

## Islam, Protest, and Conflict in Nigeria

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U.S. security interests in Africa have been cast in a new light since the September 11 attacks. There is good reason to surmise that several African countries will furnish a hospitable setting for terrorist activities. The history of Sudan's support for regional Islamist and international terrorist networks is well known—particularly its close relations with Osama bin Laden in the mid-1990s. The success of Al Qaeda groups in executing the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania also indicate the reach and capacity of this network. Since September 11, 2001, U.S. analysts have renewed their attention to Somalia, which appears to have many of the attributes (weak sovereignty, warlords, Muslim identity) present in Afghanistan in the 1990s, when it became a haven for bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In addition to the primary concern with security, the more general possibility that Islamic mobilization and religious antipathy will further undermine states in the region is a problem that has taken on new salience in the last year. If the divisive religious politics characteristic of Pakistan or Indonesia emerges in more African states, then the prospects for regional stability and democratic reform will surely diminish, with negative spillover effects both locally and internationally.

Nigeria presents a natural focal point for these concerns. The country embodies many of the problems of sub-Saharan Africa's frail states. It has a large Muslim population, widespread poverty, and social restiveness, all of which suggest a strong potential for the expansion of Islamic radicalism. It is home to at least fifty million Muslims, who have lived for decades in unsteady equilibrium with a roughly equal number of Christians. Chronic political instability, including a civil war and half a dozen coups, compounded by prodigious corruption among elites, has severely weakened the state.

Nigeria has experienced a palpable intensification of religious polarization over the past decade, manifest in political mobilization, sectarian social movements, and increasing violence. Since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, there has been an upsurge of communal antagonism and conflict, including numerous confrontations between Muslims and Christians. Efforts by the governors of the northern states to expand shari'a law have provoked intense and often violent reactions among Nigeria's religious communities. Several thousand people have been killed in strife, directly or indirectly, related to shari'a law initiatives. The prominent activities of Islamists in major northern cities provide further indication of restiveness and radicalization among the country's Muslim population. Most recently, an outbreak of religious rioting in Kaduna, claiming more than 200 lives, was instigated by Muslim indignation at Nigeria's plans to host the Miss World beauty pageant. Viewed in light of current concerns for stability and security in Africa, we must look closely at Nigeria to assess the implications of religious mobilization, tension, and conflict.

On October 13, 2001, days after the commencement of the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan, several hundred demonstrators gathered in Kano—the largest city in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim northern region—to protest the American action. The protesters carried banners criticizing the United States, and many reportedly displayed images of Osama bin Laden. The peaceful demonstration was immediately followed by rioting and street battles between Christians and Muslims, in which more than 100 people died. The international media reported these events as the most militant anti-American protest around the world since the beginning of hostilities in Afghanistan, and the violence was described as part of a rising tide of Islamic militancy and religious conflict in Nigeria.

Just a year after the Kano protests, the November 2002 disturbances in Kaduna highlighted the depth of Muslim resentment and the continuing dangers of religious

discord in Nigeria. Angered by a commentary on the Miss World pageant appearing in *This Day*, a major national newspaper, crowds of Muslims burned the publication's Kaduna offices and then attacked Christian sites and political targets in central sections of the city. Some Islamic clerics issued a *fatwa* (religious ruling) calling for the death of the newspaper's publisher. Reaction by Christians sparked generalized religious fighting that lasted for several days, with a sharply escalating death toll. The lethal consequences of a careless remark made by the media (which was retracted with apologies shortly after it appeared) illustrates the hair-trigger tensions among sectarian communities in parts of the country as well as the potential threats to political stability and social order.

Dissident Islamists are a significant force in countries such as Nigeria, where there is a ready social foundation, deep inequities, and a broad failure of governance. Conditions that foster radicalism—poverty, unemployment, social dislocation, cultural polarization, and a large pool of disaffected young men—are evident in abundance. Among Muslims, social grievances often find religious expression through fundamentalist appeals to piety, or through Islamist challenges to the political status quo. Both trends are evident in the country's political and religious landscape, and Islamist pressures may become a serious danger. There is no doubt that religious polarization and the spread of fundamentalism pose major challenges to Nigeria's fledgling democracy. The movement toward Islamic assertion through the expansion of shari'a law in the northern states could also have serious consequences for the stability of Nigeria's federal system.

