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Representations of Terror and Resistance: International Perspectives and African Experiences

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Abstract:

This paper examines the economic and religious motivations for terror in modern Africa and revolutionary France. A comparative paradigm to humanities research is adopted to explain the similarity of factors that precipitated the French Revolution and Boko Haram as institutions of terror. The position of the paper is that economic marginalization and religion are motivators in both instances and that they are intertwined. It realized that religious fanaticism and economic inequality were bedfellows which caused the rise of terror in France during the revolution and Nigeria in the Twenty-first Century. Whereas religion was a cause of bitterness in the match towards the French Revolution, it was an object of good motivation which brought people together towards instigating terror in Nigeria. Economic need again propelled popular discontent in revolutionary France and Nigeria towards the rise of terror as a tool to resolve national problems and register local discontent against central authority, respectively.

Keywords: French revolution, Boko Haram, terror, economic marginalization, religion

1. Introduction

One might argue that Man's quest for power and dominance has always pushed him to seek ways of destroying his perceived competitor. For many observers, this human power struggle made the twentieth century the most blood-letting century in human history with the two World Wars serving as its tragic and eternal witnesses. The twenty-first century subsequently also opened with terror; both state-sponsored and radical groups have been battling for supremacy. As a result, global terrorism occupies center stage in the world politics of domination. Terrorists employ techniques of coercion, provocation, devastation, and blackmail to press for their demands. Africa has suffered varied but nefarious forms of insurgencies and terror. The activities and networks of these terrorists are on the ascendancy globally. The attacks of the offices of Charlie Hebdo, 9/11, the 200 Chibok girls abducted in Nigeria, and the Garissa massacre in Kenya are just a few of the highlights that are still fresh in our memories. The constant threat to security in many parts of the world, and particularly in Africa, is alarming given the loss of human life and the destruction of property that accompanies these terror activities. This inevitably rolls back the clock of development and human progress whether in economic, social, or political terms.

The harrowing effect of terror in our era is of great concern to the affected regions and the world at large from a contemporary international perspective. Yet, terror can be traced to ancient governments where the political bond between subjects and rulers was also based on coercion and fear. Resistance to the rulers from the subjects came in equal measure in the form of violence against the established order and in disgust with aristocrat-proletariat relations. The socio-political settings of ancient communities are not that different from modern-day political relations in some undemocratic world jurisdictions. The impact of terror cuts across political, religious, social, economic and cultural spheres of life in many African societies.

2. A brief Background on Terror

The English word *terror* derives etymologically from the Latin word *terrere* meaning 'to frighten'. Terrorism is, therefore, an offshoot of terror which defies a single, acceptable definition. For the purpose of this paper, terrorism will be considered as an instrument of fear usually unleashed by a disgruntled party in a parity relationship or otherwise to demand or show disapproval of aspects, actions and structures of the established order and or the nature of the relationship between the disgruntled party and the other entity be they the government, colonialists, or other constructed enemies. Terror's natural bedfellow is, without a doubt, religion. Religion has been one of the root causes and drivers of terror since time immemorial. Chaliand and Arnaud (2007) believe that historians of terrorism tend to point out that *terror* applies to the state terror of the French Revolution, but they often neglect to add that, to varying degrees, the phenomenon was a constant of earlier eras and has also been prevalent ever since. Violence and fear in the name of religion, or holy terror, is a recurring historical phenomenon throughout history (Esposito, 2010). In Jewish and Arab history, the rise of the Zealots and the Ismailis and their opposition to the establishment namely the Romans and the Sunni group exemplified one of the earliest

roots of terror in world religions. Religion has, therefore, played an important role in the evolution of our contemporary notion of terror.

Similarly, Andrew Silke (2014) proposes that ideology is another primary motivator of terrorism. "Ideology sets the wider context for terrorist groups. It establishes who the enemy is and what the organization is fighting to achieve", contends Silke (2014). An act of terrorism, according to him, is never just aimed at its direct victims but always has other audiences in mind. The wider impact of violence is always the prime goal of terrorism. Terror is a tool used by both state and non-state actors to achieve their aims. Violence committed by states is by far the deadliest and more destructive than acts of violence emanating from non-state groups. The reason is that the state has a well-established structure and the resources necessary to crush any perceived dissent. One classic example comes from the French Revolution of 1789 where such violence was employed to repress counter-revolutionaries. A leading figure of the French Revolution, Maximilien Robespierre, aptly summed up the essence of this violence: "We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with it; now in this situation, the first maxim of your policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people's enemies by terror" (cited in Silke, 2014). An estimated 40,000 French citizens lost their lives through the guillotine. The term *terrorism* was applied to state-sponsored terror but its usage has now largely shifted to refer to violence committed by non-state militants; nonetheless, governments are not left out in contemporary acts of terror.

2.1. An International Perspective: French Terror and Maximilien Robespierre

According to Linton (2004), terror took a variety of forms during the Revolution. But when historians refer to 'The Terror' they generally mean the period when the Jacobins dominated the government. This period lasted from June 1793 to the end of July 1794 (Thermidor) when the overthrow of Robespierre led to a winding down of 'The Terror' – at least as a legalized system embedded within the structures of government.

