

EXTREMISM IN NIGERIA

Extremism means, literally, "the quality or state of being extreme" or "the advocacy of extreme measures or views".⁽¹⁾

The term is primarily used in a political or religious sense, to refer to an ideology that is considered (by the speaker or by some implied shared social consensus) to be far outside the mainstream attitudes of society.⁽²⁾ It can also be used in an economic context. The term is usually meant to be pejorative. However, it may also be used in a more academic, purely descriptive, non-condemning sense.

There have been many different definitions of "extremism". Peter T. Coleman and Andrea Bartoli give observation of definitions: Extremism is a complex phenomenon, although its complexity is often hard to see. Most simply, it can be defined as activities (beliefs, attitudes, feelings, actions, strategies) of a character far removed from the ordinary. In conflict settings it manifests as a severe form of conflict engagement. However, the labeling of activities, people, and groups as "extremist", and the defining of what is "ordinary" in any setting is always a subjective and political matter. Thus, we suggest that any discussion of extremism be mindful of the following: Typically, the same extremist act will be viewed by some as just and moral (such as pro-social "freedom fighting"), and by others as unjust and immoral (antisocial "terrorism") depending on the observer's values, politics, moral scope, and the nature of their relationship with the actor. In addition, one's sense of the moral or immoral nature of a given act of extremism (such as Nelson Mandela's use of guerilla war tactics against the South African Government) may change as conditions (leadership, world opinion, crises, historical accounts, etc.) change. Thus, the current and historical context of extremist acts shapes our view of them. Power differences also matter when defining extremism. When in conflict, the activities of members of low power groups tend to be viewed as more extreme than similar activities committed by members of groups advocating the status quo.

In addition, extreme acts are more likely to be employed by marginalized people and groups who view more normative forms of conflict engagement as blocked for them or biased. However, dominant groups also commonly employ extreme activities.

Extremist acts often employ violent means, although extremist groups will differ in their preference for violent vs. non-violent tactics, in the level of violence they employ, and in the preferred targets of their violence (from infrastructure to military personnel to civilians to children). Again, low power groups are more likely to employ direct, episodic forms of violence (such as suicide bombings), whereas dominant groups tend to be associated with more structural or institutionalized forms (like the covert use of torture or the informal sanctioning of police brutality).⁽³⁾

The most popular example that can be used to explain extremism in Nigeria is the Boko Haram terrorists. Etymologically, Boko Haram is derived from the Hausa and Arabic languages. In Hausa, 'Boko' literally means book, but figuratively is translated as learning or education. In Arabic, 'Haram' is translated as forbidden, sin or unlawful.⁽⁴⁾ In the context of this extremist group, Boko Haram stands for 'Western education is forbidden'. Emic studies reveal that this group prefers to be called '*Jama 'atu Ahlis Sunna awati wal-jihad*'. This means

'People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad' or 'Association of Sunnas for the Propagation of Islam and for the Holy War'.⁽⁵⁾

Western education, according to Boko Haram, is a value system that differs from its own interpretation of Islam, which is coined from selected verses in the Qur'an. In view of this, Boko Haram is equally against traditional African practices, and also forbids Oriental, Shamanist and Hindu-based approaches. Therefore, in this discourse, 'Western' stands for any world view that is inconsistent with the Boko Haram ideology. On the one hand, the leaders, members and supporters of Boko Haram reject a secular state. They aspire to impose their own interpretation of sharia⁽⁶⁾ principles and Islamic practices in Nigeria; for them, this is a legitimate desire. On the other hand, their ideology violates the intrinsic rights and legitimate desires of the larger population of Nigerians who have juxtaposed ideological, religious and political orientations.

