

Despite conflicts between Muslims and Christians, the African state, which, in 2050, will become the world's 3rd most populated country, does not face division

Nigeria: stop the doom and gloom!

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Under the combined pressure of Islamist sect Boko Haram's terrorist attacks and demonstrations against rising petrol prices, Nigeria is page one news at the moment. Is the country at risk of civil war? President Goodluck Jonathan considers the situation to be worse than during the pogrom in 1966 which, in the Muslim-dominant North, resulted in over 40,000 deaths and led almost 2 million refugees, essentially Christians and Igbo from the Middle Belt, to flee to the South. At the time these events resulted in the creation of the secessionist Republic of Biafra and the continent's most populated country saw one of the bloodiest wars in African history.

But today it is not all doom and gloom, despite wide media coverage of Boko Haram's attacks against Christians during the Christmas Mass. Indeed, the chaos over recent weeks, resulting in dozens of deaths, does not match the magnitude of the 1966 pogrom. The country has overcome far more trying times and is actually experiencing a decrease in violent deaths according to NigeriaWatch.

What's more, for the time being population displacements are confined to the Northeast where the Boko Haram sect is active. The displacements concern tens of thousands, not millions, and are not denomination-specific. In Yobe State, where Boko Haram's leader was born, for example, both Christians and Muslims are fleeing the combat zones around areas such as Damaturu. With the majority of the region's population being Muslim, it is important to stress that they are the primary victims of the confrontations between Islamists and the security forces.

Another key factor, Christian minorities in northern Nigeria do not face the same problems from one region to another. In Kano, which was the epicentre of the interreligious turmoil in the eighties and nineties, they are confined to something of a ghetto, the so-called Sabon Gari, which heightens their stigmata. The city's Christians are emigrants from the South. When a massacre occurs their bodies are sent back to the birthplace for burial and their funerals can lead to retaliation, as in Aba in 2000, to avenge the attacks against Igbo from Kaduna. In Boko Haram's stronghold, Maiduguri, however, the Christians are spread across the entire city area and are harder to target. Mostly we are dealing with the native population. Their

bodies are buried there and so there is less risk of retaliation in the South. On a national scale a vendetta process would be more likely triggered if the Islamists were to attack the Yoruba or Igbo people from Kano. But the Boko Haram movement has thus far avoided attacks on the city, mainly because some of its leaders fled there after the army's crackdown in Maiduguri in 2009.

From this viewpoint, statements from Goodluck Jonathan, comparing the situation to the civil war, are tactless and add fuel to the flames, giving the impression that the government is overwhelmed by the events. An Ijaw and Southern Christian, the president has a history of such "blunders".

He blamed the Northern Muslims for the bomb attacks tarnishing the 50th anniversary independence celebrations in Abuja on October 1, 2010 when in fact it was an operation led by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a group well-established in the oil-rich areas where Goodluck Jonathan was born. In doing so, the Head of State has given the impression of being ethnically-focused. At present, eliminating subsidies to cap petrol prices is also seen as part of a more general reform which comes down to helping the Ijaw people of the Niger delta.

Since the end of the military dictatorship in 1999, several mechanisms have hindered the equalization principle whereby the oil-rich regions funded the poorer regions' development. Goodluck Jonathan's predecessors had to make concessions as the armed attacks by delta rebels dampened oil production and government income, with economic leverage that Boko Haram does not benefit from in the destitute areas of the Sahel. So Nigeria's leaders have revamped a derivation principle giving greater latitude to richer regions to use their own resources.

In this context the government subsidies on petrol prices appear fairer at national level. They enable the entire population to profit from an abundance of oil that, otherwise, would only benefit a handful of people in government circles. Despite the expanding black market and supply shortages in petrol stations, rich and poor, Northern Muslims and Southern Christians alike could hope to reduce their transport costs.

Boko Haram's terrorist activity and the demonstrations against the doubling of petrol prices are of course two entirely different things. But each in its own way highlights the fragility of a State under construction and a Mafioso political system where corruption is often a substitute for social redistribution. Despite his faux pas, Goodluck Jonathan remains a compromise, with minority origins and arriving to power in 2010 through an extraordinary set of circumstances after the death of his Muslim predecessor Umaru Yar'Adua.