In the wake of the transition to civilian rule in May 1999, Nigeria has been afflicted with widening social violence and communal conflict. Strife has broken out in all corners of the country, ranging from small-scale village feuds over land or chieftancy claims, to large urban upheavals embroiling religious and ethnic groups. The accumulating violence represents a growing crisis of public order. Religious divisions have played a salient role in these turbulent events. Sectarian identities have sharpened in recent years, and both Muslim and Christian communities have focused on the expansion of shari'a law in the northern states. Religious polarization is aggravated by the increasing visibility of regional organizations with a religious cast (in both northern and southern parts of the country), the activities of radical Islamist groups, and

religious activism among Christians. The causes of strife vary, as do the belligerents, but there is a prominent religious dimension in much of Nigeria's recent turmoil.

With these concerns in mind, it is important to sound a note of caution in assessing Nigeria's current problems. The development of militant Islam in Nigeria needs to be carefully monitored, but the danger should not be exaggerated. It is important to keep in mind that Nigeria is a multi-religious country in which Christian and Muslim communities are roughly proportional. Although pressures for Islamization are growing among Nigeria's northern states, they are being played out within the parameters of a federal system and a non-religious state. Diversity within Muslim and Christian communities, and varying relations between them, belie notions of an all-encompassing confrontation among regions or religions in Nigeria. Moreover, the character and history of Muslim social movements in Nigeria does not suggest a rapid expansion of radical Islamist organizations or a ready base for terrorist activities.

## Asking the Right Questions

To understand the possible influence and limitations of Islamist organizations and terrorist networks in Nigeria, it is important to address four key questions about the challenges of Islam and politics:

- Is radical Islam ascendant in Nigeria?
- Does the rise of radical Islamic movements threaten the stability of Nigeria's nascent democracy?
- To what extent does Islamic assertion threaten Nigeria's unity as a state?
- Is Nigeria a likely staging point for terrorist networks and operations?

The answers to these questions, briefly, follow.

Radical Islamist organizations do not appear to be expanding substantially in Nigeria, although the conditions for such movements are hospitable, and we could see a rise of political Islam in the future.

Islamic assertion, as part of the wider trend toward communal conflict, is a destabilizing influence that undermines Nigeria's fragile civilian regime. Religious dissension is not the sole source of social conflict in

present-day Nigeria, and the activities of political Islamists to mobilize support in a few northern cities are not a driving force of instability.

Similarly, the assertion of Islamic interests—especially through the expansion of shari‘a law in the north—has aggravated regional and ethnic tensions. Yet religion and ethnicity do not strictly coincide in Nigeria, and religious mobilization has not animated a central fault line in the social terrain likely to fracture Nigeria’s federal compact.

Finally, it is possible, even likely, that Nigeria can serve as a staging area for terrorist activities because of its porous borders, large shadow economy, and weak policing capabilities. Nevertheless, in the absence of a hospitable government or a large allied political organization, such terrorist activities will be transitory and limited in scale. Young Nigerians are unlikely to flock to Al Qaeda, although a few individuals might well do so, and Nigeria might become a haven for money laundering or isolated actions by terrorist organizations. Muslim interests, however, are more likely to be internally directed—toward asserting legal autonomy and countering challenges from evangelical and Pentecostal Christian groups within the country—than toward an international agenda.

## Islam, Protest, and Mobilization

The concern with radical Islam in Nigeria focuses attention on “anti-system” Islamic movements that articulate opposition to the political status quo, the Nigerian government and religious elites, and foreign (mainly U.S.) influences. They seek to replace the existing state with an Islamic order centered on the shari‘a, which is seen as integral to the realization of a just society. Movements generally reflecting this description have been evident in Nigeria for more than two decades, the most prominent being ‘yan Tatsine (Maitatsine), the millenarian movement at the center of upheavals in several northern cities during the early 1980s. Since the 1990s, the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood), a putatively Shi‘i movement led by Ibrahim El-Zakzaky, has been active in Kaduna, Kano, Zaria, and other cities of the north. Zakzaky and his followers had particularly contentious relations with authorities during the rule of Sani Abacha, and Zakzaky himself was imprisoned. Most recently, foreign media have given some attention to

Abubakar Mujahid, who leads the Ja’amutu Tajidmul Islami (Movement for Islamic Revival). These leaders are presented by outside observers as the vanguard of a militant or fundamentalist tendency in the northern part of the country. Independent preachers and mosques, widespread in the northern states, also have considerable potential to mobilize followers through appeals to social justice and religious purity.

