

## POLITICAL VIOLENCE: ITS NEGLECTED DIMENSION

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### Abstract

*In majority of cases, politicians, analysts and scholars talking and writing on the subject of political violence have concentrated attention on the victims and effects (outcomes) of violence and violent activities at the exclusion of the perpetrators of violence, their motives and their existential situations. This has led to an inadequate understanding and analysis of the meaning, forms and justification of violence. What is being suggested in the paper is that a better understanding of the issues relating to political violence requires a shift of emphasis from the victim/effect approach to the perpetrator/motive/existential approach. This approach takes into consideration the role of perpetrators of violence, their motivations, and the social and existential conditions under which they operate. This position will be illustrated by the violence identified with the **Boko Haram** religious sect in Northern Nigeria.*

### Introduction

Major concerns of philosophers writing about violence have been with the problems of specifying in non ambiguous terms what violence is, who does violence and who are the victims of violence. Part of their concerns also relates to whether particular forms of violence and violence in general can ever be justified. The point here is that though violence is generally undesirable, there are certain occasions when it is morally or politically expedient to engage in it. The requirement of justification hinges on the need to specify those occasions in terms of the conditions that would justify violent action. For some, the requirement is met by appeal to a consequentialist ethics. This is because in most cases, the expected/intended outcomes of an act of violence provides the justification for engaging in the action and such action is always evaluated by certain effects it has on victims; whether human beings or properties. Thus, those that are attempting to effect changes in a social and political system are often encouraged to do so on the basis of the fact that if they succeed, then a better state of affairs will be ushered in by their action, whether in the present or in the future; whether in this life or in the life after. We shall, however, argue in this paper that the outcome or effects of acts of violence do not provide adequate ground for understanding what violence is, its forms and the issues involved in its justification. This is because the outcomes and effects of actions, especially acts of violence, are always physically observable and in most cases they lie in the future; while the *raison d'être* of violence is also in most cases, covert and not directly visible..

One philosophical position which supports the effect/victim perspective in understanding the issues that relate to violence is consequentialism, an ethical position that has been roughly characterized by Williams (1973: 79) “as the doctrine that the moral value of any action always lies in its consequences and that it is by reference to their consequences that actions and indeed such things as institutions, laws and practices, are to be justified if they are to be justified at all”

We are aware that consequentialism has its strengths and weaknesses, but we are not directly concerned about them in this paper. What the paper seeks to point out is that by focusing attention only on the visible harmful outcomes of acts of violence, not much can be understood about the nature of violence and the reasons behind the actions of perpetrators of violence whether by the state or agents and forces that are opposed to the state. Our position is that if the contemporary global democratic society is serious about enacting policies that will curtail acts of violence, then attention should be focused on the motivations and existential situations of agents and perpetrators of violence. Our focus in this paper is to examine the connection between violence, human nature and culture, given the fact that perpetrators of violence are cultural beings that occupy a cultural universe.

### **Violence, culture and poverty**

Sen (2008) discusses two main approaches to explaining violence in contemporary global society. One of them is the cultural approach while the other is the political economy of poverty and inequality. The cultural approach explains violence by referring to antagonisms between collective identities; while theories of the political economy of power and inequality seek the sole cause of violence in economic factors. In this essay, we shall examine these two factors in relation to acts of violence that are perpetrated by certain groups (*Boko haram*) that are opposed to the (democratic) state in Nigeria.

The cultural approach to understanding violence tends to look at conflicts and violence as they relate to modes of living as well as religious beliefs and social customs. Perry's (1970) observation about the connection between violence and culture is similar to Sen's view when he asserted that the culture that shapes men (women) is filled with ideas and symbols of violence. According to him, history, fiction, political oratory, sports, even religion is built upon a framework of conflict and violence. The two positions have been borne out by historical events of how nations were formed and how they have been managed and sustained. It is a known fact that most nations in our contemporary world are products of wars and revolutions which were violent in nature. There are indications that the culture of violence that characterized the struggles for emancipation and independence was re-enacted in modern and contemporary societies, either in dealing with their internal affairs or in their relations to other nations. Thus the cultural approach to understanding violence takes into consideration the nature of persons and the type of society that produced them. It is from this view that one could understand why certain scholars are apt to label certain cultures as violent with the attendant effect of linking this view with certain actions of the people that come from such cultures. While this view might be said to have committed the "naturalistic fallacy" (Moore 1992) it is instructive in the sense that the understanding of certain acts of violence could be traced to certain factors that are inherent in the historical and cultural situations of a given people. If the issue is understood in this way, then our attitudes to particular acts of violence or violence in general might be different from what obtains at present where acts of violence are condemned without the consideration of the antecedent event/actions that necessitated them.