The Boko Haram ideology may be built on aspects of the Qur'an, but numerous Islamic leaders and scholars have publicly chastised this group on the basis of other Qur'anic teachings. That is to say, Boko Haram is a sectarian organisation, because its ideology does not represent the views of many Muslims in Nigeria and in the world at large. Ironically, the leaders and doctrine propagators of Boko Haram claim to forbid all forms of Westernisation, but they contradict this declaration by using Western-made weapons, by wearing foreign-made fabric and clothing, and by utilising Western technologies such as automobiles, computers, Internet and mobile phones, as well as Western social media innovations such as Facebook and Twitter. Hence, the paradoxical nature of this group brings into question if Westernisation is actually the problem or there is a political motive.

There have been several speculation on the motive of the Boko haram extremists but one of them which seem to stand out is, the fact that there seems to be a power struggle between Northern and the Southern Nigeria, because there was a significant rise in the activities of the extremists upon the conclusion of the 2009 election which saw Goodluck Ebele Jonathan become the president of the nation. This is clearly a pointer to the fact that a Southern man ruling the nation made the Northern extremists recruit young people to join their extremists group under the cover of Jihad (Holy war).

Based on all of this we see that the majority of the extremism in Nigeria are based on political motives and religion is mostly just used as a front. The use of Boko Haram as an example does not in itself exhaust extremist groups in the nation, other smaller groups exist and Nigeria has had a long history of conflicts but Boko Haram is the most popular because of the vast impact it has had on the lives of Nigerians in recent times.

Religious extremism is also a problem in Nigeria, a large number of Nigerians fail to tolerate the differences in their beliefs and the belief of other people, most times they take approaches that lack wisdom while trying to make a point, and this usually causes actions which most times is tagged extremism.

Ethnocentrism is also an issue, majority of Nigerians see their ethnic group as superior to other ethnic groups and this causes conflicts and resentments, when situations which require dialogue to solve arise, the pre-existing hatred for the other ethnic group creates a hostile

environment with each of the feuding ethnic group determined to prevail over the other leading to casualties.

The above are some of the examples of the types of extremism that exist in Nigeria, all these contributes to the terrible relationship we have with each other as citizens of this country, “the pushing of incompetent people to positions of power, at the expense of growth and development to retain power within a certain group of people”, the incessant feud between farmers and the nomads, destruction of lives and property just to name a few.

To solve the problem in Nigeria, the major challenge is really how to transform the recurring patterns of extremism in Nigeria. Considering these influences, there is a need to transform the cultures that breed fundamentalist mindsets and structures that rationalise extremism and violence. This can be achieved through building ‘cultures of peace’:

A ‘culture of peace’ is defined as “a set of values, attitudes, traditions and modes of behaviour and ways of life based on respect for life, ending of violence and promotion and practice of nonviolence through education, dialogue and cooperation”.⁽⁷⁾ Peace and conflict practitioners argue that violence and war are learned behaviours; therefore, non-violence and peaceful behaviour can be learned through education and socialisation. Cultures of peace can gradually be instilled if families, social groups, faith-based organisations and educational institutions engage in peace-oriented awareness, education and enlightenment. In doing so, the mindsets and attitudes that promote extremist groups such as Boko Haram can gradually be overcome.

Building cultures of peace is a necessity for children, youth and adults. However, priority should be given to (re)framing the mindsets of adults to embrace peace cultures. This is because families and socio-communal units are the first point of learning for children. To have sustainable peace in Nigeria, parents, guardians and teachers need to understand the relevance of respect for life, the need to jettison violence and the obligation to promote a lifestyle of peace and non-violence through education, dialogue and cooperation. Furthermore, there is a need to review the curriculum and content in both the formal and informal educational systems in northern Nigeria, because the channels through which learning takes place are very important in building cultures of peace and non-violence. This means that peace should be seen as more than the end of armed conflict – peace should be understood as a way of life.⁽⁸⁾

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5. Sani, Shehu (2011) Boko Haram: History, Ideas and Revolt. *Journal of the Centre for Constitutionalism and Demilitarization*, 11 (4); and Okoro, Efehi (2014) op. cit.
6. Sharia is a traditional Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Mohammad. It is believed to be a divine command from Allah.
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