These movements draw upon a large pool of disaffected young people (overwhelmingly male) who have largely been forsaken in the economic malaise and social dislocation of recent decades. Rapid urbanization, scant economic opportunity, widening inequality, and flagrant corruption and lawlessness have produced acute tensions, which are often channeled into religious dissent. Some religious mobilization targets political authorities and other religious groups—not only Christians but also those Muslims considered secular or apostate. In many instances, Islamist groups and independent mosques focus on the provision of social services, religious education, and other forms of community self help. Government officials regard Islamists with hostility, and efforts to curtail their activities have instigated clashes with security forces in various parts of the country.

Islamist groups are best understood not as a new insurgency, but within the broader range of political organizations and social movements in northern Nigeria. Despite the rhetorical identification of some Islamist leaders with Iran (and more recently, Osama bin Laden and the Taliban), there is no strong evidence that a substantial anti-system Islamist movement is growing in Nigeria. Polarization between the Muslim and Christian communities and the recent rise of anti-Americanism may invigorate the rhetoric of these preachers and their followers, but these groups appear localized and limited in their membership. Though capable of sporadic provocation and violence, political Islamists in Nigeria are not mobilized on the scale of the Muslim Brotherhoods of Egypt or Uzbekistan, or the popular Islamist parties of Algeria or Pakistan. In the past year, while religious tensions have been acute, there are few signs that radical organizations have expanded their appeal or organizational reach. Sheikh Zakzaky claims that he can mobilize a million supporters “on any issue,” but the Ikhwan’s public events have drawn, at most, a few thousand participants.<sup>1</sup>

1. Dan Isaacs, “Nigeria’s Firebrand Muslim Leaders,” BBC

## The Islamic Alternative to Islamism

Close observers of the Muslim world remind us that this community is not homogenous, and we must take account of the urgent doctrinal and political struggles within Islam.<sup>2</sup> Throughout most of Nigeria's post-colonial history there has been space for wide-ranging religious and political discourse. In the Muslim-majority northern region, political organizations, social movements, and religious groupings represent diverse approaches to religion and politics. Islam in Nigeria is heterogeneous, eclectic, and often liberal in practice. The Muslim establishment is structured around the traditional emirate system, Sufi brotherhoods, and a growing stratum of conservative Wahhabi-influenced clerics, scholars, and organizations. There is also a long history of political parties, popular organizations, and religious sects that speak mainly to the northern Muslim *talakawa* (commoners or masses). During the past twenty years, millenarian religious movements, fundamentalist clerics, and radical leaders have offset appeals from populist parties and enterprising mainstream politicians.

Different forms of Islamic mobilization influence the current political scene. Radical Islamist groups (distinct from the politicians and legal reformists promoting the extension of shari'a law) occupy a limited space in the Muslim political terrain. Ideological and organizational diversity is especially contentious in the setting of democratic politics. Voices of conservatism and Islamization are prominent, but there is also room for countervailing appeals to moderation, individual and civil rights, and religious coexistence. This has been evident in the most recent Kaduna upheaval, where Ikhwan leaders and like-minded Islamists have not been prominent. Several groups associated with shari'a reforms were most provocative in their reaction to the offensive newspaper article. When violence broke out, other prominent leaders,

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Africa, October 1, 2001.

1. See for example John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (3d Ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), and Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (2d Ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). On Nigeria, in particular, see John Paden, "Islam and Democratic Federalism in Nigeria," CSIS *Africa Notes*, No. 8, March 2002, available at: <http://www.csis.org/africa/ANotes/index.htm>.

such as the sultan of Sokoto, and organizations including the Nigerian Supreme Council of Islamic Affairs (as well as the Christian Association of Nigeria) urged restraint and a cessation of conflict.