### **Religion and violence**

One of the most potent factors in understanding violence in contemporary world is religion. In relation to this, Carroll (2003:9) has drawn attention to the question put to religion by the secular Enlightenment which has been asked in a different way in the age of terrorism: *How can otherwise sensible people, in affirming God as a source of meaning, manifest such infantilism?* Now the question has become, *how can people committed to the democratic ideal embrace a belief system that underwrites intolerance and even violence?*

These questions reflect the paradox involved in situations when certain persons are committed to beliefs that have deep respect for the value of human life and institutions that sustain these values and yet who are

willing to destroy or in certain cases to annihilate the same persons and institutions in the name of certain social/religious ideals. Thus as Carroll observed: “The suicide-murderers of Al Qaeda (and of Hezbollah, for that matter) are not the only ones to justify violent absolutism by appeals to the divine. American’s War on Terrorism is itself defined by a fervent Manichaenism that divides the world between good and evil” (2003:9)

One thing that is clear from Carroll’s analysis in the last paragraph is one view of religion which sees the term in relation to an object that deserves people’s fervent allegiance, which is then ‘worshipped’ or revered in a particular manner. Such objects can be a being of ultimate reality, for example God or Allah. It may also be one’s nation exemplified in the American phrase “God bless America”, a slogan that has its corollary in the statement of American Declaration of Independence adopted by the Continental Congress in July 4, 1776: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness”. Just as the Islamic religion reveres Allah as its object of worship, the American state reveres Life, Liberty and Happiness as values that are worth having. Also while Islam believes that the wish of Allah is worth pursuing, and in some cases is worth dying for, the American state believes that these liberal values are worth pursuing and wars could be fought in order to establish and sustain them. The issue here then relates not to the question of goals, but to the means that could and should be used to achieve such goals. We have seen in our contemporary society that the means of pursuing these ends involves the policy of violence in one form or another. The question that is relevant then is not about the legitimacy of who does violence, but to what extent can violence be used to pursue worthwhile goals?

The insight in the above view is that in order to understand the issues that are involved in violence in our contemporary societies, then certain old and contemporary distinctions about the phenomenon of violence have to be revisited. We may identify these distinctions for the purpose of discussion. They include: (i) Force and violence; (ii) Liberator/terrorist; (iii) innocent/collateral damages. Thus it is often believed that Coalition Forces in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya used force to achieve their desired ends and that as such, they are liberators while Al Qaeda in Iraq, Taliban in Afghanistan and Pro-Gaddafi forces in Libya use violence and hence they are terrorists. It is often believed that non combatant in acts of terrorism are innocent/civilian and as such the terrorists have committed criminal acts, while persons killed by the coalition forces in their attempt at bombing military targets of the enemy are regarded as collateral damages. These distinctions are informed by certain assumptions about the place of intention in human action and the nature of the (democratic) state and its relationship to certain elements that are embedded in it. What we are driving at here can be exemplified by Arendt’s (1966) distinction between power and violence. Arendt has made the distinction in the following way:

Power is indeed of the essence of all government, but violence is not. Violence is by nature instrumental. Like all means it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. And what needs justification by something else cannot be the essence of anything (Arendt 1966:26).

And she continues, (Arendt 1966:27):

Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities: what it does need is legitimacy... Legitimacy when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past while justification relates to an end that lies in the future. Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate

There are at least three issues raised by Arendt's distinction: (i) The essence of government is power which does not need justification; (ii) Violence cannot be legitimate; (iii) Justification always relates only to the future. We shall respond to these positions in turn. The definition of government in terms of power might be adequate from a sociological perspective. This is because this sort of definition only tells us what government possesses but it does not tell us how and why it possesses such a thing. The how and why of the case call for a justification. The only thing that Arendt says is that power is based on legitimacy, that is, legitimacy from (people's) "initial getting together". But this only does not explain the ground of our political obligation. The people's "initial getting together" has to be based on something other than their merely getting together. One explanation in this connection is to say that people get together in order to give their consent to a leader or sets of leaders to govern them. This, in agreement with Hannah Arendt, confers legitimacy on the government. But it also provides a ground or justification for people's continuous allegiance to the government through the policy it pursues, which is a forward looking view. This position is consistent with Arendt's criterion of justification that justification looks forward to the future. On this reasoning therefore, one can claim that there cannot be a rigid distinction between legitimacy and justification.

In the second place, the idea that violence cannot be legitimated is difficult to sustain. Take, for instance, a case where some people, especially a minority group in a state comes together to organize an act of violent protest against what they consider as the illegitimate state. The initial coming together gives their acts an element of legitimacy. Their action can also be justified through the end they hope to pursue (forward looking and therefore futuristic) by means of the acts of violence.

