

The Crisis in Christian-Muslim Relations in Nigeria

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The recent escalation of violence between Nigeria's Muslim and Christian communities is not a single conflict between these two great religions. Rather, the crisis is a series of local and regional struggles, some of which feature religion as a strong motivation for conflict, while others ignite the Muslim-Christian fault line as a secondary or circumstantial matter. Recently, however, several actors have seen interest in trying to frame these localized conflicts as a single religious contest across the Christian-Muslim divide. US policy in the region should continue to support efforts to promote religious tolerance and improved governance in Nigeria, while avoiding actions that could feed the perception that the United States is ready to take sides.

A Complex, Explosive Context

With over 150 million people belonging to over 200 nationalities, and nearly evenly divided between Christians and Muslims in a federation of 36 states, Nigeria poses a difficult environment for peace and development under the best of circumstances. Several contextual factors are particularly important for understanding the recent escalation of violence igniting the religious divide:

1. Nigeria has undergone a **dramatic demographic shift** in its number of Christians over the last 20 years. Heavy Christian proselytizing in the minority-dominated regions of the "Middle Belt," in the northeast, and in the far Northern regions of the country has won numerous converts in these areas, fueling **resentment** among some members of Muslim communities. Some Islamic sects also proselytize in Christian majority regions, but they have been far less successful. Initially, both religions focused their expansion efforts on practitioners of traditional religions, but now that most of these have been converted, Christians and Muslims have largely turned the proselytizing race on each other. Ethnic minorities that were once alone and dominated by majority groups, particularly by the largely Muslim Hausa, have found **new political**

power in being part of a larger Christian community, giving them increasing leverage in the struggle over scarce resources.

2. The leading contenders for the **April 2011 presidential elections** were President Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, and retired Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim, giving the race religious undertones. Widespread perception among supporters of Gen. Buhari that President Jonathan's ruling party rigged him the victory led to outbreaks of violence in key cities of the north, particularly Kaduna, which is evenly divided between Muslims and Christians. The election left enduring frustrations across the north against the Jonathan government. President Jonathan's campaign also actively courted Christian minorities across the Middle Belt and northeast, which further framed the contest in religious terms and fueled the growing Christian political awakening in these areas. These northern frustrations are certain to **resurface if President Jonathan runs again for office in 2015**, as expected.
3. **Massive poverty amid a conspicuously corrupt political elite** on both sides of the religious divide fuels widespread anger at the Nigerian state and increases the attractiveness of radical movements of all types. Economic growth on average of over 6% annually for the last decade is encouraging, but much of this growth has been concentrated in the south.
4. **Growing militarization in the Middle Belt and northeast** is increasing the destructiveness of violence and the pace of escalation. Christian and Muslim militias across these areas, particularly in Jos/Plateau state, are increasingly well armed, and occasionally benefit from informal relationships with police and military units. **Numerous atrocities are alleged to have been committed by both sides** against the other in reciprocal acts of violence. This spread of loosely organized paramilitary activity has exacerbated an array of local conflicts, with several particularly noteworthy trends:
 - a. **Pastoralist-farmer conflicts** across the region are aggravated by desertification, which is reducing the size of arable land just as Nigeria's rapid population growth creates greater demand. In locales where predominantly Christian farmers have moved into traditional grazing lands for Muslim Fulani herders, conflicts have aggravated religious tensions.
 - b. **Jos/Plateau state** remains the main religious flashpoint in the region, where longstanding disputes over control of scarce land and local government resources have sparked numerous bouts of violence over the last 15 years, particularly during local election cycles. Politicians from local Christian majorities in the state, seeking to build political capital, have often appealed to religion and systematically excluded the local Hausa minority from access to state resources. Although the Hausa are a minority in Jos, the capital of Plateau state, they are the

largest ethnic group in Nigeria overall, fueling fears among the other groups of a Hausa influx and political dominance.

- c. Numerous **pockets of internally displaced persons** from previous bouts of violence across the region have been largely ignored by the government and forced to fend for themselves. Youth from both religions living in these desperate conditions have proven to be extremely susceptible to militant activity.
- d. Christian and Muslim clerics in recent years have been **preaching hate messages** – ranging from the subtle to the blatant – from the pulpit largely unchecked by religious or government authorities. More decentralized sects such as Pentecostal churches or itinerant imams loosely affiliated with the Izala movement among Muslims have been particularly prone to these messages, which contribute to escalation.

The Boko Haram Challenge

These factors alone have heightened religious tensions across Nigeria, but the recent rise of a militant Islamic movement, known as Boko Haram, has aggravated the entire Christian-Muslim fault line and provoked reprisals from Christian communities. For most of its existence, Boko Haram was little concerned with Nigeria's Christians, and focused its attentions on spreading its interpretation of Islam within the nation's Muslim community, particularly in the northeastern states of Borno and Bauchi. Its shift to military operations in 2008-09 occurred with a devout Muslim, President Yar'Adua, as head of state, and its primary targets were the Nigerian security forces – the police, military, and the internal intelligence operatives of the State Security Service (SSS) – and the Borno state governor at the time.