A preoccupation with radical Islam loses sight of the diversity among Islamic social movements. The millenarian calls of Mohammed Marwa in the late 1970s were not the dissident Islamist views of Zakzaky (who sounded a fairly conciliatory tone in the weeks after September 11), or the militant utterances of Mujahid (who has hardly been heard from since). Rather than seeing a broad, continuous radical movement, we have witnessed the periodic emergence of dissident organizations with varying leaders and doctrines. Political Islam is only one dimension of mobilization among Nigerian Muslims. Indeed, these movements have vigorous ideological and organizational competitors that have shown far greater appeal and staying power. The tradition of progressive northern populism, advanced in the 1950s and 1960s by Aminu Kano and the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), continues to have legitimacy and appeal among the northern *talakawa*. The present-day political network associated with the late Shehu Musa Yar'adua (who died in prison under Abacha) and his associates have identified with that progressive legacy.

The concern with a dissident minority loses sight of the main trend toward Islamic assertion in Nigeria, the movement for the expansion and enforcement of shari'a law in the northern states. Prompted and organized by elements of the mainstream political class, this "neofundamentalist" initiative has quickly seized the attention of the Muslim public.<sup>3</sup> The cause of shari'a has been employed as a tool in domestic political debates by the "new men" who prospered under Abacha, against the aging Muslim establishment who draw their authority from the lineage of the historical Sokoto Caliphate. The assertion of shari'a law has attracted wide support, including much of the social base associated with the populist and Islamist movements. Legions of young men have been recruited to vigilante groups organized by northern state governments for the enforcement of shari'a

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3. Olivier Roy's term "neofundamentalist" is adopted here to connote the self-conscious use of religious traditionalism within the existing political order. This type of populist reformism is distinct from the political agenda of the Islamists, which largely seeks to circumvent or replace the political status quo. See Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, p. 25.

law, and the politicians most closely associated with these policies have reaped political gains from their reforms. In Nigeria today, the issues of religion and politics center on the question of the shari'a, as Muslim and Christian communities have mobilized—often violently—around this critical movement.

## Religious Conflict and Democracy

The second important issue is to what extent the escalation of religious polarization and conflict threatens democratic stability in Nigeria. Religious assertion, particularly that instigated by fundamentalists of both major faiths, has incited growing tensions and violence since the return of civilian rule in 1999. Religious antipathy is one among many dimensions of instability in the country. Democratic institutions and elected leaders have failed to mitigate communal tensions and, in many instances, exacerbated conflict for political ends. There is reason to be highly concerned over the impact of religious tensions on Nigeria's fragile democracy, though it is misleading to suggest that religious contention is the sole or leading catalyst of instability in the nascent civilian regime.

Conflict poses a major hazard to the consolidation of Nigeria's fragile democracy. In the wake of the political transition, social conflict has erupted throughout the country. Since 1999, there have been more than 40 incidents of violence with a toll of perhaps 10,000 lives. Nearly every region has been affected, including most major cities and a number of rural areas. State security forces have inflicted hundreds of casualties, raising serious questions about civilian control of the military and the ability of elected leaders to preserve human rights and ensure public order.

The violence and instability afflicting Nigeria is varied in its causes, forms, and directions. Several dimensions of confrontation have been manifest in recent years. The first dimension can be considered mainly ethnic, as belligerents group along linguistic and cultural lines, either informally or through vigilante and cultural defense organizations. Second, are chiefly sectarian conflicts, in which communities self-consciously mobilize according to religion, and targets of violence are houses of worship, schools, bookshops, and other religious sites. Ethnic and religious factors often mingle in regional tensions that set

northern, southern, eastern, or middle-belt groups against one another. Fourth, there is a distinctly local dimension of instability, as various communities have contended over land, title, or political boundaries, commonly setting natives against settlers. Fifth, some violence is directed mainly at the central state or foreign corporate interests, as manifest in much of the Niger Delta. Sixth, there is a rising tide of political violence, as partisans have increasingly used force in political feuds and electoral contention. Recent violence in the states of Osun, Anambra, and Kwara provide examples. Finally, these other forms of strife occur against a background of criminal violence, which is widely perceived to be increasing.

