Political Violence and Radicalization in the North-Eastern Nigeria: Analyzing the Youth Bulge Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

Political Violence has recently become a recurring decimal in Northern Nigeria especially in the North-Eastern part of the country where peace seems to have eluded the region since 2009. Several scholarly inputs were propounded in an attempt to address and find a lasting solution to the persistent incidence of violence ravaging the region. This article is another attempt geared toward addressing the problem by looking at it from a different perspective that is the youth Bulge Phenomenon. It is the conception of this paper that, the genesis, the life span and the demise of political violence is greatly influence by the socio-cultural and political environment surrounding it. To understand political violence and the factors that breed it, one has to understand the environment that actually nurtured it. In other words, without understanding the socio-political attributes of a given population, one will not understand the causes of insurgency within it. This paper views environment as a key factor in understanding the political violence within the context of the North-Eastern Nigeria. It examines environment from a demographic parlance and adopts the youth Bulge theory and the social identity theory to conceptually analyse the key elements that continue to shape and mould the growth of political violence in the North-Eastern Nigeria, where institutional weakness due to poor governance, social categorization and the formation of social network were discovered to be the contributing factors to the menace.

Keywords*: North-Eastern Nigeria, political violence, radicalization, youth bulge, insurgency, violent extremism*

INTRODUCTION

Recently the Nigeria state appear to have been in the front cover of the world newspapers for a very ugly reason of the unprecedented political violence occurring in different parts of the country but with specific dominance in the north-eastern geo-political zone where the activities of the Boko Haram miscreants appear to constitute a serious security challenge to the policy makers and the citizens as well, in the sense that incidence of political violence such as the abduction of Chibok girls, the attacked on military barracks and the capturing of several towns and cities in the North-Eastern Nigeria has indeed generated a serious havoc which was never witnessed before in the country (Mohammed, 2014).

It is imperative to note that the North-eastern geo-political zone has since 2009 continued to witness a deadliest political uprising and violence unleash on it by a group of miscreants popularly called the Boko Haram, who are rated in 2012 as the second dangerous group of insurgence in the world, having murdered about of 1,132 individuals in 364 attacks, a record surpassed only by the Taliban, who massacred about 1,842 persons in 525 attacks (Egharevba & Aghedo, 2013). It is imperative to note that a study conducted by the University of Maryland on global terrorism in the late 2013 revealed that Boko Haram related deaths by far superseded those inflicted by the Maoists in India and Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Osumah, 2013; LeVan, 2013).

The incidence of political violence in the north-eastern Nigeria has gone beyond humanitarian and security concerns as it has appears to adversely challenge the political sovereignty of the Nigerian state, where the insurgency metamorphosed from guerrilla attacks to a full-pledge warfare involving the capturing and exercising control over territory, where by the mid-September 2014, the insurgents had overran and captured 25 towns in Adamawa, Borno and Yobe states, with a landmass of approximately 20,000 sq km, about the size of the state of Maryland in the U.S or Wales in the United Kingdom (Mohammed, 2014).

Against the above background, several studies were conducted to explore and explain the root cause of political violence in Northern Nigeria where factors such as colonial heritage, endemic poverty and youth unemployment were identified by scholars as responsible for the persistent violence (Awofeso, Ritchie & Degelin, 2003; Falola, 2009; Adetoro, 2010; Adesoji, 2011 & Adibe, 2012). However, in contrast this paper posit that such ugly scenario is principally an aftermath of the youth Bulge phenomenon which paved the way for the existence of traumatized and socially excluded Almajiri demographic cohort who are highly vulnerable to violence.

It is imperative to note that, Northern Nigeria has the highest birth rate in the country (Aluaigba, 2009). The region also manifests highest poverty rate, illiteracy, and unemployment, accompany by an explosive youth demographic cohort (Olaniyan, 2015). The Almajiri system constitute a serious social hazard by promoting begging culture and street children, in which as at 2014 there are about 9.5 million Almajirai roaming the street of northern Nigeria who are mostly between the age of 15 and 25 (Taiwo, 2014). With a population of about 167 million people, in which about 20 per cent are between the age of 15 and 24, with 39.9 per cent unemployment rate, where youth unemployment representing 50 per cent of this total. As argued by the youth bulge theorists, any society with the above attribute has a strong tendency for violent conflict (Urdal, 2006).

