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BOKO HARAM AND LITERACY: A NEED FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract

Boko Haram rose from a harmless organization into a dreaded sect, repudiating western education and affirming the supremacy of Islamic culture. Within a short period, it aspired to take over the Nigerian state and impose sharia law in the whole country. But its attacks on schools, police stations, prisons and kidnap of school children, men and women in the North East have brought it into collision with the Nigerian military. The thrust of this research is that the nation should look beyond the present and try to establish social justice for peace to reign in the region to wipe out issues leading to insurgency.

Introduction

The rise of Boko Haram from an inconsequential organization known as Shabaab Muslim Youth organization in 1995 to a terrorist organization with affiliation to Al Qaeda has continued to generate interest and concern not only in security circles but to the entire citizenry of Nigeria and other neighbouring countries like Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Although controversy dogs the actual date of its commencement which has been put variously at 1995, 1999, 2002 and 2003, the sect's extremism is never in doubt. Onuoha (2012) in his submission has opined that the sect had been existing under different names like Mahajirum, Yusufiyyah sect and Nigerian Taliban. It has been said that the sect was first led by Abubakar Lawan who later went to University of Medina in Saudi Arabia for further studies. Then the activities of the sect were limited to revolts and insurrection which marked them out as deviants and non-conformists.

Studies so far conducted on the activities of Boko Haram seem to concentrate on the insurgency it has created and the humanitarian crises it has fostered in Northern Nigeria, the loss of lives, its effect on the socio-economic development of the region, its impact on national security and the general fear and insecurity it has infused in the West African sub-region. The thrust of this paper is to see the effect of the Boko Haram insurgency on literacy, what caused it and how the crises can be addressed.

The meaning of Boko Haram

Boko Haram's grouse emanates from its perception of public misunderstanding of its meaning and ideology which have been portrayed as being against western education. The sect maintains that it only affirms the supremacy of Islamic culture that is not influenced by western education. It reiterates that it does not really oppose western education as it uses western made goods like rifles, video, cars

and other facilities to put across its message. Boko Haram's ideological mission include:-

1. Total overthrow of the Nigerian state and the imposition of sharia law in the entire country.
2. To assist devout Muslims to migrate (hijira) to an ideal place where they will be free of western corruption.
3. To purge the country of western education, culture and science and its sinful traits.
4. To weaken the Nigerian state through violence and insurgency until breakup.
5. To classify the citizens of the country into kaffir/unbelievers and believers.
6. Popularise the identity of its members which are long beards, red or black headscarves.

Radicalisation of Boko Haram

In its early days, Boko Haram did not use violent methods to push through its agenda. But with the appointment of Mohammed Yusuf who had Islamic extremist views, the sect turned from a docile organization to a violent one. Mohammed not only excluded the sect members from the main stream society but built a school and a mosque with the sole aim of radicalizing the sect. According to Ajayi(2012) and Onuoha(2012), other factors that led to the radicalization of the sect include:-

1. The killing of Mohammed Yusuf in controversial circumstances in 2009 which led the sect to go all out to avenge his death.
2. The killing of some sect members by security agents without trial.
3. Inadequate knowledge by the insurgents of the true teaching of the prophet Mohammed who abhorred the attack and killing of Muslims.
4. Corruption and ostentatious lifestyles in government circles which infuriate the sect members.

5. The poor state of the economy which led to massive youth unemployment and their being ready tools in the hand of the sect members.
6. The half-hearted adoption and implementation of the Sharia law in the 12 northern states of Nigeria which was skewed against the poor and the downtrodden.
7. Refusal of former President Jonathan to accede to their four point requests of;-
 - a. Withdraw troops from Maiduguri
 - b. Grant unconditional amnesty to the sect members
 - c. Negotiate with the group
 - d. Provide succor for their displaced members.
 Jonathan's administration had first insisted that the group should first unmask as the Niger Delta militants had done and then lay down their arms as a precondition; insisting it would not negotiate with a faceless group.
8. Opposition to the presidency of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan which they saw as Christian and insensitive to Muslim interest.
9. The quagmire President Jonathan was thrown into; perceived as anti-Islam just because he was perceived as anti-terrorist.
10. Use and dump method of northern leaders who use them to win elections only to abandon them to their fate afterwards.
11. Open support, military training and equipment granted to the sect members by international terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda.
12. Financial support from rich northern politicians who transfer large sums of money to their accounts at home and abroad.