These different dimensions of conflict overlap and mingle in practice. Religious enmity, for example, has been aggravated by ethnic and regional identities, as seen in recent violence in Jos, Kaduna, Kano, Aba, and Lagos. Vigilante organizations around the country are organized along ethnic or religious lines, and their activities focus less on crime (their ostensible purpose) than on cultural defense and contention with other communities. The tide of religious violence since clashes erupted in Kaduna in early 2000 reflects communal mobilization by both Christians and Muslims, blending with other forms of identity and organization. Christian proselytizing and activism complement the trend toward Islamic assertion in contributing to polarization. During the past decade, the activities of evangelical Christian churches in the northern and middle belt states have often fomented tension, particularly when visiting foreign evangelists hold large public meetings in religiously divided communities. Competitive mobilization among religious communities increases the sense of discord, and the rise of vigilante groups facilitates a rapid escalation of violence when conflicts occur.

The alarming spread of conflict since the transition to civilian rule has been profoundly discouraging to those who hoped that democracy would permit an alleviation of social tension. Indeed, many Nigerians have come to question whether the democratic system provides any advantages over military rule, since violence and insecurity seem to be worsening under the new regime. This reaction, while understandable, misapprehends the foundations of strife in Nigeria today. Nigeria's post-transition disorder is comparable to the experiences of Russia, Indonesia, and other countries with a great deal of social diversity and a legacy of authoritarian rule. The

spate of conflict may be traced as much to the legacy of the old regime as to problems arising from democratic politics. Decades of military rule aggravated many inequities and grievances while providing few legitimate outlets for resolving these tensions. When repression was abruptly lifted in the wake of General Abacha's autocratic rule, many communities found new opportunities to mobilize and vent their concerns. Political liberties and a more open arena for association allow for resurgent expression of group interests and protests.

Since the new democratic setting is fluid and inchoate, most communities feel unsure of their position in the political system or their claim on resources. In these circumstances, political entrepreneurs can more easily incite communal feeling and take advantage of social anxieties for partisan or personal gain. A cycle of mobilization and counter-mobilization among contending groups heightens the sense of confrontation and insecurity. This syndrome is a product of political transition, rather than a symptom of democracy. The foundations were set in the authoritarian era, though the sudden advent of open competitive politics has given rise to increased uncertainty.

Religious confrontation is a potent catalyst to the general situation of instability. Radical Islamists contribute to tension in some of the northern urban areas, though other groups have been much more prevalent in recent violence. One major source of polarization are the *hisbah*, vigilantes organized by the governments of Zamfara, Niger, Katsina, Sokoto, and other northern states. These religious police are deployed throughout their states for the purposes of enforcing shari'a codes.<sup>4</sup> In addition, there is the Arewa People's Congress, which primarily emphasizes regional and ethnic identity, and has been prominently involved in clashes in the north and in Lagos. These groups vary in their leaders, guiding ideas and activities, though they draw substantially upon a common social base. yet to be tested.

Apart from concern with religious dissension, the president has also pursued ad hoc interventions into some

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<sup>4</sup> State-sponsored hisbah have not been identified as participants in the November 2002 violence in Kaduna. In fact, the rioters attacked business interests belonging to the state governor. It is known, however, that the initial attack on the newspaper offices was an organized action by a mob of young men arriving at the site in several buses.

local conflicts and taken steps to address grievances among the Niger Delta minorities. However, the government has not established a broader framework for conflict alleviation that could identify situations of instability, mediate conflicts, and actively engage antagonists. The cursory involvement of the president cannot substitute for a network of government officials, eminent persons, and non-governmental organizations with a clear mandate for addressing volatile situations and constructively intervening in conflicts. In the religious arena, there are important figures with a reputation for interfaith dialogue, and ecumenical organizations that can serve to mitigate tension. The government could do much more to encourage these efforts and facilitate networks of religious accommodation.

Senior leaders have also been unable or unwilling to ensure that government security forces can maintain order with discipline and restraint. The police have been ineffectual in managing instability, and the military appears to operate significantly outside the boundaries of civilian control. There is a widespread perception that President Obasanjo's concern with maintaining civilian government and reigning in the military's political ambitions, has caused the administration to countenance excesses by the armed forces in responding to unrest. In the Niger Delta village of Odi in November 1999, and in Zaki Biam and other villages in Benue state in October 2001, the military deliberately assaulted civilians, killing several hundred people. Regardless of claims by the armed forces that they were provoked, these incidents indicate that the military has broad latitude in settling scores without regard for the appropriate use of force or respect for human rights. Whether these attacks were merely tolerated or deliberately ordered by the presidency (as human rights monitors have alleged), they point to a major impediment in managing the country's growing instability.

