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SECURITY / INTELLIGENCE / CONSULTING

BETWEEN THE SEAMS

The Stress of the Nigeria's Middle Belt

The North East has been ravaged by Boko Haram and the effects have rippled primarily in to surrounding countries. What has not been reported widely is the stress and effects on what is known as the "middle belt". An area that has always been associated with conflict. Within this eclectic and electric area of Nigeria, a recent attack by the Nigerian Army on a Shiite group in Zaria, Kaduna has been ignored. Most people in southern Nigeria don't know much about this group or what has precipitated this civil disturbance. Others who are more cognizant of the situation are wondering if we are seeing history repeat itself and make way for yet another insurgency.

The Background

The Shiite group is known as the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) and is led by Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky. Security authorities are aware of Zakzaky which is said to seek the establishment of an Islamic state through an Iranian-styled revolution.

In July 2014, there was a violent crackdown by the Army while they were carrying out a pro Palestinian solidarity march. This attack led to the death of 34 people including 3 sons of the IMN leader El Zakzaky. The Army claimed it was attacked by the civilians, even though eye witness report showed that the civilians were unarmed and even the Army themselves reported no injuries, no casualties, no loss of equipment.

At that time the military was under a different leadership and had been accused of human rights violations. However, there have since been leadership changes and the current leaders have zero tolerance for human rights abuses and have taken steps to ensure the military do not torture or kill innocent civilians. This however has not impressed the group who probably still view the military in insolent regard.

Recently, the members of the IMN embarked on their annual Ashura march which commemorates the death of Hussein the grandson of Prophet Mohammed. The march was from Kano to Zaria in Kaduna state. During this march, a Boko Haram suicide bomber attacked the crowd while in a southern city of Kano. This attack did not stop the march. Instead, it led to an increase in the number of individuals who joined the procession. The attack probably fueled some renewed sentiments against the military who they see as quick to attack unarmed citizens, but unable to defeat the armed Boko Haram insurgency. The procession finally made its way to Zaria and many motorists complained about having to park for almost 5 hours while waiting for the procession to move past the highway and free up the roads.

Why the Army Attacked

In Nigeria, when "VIPs" are maneuvering through traffic that is caused by a simple traffic light, they are absolutely impatient and insist on having their way, talk less of a high valued individual such as the Chief of Army Staff (COAS). The COAS was in Zaria on the Saturday to pay homage on the Emir of Zazzau, and also attend a review parade by 73 Regular Recruit Intake at the Nigerian Army Depot in Zaria when his convoy ran into the Shiite procession or a group of unruly youth (depending on the different narratives)

The COAS armed convoy attempted to disburse the crowd but were unsuccessful. The Army alleges that the members of the group put up barricades and specifically targeted the convoy of the COAS. This is understandable considering the history of this group with the Nigerian Army. However, the group insists they were simply carrying on with their procession and were gathered for a ceremony at their Husainiyah base, to change the flag on the dome of their building. Either way, the crowd refused to give way and this put the Army Chief in a compromised position. His troops had to engage and this led to loss of lives.

The military decided to keep vigil in Zaria overnight, but then more IMN followers from other parts of the North made their way into the city to protect their leader Sheikh Zakzaky. This led to a shoot out over night and the deaths of many more IMN members. El Zakzaky and his wife were arrested by the military and are in protective custody, while his house and the IMN center were completely decimated.

The Crime

The army states IMN is guilty of attempted assassination, but in reading the reports on the matter, it appears the crime really is “the violation of people’s rights of way on public highways” including that of the COAS. The Acting Director, Army Public Relations, Col. Sani Usman stated that “The Nigerian constitution guarantees the rights of any group of persons. It gives the Sheikh El-Zakzaky’s followers the right to hold a peaceful march or procession unhindered, while it also guarantees other people’s right, including the Army’s right of passage on public highways. It is important to note that over the years, this group has subjected ordinary citizens using public roads to untold hardship, delays, threats and disruption, simply because they insist on using the public space irrespective of inconvenience and hardship on other law-abiding citizens and motorists. This cannot be tolerated and must stop! ”.

Why This Matters

In Nigeria, history tends to repeat itself. This Zaria issue is a cause for concern as similar violent crackdowns against gathering members of religious sects is what birthed the Maitatsine Uprising and Boko Haram insurgency.

The key difference between the aforementioned and the IMN is that the Maitatsine and Boko Haram leaders tended to preach overwhelmingly anti-government rhetoric. Therefore, any actions the government security agencies took against their members was always met with fierce battle and resistance. The IMN members have not appeared to respond with overwhelming violence or battle determination, and recent reports indicate that relative calm has been restored to the area.

Typical military statute gives priority to combat rather than dialogue. The military must do all that they can to protect the life of the IMN leader who is said to be in safe custody. This is important because history has shown that any harm to the leaders of the sect typically exacerbate the unrest. When Maitatsine leader Marwa was killed, his members fled to other states to continue their attacks and vandalism. When Boko Haram founder Mohammed Yusuf was killed, members fled to regroup, and later reemerged under a more deadly force under a new leadership.

Finally, the government needs to insist that their religious leaders understand and promote the existence of peace and harmony within Nigeria. In this instance, the government could have carried out advance dialogue with the sect leader and senior members regarding the need for their procession to free up the highways and arrangements could have been made well ahead of time to ensure a procession more considerate of other road users.

This incident led to protests across the north, as other Shiite marched in solidarity with their leader while protesting the death of their fellow brethren. Even as far away as Iran, protesters gathered outside the Nigerian embassy in Tehran condemning the attacks, while President Buhari purportedly received a call from the Iranian president regarding the same.



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