Religion and Social Cohesion in Nigeria: Frustration, Polarization, and Violence

Case Study Overview

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1. INTRODUCTION: NIGERIA ON THE GREAT DIVIDE

In this case analysis, the complex interplay of religion, ethnic identity, and political competition in Nigerian society is analyzed in relationship to the concept of social cohesion. The case assesses religion's overlapping boundaries with political, economic, and ethnic conditions, and pays special attention to the role that civil society groups and foreign donors have played in seeking to foster greater social cohesion and limit vulnerability to inter-group conflict and violence. Overall, the case study finds that:

- The religious cleavage in Nigeria has evolved toward a bipolar, Muslim-Christian political identity that overlays a dynamic two-party system. This cleavage places social cohesion in Nigeria under tremendous strain, and in risk of further fragmentation, even collapse.

- At the same time, religious actors and communities also operate as unifying forces, where civil society and political actors are able to bridge inter-religious divides, assist in pluralizing intra-religious conversations, give voice to moderates, and provide political, social, and economic alternatives to religious extremist solutions to Nigeria's deep sociopolitical corruption and poverty.

2. POLITICAL DIMENSIONS: ETHNIC ACCOMMODATION AND RELIGIOUS POLARIZATION

The nation-building project of the Nigerian political elite is one that is fundamentally built around establishing and strengthening Nigerian public institutions to mediate competing interests, particularly ethnic interests, and to provide a platform for regulated (though not equal) access to public resources. Core institutions to the national building project are the National Youth Service Scheme, Citizens and Leadership program in the office of the President, Unity schools and Federal Universities, the Federal Character Commission and the Federal civil service and the military. The early argument for the unity institutions revolved around de-emphasizing tribe and to a lesser extent religion, and around the goal of building a Nigerian citizen loyal to the "fatherland".

Alongside elite efforts at nation building, there has also been a tendency to dismember the nation state into micro units, which can enter into negotiation around resource allocation, control and access to the wealth of the Nigerian nation. Commenting on this tendency towards fragmentation, Kukah notes that Nigeria has evolved from one country of three regions to four, 12, 19, 21 and currently 36 states with one Federal Capital Territory and six geopolitical zones.[1] In the contemporary discourse on state fragmentation, religion has seeped into the argument for micro entities. This is apparent in the most recent agitation for state creation before the 2014 National Conference.

The story of the Nigerian Labor Congress is particularly significant given that the predominant basis for associational life in Nigeria is the local community, hence the preponderance of community-based organizations (CBOs) in the landscape of CSOs in Nigeria. Several mapping studies of CSOs in Nigeria point to absence of national issue-based groups around big ideas of nationhood and development. While the emergence of ABANGOs (Abuja based NGOs) and some national rights-focused groups and networks such as SERAC, the National Council of Women's Societies and the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), have had national resonance, these groups do not focus on constructing a pan-Nigerian front around issues of citizenship, inclusion and nation building. To be sure, even established human rights NGOs in Nigeria have become embroiled in accusations of ethno-religious bias and failure to represent objective pan-Nigerian views.

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1 Kukah, Mathew Hassan, Witness to Justice. An Insider's Account of Nigeria's Truth Commission. (Bookcraft, 2011): 341

3. International-Domestic Interactions: Efforts to Foster Cohesion in Nigeria

- Development assistance to Nigeria has fallen since its peak in 2006. The impact of falling donor funding for social cohesion and peace building interventions in Nigeria is mitigated by often-times well-funded government interventions and by Africa-wide and indigenous civil society initiatives.

Perhaps the most significant regional initiative funded by the Federal government of Nigeria is the hosting of the African First Ladies under the aegis of the African First Ladies for Peace Mission (AFLPM), which took place in July 2012. Nigeria's First Lady, Dame Patience Goodluck-Jonathan was the chief host of the million naira event entitled, "The African Woman: A Voice for Peace."

Numerous government programs exist to maintain social cohesion, peace and tolerance in Nigeria. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) is the lead agency in this regard. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (Establishment) Act, 2007, created this entity. Section 8 (1) of the Act states the multi-faceted function of the Institute: promoting peace and security internally within Nigeria and externally in Africa; conducting research into the cause, patterns, dynamics, factors and forces behind conflicts and insecurity in Nigeria and Africa; promoting a culture of transparent, credible and peaceful democratic succession as a mechanism for conflict prevention; and getting practically involved in the task of mediation, conflict management and conflict resolution.