Over time, acute social conflict has the potential to erode confidence in the democratic system, perhaps tempting the military to intervene once again under the mantle of restoring order. The armed forces have largely acquiesced in civilian control since the 1999 political transition, but chronic strife could revive thinking in the officer corps about the possibility of renewed intervention. These concerns are offset by evidence that the regime of democracy (as distinct from the administration in office) enjoys substantial popular legitimacy, and the public is strongly opposed to a return of the military, in which they

have little trust. The most recent survey by the Afrobarometer research network indicates that seven out of ten Nigerians believe democracy is the ideal system for the country, eight of ten would be opposed to a renewal of military rule, and more than half express little or no trust for the armed forces.<sup>5</sup> Further analysis also reveals a strong attachment to democracy among Muslims. Nigeria's Islamic community does not vary significantly from Christians in their preferences for democracy or their rejection of nondemocratic political alternatives. In fact, more observant Muslims tend to be more firmly committed to democracy and civil institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Despite some encouraging signs, pervasive social tension and conflict clearly threaten Nigeria's fragile democratic regime. We must take account of the full panoply of divisions in the country's social terrain. The accentuation of religious identity and intensification of religious conflict are important sources of instability, but are not the only dimension or (in many areas) the decisive element of strife. Furthermore, radical Islamists do not appear as the leading catalyst of religious or sectional assertion. Militant organizations and networks in the northern states share an arena with reformist organizations, populist politicians, ethnic defense groups, and state-sponsored vigilantes. An exclusive focus on the political Islamists overlooks the broad, contentious mobilization in the north.

## Religious Polarization and the State of Nigeria

Religious polarization carries important consequences for national unity, and Nigeria's current instability raises questions about the cohesion of the state. Does Islamic assertion constitute a leading threat to Nigeria's fragile federal compact? The expansion of shari'a law has been one of the most divisive issues in politics and social relations during the first civilian regime. Initiated by a few

northern governors, the movement quickly gained support among broad segments of the public and was taken up by other politicians, eventually spreading to 12 of the country's 36 states. The reforms extend shari'a law from a voluntary civil code in Muslim-majority states (the common arrangement for decades) to the prevailing criminal and civil system in these states. The movement for expanding shari'a law has sharply exacerbated sectarian identities and religious tensions. This antagonism has degenerated into violent conflict throughout the north and the middle belt, producing shock waves as far as Lagos in the southwest and Aba in the southeast.

The extension of shari'a law has complex motives and effects. Many observers associate the movement with a group of relatively marginal state governors seeking to build a populist base through appeals to fundamentalism. This political interpretation is bolstered by the fact that the earliest states to extend shari'a law were in the far north, largely governed by the minority All People's Party. Whether or not political opportunism is a sufficient explanation for the motives of leaders, it cannot account for the significant popular support of these legal reforms. The conservative reformist movement 'yan Izala with strong roots among the northern youth and the middle class, has strongly supported the legal changes. The Muslim public in the northern states, deeply alienated by the prevailing civic political system, has substantially embraced the movement toward shari'a law as a turn toward order, justice, and moral legitimacy. There is no question that the northern governors have failed to deliver on these promises. The extension of shari'a law has been associated with widespread abuses of human rights—disproportionately women's rights—as well as increased social violence, insecurity, and unabated corruption. These negative developments, however, have not diminished the symbolic appeal of shari'a law for many Muslims. Given the sacrosanct status of the shari'a within Islam, it has been politically impossible for moderates in the Muslim community to attenuate the movement, even its more extreme forms of application.

The other important dimension of the shari'a law movement is linked to the regional divisions that have animated Nigerian politics for nearly a half-century. The northern political elite, who have frequently controlled the central state since independence, acquiesced in the election of a southwestern candidate in the 1999 election. This power shift from north to south was seen as a

5. See Peter Lewis, Etannibi Alemika, and Michael Bratton, "Down to Earth: Changes in Attitudes Toward Democracy and Markets in Nigeria," *Afrobarometer Working Paper* No. 20, Michigan State University, August 2002, available at <http://www.afrobarometer.org/abseries.html>.

