

MASARYK UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Social Studies

Department of International Relations

Brno, Joštova 10, 602 00, Czech Republic



Lenka Vybíralová

UČO: 414840

**NIGERIA AND BOKO HARAM INSURGENCE: THE ROOTS OF
POLITICAL VIOLENCE**

Causes of Political Violence (MVZ489)

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Introduction

In the past decades the region of Western Africa has gone through many turbulent changes and the country of Nigeria presents no exception. What has shown as the current biggest security challenge was the appearance of Boko Haram- radical Islamist group with religious and political demands, which recently swore *bayah*- the pledge of allegiance- to Islamic State and whose influence is slowly spreading beyond Nigerian borders.

Since 2011, more than 42 955 people have been estimated to be killed in Boko Haram insurgency, which now controls about 20% of Nigerian territory (Council on Foreign Relations 2016) and with its newly announced allegiance with Islamic State and previous ties to Al Qaeda, Al-Shabaab in Somalia or MUJAO in Algeria it is becoming one of the deadliest Islamist sects in sub-Saharan region (Weeraratne 2015: 13-14). Its practices include the abductions of civilians, forceful conscriptions and terror causing over 2.1 million displaced people (Human Rights Watch 2016).

This essay attempts to analyze Boko Haram violence and its evolution in the national context. In the first part the paper introduces theoretical frameworks and the concepts I shall work with. Besides of the analysis of the interplay between violence and religion in Boko Haram context two related theories shall be explained- the grievance theory and to it connected relative deprivation theory. The paper aims at the investigation of the relationship between purely religious motives and the grievances Boko Haram and Nigerian people suffered from in the past, and tries to find whether the theories indicated above can give us satisfying explanation of Boko Haram's perpetual terror.

The main objective of the paper is to answer the question: *What are the root causes of Boko Haram political violence?* Essay is qualitative one-case study limited by the context of Nigeria and Boko Haram violent activities, with focus on years of 2002-2016, when Boko Haram was operatively active. The paper attempts to shift from descriptive explanation of the group functioning and instead to evaluate broader conditions and situation in Nigeria which can clarify the root sources of the violence Nigeria is witnessing.

Boko Haram

Boko Haram, officially *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad* (can be translated as “people committed to the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and *jihad*”) is a religious sect operating in mostly north-eastern regions of Nigeria, with recent significant spill-over to the countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger (Council on Foreign Relations 2015). The roots of Boko Haram can be traced to 2002 to the capital of Nigerian Borno state Maiduguri, where the group was founded by the cleric Mohammed Yusuf (ICRtoP 2016). What happened to be firstly revolt against the governmental security forces turned into the full-scale regional insurgency at the end of 2009, following the crackdown on Boko Haram members and killing its leader Yusuf in the custody (Eke 2015: 319).

Boko Haram's name, which in Arabic means “*Western education is a sin/forbidden*”, says a little about the group intentions and objectives as the it was imposed upon them by those outside of the establishment and which represents mostly its two ideological tenants- opposition to Western education which was prioritized over Islamic, and to the Westernization generally. The main goal of Boko Haram stems from their persuasion about the corruption and falsehood of northern political authorities, when they aim at the creation of the Islamic state with pure *Shariah* law which shall substitute current Nigerian government (Walker 2012). In August 2014, current leader Shekau made an announcement of the establishment of Islamic state- *caliphate*, by which the group achieved one of its biggest objectives and subsequently led an annexation campaign of towns in Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa (Pieri – Zenn 2016: 66).

Religion and conflict in the context of Boko Haram

Boko Haram is generally perceived as a violent Islamist group basing its ideology on the religious principles and therefore often framed in the terms of religious conflict, which Svensson defines as “*a conflict where at least one side has raised explicit demands from the onset of the conflict relating to religious issues*” (2013: 412). Despite the fact that Boko Haram clearly stated its religious objectives and views Christians and Muslims who object against their attempts as enemies and legitimate targets of violence (Mohammed 2014: 19), it is necessary to analyze the role of religion within the context of its application and other possible primary sources.

