Effects of Boko Haram Insurgency on Religious Cleavages in Nigeria

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Abstract
With their open claims on recorded video/audio clips to Islamize Nigeria with the force of war, Boko Haram attacks on the Nigerian civilian population in places of worship has further exacerbated existing religious cleavage among the adherents of the two major religions — Islam and Christianity — in Nigeria. This is why this article offers critical analysis of patterns of rhetoric between leaders and adherents of the two religious groups, which centers on their viewpoints of the sponsors, agenda and principle targets of the insurgents. Based on Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) theory of social cleavage, the findings indicate that the kind of rhetoric that Boko Haram attacks spurred among leaders and followers of the two religions has produced the deepest and bitterest opposition among the two religious groups, therefore affected relations.

Keywords: Boko Haram, Group Division, Religion and Social Cleavage Theory.

Introduction
This article examines how Boko Haram insurgency [BH insurgency] has affected existing religious cleavage within Nigerian society. The article begins by exploring the genesis of cleavage between the two major religions—Islam
and Christianity in Nigeria, an issue that is directly related to colonial and post-colonial policies.\footnote{See for example; Diamond, L. (1982). *Cleavage, Conflict, and Anxiety in the Second Nigerian Republic.* The Journal of Modern African Studies, 20(04), 629-668 and Ballard, J.A. (1971). *Administrative Origins of Nigerian Federalism.* African Affairs, 333-348.} The term cleavage has many definitions but this study will adopt Bartolini and Mair’s (1990) because of its precision. They defined cleavages as social differences that are embedded in social structures of a society (Bartolini and Mair, 1990). The article then examines the pattern of conflicts (rhetoric) between the leaders and adherents of the two religious groups, which centres on their viewpoints of the sponsors, agenda and principle targets of the insurgents (Onapajo and Usman 2015). On the history of the genesis of the division of the two groups, detailed chronological history of the division is not discussed here, but only an overview that has helped in reflecting on in the examination of how BH insurgency has affected existing religious cleavage. The findings, following the history of relations between the two major religions in Nigeria, reveal BH insurgency to have reinforced suspicion and mutual fear of domination between leaders and adherents of the two major religions in Nigeria. Examination of perspectives of the Christian leaders revealed BH to be an Islamic army of inquisition, designed, and sponsored to wipe out Christian population and Islamise Nigeria, and from the Muslims leaders’ point of view, BH insurgents are agents designed and sponsored to discredit Islam (Onapajo and Usman 2015). Given these contestations, it is apparent that BH insurgency has affected group relations in Nigeria through reinforcing suspicion and mutual fear of domination among group members.

The revelations above show that group division that is built around religion will pose wary and difficult to solve challenge to States, which come in the form of conflict between groups of different religion. Cleavage, and or conflict along this line tend to be one of the most intense (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). This is because, ‘people build walls around their belief systems and defend them at all cost’ (Fox 2010).

**Historical Overview of Christians-Muslims Relations in Nigeria**
The first impression that springs to mind if religion is mentioned in Nigeria is Islam and Christianity, even though some still choose to identify with their ancestral traditional faith (Adogame 2010; Onapajo and Usman 2015). This shows that Muslim and Christian identities have dominated the central position of the discourse of religious differentiation and conflict in Nigeria (Osaghae and Suberu 2005). This should be no surprise, as many Nigerians prefer to be identified as Christian or Muslim. This has been proved by a 2006 survey carried out by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, which found that 76 and 91 per cent of Christians and Muslims respectively, view their religion as more important to them than their identity as Africans, Nigerians, or members of an ethnic group (USCIRF 2015). Jibrin (1991) has attributed this mobilisation to two major factors. First, he linked Muslim-Christian identity issue to the de-legitimating of traditional religion by colonial administrators when they stereotyped against Nigerian traditional religionists as ‘pagans’. This accordingly, made it practically impossible for them to admit publicly their adhesion to the religion of their ancestors. Second, he argued that the strategy adopted by Nigerian government(s) [under self-rule] to recognise orthodox Christianity and Islam as the major religions because their philosophies are believed, could lay the foundations for happy national co-existence, played a role in mobilising groups along religious line. This is why he argued that these measures have not facilitated the unity that is supposed to emanate from the support of the orthodox religion, given that relations between them turned out to be conflict-prone (1991, p. 117), that can be ignited by the most trivial issues. Therefore, against the expected outcome of government policy of identifying the two major religions as a means to foster unity in the country, the growing diversity of the two religions has led relations between the adherents of both religions to be characterised by rivalry and mutual fear of domination (Iruonagbe 2009; Mang 2014; Onapajo and Usman 2015). This has been seen in the 1980s when Nigeria made a move to join the Organization of Islamic Countries, a situation that was perceived in the ‘Christian South’ as a move to Islamise Nigeria (Iruonagbe 2009).