6. See "Islam, Democracy, Public Opinion in Africa," Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 3, September 2002, available at: <http://www.afrobarometer.org/abbriefing.html>.

necessary act of political conciliation in view of the annulled election of 1993, in which a Yoruba, Chief Abiola, won the poll. Yet northern elites are evidently dissatisfied with President Obasanjo's performance, and their resultant position in the political system. Consequently, the movement for shari'a law should also be seen as an act of northern regional assertion, through which political and religious leaders declare a realm of legal autonomy and sectarian identity in Nigeria's federal system. This is facilitated by ambiguities in the 1999 Constitution, which appear to leave open the degree of legal pluralism among the states. Northern leaders seek to push the boundaries of federalism to reverse their marginalization and bolster their political control.

The issue surrounding these developments is whether religious extremism and antipathy have the potential to divide the republic. Having already suffered a devastating civil war 35 years ago, does Nigeria now face the possibility of Islamic (or northern) assertion rekindling such fatal divisions? The expansion of shari'a law is obviously a constitutional watershed for Nigeria, with consequences for domestic political stability and the country's global position. The increasingly stringent enforcement of shari'a law has aggravated sectarian division in several northern states, which not only fuels violence and mistrust, but also contributes to international perceptions of Nigeria as a human rights pariah. The fiasco surrounding the Miss World pageant only adds to these impressions.

The serious problems arising from the neofundamentalist movement, however, do not automatically imply the disintegration of Nigeria. It is worth observing that no significant political force in Nigeria currently supports partition, in contrast to countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, or Russia, where significant groups seek to break away from the state.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, leaders in the northern region have a large stake in the preservation of the Nigerian state, since they would likely inherit a landlocked, resource-poor territory if the country should divide. National elites—both civilian and military—across regions, remain fundamentally committed to Nigeria's unity as a federal state.

6. The New Biafra movement calling for Igbo secession is at best a minor tendency with no significant organizational presence. Nor have any of the militants in the Niger Delta mounted a serious bid for secession.

Equally important, however, are the divisions within northern society and among Nigeria's Muslim population. Notwithstanding the momentum of the neofundamentalist movement, new shari'a codes have not been adopted by all northern states, and the application of existing codes has been uneven. Several states, though nominally adopting reforms, have essentially affirmed the status quo under which shari'a law is mainly a civil code employed by Muslims. Not all shari'a states have formed hisbah militias, and the harshest sentences of amputation and stoning have so far been concentrated in a few states—though still a distressingly high number. Among moderate and progressive elements in the Muslim community, the struggle over shari'a law is importantly a matter of jurisprudence as well as politics. Differences among *ulama* (scholars) and *Qadi* (judges) in interpretation and legal outlook constitute an important arena of contestation in moderating the scope and severity of these codes. Indeed, the first prominent sentence of stoning in the north was overturned under appeal by a higher shari'a court that rejected the standards of evidence and legal reasoning used by the original judges.

Although religion frequently merges with ethnicity and region in Nigeria, these identities are far from identical. Many of Nigeria's Muslims are Yorubas in the southwestern states, who are ambivalent toward shari'a law. A national opinion poll administered in 2001 by Afrobarometer found that two-thirds of Muslims in the north supported the expansion of shari'a law, compared with 38 percent of southern Muslims.<sup>7</sup> In fact, nearly six of ten Muslims in the south supported a national common law system. Furthermore, the Muslim majority varies across northern Nigeria, from 90 percent or higher in states such as Zamfara, Sokoto, Katsina and Kano, to near parity with Christians, as in Kaduna. The north and the middle belt are permeated with Christian minorities, many indigenous to their areas, which naturally adamantly oppose the trend toward Islamization. We know that sectarian strife and instability will arise from the imposition of Islamic law in religiously diverse states, but this conflict does not fall along a clear political or geographic fault line, which might presage division of the country. In the absence of an Islamic political party or social movement with national reach, it is also difficult to identify the vehicle for mobilizing the country's Muslims in a religious or regional schism.