The religion in Nigeria serves primarily as an *identity marker*, when Sells distinguishes between religion serving either as an identity cultural, or ideological (Svensson

2013: 414). Agbiboa agrees to this definition and concept by introducing the problem of the heterogeneity of Nigerian population, which according to him defines itself on the religious or possibly ethnic grounds, with religion being prevalent identification and creating stereotyped assumptions about the relation between ethnic and religious affiliations and causing many discriminatory practices (2013: 154-155). Such marker can be traced to the split between Muslim majority in the north and Christian in the south with “middle belt” in the center, and more than 350 ethnic and 250 language groups dividing Nigeria into specific regions, where such affiliations are prioritized over national due to colonial history and artificially drawn borders by European great powers (ICRtoP 2016). The PEW research shows that in regards to the importance of nationality, ethnicity or religion, 90% of Muslims and 76% of Christians view religious affiliation as the most relevant, with Muslims dismissing the ethnicity completely (PEW Research Center 2007).

Yet, what he views as the key distinction in Nigeria, is the role of religion as the *legitimiser of power*. The constant power clashes and tensions over the political leadership, where religion influences preferences instead of political orientation, were clearly shown in 2001 by the demonstrations after the appointment of Christian Chairman in Jos, or the protests causing more than 800 dead as the result of presidential elections won by the Christian incumbent candidate Goodluck Jonathan, where protesters assumed that the office will regularly rotate between both religious majorities (*ibidem*). Such religious contestation acts as a fertile ground for both religious and political grievances and the feelings of exclusion and opponent’s dominance.

Despite the obvious and important role of religion and Islamic motives in Boko Haram rhetoric it proves necessary to analyze other alternatives as the roots of political violence which we can observe in the northeastern region. Religion, which serves as the power projector, indicator of identity and unifier, represents only one part of the explanation for Boko Haram behavior. As Fox (2000) mentions, Niki Keddie’s assumptions (1985) demonstrate that the same concept of the religion is subordinate to its time and place in regards to the outbursts of violence or its possible quieting role in conflict resolution. Religion according to her findings therefore presents dependable variable with other aspects influencing its final shape.

Relative deprivation and grievance theory

Grievance theory stems from the question of identity and group affiliation. It covers whole range of topics focused on the question of relative position of the individual within the

context of society. Collier describes grievance in close relationship with greed theory, which he utilizes in order to analyze the causes of civil wars and rebellions. He centers grievance on four factors- the expression of ethnic or religious hatred, which might have its roots in the past events, economic grievances caused by unequal distribution of income or ownership, lack of political rights and subsequent autocratic rule or repressive government, and the incompetence of government in regards to economy (1999: 4). Grievance theory can contain different sub-theories, which further elaborate on the factors Collier proposed, relative deprivation theory being one of those.

Ted Gurr, the founder of *relative deprivation theory* sees the situation as “*the tension that develops from a discrepancy between the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’ of collective value satisfaction, and this disposes men to violence*” (1971: 24). It can be defined as the disproportion between the expectations and actual benefits they receive, hence in a conflict perceived as constructed feeling of being deprived of certain values and gains which they believe rightfully or proportionally belong to them. Richardson (2011: 6) mentions Walter Garrison Runciman’s (1966) explanation, which says that the main conditions for relative deprivation shall be as follows: “*Person A does not have X; Person A wants to have X; Person A knows of other people who have X; Person A believes obtaining X is realistic*”. Relative deprivation theory puts emphasis on frustration and anger caused by unequal disparities within the societies or groups, which can generate violence and serve as a societal division. As for analysis, relative deprivation theory can use measurements of the difference (ratio) between divided groups, when the various socioeconomic factors and indicators are compared and measured as to achieve objective results of possible disparity (Murshed- Tadjoeeddin 2009).

Both of these theories shall be taken in account during the analysis of Nigerian society as to suggest alternative approaches to the oversimplified understanding of conflict as religiously driven violence, taking in account the fact that grievance theory mostly covers relative deprivation in terms of common indicators.