Literacy and Boko Haram

Scholars have expanded the frontiers of literacy from reading, writing, knowledge and skills to encompass information communication technology. In making a case for its expansion, the former Executive Vice-Chairman/CEO of Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), Engr. Ernest C. A. Ndukwe (2006) advocates "the broader literacy model-which encompasses digital literacy and encapsulates global awareness, economic literacy, technology literacy and basic literacy". According to him, adopting this model would not only put the nation in the mainstream of global events and awareness of literacy options but help the Nigerian youths to be employable and employers of labour.

When literacy was defined as the ability to read and write in any language, the definition left it at a rudimentary level. According to Otagburuagu, Okorji

and Ogenyi (2006) "Literacy is both a process of skills acquisition and a product of organized intellectual schemes and effort. It is an attribute of human civilization. Literacy removes man from the realm of passivity to activity. Literacy has different forms. The first type of literacy is the basic type which is just rudimentary. The use, the agent and the media through which literacy activities proceed and are sustained have become sources of the parameters for the classification of literacy".

The very first devastating effect of Boko Haram activities is the destruction of both the incubator and the cocoon of literacy. By attacking homes and making parents internally displaced persons (IDPS), the child is made to skip the rudimentary stage of educational development and to learn along with adults instead of following in their footsteps. Living in camps with inadequate facilities like water, food, toilet and other comforts of life, the child is denied organized life; and organization is the first law in fostering literacy. Both the child and the teacher must live an organized life to be able to function optimally. This argument is supported by Mary E.U. Ogah (2009) when she says: "Literacy is best cultivated when people are young, since literacy is learned as a way of life. Literacy, like other development tasks has its critical stage. When reading habit, which is one of the most important literacy skills, is started early in life, children are found to benefit more physically, cognitively, socially and morally from the exercise".

The kidnap of more than 200 girls from Chibok in their school by Boko Haram has done more harm than all the attacks on schools in the north east put together. This is because the controversy it generated has infused more fear and led more parents to withdraw their children from schools than other attacks in the past. Despite appeals and beefed up security in schools, the situation has not improved. Dr. Ulrike Hanemann (2005) of UNESCO Institute of Education, Hamburg, Germany confirms this situation when he says, "During wartime and prolonged conflict the school buildings and infrastructure are damaged or destroyed, qualified teachers are displaced and the lack of security prevents parents from sending their children, particularly their daughters, to school."

Literacy is unarguably a signpost for the future. It points the way forward for both the adult and children to know where their future lies; especially for parents. This is because children are seen in Africa as human investment and insurance against old age. While northern Nigeria trails behind in education, the continued attacks on schools and

human beings there have made the future a mirage. In its editorial (13/04/15), The Sun newspaper has this to say: "The North –East Nigeria before this insurgency had a 35 percent literacy rate as opposed to 77 percent obtainable in other parts of the country. Seventy-seven percent of women in the North- East of Nigeria have no formal education, compared to 17 percent in other parts of the country. North East Nigeria records highest number of the estimated 10.5 million out of school children in the UNESCO report. The attacks on the schools, pupils and their teachers have negatively impacted education in the zone".

Recruitment of School Children as Child Soldiers

One major tragedy of the Boko Haram menace is the recruitment of children who should be in school as child soldiers. Usually, they are handy as almajiris roaming the streets begging for alms for their Islamic teachers. Sometimes they are sent on suicide missions or made to fight at frontlines. Since they do not value their lives nor in a good position to know what the future portends, they exhibit more bravery and brutishness in their activities. When they are maimed or suffer permanent disability, they take to the streets as beggars and urchins tormenting the society.

How Boko Haram has helped to underdevelop the North East

In the last six years, Boko Haram has consistently launched its attacks on schools, offices, markets, police stations, hospitals etc and these have not only resulted in the huge loss of lives and property but the increase in internally displaced persons(IDPS). Perhaps it is better to know the extent of the catastrophe unleashed in the north east before one could determine how to address the imbalance and advocate for a better society.