7. Lewis, Alemika, and Bratton, "Down to Earth."

## Islamic Assertion and the Problem of Terrorism

One of the most disturbing conclusions suggested by some foreign observers of Nigeria is that the spread of religious extremism underscores the potential for a terrorist threat from Africa's most populous state. The reasoning is that northern fundamentalists will create a haven for radical Islamists, and terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda will find a hospitable environment for their activities. This view must be questioned on a number of points. First, as noted earlier, political Islamists with a presence in the northern urban areas are frequently at loggerheads with state officials and the Muslim establishment. The politicians and reformists promoting shari'a law have few motives for encouraging the activities of figures like Zakzaky, who has in fact criticized the expansion of shari'a law in the absence of a fully realized Islamic state. Indeed, radical Islamists constitute as much of a threat to the interest of the northern emirs and party politicians as they do to other segments of the political and religious establishment.

Second, Nigerians do not have a history of significant linkages with global Islamist networks or terrorist groups. Over the past twenty years, Libya, Iran, and Sudan have made forays into Nigeria's Muslim community, but have met with scant success. Nigeria's Islamist groups have not been linked to Al Qaeda or other revolutionary organizations. Despite considerable sectarian violence, there has been little terrorist activity in the north, whether directed at other religious groups, the state, or foreign interests. In contrast to the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Chechnya, Uzbekistan, Georgia, or even Germany, there is little evidence to suggest that Nigeria is currently an active staging area for terrorists.

Notwithstanding their challenges to the federal system, the northern states remain part of Nigeria and, therefore, subject to the jurisdiction of a central government controlled by civil politicians and officials. Federal authorities are concerned about domestic security and the potential for terrorist activities, and the present Nigerian administration has expressed a commitment to work with the United States in anti-terrorist efforts. Surveillance and control in the northern states are certainly made more difficult by the growing distance between the northern governors and Abuja, as well as the inefficiency of Nigerian security and intelligence agencies. Nonetheless,

state authorities are motivated to contain radicalism and preserve international cooperation against terrorist actions. Unlike Pakistan or Indonesia, there is no evident faction within the Nigerian security establishment that is sympathetic to Islamist groups.

Nigeria unquestionably has characteristics that make it a potential theater for terrorist activities. Porous borders, weak law enforcement, a large parallel economy, pervasive official corruption, and an enormous Muslim population, all suggest that terrorist networks will seek a foothold in Nigeria for logistics, finance, and possibly actions against foreign interests. This is a serious policing and intelligence challenge, but it does not necessarily mean that Nigeria is (or will soon become) a major platform for terrorist operations.

## Conclusion

Nigeria's stability, democracy, and national cohesion are threatened by extremism and conflict. There is no reason to be sanguine about the serious challenges of growing religious fundamentalism, polarization, and violence in this large, fragile state. But alarmist warnings that Nigeria is an Algeria or a Pakistan-in-waiting must be examined carefully. Nigeria's problems cannot be traced to the agitation of radical Islamists, nor are they simply a product of Muslim assertion. They are part of a broader crisis of governance and federalism in a state crippled by decades of authoritarian rule, endemic malfeasance, and social division.

U.S. relations with Nigeria, which have largely been constructive since the advent of civilian rule, should not be clouded with an illusory security agenda or a new tone of cultural confrontation. Exaggerated concerns over terrorism can lead to the wrong types of involvement with Nigeria. An inappropriate emphasis on military and intelligence cooperation could undermine the country's fledgling democracy by strengthening the role of the armed forces and encouraging repressive measures against dissidents. A sweeping censure of Muslim extremism by the United States would likely promote a northern backlash, polarizing Nigeria's religious communities further and stoking anti-Americanism. The United States should be alert to the dangers of Islamism in Nigeria, but while recognizing these challenges, it is equally important not to confound the problems of religious mobilization

and extremism with the war on terrorism and the threat of insurgent groups and networks.

The United States will undoubtedly pursue necessary intelligence and police cooperation with Nigeria over specific areas pertaining to terrorism. But the most appropriate engagement with a democratic Nigeria is to help strengthen the political and social mechanisms that allow for moderation, conciliation, and the resolution of social conflicts. This means encouraging inter-regional dialogue, supporting a much-needed process of constitutional reform, and bolstering elements of civil society that seek to defend the rights of women, judicial defendants, and religious minorities. Alternative voices within the Muslim community, and communication and accommodation across sectarian lines, will furnish the strongest antidotes to extremism, polarization, and violence. By emphasizing democratic mechanisms of religious and ethnic conciliation in Nigeria, we will serve the dual interest of advancing the country's fledgling democracy and fostering alternatives to fundamentalism and sectarian antagonism.

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