Relative deprivation and grievance theory: The case of Nigeria and Boko Haram

Ethnic and religious hatred

The perception of religious hatred and discrimination towards Muslims can be clearly seen in Yusuf’s lecture in 2009, when he stated that “*the government of Nigeria has not been built to do justice...It has been built to attack Islam and kill Muslims*” and accused Nigerian government of plotting anti-Muslim violence towards Muslim communities. Similar message

can be traced in Yusuf's successor's speeches, when Abubakar Shekau, current Boko Haram leader, pointed out to Yusuf's death as unjust and added that "*They're fighting us for no reason, because we've said we'll practice our religion, we will support our religion and stand on what God has said.*" (Thurston 2016: 17). Despite the fact that Collier warns against the excessive use of grievance motives as they serve as useful narratives for the groups, either in the sense of legitimization or public support, such statements can prove useful in the possible addressing of the feelings of hatred as they help to name and identify them. Collier also adds that they can persuade even the leaders themselves to accept this kind of propaganda in their mind-set (1999: 1).

The role of history and feelings of grief and unfair treatment are very prevalent throughout Nigeria and in Boko Haram statements. Colonialism ranks as one of the periods which are presented highly negatively, as the colonial powers were perceived to exploit Nigeria, its people and artificially regroup different ethnic and religious groups into national identities they did not identify with. Boko Haram has used the notion of colonialism in one of the sermons by stating that "*Europeans divided the countries*" and "*left them in poverty or created ethnic problems*", while adopting the rotation system of governance between different groups and tribes, which caused their political instability (Pierri – Zenn 2016: 77).

Besides purely religious grievances, Pierri and Zenn connect the notion of Islam and ethnic discrimination stemming from the historical backgrounds, which Collier perceives as one of the key factors. They attribute the grievances to the precolonial ruler Al-Kanemi, who conquered current Boko Haram territory- Borno- and subjugated ethnic group of Kanuri Muslims, which count for over 80% of Boko Haram members. Aside from prohibiting Kanuri language in religious instructions he also prohibited Islamic education and indirectly discriminated the core practitioners of Islam by assigning them the special status (2016: 81). This period is often mentioned in Boko Haram sermons and speeches and one of its signature characteristics- the prohibited education according to Islamic principles can be seen as the sign of relative deprivation leading to current strive of Boko Haram for its full implementation and at the same time hatred towards its Western form.

Economic grievances

Nigeria is deeply divided country not only in the religious and ethnic sense, but in economical as well. Despite the fact that it has per capita income higher than \$2700 and rich oil fields and natural resources located mostly in Niger delta, the majority of the population is living below the level of poverty (Council on Foreign Relations 2015), with northern regions

with predominantly Muslim population being poorer than Christian south. Harnischfeger considers the poverty, high unemployment rates and overall socio-economic situation of the region as the reason for youth joining Boko Haram's rebellion and quotes the US Department Officer, who said that instead of religion being the root of violence, it is "*the underlying political and social economic problems in the north*" causing instability (2014: 35). The point of economic grievances can be supported by the economic crisis in 1980s caused by declining profits due to structural adjustment programmes which have proved to be harmful till these days and not tackling poverty of the majority (Mohammed 2014: 23).

Yet if we have a closer look at Boko Haram rhetoric, the question of poverty is mostly connected to the governmental corruption and mismanagement and therefore serving as the sign of its illegitimacy, than as an actual structural factor Boko Haram attempts to address. Also the membership of Boko Haram show that while some of the poor are joining its ranks in hope for economic and social justice, its composition also greatly varies- from university professors, political elites of the past, collar workers or migrants from neighboring countries (Agbibo 2013: 160). However, facts on this greatly vary as others perceive Boko Haram to be composed mostly of "*poor, uneducated, unemployed and illegals*" who are often crossing borders in search for better future. For example Osumah suggests that Boko Haram is mostly an organization seeking social justice through the establishment of new, uncorrupted and Islamic government, which also fits to the Boko Haram beginnings, charity work and running school for poor (2013: 542-543).

