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Nigeria: A Case Study of U.S. Government Engagement with Religion

As Nigerians look toward national elections this April, the first time in the country's history that a civilian presidential leadership will change hands democratically, many describe their country as a "time bomb," often citing its religious fault lines as being particularly ripe for manipulation.

In vulnerable cities such as Jos, located in Nigeria's Plateau State, established religious leaders and regular citizens alike openly admit that they would vote for a crooked coreligionist over an honest candidate from the "opposing" religion. In such an environment, any election problems or delays could cause at least small-scale conflict. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is lagging dramatically behind on election preparation efforts, while gubernatorial impeachments and stories of corruption at every level have dominated Nigerian political news over the past year. Concerns about the regional and religious background of the next president suggest that even the results of a free and fair election could precipitate violence, and religious and ethnic divisions may also play a prominent role in the elections at the state and local government levels.

The Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project study, *U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict-Prone Settings*, aims to help the government devote its resources and energy to addressing religion abroad in a more strategic manner. Through the Nigerian case, the study examined how the U.S. government approaches the role of religion in mobilizing conflict, how religious leaders contribute to peacemaking, and what role faith-based organizations play in humanitarian and development work.

The site of religious violence between Muslim and Christian populations in recent years and home to a number of groundbreaking interfaith peace-building programs, Nigeria is a particularly relevant case study for this work. Nigeria's population of 138 million is believed to be almost evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, with both Islam and Christianity gaining adherents in the past half century and a particularly dramatic rise among Pentecostal and charismatic Christian movements.

As the functions and structure of the state have deteriorated over the past 20 years, affinity groups have become increasingly important in political organizing and service provision. The rise in identity politics has included the extension of shari'a criminal law into 12 northern states. Meanwhile, internal migration has brought Christians and Muslims to live alongside one another in an increasing number of "fault line" cities throughout Nigeria, and fighting over land ownership and political representation has led to the deaths of tens of thousands since 1999.

Religious tensions remain a prominent feature of civil society in Nigeria. Some interviewees reported that churches and mosques alike have stocked up on small arms in anticipation of future conflict. Only 36 percent of Christians recently surveyed in Nigeria said they have a favorable opinion of Muslims, while 73 percent of Christians associate Muslims with the trait "violent."¹

These dynamics were reflected in CSIS interviews throughout the country, especially in cities where recent religiously motivated conflict has occurred.

At the same time, religious and political leaders have also harnessed religion's capacity for positive social mobilization.

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Indigenous groups such as the Interfaith Mediation Center have led groundbreaking interfaith conflict-resolution work. Church and mosque leaders encourage voting and frequently speak out against corruption and poor political leadership. The Nigerian government has also begun to capitalize on the influence of religious leaders. One innovative example of the Nigerian government's role is the recent appointment of Reverend Father Matthew Kukkah, a well-respected Catholic priest from northern Nigeria, to mediate negotiations between ethnic militias and oil companies operating in the Niger Delta region.

Current diplomatic, military, and foreign assistance activities of the U.S. government address the role of religion in conflict and peacemaking in Nigeria, but these efforts are often ad-hoc and do not represent an integrated strategy on these issues.

U.S. government foreign assistance to Nigeria is approximately \$100 million annually, or less than one dollar per Nigerian per year. With limited resources, the U.S. Agency for International Development has tried to implement some creative programs that could help promote religious tolerance and prevent conflict and has also worked indirectly with a number of mainstream, faith-based organizations in order to achieve development objectives. But overall assistance in Nigeria remains token. Diplomatic outreach to religious actors has also been problematic. After September 11, 2001, the United States distributed brochures about the terrorist attacks that offended and alienated many Nigerian Muslims. And while the U.S. government has developed more sophisticated engagement strategies especially for Muslim religious actors, it still lacks a systematic and regular forum for consultation with interfaith groups and religious leaders.

Since September 11, defense and intelligence officials have focused on radical Islamic groups in Nigeria and their potential to threaten U.S. national security. Analysts have viewed Nigerian religious dynamics through the lens of the Global War on Terrorism and harbor concerns about Osama bin Laden or transnational terrorist groups having influence in Nigeria. Meanwhile, CSIS's interviews demonstrated that Nigerian Muslims and Christians alike continue to view the United States as a Christian nation engaged in a global war against Islam, with the tone of its language identified as a key factor contributing to this perception. Importantly, a recent U.S. interagency assessment conducted jointly by the Department of Defense and USAID "found little evidence that there is an active and growing terrorist threat in northern Nigeria today." This finding suggests that a focus on terrorism prevents a fuller understanding of the complicated nuances of inter- and intrareligious dynamics in the country.

The Nigeria case offers a number of key opportunities for the U.S. government to improve and integrate engagement strategies with religion in conflict-prone settings. These include achieving greater dialogue and mutual exchange of information with religious actors abroad; mainstreaming faith-based diplomacy efforts in U.S. government outreach, with special attention paid to appropriate use of secular or religious language; considering the impact of Washington frameworks—including counterterrorism efforts—on U.S. understanding of religion abroad; and assessing ways to harness the resources, expertise, and credibility of underengaged local religious groups in order to achieve development and conflict-prevention goals.

¹ Interestingly, Nigerians Muslims gave Nigerian Christians a 63 percent favorability rating; Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Conflicting Views in a Divided World 2006* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2006).

■ **Jennifer Cooke of the Africa Program and the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project's Rick Barton and Liara Danan, who all completed a 19-day trip to Nigeria, led the discussion. -**

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