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Structural violence and the Boko Haram crisis: A blind spot of the theory

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Nearly half a century after Galtung's thesis, the key elements of structural violence appear to be reinforced by the thousands of impoverished and unemployed youths in northern Nigeria. These are youths willing to be recruits for Boko Haram's aggression against the Nigerian state. However in re-examining the theoretical bearing of structural violence on a crisis that has a sectarian angle, reducing the Boko Haram crisis to causes such as poverty, lack of education and social marginalisation obscures analyses of the role played by other factors such as ideology. The correlation between economic deprivation on the one hand and violent

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Female students in the remains of a classroom at Maiduguri Experimental School, burnt by Boko Haram to keep children from school, Maiduguri, Nigeria, 12 May 2012. Photo credit: PIUS UTOMI EKPEI/AFP/Gettyimages

extremism on the other is more indirect and intricate than it seems. A critical reconsideration of the crisis in northern Nigeria reveals a blind spot in the structural violence approach to understanding the current state of affairs. This therefore renders the idea of structural violence inadequate for explaining the complete motivations of terrorist violence in northern Nigeria. Consequently restricting the extent to which the security challenge can be adequately addressed.

Economic Neglect and Claims of Structural Violence

The structural violence paradigm offers theoretical insight to the ongoing crisis. Its logic, as advocated by its chief proponent Johan Galtung, underscores how socio-cultural systems, political structures and state institutions act as indirect instigators of violence (Galtung 1969). It further explains how poverty, class discrimination and societal injustice prevent citizens from reaching their full potential. Accordingly, the theory suggests how seeds of hostility are sown and ultimately degenerate into large scale uprisings, revolutions and conflicts within societies. In Nigeria, a number of observers and senior administrators have been quick to underscore a nexus between the rising rate of aggression and the governance and development shortcomings of the Nigerian state. The Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Sanusi Lamido, noted the appearance of economic and structural imbalance caused by an excessive investment of oil revenue in favour of states in the Niger Delta region (ThisDay

Live 2012). Lamido further stated how attempts to redress historic grievances in Nigeria's oil-rich south may inadvertently have helped create the conditions for the Boko Haram insurgency in the north. However, while development deficits in the north present a compelling case, it still does not fully explain why Boko Haram attacks have persisted.

Beyond Structural Violence

Without doubt, poverty is a challenge to parts of northern Nigeria. However, there are several other sections of Nigeria plagued by impoverishment but whose inhabitants have not taken up arms against the state in the name of terrorism. In cases where this has happened such as in the Niger Delta region, aggrieved actors usually direct their attacks at thieving elites and hardly at sectarian institutions. Information by the National Bureau of Statistics (2012) reveal that during the high point of Boko Haram violence in 2010, Ebonyi state located in the south-east suffered absolute poverty at 73.6%. This figure exceeded that of northern states such as Bauchi which measured at 73.0%. Similarly, the absolute poverty figure for Edo state in the central-southern part was 65.6%. This figure surpassed that of another northern state, Borno, which had 55.1% absolute poverty. Reference to Borno state is particularly significant because of its role in regard to the origins and proliferation of the Boko Haram sect. Furthermore, Ogun state located in the south-west had an absolute poverty level of 62.3%, which was higher than the northern state Kaduna

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with 61.5%. Therefore, to define the Nigerian polity as one in which the northern region is exclusively indigent would amount to an unfair assessment of the socio-economic picture of the country.

The Extremist's Profile

Economic deprivation may explain why some individuals become terror recruits. However, this factor is at best contributory because the economic wellbeing of certain individuals who have participated in violent extremism contravenes the popular notion that terrorism is the 'weapon of the weak'. Factors such as social affluence, educational proficiency and economic wealth appear to be reflected in the personality profile of Farouk Abdulmutallab who attempted to blow up the Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on December 25, 2009. Abdulmutallab was from a well educated, socially aware and wealthy family background (Caldicott Report 2010). Similarly, there are members of Boko Haram who appear to be related to wealthy individuals among the northern elite in Nigeria. In October 2012, a member of the sect, Shuaibu Bama was arrested in Maiduguri and following investigations, he turned out to be a nephew of a Senator. Although subsequent

reports revealed that the Senator was not a sponsor of Boko Haram, the point being made here draws attention to the fact that members of a violent sect can indeed possess filial ties to wealthy families and may therefore not be indigent after all. In the instance involving Mohammed Abul Barra, the suicide bomber who attacked the United Nations office in Abuja on 26 August 2011, it was later reported that he was a fairly well-to-do businessman. These individuals were certainly not victims of structural violence. Thus, it is difficult to match the profile of such people with a personality outline etched out of the structural violence model.

Ideology

Some of Boko Haram's targets are sectarian-related, with churches affected by attacks. This is suggestive of the ideological dimension of the crisis. The nature of these targets have very little to do with agitations located within the framework of structural violence. The ideological significance of the crisis further explains why there have been dogmatic schisms within Boko Haram. While a new splinter group known as *Jama'atu Ansarul Muslimina Fi Biladis Sudan* (Vanguards for the Protection of Muslims in Black Africa) denounced the call for negotiations with the government, it has also been reported that another faction, *Yusufiyya Islamiyya* under the leadership of Sheik Abu Usamata Al'Ansari, expressed disapproval with certain aspects of the terms of mediation with the same government in late 2012 (The Nation 2012). It would also be recalled

that Boko Haram's emergence in 2002 occurred in light of the immediate post-9/11 global context wherein al-Qaeda's anti-Western ideological avowals prevailed.

An Important Note on Leadership

Suspected links between Boko Haram and individuals in leadership positions in Nigeria are very worrying trends. The slightest possibility of members of the Nigerian government sympathising with Boko Haram not only reinforces statements of concern by President Jonathan (ThisDay Live 2012) but it also waters down the waning confidence the people have left in the competence of law makers or leaders. It is important to note that a few days before the accusation against a member of the Senate in regard to the Boko Haram member Shuaibu Bama, law makers had passed a new anti-terrorism bill.

While poverty is not a standalone instigator of violent extremism in Nigeria, the government should endeavour to undercut the ability of extremists who exploit the economically vulnerable in society. Developmental reforms need to be geared towards improving infrastructure, stimulating human enterprise and ensuring that political institutions are corruption-free. Particular focus should be targeted at educational needs, and in implementing this, all excluded groups including women must be fully incorporated into a broad strategy of empowerment. There is also need for deeper understanding of radicalisation issues based on expert studies, joint research and knowledge production which aim to explore causes, dynamics and actors.

Conclusion

The manifestations of acts of terrorism and the motivations of terrorists do not fall exclusively in line with the rationale of structural violence. The limited degree to which structural violence explains acts of terrorism calls its theoretical utility into question within the discourse of violent extremism or terrorist violence. A clear-cut theoretical link between structural violence and the sectarian crisis involving Boko Haram in northern Nigeria remains inconclusive. As a result, this requires further empirical investigations because the idea that causality can be so easily measured is contentious and can lead to simplistic reductionism. ■

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