Lack of political rights and incompetent government

Grievances in regards to the insufficient political participation and governmental failures seem to dominate Boko Haram discourse, together with its anti-Western rhetoric. Boko Haram criticizes high levels of corruption and "Western orientation" officials causing the economic crisis in Nigeria on a long-term-basis. The first clashes occurred during Yusuf's leadership, when he attacked local Muslim community- *ulema*- as a reaction to their close relationship with governor Sheriff known for his predatory and corrupt governmental policies (Mohammed 2014: 18). Such claims are supported by international NGOs such as Transparency International, which ranks Nigeria as 136th out of 168 in corruption measurement tools and confirms that over 90% of population thinks that the governmental security forces are corrupted, while 45% assumes the same about the military. All is accompanied by the proofs of highly ranked officials embezzling funds appointed to the regional development (Transparency International 2014).

Boko Haram generally refers to current power-holders as *yan boko*- modern elites which were educated and trained in secular way, and which are therefore responsible for ills of Nigerian government and unjust due to their relations with West (Onuoha 2014: 7). The roots of violence and mistrust in government can be also found back in 2009 in the violent clash between police and Boko Haram members in an argument over newly introduced Bike Helmet Law, which Boko Haram disobeyed during funeral procession of some of them members and in following dispute 17 of them were killed by the police forces. The same situation happened with extrajudicial killing of Yusuf in 2009, which both lead to the radicalization of the group, their growing insurgency and critique of Nigerian government and its incompetence (The Atlantic 2014). The relative deprivation theory in this case can be understood as the feeling of not enough religious rights and the voice in political matters, as well as disproportional discrimination in usually common situations such as mentioned Bike Helmet Law incident, which was seen by majority of Boko Haram members as unequally targeting their group and through anger and frustration increasing their radicalization.

Conclusion

Previous summary and the application of grievance theory and relative deprivation theory have clearly shown that the roots of Boko Haram violence stem from several causes. Despite common oversimplifying of Boko Haram intentions to solely religious motives, there are others which need to be considered and addressed if Nigeria and international community tries to curb the violence by also non-military means.

The role of religion is definitely one of the key factors, also due to its specific and significant position in Nigerian society and politics. As many of Boko Haram demands are Islam oriented in its character and are increasing with current establishment of *caliphate*, it can be very complex and complicated to address them in such manner which would not influence the balance of Christian and Muslim groups. However, there are other aspects which fuel Boko Haram violence and which, if eliminated, could potentially lead to the decrease of violence or at least lower number of recruits.

The ones identified are mostly religious and marginally ethnic hatred having its origins in precolonial and colonial era, which discriminated certain religious groups and caused unnatural divisions within the society and which Boko Haram often uses in its discourse. Yet, this phenomenon could be hard to settle as the narratives of historic hatred are deeply engraved in the society and carried through the oral tradition with many subjective aspects.

However, what should be taken in account are the grievances connected to the economic disparities, poverty and government not being able to ensure basic public needs to its citizens. Even though on a larger scale and in the context of sub-Saharan Africa Nigeria is a country with more than satisfactory economic revenues, their unequal distribution and mass poverty often concentrated to the few regions can be seen as one of the root causes of Boko Haram movement, violence and further recruitment. Even though many of Boko Haram political conditions, such as pure Shariah being introduced throughout Nigeria or caliphate substituting for current form of governance are impossible to apply, the call for resignation of corrupted politicians and efforts to redistribute wealth in fairer manner can be beneficial both for curbing Boko Haram violence and its legitimacy, as well as general satisfaction of public with governmental services and increased trust in politicians.

All these factors based on inequality and the gap between expectation and reality prove us the plausibility of relative deprivation theory, as Boko Haram often points out to the differences between the members of their establishment or common Nigerians and the governmental elites or “privileged” Christians.

The problem of Boko Haram shall be therefore thought about in the sense of mix of factors and incidents, some of which can be addressed or altered, but others remain highly challenging for final resolution.

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