The youth bulge theory therefore provides a framework for identifying and analysing the root cause of political violence and radicalization in northern Nigeria where there is a sharp division of the society along religion and ethnic lines. However, there is the need to further look at contextual factors such as governance and politics, in the sense that the mainstream literature linked youth Bulge with violence through the instrument of generational consciousness of common identity, sense of belonging and collectivism (Urdal; 2011, Bristow, 2015). However, such body of knowledge do not seem to be backup by any empirical evidences in the sense that we are yet to witness any incidence of political violence along age demarcation, hence the generational approach in explaining the youth bulge syndrome in relation to political violence possess an inherent weakness regarding it explanatory power of the nexus between youth bulges and political violence. Though there is no disputing the fact that the development of consciousness through group identity and sense of belonging are instrumental in unleashing a collective violence, it however, it may be flaw to attributes such identity and sense of belonging only to generational consciousness as the main factor in explaining the increasing tendency for involvement in violence by large youth cohort.

This is because, the generational approach has fail to provide adequate explanations of the motives behind the youth involvement in rebellious movement, it also fails to offer concrete explanation of the conditionality's that contributed to development of such generational consciousness. It can therefore be argued that if a mere feelings of generational consciousness by clear large youth cohort is enough reason to trigger violence, then incidence of youth revolts would have been a lot more phenomenon. It is imperative to notes that the circumstances providing youth bulges with the motives and opportunities to engage in political violence differ considerably among countries more so as even countries with the existences of large youth cohort is not all the youth that engage in political violence (Sommers, 2010).

This work therefore tried to fill this research gap by critically examining the youth bulge linkages with political violence through an in-depth contextual analysis of the general structure of the youth so as to ascertain the contextual and underlying factors that makes some youth more prone to violence than others in the same geographical context and also to identify the factors that provided the youth a bonding mechanism for collective action because the generational conscious studies have failed to do so (Collier, 2011). This serve as the only means of avoiding stigmatizing and guilt generalization on the basis of youth poverty and unemployment as suggested by previous researches for instance (Aghedo, 2013). Contextual analysis in this parlance also offer a significant contribution, in bringing to limelight what the policy makers need to do in order to support vulnerable youth so as to prevent them from being radicalize into violence.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The Concept of Almajiri

The concept of Almajiri was coined from an Arabic word "Almuhajir" which connotes a migrant, the word is therefore use to describe the students of an informal Arabic schools called the Almajiri system which dates back to the eleventh century. In the pre-colonial period, Almajirai lived with their guardians and were attending school in a demarcated place called a tsangaya. However, the political and social changes accompanying the Usman Dan-Fodio jihad (1804–1808), resulted in structural transformation of the system which saw the creation of an inspectorate of Qur'anic and Arabic studies, which invariably served as a regulative mechanism thereby representing an important milestone in the annals of Qur'anic education in Nigeria (Muhammad, 2014).

The amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorate in 1914 marked the establishment of the Nigerian state, a development that was accompanied by the modernization of vast urban areas thereby placing significant numbers of the Almajiri schools in these urban areas. This therefore created a situation in which peoples from the rural areas send their kids to these urban communities, such as, Maiduguri and Kano which were eminent as center for Qur'anic education (Baba 2010). With increasing presence of the Almajiri school students in these urban areas, the pattern of the relationship between these students and their teachers therefore turned out to increasingly draw the interest of researchers and security experts (Muhammad, 2014).

The Almajiri system represent a system in which a large youth cohort between the ages of three and twelve, are sent by their parents to a system of Islamic boarding school, in order to study the Qur'an under an individual Islamic scholar popularly refer to as Malam. Once enlisted, the desire is that the young men will study the Qur'an, and contribute to the welfare of their teacher, as well as the discharge of other domestic obligations. The Learning process, by and large would continue until the student's reach graduation normally in their mid-twenties (Muhammad, 2014).

