

INTERVIEW



Inside the Labyrinth: Nigeria's Unending Conflicts

An Interview with Dr Sadeeqe Abubakar Abba

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Overview

Nigeria is among the most dangerous places on earth at the moment. It is ranked number 14 on the Failed States Index 2011 by the Fund for Peace, just after Iraq, Pakistan and the Ivory Coast. The Islamist radical group, the Boko Haram is on the news, maiming and killing innocent people in Nigeria. The Joint Task Force (army) to repel the Boko Haram is being accused of gross human rights violations. The 2011 elections were marred with violence. Hundreds died in the pre- and post- election period. The offices of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were bombed. During the celebrations to mark Nigeria's 50 years of independence in 2010, there were explosions, gifts from the MEND guerrillas. Nigeria is a country torn apart by conflicts, from the Niger Delta to the northeast states. The United States and European nations continue to issue travel warning to Nigeria's southeast, Niger Delta and northeast states. Is this a troubled democracy or a troubled presidency for Goodluck Jonathan? Is Nigeria a failed state? Is there an ongoing war between the Christians and the Muslims? Dr Sadeeqe Abubakar Abba, a political scientist in Nigeria, takes us into the labyrinth that is modern day Nigeria.



Keywords

conflict, Nigeria, elections, Boko Haram, ethnicity, religion

THE INTERVIEW

Question: There is tension in Nigeria at the moment. Nigeria's 50th birthday in 2010 was marred by bombs that killed many people. The Boko Haram is now in the forefront of the chaos dogging Nigeria. They are maiming and killing people. Is it prudent to say that Nigeria is one of the most insecure countries in Africa at the moment? And if so, is the Nigerian government doing something or nothing - in your opinion?

Dr. Abba: Yes, in all honesty, Nigeria is one of the most insecure places in the African continent at the moment. The

Nigerian Government is helpless and the situation is getting out of control. The identity and mantra of the Boko Haram are not properly defined. Some call it a Radical Islamist Group, others refer to it as a sect. The Federal Government has been caught off guard and is unable to do anything tangible. The people of Nigeria see virtually no difference between the Federal Government and the Boko Haram in terms of their actions on the masses. The Boko Haram, like the Government, does not care. So far, the army (Joint Task Force) in the crackdown of the Boko Haram is responsible for unlawful killings of innocent people. Just like the Boko Haram.



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Question: There are migrations from the city of Maiduguri where the Boko Haram attacked and killed at least 40 people in early and late June, 2011, in Abuja. The attacks seemed well coordinated. Who do you think is/are the main target(s) of the Boko Haram's fury? And what can be done to avert all these?

Dr. Abba: So far, the target of the Boko Haram is clear and concise. They are the elite who, by virtue of their official positions, compromise the interest, aspirations and welfare of the citizenry. In their thinking (Boko Haram), their aim is to create an attitudinal change through the use of Islamic teachings as an instrument to get rid of the burdening liabilities imposed on the country. Since their destination is socio-economic and political justice, only that can avert their fury.

Question: Looking at the modus operandi of the Boko Haram, do you think they are a radical Islamist group with ties in Somalia and Afghanistan? And are there links with Al-Qaeda?

Dr. Abba: I am sure they are a radical Islamic group. Boko Haram is a Hausa translation of their original name (Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad) which partly got lost in translation. In Arabic it simply means they are 'devoted to disseminating the teachings of the Prophet and Jihad.' But speaking as a political scientist, I don't think there is any linkage between the Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda. At the same time, I am not overlooking the willingness of the Boko Haram to accept help, aid or assistance from Al-Qaeda. In my opinion, their motives are similar to those who want to see Nigeria divided by 2015.

Question: You mentioned aid/assistance to the Boko Haram. So, is it possible that the Boko Haram have funding from somewhere that enables them to launch attacks on innocent civilians? Any suggestions?

Dr. Abba: Funding is relative, it could be internal or external, but certainly such an organisation operates on a solid financial and logistical platform. My opinion is that they were created by local politicians for obvious reasons, but got hijacked by external forces for economic reasons.

Question: The Boko Haram continues to cause mayhem in Nigeria even today. What's your opinion of the August 26th, 2011, suicide car bombing of the UN headquarters in Abuja where 18 people died and scores got injured?

Dr. Abba: What happened in Abuja is unfortunate and most regrettable. I think that either the Boko Haram intends to go international or the UN wants to go deep into Nigeria's local politics (that's why it was targeted). Alternatively, the

UN suicide car bombing event was just one in the chain of events planned to destabilise the country in the interest of foreign capital.

ETHNICITY, SECTIONALISM AND RELIGION IN NIGERIA'S APRIL 2011 ELECTIONS

Question: During the April 2011 elections, there were explosions at the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) offices killing several people and maiming others. Looking back at previous elections, they were no different. Is this the norm during elections in Nigeria?

Dr. Abba: As a norm, no. Because we have had violence-free elections in the past. 1959, 1979, 1993, 1999, 2007 were all elections that pass the best of judgements. What happened in 2011 was an isolated case, and it can happen anywhere. Kenya set the stage in 2002 with free and fair elections but look at what happened in 2007/8. The same for the Ivory Coast and many other countries.

Question: How open were the 2011 elections to the media, the people of Nigeria and the rest of the world?