The Society for Peace Studies and Practice (SPSP) is another example of a locally-funded civil society group working to conduct peace and social cohesion initiatives. According to it's stated mission, "SPSP provides a collaborative space for peace scholars and practitioners from various areas of specialization to creatively share and synthesize ideas and experiences as a way of evolving a more holistic approach to the understanding and practice of peace."[2] Additionally, Nigeria Alliance for Peace is a program that was developed shortly after the Africa Alliance for Peace (AAP) summit in Ghana. Numerous University departments and independent centers also focus on social cohesion and peace building in Nigeria. These include the Mambyyia House at Bayero University Kano and the Peace and Conflict Studies Programme of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

The Nigeria Stability and Reconciliation Programme (NSRP), the newest major peace program in Nigeria, provides support to Nigerian stakeholders to better manage conflict through strategies of wealth creation, service delivery and poverty reduction. The program is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and implemented by the British Council in partnership with International Alert and Social Development Direct. The programme implementation spans five years (2013 to 2017). One important component of the intervention relating to peace and security is the focus on Women, Peace and Security. Recently, NSRP conducted a study on, "the Role of Women in Peace Initiatives in Nigeria." The study shows that, in Nigeria as elsewhere, women will take action wherever they can to reduce conflict, and thus they have a powerful role to play. However, obstacles such as discriminatory social norms and gender-based violence hinder their participation.

Another organization, Lead Nigeria, is implementing a program titled "Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Programs." The overall goal of this program is to help prevent, minimize and resolve the conflicts within and around Nigeria, increase conflict management capacities, and promote post-conflict stability and development by providing tools and intellectual capital in the region, empowering the youth in the region with knowledge, skills and resources, as well as directly engaging young people in the peace building efforts around the region. The program also places heavy emphasis on linking peace with developments and determining how the skills of the armed groups can be harnessed for positive purposes. They have outlined various peace and security

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2 http://www.spsp.org.ng/about.aspx; Accessed on the 7th July 2014.

strategies that are necessary to achieving peace in the region. These strategies include: 1) human capital development, 2) good communication, 3) bringing Major stake holders of the region together, 4) disarmament, demobilization and re-integration, and 5) support for the Federal Government's reconciliation and amnesty process.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation's conflict management program was designed to mitigate threats to Nigeria's democratic processes. Initially tageting conflict-prone communities in the South-West of the country, the Foundation extended its work to the North where partner organizations strengthen local mechanisms and institutions to support and institutionalize existing efforts for sustainable peace. Due to the religious undertone of conflicts within the target regions, interfaith dialogue is an important tool used for conflict management. The program puts an emphasis on addressing the role of women in peace-building in order to enhance and sustain a peaceful society as well as developing a coherent training strategy for expert trainers in conflict management. Research studies and expert round tables are aimed at demystifying the multilayered causes of conflict and developing well-targeted intervention strategies at local and state level.

4. Social Cohesion Programming: Beyond Fragmentation and Short-Sighted Visions?

Analysis of the effectiveness of various strategies for ameliorating vulnerability to identity-based conflict yielded multiple critical perspectives. A wide cross-section of respondents lamented the fact that donors seem uninterested in funding institution-building platforms where lasting forums are created beyond the life of the project for continuing dialogue amongst ethno-religious groups. Similarly, a wide cross-section of respondents interviewed on the effectiveness of donor funded conflict mitigation programs observed that most programs were designed in a vertical manner without many opportunities to bring different interest groups to the same table.

Respondents noted that donors had carved out their niches and did not explore linkages, focusing exclusively on particular sectors (ranging from the government to women's groups to Islamic thought leaders), or on particular geographic regions, from the North central or core North to the Niger Delta. Respondents argued that by doing so, donors are perceived to have taken sides in conflicts and thus fail to leverage opportunities for broad-based platforms of understanding and learning. Mature NGO and University participants observed that donor agencies preferred to engage international NGOs, despite their lack of in-depth knowledge of conflict drivers in Nigeria, as opposed to building on the capacity of local groups to enable them to be full partners.

NGO respondents noted the failure of donors to build upon their past successes, opting to shift focus, particularly in light of leadership turnover. NGO respondents were weary and in some cases dismissive of the overemphasis of research and mapping studies on peace and conflict mitigation. Respondents spoke of the disproportionate allocation of funds allocated to understanding the drivers of conflict with little resources devoted to establishing long-term sustainable platforms for dialogue and peace.

The absence of a conflict and risk management protocol in conflict mitigation programs was an issue raised by beneficiaries of the Active Citizens British Council program. Active Citizens who were beneficiaries of the project spoke of the truncation of activities and the feeling of abandonment as a result of the British Council's hasty departure from its Kano office after the 2012 state-wide attack by Boko Haram. It was also noted that there was no mechanism for mitigating the impact of the succession of unplanned events and conflict within, such as the death of a participant during the 2010 riots in Jos, the withdrawal of the anchor NGO, the development Research and Projects Centre from the program under protest, and the allegations of preferential treatment for Irish visiting partners compared to local Active Citizens by the program administrators. That the

Program Office initiated a wrongful dismissal legal action against the British Council additionally mired the program's work and negatively affected its reputation in development circles.

Some respondents speculated that conflict reporting by donor agencies actually exacerbated tensions. Respondents interviewed recalled the case of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) Hausa Services reporting of the 1999 Shagamu riots against northerners in Shagamu, Lagos. Media professionals interviewed felt that both BBC and VOA reporting of events contributed to reprisals in Kano State. While respondents did not agree with the Obasanjo administration's open attaché on the BBC and VOA Hausa Services, they noted that reporting was not entirely professional and circumscribed.