The Concept of Youth Bulge

The concept of "youth bulge" was coined by Gunnar Heinsohn a German social scientist which was latter by popularized Gary Fuller and Jack Goldstone in the 1990s (Hoffman & Jamal, 2012; LaGraffe, 2012). The advocates of this school of thought argued that "societies characterized by a youth bulge (a burgeoning youth population) while simultaneously facing limited resources and, in particular, a lack of prestigious positions for 'surplus' youngsters…. are much more prone to social unrest and acting belligerent towards their neighbors than those societies without these demographic stressors" (Schomaker, 2013, p. 117).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper intends to revolve around two theoretical paradigms the Youth Bulge theory and the Social Identity Theory. The justification for that is that while the Youth Bulge Theory advocated that political and institutional weakness amidst demographic transition could lead to the eruption of political violence when democracy and good governance are not fully internalized. This provides an explanation of the potency of bad Governance in promoting political violence and radicalization process. However, the existence of demographic transition amidst political, institutional weakness are not sufficient to provide a mobilizing force for the youth to resort to violence there is a need for a bonding mechanism and identity building because political violence is a collective action this makes the social identity very relevant in strengthen the youth Bulge theory in this study.

The Youth Bulge Theory

The youth bulge theory has its theoretical bedrock on the notion that states characterized by political institutional weakness amidst demographic transitions manifest high vulnerability to political violence and social unrest, in the sense that there is higher tendency for the unemployed male

youth to resort to illegal means of seeking socioeconomic advancement. States that display attribute typical of the youth bulge conception are mostly found in the Middle East, Asia, the Pacific Islands and sub-Saharan Africa, which manifest a large youth cohort of over 30 per cent of the total adult populations (Schomaker, 2013; Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004).

The nexus between youth bulge and political violence is therefore a growing field of research (Schomaker, 2013). However, it is imperative to note that such nexus is not automatic. This is because in every situation some variables play key intervening role between demography and violence (Aghedo, 2013). Some of these intervening conditions include relative deprivation, unemployment and urbanization, which as observed by LaGraffe (2012, p. 67), "demography acts as a "force multiplier," aggravating these preexisting conditions, in which the alienation, frustration, and growing discontent arising from lack of sustainable livelihoods, along with other stressors, make the youth easily susceptible to mobilization for violence".

The youth bulge theory is operationally suitable in explaining the involvement of Almajirai in political violence in the sense that in Nigeria the youth constitute the lion share of the population at the epicentre of the societal transformation and social interaction (Olaniyan, 2015). However, the youth hardly plays any significant role politically as they always seem to be at the margin of the major political and socio-economic process. So when this feeling of hopelessness due to future despondency, economic repression and social exclusion combine with the perception of religious persecution the Almajirai cohort thus become easily susceptible to radicalism and violent extremism in order to find a way out of their predicaments.

The Social Identity Theory

Social identity can therefore explain further how the Almajiris cohort subscribe to political violence in Nigeria, in the sense that there are two important factors very vital in explaining the linkage of social identity to violent extremism which are; insecure environment and bonding mechanism. It is therefore imperative to note that all these important conditionality's are applicable to the Almajiri situation in the north-eastern Nigeria.

Beginning with an insecure environment, the Almajiris youth cohort depicts a clear-cut disadvantaged social class that have being subjected to deprivation and social exclusion. For instance, the Almajiris are denied of the opportunity for western education which automatically relegated them to second class citizens who do not have chances to excel in life. As observed

Crosby (1979), when individual or group consider themselves as unfairly disadvantaged in comparison with other group in same settings they have a strong tendency for rebelling against the system. This was exactly what Gurr (1970), observed earlier, when he argued that an existence of discrepancy between individual subjective value expectation and value capabilities resulted to rebellious tendency, where the former connotes conditions of life which individual believe they are entitled to while the latter depicts the conditions of life which individual thinks he is capable of attaining.

In Nigeria for instance, the government has practically fail to provide social security to the Almajiris cohort and the political system is designed in such a way that does not ensure inclusiveness of the Almajiri school system into the mainstream educational system, therefore depriving the Almajiri school graduates the opportunity to be relevant to the society. This therefore serves as the foundation for them to have feelings of alienation thereby devolving a parallel social institution with a distinct identity. The promoters of the idea of insurgency may capitalize on this by portraying troubling event such as mismanagement of resources, corruption, unemployment or economic recession in a particular parlance to justify taking arms against the state.