Finally, that justification focuses attention on the future only recognizes that justification is only of the consequentialist type. There are other theories of justification (e.g. deontology) which look at the duty imposed on certain individuals, groups or nation to carry out certain actions (violent action inclusive) based on the past relationship between them and other peoples or institutions. In ordinary life situation, what justifies a debtor to pay back a sum of money to a creditor is that she has promised to pay. The justification for her paying back the money lies in the promise she made in the past rather than the future consequences of her not paying back the money. Although it might be argued that the debtor pays back the money to the creditor because if she does not pay back, she may not enjoy a similar gesture in the future, this may not be the sole reason for her paying back the money. She pays back the money because she owes it a duty to fulfill her promise. By the same token, it may be urged that certain individuals or group of individuals that had suffered oppression, exploitation and repression in the past may decide to carry arms and fight their oppressors, especially when they have the wherewithal to do so. Thus according to Kelly (1977:112-113): "Although it is convenient, perhaps necessary, to define

violence according to the law or by prefigured statistics in an extremely physicalist way, such a description will not satisfy those whose potential violence convention or the law restrains, or those who claim to justify their overt acts of physical violence on the ground that verbal or more subtle kinds of violence have previously injured them or even their kinsmen and forefather".

This passage recognizes that evaluation of acts of violence does not only focus attention on the future, but people also engage in acts of violence in order to put an end to oppression and denial of their selfhood/personhood that have occurred in the past. Thus, the violence perpetrated by South African Blacks against the former Apartheid regime and the Palestinian Liberation Organization's acts of "terrorism" against Israel are meant to right the wrongs that have been done to them by racial discrimination and the seizure of their homelands respectively. Although it can be argued that their actions are forward-looking in the sense that they

look forward to the time when their cause will be vindicated, (had been vindicated in respect of South Africa and yet to be vindicated in respect of the Palestinian people) their actions were promoted by events in the past. This is the motive for their respective acts of violence against the state. What could be inferred from this position is that issues relating to acts of violence cannot be sufficiently understood when consideration is limited to the physical harm that results from such acts. There is the need to also understand the motives and the existential conditions of those agents and groups which carry out acts of violence against the state. This is not to suggest that one is justifying acts of violence like terrorism in an absolute manner. The point that is being made is that in order for us to properly understand the issues involved in violence, especially in a democratic state, one needs to engage in a more profound reasoning about the nature of the state, its workings and the elements that are related to the (modern) state. Given this consideration, acts of violence cannot be wholly condemned; rather they can be deplored “just as moralists do not condemn a just war but keep deploring it” (Eeche, 1970:144).

### **Violence and poverty**

One of Gurr’s (1970) three explanatory models for understanding collective violence is the *relative deprivation or misery thesis*. According to this model, violence results from the hardships which individuals collectively endure in form of stress, land alienation, hunger, poverty and frustration due to the impact of large scale structural changes. Similarly, (Sen 2008) has observed that poverty and inequality are root causes of violence.

This explanatory model of understanding political violence seems very plausible given the experience in our world, of events and happenings in the political arena, especially in the liberal democratic state, a state that has been ironically regarded as the best form of government.

The critique of the liberal democratic state has engaged the attention of many theorists, especially theorists with Marxist orientations. This is not the place to engage in the critical discussion about such critiques, but it suffices to note that the capitalist and the neo-liberalist economy that sustains the liberal democratic state promote a distributive process which has no inherent connection with the end of justice. This is because the coercive power of the state is used to promote differences in relation to the satisfaction of those who are politically and economically powerful and to the detriment of those who lack these capacities. The result of this action and in some cases, inaction is that certain people within the state are alienated and left to live in penury. This is a kind of structural violence which often leads to anger and frustration, which eventually can trigger off acts of violence by the victims. The features of the liberal democratic state are such that some people are forced to occupy a certain position within the structure of the society which carries with it some elements of social disability.

The linkage of violence with poverty is most visible in the so called Third World countries, especially in Africa, where leadership deficit has left the vast majority of the population economically bankrupt. A vivid example of this leadership deficit is exemplified in the Nigeria state where natural and human resources have been badly managed over the years. The resultant effects of this have been responses by means of series of violence perpetrated by different religious, ethnic and political groups. To some extent, the *Boko Haram* violence in Northern Nigeria could be understood from this perspective.