Prior to the French Revolution several remote and immediate factors served as precursors to the revolution. Chief among these were the economic hardships that French people faced as a result of the political structure that made the crown and the cross bedfellows. Religion in France represented by the Catholic Church supported the political system that oppressed the poor. French society was divided into three estates: The First Estate, the Second Estate, and the Third Estate representing the clergy, the aristocrats, and the middle and lower class respectively. The Third Estate, mostly the working class or the *sans-culotte* (working class), provided bread and butter for the clergy and the nobles. The working class paid tithes to the clergy and therefore saw the church as an instrument of oppression and exploitation (Touzery, 1997). The glaring economic and material gap between the First and Second Estates, on the one hand, and the Third Estate, on the other hand, culminated in benign discontent that festered over centuries. The bubble only burst when severe economic conditions caused by environmental factors like droughts and incompetent economic management of the national coffers led mobs to take action in Franche-Comte, Dauphine, and Provence and gradually, like a cancer, spread throughout the kingdom. The clearest demonstration of the triumph of popular sovereignty was the capture of the Bastille, the last symbolic bastion of the aristocratic age in France and possibly in Europe. Revolution in France was attained through terror and the capture of the Bastille signified victory and liberty for the Third Estate.

When the proletariat - commoners took over, France faced invasions from neighbors who wanted to reverse the gains of the revolution and internal divisions also threatened to derail this success. Monarchies from other European countries such as Spain, Netherlands, Great Britain, among others rose up against the Revolution for the fall of the French monarchy and the assassination the king. Robespierre reinvented terror to save the Republic by de-Christianizing the population. Terror thus became the sole means of exorcising France and French people of the evils of religion and its threats to the progress of the revolution. Morrisson and Snyder (2000) contend that inequality and poverty were rife and high in the pre-revolutionary period. There is, therefore, a sense that hunger compelled the French to rise up against religion in an effort to improve their well-being and meet their basic human needs irrespective of the other-worldly consequences. The use of terror enabled national leaders to undo the spirit of subservience the church had planted in the French people; the shackles of submissiveness were broken and the psyche of the French people was liberated.

The physical manifestation of terror was the guillotine. It served as the humane way of executing criminals and counter-revolutionaries who were thought to be enemies of human freedom, equality and fraternity. Every necessary step was taken to give terror legal recognition and national acceptance because it had become an instrument of the state. Every class of the French society passed through the guillotine and Linton (2004) notes that because the Jacobins were so meticulous in maintaining a legal structure for the Terror, we have very clear records and know that the total number of death sentences in Paris was 2,639. But many more people died without formal death sentences imposed in a court of law in overcrowded and unsanitary prisons while awaiting trial. The terror machine was well structured; it had deputies who were members of the Convention and sent as political watchdogs to the provinces, the local surveillance committees, and the *sans-culotte* militia. This machinery also instituted local terrors to safeguard the Revolution, spread its ideology and arrest people, especially with the passage of the Law of Suspects on September 17, 1793. Further legislation like the Law of Frimaire (further official sanction) of December 1793 and the Law of Prairial (process of dealing with the backlog of arrested persons) of June 1794 were passed to increase the powers of the executive. All these exemplified how terrorism against human life, rights, and freedom was legalized and institutionalized by the state to serve its revolutionary political purposes. This shows that terrorism can take many forms; the primary difference being what is referred to or named.

Frenchmen who had suffered the economic injustices of the *ancient regime* notably the *sans-culottes* saw the revolution as the only source of securing the economic freedom they had attained from the aristocrats (Bishop, 2014). Bishop argues that when France faced European military coalitions following the execution of the king, the *sans-culottes* took up arms in support of the revolutionary government and its reign of terror. Indeed, "the radical Jacobins and their *San-culottes* supporters now became the base of political power in France" (Bishop, 2014:12) all in an effort to protect the gains of the revolution using the instrument of terror. The gains to be

protected for the *sans-culottes* were the destruction of the economic relations between citizens and aristocrats which implied heavy taxes, financial obligations to the aristocracy and the lack of access to lands appropriated for the church. The *sans-culottes* unequivocally endorsed the terror instituted by the Committee of Public Safety as a means of satisfying their economic and political objectives.

2.2. African Perspectives and Experiences of Terror

Africa has been home to terrorist organizations for several decades. Many countries have suffered terror in the form of civil wars, ethnic clashes and insurgencies while others continue to live under constant threat. Non-state terrorism has mushroomed at an alarming rate on the continent in recent years. According to the 2015 Global Terrorism Index, the effects of terrorism are felt most strongly in the Middle East and Africa where countries such as Iraq and Nigeria account for the majority of deaths due to terrorist attacks. Africa is rated second after Asia (Middle East) and sadly with 10 countries making it to the top 20 countries that have been the worst hit in the world. Nigeria sits next to Iraq and Afghanistan at the top of the list of nations hit by terror. The most visible terrorist groups on the continent, in recent times, are Boko Haram and Ansaru in West Africa, Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Shabaab in East Africa.