Regarding the bonding mechanism, there is no disputing the fact that an insurgency needs a strong mechanism that can tie its members together and ensure inflow of new recruit. In this parlance, culture and religion serve as strong instruments of social identity and brotherhood, which tend to create unity of purpose and direction especially in terms of uncertainty. Religion therefore, becomes an effective mechanism for recruitment and radicalization by the Boko Haram, in the sense that the insurgence leaders offer a radical interpretation of Islamic religion which underlines the Almajiri's feeling of alienation and exclusion, in this parlance the radical interpretation of religion not only promote awareness of the rationale behind the suffering of the Almajiris cohort but also provide a yardstick for identification and categorization of peoples as either "we" or "them" and institutions as either "ours" or "theirs"

METHOD AND DATA

The paper employs a qualitative method in which secondary data was sourced and analysed descriptively to assess the relevance of the youth Bulge phenomenon and social identity in explaining Political Violence in the North-Eastern Nigeria.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section try to conceptually analysed the linkage between youth Bulge and Political Violence by exploring the environmental and political factors that have individually and collectively contributed in generating the feeling of hopelessness due to future despondency, economic repression, social exclusion and religious persecution among the Almajirai cohort thereby making them susceptible to radicalism and violent extremism in order to find a way out of their predicaments.

The paper therefore, tries to address and explore this problem from two important parlances; firstly, the youth bulge which tries to explore the relationship between bad Governance and political violence, the second parlance explore how social identity makes the linkage between youth bulge and political violence even more stronger.

Youth Bulge in The Persistency of Violence in the Northern Nigeria

Good governance is a process whereby the society's resources is being managed transparently with accountability as well as given room for popular participation in governance among others by responsible leaders. It is imperative to note that the involvement of the Almajiris in political violence have a direct nexus with institutional weakness which lead to deprivation of some basic human needs in the areas of political and socioeconomic structures, which occurs due to lack of human agencies such as the government which may make the political system to favor discrimination, societal injustice, structural imbalance, unequal distribution of resources and social exclusion.

In Nigeria abject poverty and economic dislocation of livelihoods have drastically reduced the options of most Almajiris. Therefore, deducing from the youth Bulge theory, the Almajiris political grievances, such as discrimination and political marginalization, have constantly been used as mobilizing instruments by the Boko Haram elites to find support and recruits them for terrorism and political violence. This evidence was further supported by the released dozens of infantilized Almajiris previously detained as suspected Boko Haram members in May 2013 by the Nigerian government where significant portion of those youths were individuals who confessed to previously accepting payments of 5,000 Nigerian Naira from Boko Haram militants, who in turn provided them with kegs of fuel to set schools ablaze in Maiduguri, Borno State (Aghedo, 2013). This is indicative of the economic desperation expressed by thousands of youths who have been rendered vulnerable by the shortcomings of Nigeria's leadership over several decades.

The phenomenon of the "youth bulge" in Nigeria has further increased the steady supply of structurally marginalized and excluded youth cohorts of the Almajiri extraction who have become susceptible to recruitment by Boko Haram. More so as Nigeria is firmly within the category of a very young age structure, with nearly three-quarters of its population under the age of 30-38 political violence inspired by marginalized youths in the country are stark reminders of the negative impact exceedingly large and mismanaged youth populations can exert across the world, the huge number of young people living on the margins of Nigerian society intensifies these linkages.

It is therefore evident from this study that the Almajiris cohorts were people who have been prevented by the society from achieving their set goals, because the 'socio-politico' structure of the northern Nigerian society had suffered from dysfunction and crumbling family structures, value system and discipline. Such a situation, produced frustrations, pressure and, of course, strain on the deprived Almajiris class to use whatever means possible even if such means were illegitimate with the aim of finding solutions to blocked opportunities. This is the kind of condition Merton described as the 'Anomie Condition'.