Therefore, as a move to keep under check the ‘Islamic hegemony’ in Nigeria, Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) was in 1976 established in the process of advancing the interest of Christians against perceived Islamization agenda of Nigeria by Muslims (Kukah and Falola 1996). This clearly indicates that relations between the two major
religions were and, still is that of suspicion and mutual fear of domination. These suspicion and fear of domination has triggered many conflicts that nearly transformed into large-scale violence in the country. Some of the major conflicts include Kafanchan crisis of 1987; Zangon-Kataf crisis of 1992; Shariah riots of Kano and Kaduna in the year 2000, and Jos crisis 2001-2010, which claimed many lives and properties in the country (Onapajo and Usman 2015). Therefore, it is obvious that the seed of discord sown by colonial administrators and the policies of subsequent governments [under self-rule] made the country took a binary religious nature, which reinforced perceptions of ‘Christian South’ and ‘Muslim North’, terms often used in describing the religious and political geography of the country (Kukah and Falola 1996).

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Against this background of historical relations between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria came BH insurgency. BH insurgency, a campaign that at first concentrated on attacking government buildings and security personnel soon turned its guns to attacking ordinary citizens, Muslims and Christians alike. This has sparked a lot of discontent from both sides—Muslims and Christians—that nearly transformed to conflict. This is not surprising as former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (GEJ) once remarked at a press conference that ‘...it [is] clear they [BH insurgents] were out to cause a war between Christians and Muslim brothers’ (Premium Times, 2014). This corresponded with Humans Rights Watch (HRW) report on the insurgency in 2012. Therefore, if what GEJ and HRW said is one of the aims of BH, it is safe to assert that BH has almost achieved that given the contestations it has aroused between Muslims and Christian, and how it almost pushed them to the brink.

The activities and video/audio tape releases of BH group in which they blatantly professed to Islamise the entire country by the force of war can be said to have instilled fear into the minds of Christians about BH insurgents (Vanguard 2009). This only came with vindication of Christian leaders’ allegations about the agenda behind the rise of the insurgency, and made them directed their blames and grievances at general Muslim population in Nigeria, argued Onapajo and Usman (2015). With already held presumptions of what each group chooses see the other,
which are rooted in the historical relations of leaders and adherents of the two major religions, attacks that affect the interest of groups would further create social tension and disharmony among leaders and adherents of the two major religions across regions of the country.