Consequently, Boko Haram's move to targeting Christian churches and communities over the last two years appears to be largely a **tactical shift** in its operations in order to take advantage of growing northern frustrations with the Jonathan government, in order to situate itself as the Islamic alternative to the corrupt status quo, and to consolidate its recent gains. This shift raises several matters of concern:

- Boko Haram is a collection of groups, some of which are well armed and organized, particularly the hardliners, and others that are less organized and less interested in using violence to pursue the movement's goals of establishing an Islamist state in at least the northern half of Nigeria. Several of the more moderate factions of the movement have sought to initiate peace talks with the government in recent years, some of whom have been killed by hardliners for their efforts. Initiating a religious conflict with the Christians thus **strengthens the position of the hardliners**, forcing the moderates to choose sides and possibly creating more sympathizers for the movement when Christian militias counterattack. In most Boko Haram attacks on

churches, the movement has cited previous attacks on Muslims as validation for its acts. The movement justified its Christmas 2011 church bombings, for instance, as reprisals for Christian militant killings of Muslims during the Eid celebrations earlier in the year.

- Given that President Jonathan is a Christian and his supporters appealed to these sentiments in the 2011 campaign in the Middle Belt and northeast, targeting Christians allows Boko Haram to try to situate itself as **the protector of northern interests** and the embodiment of the region's frustrations. Until June 2012, all Nigeria's military chiefs were southerners, fueling perceptions even further that the Jonathan government was antagonistic to the north.
- The conflict in Jos and Plateau state offers an **ideal cause** for Boko Haram to play to Muslim senses of victimhood, so the movement has actively sought to insert itself in the conflict. Religiously charged Kaduna, which for the first time in its history now has a Christian governor, poses similar opportunities for Boko Haram, where it has also become more active.
- **Heavy-handed responses from the Nigerian police and military** to Boko Haram attacks in the past have tended to increase local support for the movement, as state security forces often use indiscriminate force resulting in numerous civilian casualties with little effect on Boko Haram itself.

In light of these issues and the general inability of the Nigerian government to stop the movement, Boko Haram currently holds the military initiative and faces an important **political choice**. It could continue its military offensive in the unlikely pursuit of total victory, or it could seek to build alliances in order to create its own political movement or some form of parallel party with which it is affiliated or which seeks to capture its message. The latter is likely preferred by moderates in the movement, some of whom have requested an amnesty process much like that in the Niger Delta.

Implications for US Policy

In June 2012, President Jonathan took an important step toward changing the terms of the struggle with Boko Haram by firing his National Security Advisor and replacing him with retired Col. Sambo Dasuki, a northern Muslim with family ties to the Sultan of Sokoto, the highest traditional ruler in the north to whom the more moderate factions of Boko Haram had appealed for mediation in the past. Col. Dasuki immediately announced his intention to engage both Boko Haram and the Christian militias, an important first step.

US engagement is particularly complicated by Boko Haram hardliners' efforts to situate themselves as Nigeria's Islamic vanguard and protector of northern interests and to portray the Jonathan government as a Christian bulwark. An invasive US policy presence could be framed by hardliners as the Christian superpower

supporting its local affiliates, and hand Boko Haram a useful recruiting tool while further delegitimizing the Jonathan government in the eyes of many northerners.

US policy, therefore, needs a subtle approach that seeks to isolate the hardliners in Boko Haram, strengthen the opportunities for dialogue with the moderates, and support Nigerian government reforms that can address the root causes of conflicts between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Several elements in such a strategy are recommended:

- Encourage the Nigerian government's new efforts to engage militant factions on both sides of the religious divide, in order to provide moderates in Boko Haram and other militias a clear alternative to the violence promoted by hardliners. Special effort should be made to encourage the moderates to steer Boko Haram (as well other Christian and Muslim militias) into the political process, where they can pursue their goals in a peaceful fashion with the promise of a broader audience.
- Target anti-terror efforts on key hardliners and factions to isolate them from the rest of the movement and from the moderate Muslim mainstream overall. The Obama administration's singling out of key Boko Haram hardliners as terrorists rather than the whole movement is a helpful approach in that regard.
- Continue US support for religious tolerance and Muslim-Christian dialogue efforts that engage local religious leaders and communities, building bridges and reducing the acceptability of hate speech. Where possible, the US government should also encourage Nigeria's national religious leaders to engage in meaningful dialogue that sends messages of tolerance and accommodation. In that regard, the Christian Association of Nigeria and the Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs should be encouraged to restart their interfaith reconciliation efforts.
- Unrest in the north is extremely likely if President Jonathan seeks reelection in 2015. US policy should continue to insist on further Nigerian election reforms that include the primaries of the ruling party in particular, to increase the likelihood of a fair contest and help to dampen perceptions of rigging by any candidate. The leader of Nigeria's political opposition in a race against President Jonathan is likely to be a northerner, and should be engaged by US policymakers as a legitimate opposition leader.
- Encourage the Jonathan administration to undertake a broad-based national development policy and serious anti-corruption efforts that address the underlying conflict drivers of poverty and poor governance.
- Encourage the Nigerian federal government to press its state governments to address local religious disputes and to prosecute crimes against humanity. Plateau state politicians in particular should be investigated for their roles in recent bouts of violence.
- Press the Nigerian government to make police reform a priority and to retool its military for more responsible crisis response capacity.