Finally elected in 2011 in less fraudulent elections than in 2007, he is a far cry from the aging dictators who continue to rule in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, or who were overturned in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya. From this viewpoint, the eventuality of a Nigerian-style "Arab Spring" does not seem likely. Goodluck Jonathan does not have several decades of weary dictatorship behind him. What's more, the ability of the youths to rally through electronic media is confined to the larger cities, when the power actually manages to come on. Lastly, the opposition in parliament is too corrupt, the unions too weak, rebellion movements too divided and protest channels too scattered to create a national coalition capable of catalysing unrest and bringing down the government. Since the implementation of a World Bank structural adjustment plan in the mid-eighties, on-going petrol price increases have

sparked demonstrations and protests that have often evolved into riots due to the brutality of the police force, which is in the habit of firing into the crowd. However, these disturbances have never led to a change in regime.

Even more importantly, several factors put the prospect of a divided Nigeria into perspective. With its Salafist ideals, the Boko Haram movement argues that a secular government cannot apply the Sharia. It therefore calls for an Islamic Republic which would effectively divide Nigeria because it would be rejected by the Southern Christians.

But the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Nigeria do not agree with Boko Haram's extremist ideals and they do not want a secession, which would deprive them of financial resources and oil in the South, which is much richer than the North. Christian merchants, particularly the Igbo, would not benefit either from a fragmentation of the tremendous market that is the Nigerian federation, especially as Nigeria is set to become the world's 3rd most populated country by 2050 behind India and China.

The mutual financial dependency between the regions is stronger than at the time of independence. In view of their influence on the political authorities, the crossover interests in Nigerian business circles are one of the best guarantees against the risk of division. In general, Nigeria's federal structure was developed and strengthened as the Nigerian Civil war ended to thwart a secessionist uprising. The centralised military in power for several decades followed divide and rule tactics by breaking up regional opposition forces. Upon independence Nigeria was comprised of three regions. It is now comprised of thirty-six federated States which complicates any potential secession plans to one versus thirty-five, rather than one against two. Still very much present in everyone's mind, the Biafran defeat is dissuasive to rebel groups, who are smaller in numbers and less well-organised than the Igbo in 1967.

Through lack of any extensive social base, the different armed movements shown in the media do not have the military capabilities to divide the country. Most of them, first and foremost Boko Haram, do not actually seek independence. Also, there is a real consensus among the political class on the need to preserve the country's unity, despite internal conflicts over government pay-outs and everyone wanting a piece of the national cake.

The role of the Sharia in Nigerian Islam

THE SHARIA and its political implications are often misunderstood when we are dealing with Nigeria, an English-speaking country that most French people are unfamiliar with despite its vastness. In the mid-2000s some of France's major newspapers attempted to explain the rise in Islam stating that the Sharia was new there and that the then president, Olusegun Obasanjo, was himself a Muslim. In actual fact he was a born again Christian, a denomination associated with the most Evangelical of Protestants. Furthermore, the Sharia was not "introduced" by the Northern Muslim States after the military dictatorship in 1999. It was already present, in a lesser form, confined to civil matters, and its scope of application was then extended to criminal matters.

At the time a growing rigid moralist current naturally influenced daily life for the minority Christians of the North, for example with the prohibition of alcohol and gender segregation in public transport. But Islamic law has continued to exist side-by-side with other legislative standards, which continue to have the upper hand. Therefore, stoning sentences for adultery

have remained extremely rare and none have actually been applied as they have been overruled in the federal courts, which are inspired by common law inherited from the British.

Similarly, Northern Christian plaintiffs and defendants are not legally bound to follow Islamic law. Given their denomination, their matters are referred to common law courts, contrary to the system in place in Sudan. Although certain Northern Christian merchants voluntarily seek to use the Islamic judicial system, this is because it is known for being faster and less expensive.

In general, Nigerian Islam is nothing like the intrusive and totalitarian Saudi Wahhabism. In practice it is much more flexible and syncretic, particularly, but not exclusively, in Yorubaland in the Southwest. Due to their doctrine and belief in magic, Boko Haram militants, who are mostly from the Northeast, do not fit the typical Wahhabist Al-Qaida profile.

Beyond the sect's recruitment circles, there are only a handful of Salafist and/or Republican Muslims who seek an Islamic Republic that would split the country in two halves.

In this respect it is important to put into perspective the revolutionary nature of the increased use of the Sharia in legislation. Since 1999 the country has become increasingly disillusioned. In their own way, the Boko Haram Islamists have expressed the disillusion of the masses with regards a project that, initially, reflected a strong demand for social justice.