors such as unemployment and poverty are crucial to our understanding of why many young men turn themselves into foot soldiers for armed groups. Nigeria's unemployed youths have particularly, through their membership of insurgency groups, contributed in no small measure to the violence that has plagued the country, especially in the period following the end of military rule in 1999. Unemployment amongst the youths tends to combine with the manipulative tendencies of dissident preachers to push young men, and sometimes women, into violence, which eventually ignites or maintains insecurity in the country.

It is amply evident that a poorly catered-for youth becomes rebellious, as witnessed in the activities of Nigeria's deeply frustrated and

aggrieved youth population. Therefore, if the Nigerian state is to minimise the violent activities that have become synonymous with its unemployed youths, then it should harness its energies for productive purposes. The state should embark on certain measures capable of engendering youth empowerment, because only such a pragmatic approach could bring about the desired antidote to insurrection. By empowerment, we mean a condition of upward mobility, using a wide range of socio-economic variables as they affect the individual within society. Empowering an individual is synonymous with improving the individual's social, political and economic conditions, all of which combine to increase the individual's sense of belonging.

One significant suggestion, therefore, is for the Nigerian state to resuscitate the moribund agricultural sector. Prior to the emergence of oil as the dominant foreign exchange earner, earnings from agricultural exports contributed immensely to the economic growth of the country. Nigeria used to be the world's largest exporter of agricultural products such as groundnuts and palm produce, and the second largest exporter of cocoa, and these three crops provided about 70 per cent of the value of Nigerian exports (Kirk-Greene and Rimmer, 1981: 74). However, the oil boom of the early 1970s caused capital and labour to be reallocated from the agricultural sector to the booming oil sector. So, by 1974 agriculture's share of total export earnings had dropped to less than 20 per cent, whereas petroleum's share of the total earnings accounted for only 10 per cent of export earnings in 1962, but rose to 82.7 per cent in 1973 (Bangura et al., 1986: 177). The decline in agricultural production consequently resulted in a situation in which Nigeria, a food exporter at independence, was transformed into a food importer. According to the Crisis Group Africa Report (CGAR) (2006: 20), in 2002 Nigeria imported almost one-third of the rice it consumed, making it the world's second largest rice market. As a further consequence, the manufacturing sector's contribution to the economy became negligible. This tide needs to be reversed if Nigeria is to resolve its poverty crisis. With its vast arable land and river channels, the north

in particular has what it takes to reverse its condition of economic deprivation, which partly breeds the terrorist mentality.

The agrarian sector could also become a huge employer of the millions of school leavers roaming the streets in search of non-existent jobs. However, a good starting point would be to stimulate youth's interest in agricultural production, for instance, by including the teaching of Agricultural Science in school curricula across the country. It is also important that Nigeria's Federal Government expands its existing loan schemes. The redundant People's Bank could be restored. This bank was established in 1989 by the military regime of Babangida to provide credit facilities to low-income earners embarking on agricultural production, with special consideration to youth engaged in agricultural production (Akpan, 2010). Also, commercial banks may set up micro-credit schemes to provide school leavers with agricultural loans. Availability of small-scale loans and other forms of credit facilities would provide an opportunity for those who want to go into farming to acquire the necessary farming tools, thereby transforming the youths into a group of self-employed and even employers of labour in the event that their agriculture businesses expand. Sustainable expansion of the agricultural sector will play a key role in enhancing food sufficiency, and also in creating job opportunities for youths, especially in the rural areas. This will in turn reduce rural–urban migration. However, the government must put in place checks on the managers of the scheme to avoid corrupt practices, such as the type that led to the collapse of the People's Bank.

Likewise, government at all levels should partner with the private sector to promote vocational education, allowing unemployed youths to acquire some skills and learn a life-long trade. The country's increasing unemployment underscores the need for vocational education, such as the type usually offered by technical colleges that have now become defunct across the country. The society's excessive focus on formal education and the subsequent neglect of vocational education has partly contributed to the rising unemployment among

the country's youth population. Secondary school leavers with no qualifications to pursue a university or college degree should be encouraged and supported to access certain vocational training like tailoring, plumbing, bricklaying, carpentry and so on. Although with little support from government agencies, individual entrepreneurs across major cities and rural communities offer vocational and technical education programmes, but these have not been enough to accommodate the growing number of unemployed young people in need of skills acquisition. Governments should increase the funding of vocational education, as efforts like this will go a long way not only in keeping youths off the streets, but will also contribute to the alleviation of poverty.

Government at the national level should also create an enabling environment capable of engendering inclusivity by providing job opportunities for erstwhile terrorists. Such a move will transform them into responsible members of society. Similar palliative measures proved successful in the Niger Delta area of the country, where amnesty programmes were tailored towards the rehabilitation of erstwhile militants who eschewed violence. In 2009 the then president of Nigeria, the late Umar Yar'Adua, offered an unconditional pardon and cash payments to rebels who agreed to lay down their arms and start small-scale businesses of their choice (Rice, 2009). Others were offered scholarships to enable them to further their education. The amnesty deal was hailed in some quarters as a positive move to resolving the region's lingering crisis, but it was also condemned in others as rewarding violence.

It is crystal clear, as exemplified by the activities of MEND and Boko Haram in particular, that there is a linkage between youth unemployment and insurgency in Nigeria. Therefore, we are of the view that empowering Nigerian youths would serve as a fundamental antidote to insurrection in the country.

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