

The Threat of Boko Haram and the Continuing Crisis in Nigeria

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RICARDO RENÉ LARÉMONT, FEB 7 2012

In Nigeria Boko Haram has struck again, this time more violently. On 21 January 2012 the city of Kano was hit with more than 30 bombs during just a few hours. At least 178 people died and hundreds were injured. [1] The city was traumatized. Its residents were subjected to terror and the nation was shocked into horror. Nigerians now wonder whether the government of President Goodluck Jonathan is capable of restoring security.

The Kano bombings came in the wake of nationwide general strike held during January 2011 that was led by labor unions and others who were protesting the Nigerian government's policy of eliminating governmental subsidies on petrol, effectively doubling the price for consumers. [2] The Petrol Protests and the Boko Haram Bombings created perilous conditions not only for Kano but for Nigeria as a whole. The January 2012 Kano bombings were preceded by bombings on Christmas Day in the northern Nigerian towns and cities of Madala, Jos, and Gadaka that killed almost 30 people. Before the Christmas day bombings, Boko Haram attacked governmental facilities in the capital of Abuja in June 2011. When we take these bombings and join them with the epic, massive national strike that occurred during January 2012 we have a combination of events that reveal that the government of President Goodluck Jonathan is being challenged on two fronts: from the armed terrorists of Boko Haram and from nonviolent Nigerian demonstrators who are demanding economic justice.

Who comprise Boko Haram? What are their aspirations? What is the nature of their threat to the Nigerian government? Boko Haram emerged in 2002 as an Islamist sect that desires an Islamic state in Nigeria because it believes that Nigeria's government is both secular and corrupt. Boko Haram originated in the northeastern Nigerian states of Borno and Yobe and operated in that region before attacking government facilities in the capital of Abuja in June 2011. [3] Its subsequent attacks in Madala, Jos, and Kadaka on Christmas Day 2011 and in Kano on 21 January 2012 speak to its expanding geographical scope of operations. Boko Haram's objective is to create an Islamic state that would be ruled by Islamic law or *sharia* in Nigeria. It is attempting to do so even though Nigeria is a bi-religious society with approximately 55% of the population being Muslim with the remainder being Christians or practitioners of African traditional religions. [4] Nevertheless, Boko Haram believes that the establishment of an Islamic state would enable it to create a just and transparent government that would benefit Muslims and Christians alike. Boko Haram has rejected integration into Western social, governmental, and legal norms and structures yet it is important to note that it turned to more violent tactics after the murder of its leader, Muhammad Yusuf, who died suspiciously while in Nigerian police custody after he had been arrested.

While we do understand Boko Haram's political objective (the creation of an Islamic state ruled by *sharia*), we simply do not know enough about the composition of the group's present leadership or its membership. It is not a centralized organization. Rather, Boko Haram is a composite of actors involving one part Islamist ideologues and militants another part opportunistically inspired hooligans and yet other part of legitimate discontents who have been incited or encouraged by political elites who may want to destabilize the state. (Notice here the arrest of Senator Ali Ndume who was accused by Nigeria's State Security Services of supporting Boko Haram.) [5] Furthermore, another source of concern is whether Boko Haram has linked with other violent Islamist groups on the African continent, especially Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Shabaab in Somalia. While there have been declarations by both Boko Haram and AQIM that there is a formal linkage between the two groups and while the increasing sophistication of

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Boko Haram's bombings in Nigeria may support that thesis, intelligence analysts and scholars have yet to acquire definitive evidence of an organizational link among Boko Haram, AQIM, and Al Shabaab. Nevertheless, because of the phenomenal success of recent attacks, the suspicion is there.

What is important about the Boko Haram bombings and the petrol strike is that it brings into question the stability of President Goodluck Jonathan's regime. Disgruntlement towards the state is being expressed by different groups using different tactics. Boko Haram has opted for violence; the petrol strikers chose nonviolence. Both streams of dissent, however, are public expressions of indignation with the continued governmental status quo in Nigeria. Both Boko Haram and the petrol strikers have been animated by participants who are expressing extreme frustration with Nigeria's ruling class, which is a class that has not professionalized state institutions, which has not created a world-class infrastructure that would encourage economic development, and which has continued to engage in non-transparent governance that enriches them as a class at the expense of the general population.

While critics legitimately decry Boko Haram's tactics of bombing, few commentators or analysts have examined Mohamed Yusuf's (Boko Haram's original leader) message of liberation theology that focused upon improving the livelihoods of the poor, which was a message that resonated with both Muslims and Christians alike in Nigeria. Mohammed Yusuf's political message was for more than just the establishment of *sharia*, his call for social and economic justice had the capacity to mobilize considerable numbers of people who wished to express their antipathy towards the Nigerian state.

The twin events of the Boko Haram bombings and the Petrol Protest have put the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan on notice: the government needs to address the systemic problems that inhibit progress in Nigeria, which include ending corruption, creating a more inclusive government, alleviating poverty and disease, extending access to education, and creating a transportation and communications infrastructure that would lead to economic growth. Nigeria has the economic and human resources to be a substantial regional power. These twin events, one nonviolent and the other violent, may impel the government to react positively. One must ask: Have the winds of the Arab Spring crossed the Sahara? Perhaps.

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[1] <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/01/2012121141320481233.html>, accessed 2 February 2012.

[2] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16579001>, accessed 2 February 2012.

[3][3] Ricardo René Larémont, "Boko Haram, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Al Shabab," Statement for the Record, House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, November 30, 2011, <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony%20Larémont.pdf>. Accessed 2 February 2012.

[4] Ricardo René Larémont, *Islamic Law and Governance in Northern Nigeria* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2011).

[5] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15829203>, accessed 2 February 2012.