1. **Massive destruction of lives and property.** It can safely be said that the north east zone has been heavily depopulated because of the activities of the sect. Although the sect even killed people from other geo-political zones, it must be stated that the casualty figure has depopulated the region. The nation has been denied her valued citizens who were caught in crises they knew nothing about.
2. **Increase in the number of internally displaced persons.** It has already been said that the activities of the sect led to the massive exodus of people from the West African sub-

region. Many people from the affected zone were made refugees in neighbouring countries like Chad, Cameroon and Niger. This not only led these nations into building refugee camps but to make allowances for other logistic support, and the scenario tested their diplomatic relationship with Nigeria to the limit.

3. **Destruction of family literacy.** Since the family is the nucleus of the society, attacks on the families inadvertently bring down the first tree of learning which is the family. As learning begins at home and lays the foundation for the future and the subsequent programme of education, Boko Haram attacks on the family are the deepest cuts on this tree of learning. As Ihebuzor (1999) rightly observes, "Family literacy re-situates the home as the epicenter of learning and recognizes its potentials as a vast learning laboratory full of learning materials and experiences---".
4. **Instilling fear and hatred for western education.** Through persistent attacks on schools and kidnap of school children, Boko Haram has instilled mortal fear in children of school age and their parents. (The story has been told of a little boy in Abuja who wept and protested that he did not want his sister to go to school with him on a certain morning. When asked by his father to give his reason for this unusual behaviour, he replied that he did not want his sister to be kidnapped by Boko Haram.) The result is that not only did they withdraw their children from schools but many married them off to protect them from being defiled. This development has dire consequences as the children will not only be illiterates but will be unemployable; a situation that will increase poverty and suffering for the affected.
5. **Increase in militancy.** It is truism that the devil provides employment for the unengaged hands. The increase in poverty and illiteracy in the youths make them vulnerable to Boko Haram recruitment. Many of them feel there is a life of fulfillment in the sect and an opportunity to live their lives to what they think is the fullest.
6. **Increase in political violence and armed robbery.** In Nigeria today, politicians set up the youths against their opponents. Youths are easily recruited as political thugs when promises are made of the supply of arms and cash to the willing ones. Once these arms are released, it is difficult to retrieve them after elections. The result is that the youth, on experiencing want,



quickly put them to use for armed robbery and kidnapping.

7. **Increase in rape and prostitution.** The very first result of dropping out of school for girls is the danger of being lured into prostitution. For boys, it is street brawl, addiction to hard drugs and rape of girls. For those that Boko Haram could not recruit, human traffickers take advantage of. This inevitably leads to crime and the attendant punishment.

Solving the Boko Haram Menace

- a. The very first attempt to address the Boko Haram menace is military as only the living can plan for the future. The situation is so grave that President Muhammadu Buhari's option has to be explored. The insurgents are either to be confronted or negotiated with. Either way, the military must be involved.
- b. Massive education of the insurgents must be embarked upon. From available reports, most of the insurgents are indoctrinated with promises of better days in heaven. Since many of them are illiterates, the only way to liberate them is education and re-orientation.
- c. Employment opportunities for the youth. It is a known fact that once the youths are engaged, they think less of crime. The youth must be profitably engaged so that they can be useful to themselves and the society. Loans could be provided to help them set up businesses for themselves and others.
- d. International collaboration. The neighbouring countries must collaborate to make sure the

problems of insurgency are addressed once and for all. If the matter is not tackled holistically, they could move from one country to another. This will water down the achievements in one nation to create trouble in another.

- e. Government must fish out the sponsors of Boko Haram and bring them to justice. Once they are unmasked, the sect will die naturally and their assets should be frozen.
- f. Establishment of cross border patrols and sharing of intelligence will help reduce insurgency. There should be international co-operation in fighting insurgency. Insurgency is now a global crime that needs international approach for its eradication.
- g. Arms control is a way to tackle insurgency. All routes where arms are imported illegally should be blocked and those importing arms without authorization prosecuted.

Conclusion

The menace of Boko Haram has not only led to the death of many but also to loss of property in a way never experienced in Nigeria before; except perhaps during the Nigerian civil war. The Maitatsine Kano uprising of 1980 was not anything to be compared with this. Efforts must be made to stop the insurgency and this will entail the entrenchment of social justice, good governance and provision of jobs for the youths. The youths must be considered in the scheme of things.

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