

Violence in northern Nigeria has flared up periodically over the last 30 years. Mainly in the form of urban riots, it has pitted Muslims against Christians and has seen confrontations between different Islamic sects. Although there have been some successes in conflict management in the last decade, the 2009 and 2010 troubles in Bauchi, Borno and Yobe states involving the radical Boko Haram sect show that violence still may flare up at any moment. If the situation were to deteriorate significantly, especially on Christian-Muslim lines, it could have serious repercussions for national cohesion in the build up to national elections in April 2011. To deal with the risks, community-level initiatives need to be reinforced, a more subtle security response should be formulated and the management of public resources must be improved. While some in the West panic at what they see as growing Islamic radicalism in the region, the roots of the problem are more complex and lie in Nigeria's history and contemporary politics.

The far north, if taken to comprise the twelve states that reintroduced Sharia (Islamic law) for criminal cases at the beginning of the century, is home to 53 million people. The large majority are Muslim, but there is a substantial Christian minority, both indigenous to the area and the product of migration from the south of the country. The Sokoto Caliphate, formed in 1804-1808, is a reference point for many in the region. As West Africa's most powerful pre-colonial state, it is a source of great pride. But for some, its defeat by the British in 1903 and subsequent dealings with colonial and post-colonial states mean the caliphate is tarnished with the corrupting influence of secular political power. The impact of colonial rule was paradoxical. While policies of indirect rule allowed traditional authorities, principally the Sultan of Sokoto, to continue to expand their power, that power was also circumscribed by the British.

In the first decades of independence, which were marked by frequent violent conflict between the regions for control of state resources, the north saw the military as a route to power and influence. But following the disastrous rule of northern General Sani Abacha (1993-1998), the return to democracy in 1999 was viewed as a chance for the north to seek political and moral renewal. This led to the reintroduction of Sharia in twelve states between 1999 and 2002, although only two have applied it seriously. Sharia caused controversy over its compatibility with international human rights standards and the constitution and regarding the position of Christians in those states. It also exacerbated recurrent conflicts between Muslims and Christians. But it was supported by many Muslims, and some Christians, who had lost faith in secular law enforcement authorities, and it also stimulated much open and democratic debate over the rule of law. Tensions over the issue have declined in recent years.

Debates among Muslims in the region tend to divide those who respect the established religious and secular authorities and their two-century-old Sufi heritage from those who take a "reformist" view. The latter cover a very wide range of opinion, from Salafist-type anti-Sufism to Iranian-inspired Shiite movements, and combine anger at the establishment's corruption with a promise of a more individualistic religious experience. Typically, some end up being co-opted by both religious and secular authorities, largely due to the latter's control over public resources. But others maintain a hostile or rejectionist stance that in some isolated cases turns into violent rejection of public authority. As in the south, religion provides a sense of community and security and is increasingly public and political. In

combination with more polarised communal politics, this has led to clashes over doctrine and political and spiritual authority.

Violent conflict, whether riots or fighting between insurrectional groups and the police, tends to occur at specific flashpoints. Examples are the cities of Kaduna and Zaria, whose populations are religiously and ethnically very mixed, and the very poor states of the far north east, where anti-establishment groups have emerged. Many factors fuelling these conflicts are common across Nigeria: in particular, the political manipulation of religion and ethnicity and disputes between supposed local groups and “settlers” over distribution of public resources. The failure of the state to assure public order, to contribute to dispute settlement and to implement post-conflict peacebuilding measures is also a factor. Economic decline and absence of employment opportunities, especially as inequality grows, likewise drives conflict. As elsewhere in Nigeria, the north suffers from a potent mix of economic malaise and contentious, community-based distribution of public resources.

But there is also a specifically northern element. A thread of rejectionist thinking runs through northern Nigerian history, according to which collaboration with secular authorities is illegitimate. While calls for an “Islamic state” in Nigeria should not be taken too seriously, despite media hyperbole, they do demonstrate that many in the far north express political and social dissatisfaction through greater adherence to Islam and increasingly look to the religious canon for solutions to multiple problems in their lives.

Much local-level conflict prevention and resolution does occur. For a vast region beset with social and economic problems, the absence of widespread conflict is as notable as the pockets of violence. Some state authorities have done good work on community relations, but the record is uneven. At the federal level, clumsy and heavy-handed security responses are likely to exacerbate conflicts in the future. More fundamentally, preventing and resolving conflict in the far north will require far better management of public resources, an end to their distribution according to ethnic identity and job-creating economic revival.

Northern Nigeria is little understood by those in the south, still less by the international community. Too often it is viewed as part of bigger rivalries in a putative West-Islam divide. All – from Iran to Christian evangelical preachers – need to be more careful of what they say and whom they support. Officials in the West need to put some of their fears about radical Islam into a much more Nigerian perspective. Reformist movements – highly diverse and fragmented – have contributed in many positive ways to debates over governance, corruption and rule of law. While some harbour real hostility to the West, for others criticising the U.S. is really a way of expressing frustration with Nigeria’s secular state and its multiple problems.