Though it has been claimed that almost everything about BH insurgency is contested with regards agenda and sponsorship (Adibe 2012; Onapajo, Uzodike and Whetho 2012), the understanding of the insurgency among leaders and adherents of both major religions seem to be their answers to these complicated issues. This is why some scholars argued that Christian leaders alleged BH insurgency to be a sinister campaign to wipe out Christian population from the north and Islamise Nigeria, which leaders openly threatened retaliatory attacks (Thurston 2012; Olaniyan and Asuelime 2014; Onapajo and Usman 2015). Similarly, Onapajo and Usman 2015 note that Muslims also allege BH insurgency to be a plot by Christians to mar the image of Islam and that of Muslim elite (Onapajo and Usman 2015). A critical look into this controversy revealed two things. First, understanding of the agenda of the insurgents from both sides is impliedly dependent on the existing religious cleavage, which is a reflection of the historical relations of the two major religions. Second, it becomes apparent BH insurgency has not only ushered in new perspectives to the rhetoric of religion in the country, but has also insinuated strong desire for revenge in the mind of those affected by the violence. This argument is in lin with what Mang 2014 found in his study. This is an indication of how BH insurgency has further affected existing religious cleavage by reinforcing suspicion among leaders and adherents of the two major religions that almost translated to conflict in the country.

On the issue of Islamization of Nigeria, the rhetoric and actions of BH insurgents have not helped matters. Taken into consideration the already held presumptions by Christians of what they choose to view the ‘Muslim north’ and ‘Islamic tendencies’ as indicated in their historical relations, BH insurgents, because of the religion they identified with, serve as agents of Islam and ‘Muslim north’ to the adherents Christianity in Nigeria, argued Mang (2014). This suspicion has been exacerbated by media reports of BH insurgency, especially when attacks are portrayed as a wider

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global religious war between Muslims and Christians (Montclos 2014), aimed at setting a Shariah compliant society (Adibe 2012; Akinola 2015). In its 2009 editorials after the first BH uprising, the Guardian (Nigeria) described Muslims [BH Insurgents] as perpetrators of violence on Christians, with clear agenda of Islamizing Nigeria, and Christians as peace-loving victims. This can be attributed to the reason why Mang (2014, p. 96) argued, media [and Christian leaders] played vital roles in shaping the situation among Christian and Muslim adherents into an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ stance in the events related to the two religions and BH insurgency. Hence, the reason why CAN viewed the ‘dastardly’ attack on church at Bayero University and other places of worship in the country as an ‘agenda...to exterminate Christians from the north and Islamise the country’ (PM news, 2012). Careful look into this perception of BH insurgency held among Christian leaders revealed Christians became deeply suspicious of not only the insurgents, but also the Muslim population at large, seeing BH as foot soldiers working to execute the plans of Muslim leaders of islamising the country, an indication of how the insurgency has affected group relations in Nigeria.

On the contrary, Muslim leaders and their adherents are also sceptical of BH insurgency (Onapajo and Usman 2015). They premised their arguments on the platform that Christians were caught in several instances of bomb and gun attacks in places of worships and public squares. In his paper titled Is Boko Haram Real or the Metaphor of an Agenda Against a Section of the country?, Aminu Sarki (2012), citing thirteen different places of Christian involvement of bombing religious and public places argued BH insurgency is designed and sponsored by Christians to discredit Islam. In addition, Aliyu Muhammad Bunza, a professor of Islamic studies, argued that BH is designed ‘to cripple Muslims and Islam by all means in its entirety’ (Olaniyan and Asuelime 2014). This rhetoric clearly show that in the same manner Christian leaders are sceptical of the insurgency, so are Muslim leaders, which is a revealing reason of how BH insurgency has affected the existing religious cleavage in Nigeria by reinforcing suspicion and mutual fear of domination.

These responses to the insurgency are finely captured by the argument of theory of social cleavage, which it asserted that whenever group relations moved to an ‘us’ vs., ‘them’ zone, affected groups will take extreme positions against
The situation between the two religious groups can be characterised as one filled with fear and suspicious of the agenda of BH insurgents. This has made relations between the leaders and adherents of the two major religions like that of typical friend-foe oppositions that Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argued would produce deepest and bitterest oppositions, with Christian leaders accusing Muslims of having an agenda to Islamise the nation, and Muslim leaders sceptical that BH insurgency is designed to mar the image of Islam. This will leave a negative footprint in the minds of group members, which will affect their beliefs and attitudes towards each other as Waxman (2011) found in his study on the impact of terrorism on Israeli society, leaving Palestinians and Israelis in extremely polarised situation.