Researchers and academics pointed to the fact that they were often engaged to carry out studies on peace and conflict resolution, while these themes are submerged within macro-level issues such as governance, the proliferation of small arms, electoral violence, and youth unemployment. Another design limitation rests in developing covert programs, which target high-level and high-value participants, some of who were parties in conflicts. This was a practice taken up by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, through a recent peacebuilding study tour to the UK. Some participants in this study tour reasoned that many participants are unlikely to complete post-study tour activities spelled out in work plans if adequate pastoral care is not given through successive mentoring meetings and forums for dialogue.

Even though actors have faced numerous challenges and dilemmas in engaging in efforts to address the social dynamics of conflict in Nigeria, respondents indicated some conditions for success. For example, NGO respondents commended the design of the new NSRP program for its ability to engage and re-grant to a wide range of CSOs and to also engage local NGOs, such as the Centre for Research and Documentation in monitoring and evaluation. Participants also commended the new NSRP program for its commitment to disseminating information on its website. It was noted, however, that more efforts should be made to translate findings into local languages and in print.

Additionally, participants of conflict mitigation training programs supported by the HBF in particular noted that participatory approaches and leadership development tools were effective strategies for catalysing understanding and change amongst different ethno-religious groups in social cohesion programs. Interviewees reported that one of the most effective strategies for developing learning and permanent platforms for peace involved explicitly focusing on Christian and Muslim secular leaders and building their capacity to carry out joint development projects. Also, working with the media and building their capacity to report conflict as was done during the Dutch Government Funding Responsibility to Report program was another best practice noted by interviewees.

5. Principal Findings and Lessons Learned: The Plague and Promise of Religion

Overall, religion's role in social cohesion in Nigeria remains as complex as the many forms that religion takes in the nation. Neither Islam nor Christianity are monolithic entities. Intra-religious disputes can sometimes be just as deadly as inter-religious ones. The increasing polarization of national politics along the religious divide, which also coincides with the geographical North-South divide and separates the Hausa ethnic group from the Igbo and half of the Yoruba, poses a major challenge for national unity. The presidency of Goodluck Jonathan has seen the ruling PDP move closely to the Christian Association of Nigeria and major evangelical and Pentecostal churches for political gain, while the main opposition party has moved toward Muslims and the Northern elite.

Fortunately, religion is not the only element at play among the politicians, but the regions of the nation that are evenly mixed between Muslims and Christians have seen tensions exacerbated by the politicians' growing tendency to resort to religious mobilization. This in turn runs the risk of creating an increasingly bipolar, zero-sum character within politics in which every major national event is viewed through the Muslim-Christian lens, which could quickly degenerate into harmful "us or them" logic.

The globalized nature of Nigeria's religious divide has further complicated matters, while also opening new opportunities for donor assistance and peace activism. The challenges were exemplified by the 2006 controversy over the Danish cartoons insulting the Prophet Mohammed, as more Nigerians died in riots over these than anywhere else in the world. Increasingly, Muslims and Christians in Nigeria see themselves not only as divided in Nigerian politics, but also as standing astride a great global boundary line between the two religions, over which the worldwide standing of the very religions themselves may be at stake. At the same time, both globalization and democratization in Nigeria have fostered a tremendous pluralization within both Islam and Christianity that is vitally important in preventing simple us-or-them perspectives and dampening inter-religious polarization. New congregations and viewpoints are boom industries among both Muslims and Christians, increasing the volatility of both religions, but also sapping the ability of national leaders to speak on behalf of all the members of one community or the other.

Whether or not Nigeria tips over the brink is a function of multiple vertical and horizontal frameworks for religious social cohesion. Perhaps the most important vehicle for addressing both the vertical and horizontal dimensions would be a National Conference, which would address the overarching questions of national unity along both ethnic and religious lines, but could also encourage religious-based political mobilization as well. President Jonathan organized his own national conference in 2013, which made a series of recommendations for constitutional and political reform, but without real powers or widespread representation, it was largely seen as an effort to deflect criticism of his government from the deepening Boko Haram crisis, as well as from divisions within the party.

Some hope may be found in the persistent strength of ethnicity, which at times can also break down or dilute religious divides, when it is not reinforcing them. The massive ethnic plurality of Nigeria itself remains a constant problem for national political coalitions of any sort, and will pose such problems for the political entrepreneurs that play the religious card nationally. Ultimately, the best hope for stepping back from religious politicization may reside in the religious communities themselves, which continue to engage in extensive efforts to bridge their divisions and coexist peacefully. Supported by local NGOs and global donors, these initiatives are working to address the conflicts at their roots, which, if the national politicians eventually shift from self-enrichment toward genuine development-oriented policies, could move Nigeria toward a more inclusive society that benefits from its great religious diversity.