

Nigeria's Violent Awakening

LSE alumnus Ebenezer Obadare argues that Boko Haram's reign of terror is the product of a nation schooled by the violence of Nigeria's decades-long military rule.

Two weeks ago, a cluster of car bombs shattered the early morning peace of a motor park at Nyanya, a suburb of Abuja, Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory. Scores of people were either killed or maimed in the most gruesome manner. A few days after the incident, Boko Haram, the extremist Islamic group which has spearheaded a full-scale insurgency against the Nigerian government, took responsibility. It was the group's third successful attack on targets in the Nigerian capital in as many years – and the most lethal. Following the incident, President Goodluck Jonathan visited the scene of the attack and sought to reassure a shaken citizenry of his government's commitment to the protection of lives and property. A chronic ditherer, he could not guarantee what majority of Nigerians desire the most – a clear programme of action to prevent further attacks, and an eventual end to the violence.



Boko Haram claimed responsibility for the recent attack on the bus station on the outskirts of Abuja Photo: AFP

All violence is ultimately local, and the Boko Haram insurgency is no exception. By delivering a jolt (make that several jolts) to their accustomed rhythms, Boko Haram is forcing Nigerians to contend with some bitter truths about the Nigerian state – its hobbled administrative and juridical capacity; its historicity as a product and perpetuator of violence; and its fundamental inability to guarantee the security of its citizens.

To say that the Nigerian state was forged in the barrel of a musket is to state the obvious. The same is true of all postcolonial states. Here, instead of dismantling the apparatuses of repression that they inherited from the colonisers, post-independence elites learned to turn them against an array of real and imagined enemies; and as the initial promise of self-rule gave way to the disillusionment of military rule, violence became the essential lubricant of the postcolonial political machine. For decades, a dark period punctuated by a brief democratic interregnum between 1979 and 1983, a succession of military rulers took turns in schooling Nigerians in the language of violence. Hence the sad legacy of martial rule: the militarisation of both the vocabulary and praxis of politics.

Boko Haram is, in some sense, a product of this bloody bequest- an entirely predictable fallout of a formation in which might is right, negotiation is construed as weakness, and official channels for the ventilation of grievance are either non-existent or clogged. Most Nigerians have come to

expect savagery and brutalisation from their law enforcement agents, and the latter routinely oblige. For instance, police dole out physical violence with a regularity that belies their claim to being the public's friend. The military is regularly deployed on "kill and go" missions against civilian malcontents, and across the country, any kind of official uniform is taken as a license to assault. True, it's a long path from everyday violence to a full throttle insurgency; but the connections are all too visible. In Nigeria, violence authorises, conducts and mediates everyday relations among citizens, between citizens and the state, and between ubiquitous "big men" and their clients.

One is reminded of this real tradability of violence as one considers the still unfolding drama of the pacification of the rebellion in the oil-producing Niger Delta. In its inaugural moment, the revolt of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) was put down with a deadly mix of corporate chicanery and violence. This was followed up with the state's own version of victor's justice, epitomised by the assault on the Ijaw town of Odi in Bayelsa state in 1999 by troops acting at the behest of the Obasanjo regime (1999 – 2007). In the most recent phase, a pact between militants and government negotiators has resulted in a truce – after a fashion.

Some commentators have urged the federal government to adapt the Niger Delta playbook for the Boko Haram insurgency. It is a tantalising prospect, until one considers two fundamental differences. First, while by and large, the rebellion in the Niger Delta has been about restructuring the Nigerian state and making it genuinely federal, Boko Haram insurgents seek to create an *alternative* Islamic republic. Pace Albert Hirschman, one can say the former is about voice, and the latter exit. This means that the reaction of the state must be different. Second, although the protest in the Niger Delta has often relied on and mobilised religious symbols and repertoires, it is not a religious phenomenon in the same way as the Boko Haram insurrection. Religion, specifically a doctrinally implacable brand of Islam, is foundational to Boko Haram's genealogy, methodology, and structure.

It is this religious aspect that gives the group its identity and valence, and sets it apart from other forms of dissent in contemporary Nigeria. Once you parenthesise its sectarian agenda and violent methodology, Boko Haram's grouse actually resonates well with majority of Nigerians. They can relate to its lamentations about breathtaking corruption, persistent neglect, and official impunity. Where Boko Haram represents a departure is in its harmonising of the political with the religious, all within an ideological format in which the state itself becomes the very essence of a modernity that must be violently rejected. In pursuing this goal, Boko Haram's rigour does not apply to its choice of targets. In a remorseless campaign of terror in which both churches and mosques have been par for the course, militants carrying the group's banner have decapitated and disabled Muslims and Christians, men and women, young and old.

Thus, as it is, Boko Haram would try the military and political resources of any state, let alone one as ill-provisioned and dismally managed as Nigeria. As noted earlier, if there is one thing that the Boko Haram insurgency has exposed, it is the conceit of state power in Nigeria. Long accustomed to the regimen of community vigilante groups, Nigerians have always had a low opinion of law enforcement. Even so, many have been shocked at the manner in which the decay within the police and the army has been so brutally exposed by the insurgents.

With nationwide elections on the horizon, and with President Jonathan having no clear grip on the situation, the Nigerian government finds itself on the proverbial horns of a dilemma: It must somehow bring Boko Haram to the table and find a way to address its political grievances; but it cannot do that without at first mustering sufficient violence to bring it to heel.

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