Further, understanding of the insurgency as an agenda to exterminate Christian populace from the north is an issue that has also made it apparent how BH insurgency has affected existing religious cleavage in Nigeria. In many different times, the leadership of CAN had alleged that Christians are the principal targets of the BH insurgents’ attacks, which appears to be a ‘systematic plan of violence and intimidation’ (HRW 2012). This is why the General Secretary of CAN remarked thus, ‘...there is no war in the North. What we have is genocide against people of the Christian faith’ (Onapajo and Usman 2015). This conclusion portrays a picture, which shows principal targets of BH insurgents’ attacks to be majorly and mainly, if not solely, Christian populace. This is why when the former president GEJ stated that Muslim population suffered highest number of casualties, CAN swiftly replied to the statement by accusing GEJ of ‘distorting facts’, and recalling ‘the statistics’ that ‘are there for everybody to see how Christians have been massacred by the insurgents’ (Chouin et al., 2014). This argument cannot be completely discarded because it gives the insurgency a particular definition and ‘chooses to analyse it exclusively as religious confrontation’, which the Christian population suffer the highest number of casualties argued Chouin et al., (2014, p. 214). This perception of BH insurgency as ‘religious confrontation’ has triggered mobilisation of Christian laity and led to reprisal attacks in some parts of the country like Plateau state where Christian youth reportedly assaulted local Muslims in response to an attack on church during Easter service (VOA 2012). This should not be surprising given that the literature reviewed have shown group contestations that are guided along religious lines will trigger
mobilisation, and influence attitudes of group members (Fox 1997). This has made the adherents and leaders of the two major religions to be more intolerant of each other, a situation that put them in polarised positions that Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argued will make relations into an ‘us’ vs., ‘them’ oppositions. This shows that the insurgency has affected group relations in Nigeria by making to be more intolerant of each other, situation that has led to reprisal attacks in some places as indicated.

However, on the issue of number of casualties as a result of BH insurgency, Chouin et al., (2014) in their quantitative, critical examination of the deaths BH insurgency has caused among Christian and Muslim civilian population, argued that notwithstanding the rise in attacks against the Christian population, data suggest that approximately two out of three civilian victims were Muslims. They further found that the hype that dominated the discourse of BH insurgency is sensationalised by ‘over reporting of Christian victims compared with Muslim’, in both Nigerian and international media. This argument can stand as an indicator of how BH insurgency has affected Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria. This is because despite data suggest that Christian population do not suffer the highest number of casualties and yet the number of victims received by Christian leaders pushed them to be suspicious and intolerant towards the Muslim population at large is a revealing measure of how the insurgency has affected Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria.

Therefore, while on the one hand, Christian leaders and their adherents alleged that BH insurgency is designed and sponsored by Muslims to exterminate Christians and Islamise Nigeria. On the other, Muslim leaders are sceptical of the activities of the group, too, especially in situations where many Christians were caught in bomb and gun attacks, which make them to allege that BH is designed to discredit their religion. In all, what these contestations reveal is that BH insurgency has further affected the existing religious cleavage by reinforcing suspicion and mutual fear of domination among Christian and Muslim population in Nigeria, findings that have been proved by the theory of social cleavage and the literature on the social effects of the violent actions of VNSAs.
Overall, what this analysis depicts is that to understand fully the effect of BH insurgency on religious cleavage in Nigeria, one need to place the insurgency on the larger framework of the historical relations of the two major religions in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This article examined the viewpoints of the leaders of two major religions in Nigeria—Islam and Christianity—in relation to BH insurgency. Through reflecting on the historical overview of Christian-Muslim relations in Nigeria, the paper has found BH insurgency has affected the existing religious cleavage in Nigeria by reinforcing suspicion and mutual fear of domination among the adherents of the two major religions. These findings were confirmed by the theory of social cleavage, which guided the analysis of this study.
Bibliography


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