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THE ABSENCE OF NORTHERN NIGERIA'S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE RISE OF BOKO HARAM

Ryan Schmidt*

A wave of euphoria swept across Nigeria when Muhammad Buhari was declared victor of the 2015 presidential election.¹ Although Mr. Buhari remains a controversial figure today, originally gaining his power in December 1983 via military coup,² in April 2015 the citizens of Nigeria enthusiastically elected him to retake the reins as the country's next president. Mr. Buhari faces a seemingly insurmountable number of challenges, as he will attempt to steer Africa's wealthiest country away from disaster.³ Mr. Buhari will inherit an economy that is extremely dependent on oil revenue and a market system that has enabled only a small minority of Nigerians to become extremely wealthy but left a majority of Nigerians, most notably in the northern part of the country, impecunious.⁴ This extreme economic imbalance is the main culprit to blame for terrorist organization Boko Haram's inevitable rise to power and its ultimate prevalence throughout northern Nigeria.⁵

Nigeria's economic gains have stemmed from liberal market reforms, but the significant increase in local and global investors is primarily based in Lagos and the southern regions of the country⁶—due to vast oil reserves located along the Niger Delta. The country's capital, Lagos, also contributes to the southern region's wealth, as it is considered to be “one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world.”⁷ By contrast, the northern region's economy is experiencing deindustrialization, and accessibility to educational opportunities is dwindling.⁸ Islam is commonly practiced throughout the north, with Fulani and Kanuri being the two dominant ethnic groups.⁹ Many states in northern Nigeria are experiencing a merge between religion and governance, as twelve northern states have adopted Sharia Islamic law.¹⁰ In many ways, northern Nigeria feels that the Nigerian government abandoned it, and a stirring feeling of frustration from poverty and Western envy ultimately led to the propagation of the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram.¹¹

A small Sunni Islamic Sect established Boko Haram, which translates to “Western education is sinful,”¹² in the early 2000s.¹³ Frustrated with the lack of social and economic development within the northern region, Boko Haram's mission is to combat Western teachings and promote strict adherence to Sharia law within northern Nigeria.¹⁴ The group believes that Western ideals corrupted Nigeria's government, and seeks to return the region to pre-colonial Muslim rule.¹⁵ Further, Boko Haram stands firmly against the idea of a modern, educated woman, and seeks to destroy secular education.¹⁶ The group has grown increasingly violent and unsystematic,¹⁷ and it inevitably devolved to become nothing more than a terrorist organization whose only desire is to wreak havoc throughout the region.

One of Boko Haram's most infamous attacks occurred on April 14, 2014, when the organization captured over 250 schoolgirls in Chibok, located in Nigeria's northeastern Borno State.¹⁸ Although this occasion was neither Boko Haram's first nor last time that they applied “forcible recruitment” upon young, unsuspecting girls, the event received so much international attention that it served as a “turning point” in global awareness.¹⁹

Better access to education in the northern region is a vital element that can eventually bridge the large economic and social gap between the north and the south.²⁰ According to the United Nation's Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF) access to education lowers child mortality rates and promotes environmental awareness.²¹ Education stands to promote gender equality, which is a major issue faced in northern Nigeria, and drastically lowers the number of child marriages.²² Boko Haram's increasing number of attacks on schools stands as a major obstacle that continuously hinders the Nigerian government's attempts to promote such equality.²³ UNICEF estimates 4,700,000 children do not attend school in Nigeria, and a large portion of these children live in the northern regions where Boko Haram is most prominent.²⁴

The 2015 presidential election made it clear that Nigerians desperately desire a leader that is a statesman and willing to forcefully combat not only Boko Haram, but also the lack of social development that underpinned the group's inevitable rise to power. Boko Haram stands as a constant reminder to the world that economic prosperity alone cannot sustain a country's development; a government must commit to social development by providing accessible educational opportunities and actively promoting gender equality.²⁵ Now that Boko Haram is in power, Mr. Buhari's first job should be to extinguish the corruption that has plagued the government and its military. He needs to take drastic measures to properly implement social development programs and to provide children and women with legitimate educational opportunities. It is clear that Mr. Buhari has a long, difficult road in front of him, but it just may take compassion from a former dictator to get the job done.

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