

Boko Haram: An Extremism Firmly Rooted in Nigeria's Colonial Past

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Emile Schepers cautions against acting on the symptoms rather than causes of Boko Haram's terrorist campaign in Borno state, Nigeria

A wave of revulsion has spread worldwide over the news of the kidnapping of at least 276 young girls from a school at Chibok, in Borno state in north-western Nigeria, and subsequently the slaughter of at least 300 villagers in nearby Gamboru Ngala on the Nigeria-Cameroon border by the violent Boko Haram sect.

“Boko Haram” means “Western education is forbidden” in a mixture of Hausa and Arabic. The ultra-violent sect is just the latest of a series of such groups, going back to the 1970s, which consider that “western,” meaning modern, education is sinful because of its teaching of scientific concepts, its association with Christian proselytisation and because it promotes the education of women and thereby alters patriarchal gender relations.

But this is not the whole story. Nigeria, with its 170,000,000 people, is Africa's largest state. It is a product of British and French colonial rivalries in west Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when feudal Muslim emirates, stretching east to west along the Sudanic belt of West Africa, were seized by direct or indirect military intervention.

The Borno emirate, where Boko Haram started, was an ally of Britain, so when it became part of its empire in Africa in 1905 the ruling dynasty was kept on. The idea of administering colonial possessions through traditional rulers was promoted by colonial administrator Lord Frederick Lugard.

As governor of Nigeria between 1912-19, Lugard continued the policy of leaving the north essentially neglected while southern areas were developed more but without concessions to labour unions and democracy.

After independence in 1960, the stage was set for north-south conflict. A 1966 coup by junior army officers from the south, in which a number of Muslim leaders were killed, set off bloody reprisals against southerners living in the north, followed by the Biafra war of independence.

Since then, hostility between the Muslim north and the mostly Christian south and a series of military coups has bedeviled Nigeria.

The roots of Boko Haram lie in the isolation, backwardness and poverty of the north. The

sect had its origins in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno, and recruited its first followers from poor and unemployed youth. It was formally founded by Mohammed Yusuf in 2002, but did not begin violent attacks against Christians, orthodox Muslims and government facilities until some years later.

Yusuf was killed by government forces in 2009 and was succeeded by the present leader Abubakar Shekau. At that point, attacks by Boko Haram became much more frequent and violent including several deadly attacks in Nigeria's capital, Abuja.

Christian churches have been destroyed and their parishioners massacred. Many students and teachers have been killed in attacks on schools.

What has turned the world's attention to Boko Haram has been the kidnapping of the girls, who include both Muslims and Christians. In attacks on schools, Boko Haram has often killed all the boys, but this time Abubakar Shekau had a video made in which he laughingly boasts that the girls he has captured would now be sold as slaves. The image of lascivious old men buying little girls has added to the worldwide furor over the incident.

Anger exploded all over Nigeria, much of it directed not just at Boko Haram but at the Nigerian government of President Goodluck Jonathan, a southerner, who is seen as having been slow and ineffective in mobilising security forces to search for the girls.

Muslim leaders denounced Boko Haram as distorters of Islam. Demonstrations have been carried out all over the country and, through social media, have now reached worldwide proportions.

There have been demonstrations in Washington DC and the Obama administration announced that it is sending intelligence and logistical military help to Nigeria.

Although he stopped short of "putting boots on the ground" this adds to an increasing US military presence in Africa.

There are complaints that the Nigerian military has — before the kidnapping — gone after Boko Haram's social base with extreme harshness, committing many murders and other violations of human rights. It is also worth remembering that a similar outcry to go after Joseph Kony, the leader of the violent Lord's Resistance Army in central Africa has so far failed to bring him to book.

There is, however, a real danger of losing sight of the root cause of the problem, namely the neglect and poverty of huge areas of Africa like Borno state.

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