Dr. Abba: Yes, the media never had it so good, the citizens never had it so fair and the outside world could not have bargained for anything better in terms of openness.

Question: The government of Nigeria deployed the army to various parts of the country just before the elections. What role did the army play in the elections?

Dr. Abba: The security situation in Nigeria was volatile and it still is. That's why the Federal Government deployed the army all over the country for security purposes. To ensure that the people of Nigeria are safe.

Question: Rigging has played a significant part in past elections. Were the 2011 elections also marred by rigging allegations? And if so, how?

Dr. Abba: Both the domestic and international observers gave Nigeria affirmation for the 2011 elections. Generally speaking, the volumes of cases at the various election tribunals indicated the frivolity of some of the results.

Question: President Goodluck Jonathan was declared the winner of the 2011 Nigerian elections by INEC. Immediately after, there was unrest in the north over the election results.



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What do you think this meant and was there an ethnic dimension to it?

Dr. Abba: The April 2011 elections were contested on the platform of ethnicity, sectionalism and religion. The post election violence in the north, initially, was targeted against the political elites of northern extraction as well as Muslims. It was a common man's response to the elite's political mischief and election rigging. However, it was later manipulated and turned into a religious and ethnic crisis.

Question: Looking at the political climate and voting patterns of the 2011 elections, was this a religious war between the Christians and the Muslims? President Goodluck Jonathan (People's Democratic Party [PDP], President of Nigeria, May 2010 till now) being a southern Christian while General Muhammadu Buhari (Congress for Progressive Change [CPC], Former President of Nigeria, December 1983-August 1985) a northern Muslim?

Dr. Abba: Religion certainly played a prominent role in the elections. But President Jonathan's victory was mainly given to him by the Muslim north. Twenty-three out of the 36 states of the federation are predominantly Muslims, and most of them voted for the PDP. The campaigns were purely religious, but the voting took a party dimension.

Question: Over the years, there has been mounting tension over the border dispute with Cameroon in the region called Bakassi. The Bakassi region was finally handed over to Cameroon on the 14th August 2008. Before and during the election; there was ethnic tension in the Bakassi region. What's the status of the dispute and how was INEC able to determine who is legible to vote and who is not?

Dr. Abba: INEC covered villages that are in the Nigerian territory (New Bakassi) and not the Bakassi in Cameroon. Both Nigeria and Cameroon are abiding to the agreements made regarding the former disputed Bakassi territory. It was the Nigerian Bakassi people with Nigerian identity and voter's cards that were allowed to vote.

Question: The Niger Delta region remains volatile. The United States Institute for Peace (USIP) published a report on the Niger titled 'Conflict in the Niger Delta' in June 2011. It says that the government of Nigeria and foreign donors are not doing enough to end the violent conflict in the Niger Delta. Is this true?

Dr. Abba: It is a lie. What is the source of their data? In the 2011 Nigerian budget alone, the Niger Delta got more than enough money. A single state in the Niger Delta gets in a month, the equivalent of what six states in the north get in the same period. What does that say? USIP has its own agenda.

NIGERIA: PRESIDENT GOODLUCK JONATHAN'S FUTURE

Question: President Goodluck Jonathan's victory was deemed free and fair by the domestic and international observers. But not General Muhammadu Buhari (CPC candidate. Lost the presidential elections to President Goodluck Jonathan), who was also running for the presidency. Is this going to be a difficult presidency considering the post-election violence that erupted after President Jonathan's win?

Dr. Abba: The only difficulty he will have as President is not from General Buhari or the CPC. Rather, from his lack of programmes and vision for his tenure. Observers are political tourists who will do anything to justify their stay. Often their judgement runs counter to the citizen's judgement.

Question: At the centre of it all are the Nigerian people. What are their views, hopes and expectations about the presidency, politicians and the future of Nigeria?

Dr. Abba: Our views are varied, very polarised. Our hopes dashed, especially due to the fact that the first bill President Jonathan sent to the National Assembly was on tenure elongation. This alone reminds us of presidents like Paul Biya of Cameroon, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Abdou Wade of Senegal, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and many other despots around the world. Our expectations are suspended for now, until we get a leader that is Nigerian at heart and in mind. A leader who is capable of solving the multitude of challenges Nigeria is facing. Nigeria's future is dependent on good leadership and proper governance/management of Nigeria's vast resources. The hawks and hyenas preying on Nigeria's resources and hoping to divide the country by 2015 should be stopped in order for Nigeria's future to be guaranteed.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Sadeeqe Abubakar Abba is a political economy scholar at the University of Abuja in Nigeria. He is also a political party specialist with the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Nigeria. He previously worked as a Senior Legislative Aide at the National Assembly Service Commission and also as Special Adviser (Political) to the Deputy Speaker, Federal House of Representatives at the National Assembly in Nigeria. He has published papers and book chapters on democracy, diplomacy and terrorism. Dr Abba holds a PhD and Master's degree in Political Economy and Development Studies from the University of Abuja. ■



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Jack Shaka is an international affairs expert focusing on peacebuilding, conflict resolution and democratic governance. He is a reporter for Africa News, run by Africa Interactive based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and covers social issues.

Jack is the author of *The Refugee: An odyssey into the refugee life* and co-author of *Silent No More - Youth Legislative Theatre Process in Kenya*.



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