In the contemporary Nigeria, the citizens are socialized through Western education, as far as modern society is concerned, to aspire to higher opportunities, but the Almajiris cohorts who constitute the lower class or disadvantaged groups were relatively blocked from getting free conventional education, good occupations and basic social amenities, health care and other basic needs required to achieve legitimate goals. Hence, the Almajiris who were 'blocked' lose confidence in the society, and as a reaction to the structure of the society that denied them these basic needs, joined a radical group that could never see anything good with the Western philosophy that had modernized their hitherto relatively simple traditional culture and social life, where members were more or less the same to a more dominant institutionalized capitalist society where every man is for himself, and hence felt compelled to join the campaign of Boko Haram.

The Potency of Social Identity in Promoting Political Violence in Northern Nigeria

Political violence requires having divided people into two categories: those whose interests are to be advanced through violent activities ("us") and those against whom the violent activities are to be directed ("them"). This cognitive dichotomization extends beyond mere descriptive differentiation

to include an intense evaluative component as well. Those associated with "us" are viewed as moral, right, good, and strong. Those associated with "them" are seen as immoral, wrong, bad, and weak. The greater the extent to which cultural influences promote dichotomous cognitive structures, the less willing and able members of the culture may be to view the world from the perspective of the other.

In the North-eastern Nigeria social categorization and group influence has immensely contributed in forging a strong nexus between the Almajiris cohorts and the Boko Haram elites via the link faith phenomenon, where access to western education stand out as one of the salient factor that promote the cognitive dichotomization between the Almajiris cohorts and the rest of the society. In the sense that the founder of the Boko Haram Muhammad Yusuf was a graduate of the Almajiri school who did not had the opportunity to attend the formal school, hence he shares same fate and social self-categorization (the 'non-yan Boko" meaning those without western education) with the Almajiri cohorts which enable his ideology to possess a substantial influence among them.

In the sense that the Almajiri demographic cohorts represent a large youth cohort with stronger ties religiously and culturally, in which the absence of participation in the institutions of the larger society compel them to create a parallel institution exclusively serving the group members. This is further confirmed by analyzing the Almajiri social network which manifested a web of social organization existing parallel with the formal institution in which owing to several decades of state negligence and societal pollution the Almajiri community developed a complex web of social network in which positions and ranks were assigned to individual members based on their relative knowledge and qualification.[1]

Such social network therefore become responsible for coordinating the group's activities, for recruitment of members, and has the ability to manipulate the flow of information within the group more easily. Since a relatively high number of members were tied to the network via a specific hub, this also implies that the hubs were responsible for recruitment processes. Structural characteristics of the network are associated with the group outcomes, internal social processes as well as members' behavior, such as, the decision of whether or not to participate in its activities hence serve as an important mechanism for the Radicalization of the Almajiris demographic cohorts.

CONCLUSION

To this end, an important missing link in the previous studies is their inability to explore the factors under which the Almajirai cohorts becomes expose to ideas and behavioural patterns which pave a way for their radicalization (Awofeso, Ritchie & Degelin, 2003; Falola, 2009; Adetoro, 2010; Adesoji, 2011; Adibe, 2012; Aghedo, & Eke, 2013). This is because youth bulge syndrome is never an automatic cause of political violence other factors such as social identity play crucial role. In the available literature, little or no attention has been given to the how social identity and agitation for self-governance has actually shaped the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-eastern geo-political zone of Nigeria. A crucial point to be noted is that identity and agitations by the ethnic and social group have led to claims of marginalization and underdevelopment. A second point is that the jobless youths are motivated and mobilized by the leaders of sects and social class as instruments for conflicts in case of agitation, these points underlying social-identity and the struggles for political relevance by the Boko Haram elites through the mobilization of the Almajirai demographic cohorts.

To this end, the contribution of this study theoretically revolves around the exploration of how social identities plays a greater role in promoting political violence in the north-eastern Nigeria where poor governance only provided the fault-line but the bonding mechanism for collective violence was provided by socio-cultural identity, this study thus based its approach by adopting the Youth Bulge Theory and the Social Identity Theory. However, future research should also look at how the failure in the designs of youth empowerment policies and programmers contributed to the youth bulge syndrome in the country.

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