

Ethnic-religious violence sweeps Nigeria

by Lawrence K. Freeman

Nigeria's very existence as a nation is being threatened by a multitude of violent "ethnic-religious" clashes, which have left more than a thousand Nigerians dead since riots first broke out in Kaduna in late February. As a result, for the first time in years, there is talk of breaking up Nigeria, and analogies being drawn to the 1967 Biafra civil war, in which millions of Nigerians were killed when the Ibos, led by Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu, tried to separate themselves from the Nigerian nation. President Olusegun Obasanjo said on national television, "This has been one of the worst incidents of blood-letting that this country has witnessed since the civil war." The fact that the most deadly conflicts in decades, between the Hausas, Ibos, and Yorubas, have occurred during the first ten months of Obasanjo's new Presidency, after years of military dictatorship, should serve notice to leaders throughout Africa and the rest of the developing sector, that democratic governments are not immune from being destabilized.

The immediate incident that set off weeks of sectarian killings throughout the country, was a march on Feb. 21 in Kaduna by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), to preemptively protest against the introduction of *Sharia*, or Islamic law, in the state. According to press reports, the march was attacked by armed Muslims, leaving hundreds, predominantly Christians, dead, and the city of Kaduna severely damaged. While *Sharia* had been practiced by Muslims in several northern states for years without incident, it was the legal adoption of *Sharia* by Zamfara state in January, that prompted other northern states, including Sokoto, Kebbie, Kano, and Kaduna, to follow suit. A dusk-to-dawn curfew ended the killings in Kaduna, but riots quickly spread to other cities, such as Aba in the southeast, an area of heavy Ibo population, where hundreds of Nigerians, mostly Muslims, were killed in retaliation.

Following these and other ghastly killings, there has been an exodus of Christians, who are piling into buses to leave their northern homes in Kano to travel to the south. And similarly, Muslims living in Port Harcourt in the south, are leaving for northern states.

A week following the bloody incidents, President Obasanjo, who has been calling for calm, convened the National Council of State (NCS), an advisory body is composed of the 36 Governors, former Presidents, the Speaker of the House,

the President of the Senate, Chief Justices, the Vice President, and the President. Following the meeting, Vice President Abubakar Atiku announced that the NCS has agreed to suspend the legal adoption of *Sharia* in the northern states. A few days later, former Head of State Maj. Gen. Muhammadu Buhari, who attended the meeting, disputed the Vice President's claims, and said that there was no discussion of *Sharia*, except for a security report. A commission has been established to determine who instigated the Kaduna riots, and the Nigerian Senate is conducting a "silent investigation" into those responsible for the violence in the country. One thing is for sure, with the arming of both Christians and Muslims, Nigeria has entered a new stage that no one is prepared for.

The target is the nation-state

Although Kaduna has historically been a center for the northern elites, it is a multi-ethnic state, more evenly populated between Christians and Muslims than the other northern states. Thus, the riots, and the subsequent calls by CAN for a separate "Christian Kaduna," are ominous.

Following the sudden death of Head of State Gen. Sani Abacha in June 1998, there were calls by the Yorubas and Ibos for a Sovereign National Conference, whose purpose was to weaken the federal government and move to a "separatist" confederation, in which eastern and western regions would be more autonomous. This was viewed by all as an attempt to break up Nigeria, and the government, then still controlled by the Northern Hausas, rejected it, correctly, as an attempt to dismember the nation. After the recent weeks of deadly clashes, the Kano State Council of Ulama (Islamic scholars) has now endorsed such a national conference, in order "to determine the basis of our continued togetherness or otherwise to determine our future co-existence." Kano is one of the centers of the Northern Hausas, and this reversal of their position is potentially very dangerous.

Other religious leaders of the North have spoken out for calm and unity. The Sultan of Sokoto, Alhaji Muhammadu Maccido, considered to be the most important Muslim religious figure in Nigeria, offered reassuring words: "Nigeria belongs to all of us. Nobody can change that. We have no alternative than to accept to live together in peace, harmony, and understanding," he said. But, the level of "ethnic rage" that is being whipped up is intense. Abia State Governor Chief Orji Uzor Kalu, for example, is reported to have warned the North: "The warning I give as a core Ibo governor is that nobody should kill any Ibo man again in the name of religion. If they kill any Ibo man, we shall retaliate immediately."

While there is a lot of finger pointing at various leaders of both the Muslim and Christian communities, and all kinds of accusations are being made as to who is responsible for the violence, the most important question is: Who benefits from the destruction of the sovereign nation-state of Nigeria? Like players in a tragedy, the Hausas, Ibos, and Yorubas—Mus-

lims and Christians alike—are all acting out their parts as if guided by strings from above the stage, with the intended outcome being the destruction of Nigeria as a nation. Regardless who is pulling the strings which are causing the various players to act according to their well-known, predictable profiles, what is being unleashed among Nigerians is a self-destructive process, one that Nigerians should, by now, recognize as not in their self-interest.

The economic factor

There are threats being thrown about to topple the government, and to bring back the military to control the crisis. President Obasanjo has made clear, that “it is not in the manifest destiny of this country to disintegrate.” But, the additional factor that is adding fuel to the fire, is the moribund economy.

The government knows that it cannot service the \$30 billion foreign debt. Taking \$3 billion a year in debt service out of the economy, is unacceptable to the government. Before 1998, the West, led by the United States and Britain, would only recognize Nigeria once it had gotten rid of Abacha and embraced democracy, leaving President Obasanjo under the illusion that some debt relief should have been forthcoming. To date, this has not been the case. The International Monetary Fund, and the Paris and London Clubs, have so far refused

to reschedule or cancel the debts, although the French may act in this direction. The young government has been unable to move the economy forward; many think it has actually become worse over the last two years. As long as the Nigerian people fail to see any improvement in their day-to-day existence, which is already at an abysmally low level, then democracy will remain a mirage. As long as people are oppressed by the material economic conditions of life, the way Nigerians have been for years, then it is to be expected that people’s rage will naturally well up—and that rage will be manipulated by those pulling the strings from above the stage.

President Obasanjo is trying to preserve the peace, and hold the nation together. In a recent speech, he called on Nigerians to be spiritual: “Let us all confess our individual and collective sins in this land where so much innocent blood had been spilled. Let us all, Christians and Muslims alike, pray for forgiveness, genuine reconciliation, brotherhood, and good neighborliness.”

Nigeria is being destabilized once again, following years of isolation and attacks by Western governments and the media. One Nigerian leader asked, “What do you expect will happen, if you leave the population physically, economically, and morally insecure?” How the Nigeria government handles this latest crisis may determine whether it survives as a nation.

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