### **Boko Haram - Religious and Political violence**

The Boko Haram religious sect in Northern Nigeria is an exemplification of religious fundamentalism. Heywood (1998) has observed that the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism has emerged as a sub-variety of ethnic nationalism and this has been significantly noticed in parts of the world where national identity has been challenged or threatened. From another perspective, Danjibo (2009:4) observed that (religious)

fundamentalism could be seen from a cultural theological framework where the phenomenon expresses opposition to religious and cultural liberalism in defense of orthodoxy and religious traditions. He goes to aver that religious fundamentalism, especially Islamic fundamentalism places great emphasis “on right doctrine and the necessity of organized warfare against the forces of modernism”.

We might not have opportunity to discuss at length, the phenomenon of (religious) fundamentalism. However, we shall note in passing that fundamentalism is not linked to particular religion. As there is Islamic fundamentalism, there is also Christian fundamentalism. Also moral, political and cultural beliefs can be fundamental if the beliefs concerned are held with a high level of commitment such that the holder or holders of such beliefs would be reluctant to abandon them in the face of other overriding principles (Bamikole, 2009). Perhaps these few remarks could form a prelude to understanding the *Boko Haram* religious sect acts of violence against the Nigeria state.

The translation of the Sect’s name also reflects its objectives. “*Boko*” means Western or foreign and “*Haram*” means forbidden. *Boko Haram* translates to “Western education is sinful”. This translation has been subject to various interpretations. Some say that the Sect is not condemning Western education *per se*, but the products of Western education. This translation can further shed light on the objectives of this group. Translated in this way, what the group tends to be saying is that many behaviors, attitudes, institutions and persons that are products of Western education have been causing a lot of havoc to what the group regards as an Islamic way of looking at reality.

At this point, one may ask, what is Western education and how do the products of Western education create the type of situation which is the centre of conflict between the *Boko Haram* Sect and the Nigeria state? The first question might not be able to admit of a general response, but a kind of response from the context of colonialism in particular. In a very simplistic way, Western (formal) education is an education associated with gathering information from the teacher which can enable the learner to read and write and able to secure a place within the social ladder of the society (Bamikole, 2008). The product of this form of education will be elitist in character and this elitism is associated with the political positions in the state that enable the educated to appropriate unto him/herself the “good things of life” provided by the society and to the exclusion of the persons that are not so educated. In post colonial societies that inherit this kind of education, leadership deficit has been responsible for how the educated, especially the youths, have lost out totally in the scheme of things. Educated youths have not been provided with the requisite opportunities that could make them utilize the education they had received. In most cases, the type of education received has not been able to make the individual attain the much needed autonomy, both intellectually and morally. The resultant effect of this kind of education is a society where there are a lot of dysfunctions in almost all the institutions that make it up. These dysfunctions manifest themselves in the degeneration of the moral and social norms that had made societies in the past to be cohesive and peaceful.

It is from this perspective that one can understand the *Boko Haram* sect’s detest of Western Education. The intention of the Boko Haram sect is “to replace modern state formation with traditional Islamic state, because Western values run contrary to Islamic values” (Danjibo, 2009: 7) For the sect, evil in society is as a result of the embrace of Western civilization and in order to curb such evil, an Islamic society must be entrenched by destroying modern state institutions. This accounts for the reason why police formations and government establishments and properties became the targets of destruction by the sect.

The evidence that the acts of violence of the *Boko Haram* sect is religious and political in character is that the sect is committed to fulfill one of the Islamic doctrines of waging holy wars in order to achieve the

fundamental goals of the Islamic faith. In this connection, it has the same religious goal with other religious (Islamic) groups who are willing to carry out acts of terrorism to achieve their goals. It is political in the sense that the group is discontented with bad governance in the Nigeria state where leaders who are products of Western education make use of their privileged positions to violate the social, political and economic rights of the citizenry.

### **Towards a more adequate understanding, preventing and managing violence in Politics**

The thrust of this paper is that our understanding and attitude toward violence has been vitiated by a partial attention to the meaning of violence, its forms and the effects which violence often have on persons and properties. This way of understanding violence directs attention only to the physical aspects of violence and the harmful effects which violence has on its victims. This has made government, scholars and others interested in the issues raised by violence in contemporary world to condemn acts of violence, especially, by persons and groups that have been labeled as “terrorists”. The view expressed in this paper is that an adequate understanding of violence in its theoretical and practical perspectives should take into consideration the motive and the existential situations of the perpetrators of violence. This will require an intensive research into human actions and their motivations. A collaborative effort among scholars in the areas of philosophy, social anthropology, economics, theology and other disciplines concerned with the understanding of human beings and the institutions which produce and sustain them is urgently required. The various outputs from this comprehensive undertaking might result in the possibility that our attitudes to perpetrators of violence and the conditions that motivate them might take a different turn which invariably might lead to a better way of preventing and managing acts of violence in human affairs.

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