Most terror groups in Africa have been driven largely by religious and economic concerns like the French Revolution of the eighteenth century. Boko Haram, West Africa's most notorious terror group, emerged in the poorest region of Nigeria. It highlighted the economic difficulties of the region, and the north in general, to construct enemies for itself, namely the Nigerian government, moderate clerics, the West and Western education. Onapajo, Uzodike & Whetho (2012) maintain that, at the same time, many in the international community are proposing non-military approaches to solving the problem of Boko Haram's terrorism. Many support the efficacy of an economic recovery strategy to address the problem, given the belief that the outrage displayed by Boko Haram is a reflection of the acute poverty in northern Nigeria. Empirically, the economic concerns of Boko Haram are confirmed by the fact that although 61 % of Nigerians are poor or extremely poor, a majority live in the northeast which is home to Boko Haram. The National Bureau Statistics said that relative poverty was most apparent in the north of the country, with Sokoto state's poverty rate the highest at 86.4%. In the northwest and northeast of the country poverty rates were recorded at 77.7% and 76.3% respectively, compared to the southwest at 59.1%. The BBC Africa analyst Richard Hamilton (2012) says it is perhaps no surprise that extremist groups such as Boko Haram continue to have an appeal in northern parts of the country where poverty and under-development are at their most severe. Thus, economic grievances provide an avenue for religion to emerge as an instrument to protest the glaring inequality evident between this region and the rest of Nigeria. The International Crisis Group (2014) corroborates that:

- Most Nigerians are poorer today than they were at independence in 1960, victims of the resource curse and rampant, entrenched corruption. Agriculture, once the economy's mainstay is struggling. In many parts of the country, the government is unable to provide security, good roads, water, health, reliable power and education. The situation is particularly dire in the far north. Frustration and alienation drive many to join "self-help" ethnic, religious, community or civic groups, some of which are hostile to the state.

This endemic corruption and inequitable distribution of wealth perhaps forms the basis for the rebellion against the Nigerian authorities in a bid to have an equal share of the national cake. In the view of Campbell (2014), Boko Haram is a radical Islamist movement shaped by its Nigerian context and reflecting Nigeria's history of poor governance and extreme poverty in the north. The movement is unique in that it combines a sectarian, radical Islamic agenda with violence.

Similarly, al-Shabaab militants in Somalia, riding on the back of economic grievances of the majority of the population, have perpetuated a culture of terror and violence in eastern Africa. Also, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) successfully used the instrumentalization of violence to force the hand of government in Nigeria to attend to the economic grievances of the people of the Niger Delta area. Before this insurgency very little economic resources were channeled by the state to develop communities in the area despite its vast oil reserves and their contribution to the economic development of the country. Following the negotiations that brought peace, great financial resources have since been made available to support the development of the area and improve the lives of youth. In Mali, the Tuareg rebellion gains much of its support from its catchment area due primarily to the economic backwardness and underdevelopment of the northern parts of Mali. Statistics indicate that little access to education and quality healthcare in northern Mali has caused much discontent over the decades. These are all indications that economic drivers are at the root of terror experienced in Africa and further provide policy makers with the tools to combat the evils of terrorism in its modern manifestation.

2.3. Resistance to Terror

Resistance to terror in Africa has been multifaceted. In many instances, a militaristic approach has been adopted by governments in Africa to tackle terror threats and agents of terrorism. In Nigeria for instance, the central government, since 2000 launched a crackdown on Boko Haram, which became a full-blown conflict in 2009. Today, the militaristic solution is still being pursued by the government in an effort to cut down on the insurgency and restore peace. In 2015, a Multinational Joint Task Force created by Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Niger was set up to combat Boko Haram. In Mali, the government with international support continues to deploy military resources to beat down the Tuareg rebellion, which has assumed international dimensions with links to Al-Qaeda. In the same vein, the Somali government has been engaged in a bitter military confrontation with al-Shabaab. In their efforts Somali authorities have been helped by Kenyan and Ethiopian governments through an international and continental initiative to defeat this terrorist group. There have also been calls for and the adoption of non-militaristic approaches to defeating terrorism on the continent

in the long-term as we see in Onapajo, Uzodike & Whetho (2012). Economic sustainability is one of the most viable solutions to terror in Africa and not military approach as it is often the stance adopted by African governments.

3. Conclusion

Unresolved grievances by a cross-section of the population can be a breeding ground for terror to flourish. The French Revolution and Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region as well as other examples started on the grounds of economic hardship and then gravitated towards ideology. Whereas in France religion was part of the political system to oppress the working class, in Africa religion is used as an instrument of terror. Most of the terrorists' groups in Africa including Boko Haram are hiding under the cloak of Islam to spread violence and terror but the remote, underlying cause is economic inequality. The long term solution is to deal with the remote cause(s) of the insurgency through education, de-indoctrination and the provision of equal economic opportunities. The government should also adopt destitute children and give them proper education as they are vulnerable to Boko Haram's recruitment. Governments and stakeholders, therefore, need to tackle the 'war on terror' by addressing underlying economic disparities.

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