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# **The Fire Next Time: Youth, Violence and Democratisation in Northern Nigeria.**



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## **ABSTRACT**

- Election rigging and brigandage were the leading causes of the 2011 post-election violence in northern Nigeria.
- Youth, who constitute over 50 percent of the voting population in Nigeria, have been deliberately excluded from the political process.
- Northern youth are disenchanted with their traditional rulers, governors, and other politicians and showed this in 2011 by attacking their homes.
- Poverty and youth unemployment are growing in the north and are driving social unrest in the region.
- So far, Nigerian leaders have failed to appreciate the depth of the rage and resentment of the younger generation of northerners. Effort should be made to include these youth in the political process before the critical 2015 elections.

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## Foreword

The post-election violence that killed up to 800 Nigerians<sup>1</sup> cast a dark shadow over the peaceful national elections in 2011 that, according to many national and international observers, were among the freest and fairest the country had witnessed.

Violence is no anomaly in Nigeria, a country of more than 160 million people, blessed with natural oil and gas resources but bedeviled by poverty, corruption and mismanagement. The incidents of 2011 remind us that, although progress has been made with regard to the country's election management, there are underlying grievances that need to be addressed if similar occurrences are to be avoided in coming elections. Nigeria's ruling elite has continuously failed its people; struggles for power have been fought by all means, and the formally democratic system has not delivered benefits to the ordinary citizen.

We are of the opinion that fact-based analysis of key policy issues will help to address the country's challenges. The post-election violence still poses many questions that this paper tries to answer. What were the motivations for Northern youths to take to the streets? How spontaneous was the violence? Which deficiencies in Nigeria's political setup -the power-sharing agreement, internal party democracy etc. have contributed to the broad feeling of disenfranchisement in Northern Nigeria? And finally: What needs to be done to prevent future occurrences like this?

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is an independent German non-profit institution committed to the promotion of social justice, peace and democracy. Our work in Nigeria (since the 1970s) has always sought to support pro-democracy movements. By offering quality analysis to a broad range of readers, we hope to contribute to preventing the country from slipping towards violence in the next general elections.

This discussion paper the third of its kind<sup>2</sup> - has been written by Dr. Ike Okonta and the New Centre for Social Research, a research centre and think tank that addresses national issues of public policy. I want to thank Dr. Okonta for his excellent work and hope that the paper will find the attention it deserves and further enrich the debate on how to prevent "the fire next time".

**Thomas Mättig**  
**Resident Representative**  
**Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Nigeria**  
**Abuja, December 2012**

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, Nigeria: Post-Election Violence killed 800, May 17, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/16/nigeria-post-election-violence-killed-800>

<sup>2</sup> After "Anti-Corruption Policies in Nigeria under Obasanjo and Yar'Adua: What to do after 2011?" by David U. Enweremadu, November 2010, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/07813.pdf> and "The Jos Crisis: A recurrent Nigerian Tragedy" by Adam Higazi, January 2011, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/nigeria/07812.pdf>

## I. Introduction

### **Youth Militias, Ethnic Hegemons and Democratisation in Northern Nigeria**

Large swathes of northern Nigeria exploded in rage and violence as the results of the country's presidential election, held on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2011 began to trickle in on Sunday, the 17<sup>th</sup>. Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian southerner and candidate of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) was poised to beat Muhammadu Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC). Buhari, a Muslim was widely viewed as the northern candidate in an election marked by bitter ethnic and religious rhetoric, further widening the country's centrifugal fault lines.

Chanting anti-government songs and claiming that Buhari had been robbed of victory through election rigging, youth armed with clubs, knives, guns and other dangerous weapons spread out into northern cities and towns, looking for known supporters of the PDP. The private home of the Sultan of Sokoto, premier traditional ruler of northern Muslims, was attacked by the mob. Also attacked were the homes of the Emir of Zaria and the Emir of Kano (Nigeria's second largest city)<sup>1</sup>. These three personalities were considered to be leading supporters of the Federal Government of which the victorious Dr. Jonathan was head. Then the rioters turned their attention to northern governors and politicians whom they accused of sowing disunity and anarchy in the region. While these politicians went into hiding, their homes, cars and other property were vandalized.

What began as a political protest quickly assumed sectarian and religious hues as the rioters widened their target to include Christian northerners and southerners resident in northern cities whom they claimed voted massively for President Jonathan. The screaming mobs burnt down churches, pursued non-Muslims and hacked them to death with machetes. Christians mobilized and launched a counter-attack, killing Muslim youth and burning down mosques. The riots quickly spread from the city of Kaduna, political base of Muhammadu Buhari and informal capital of the north, to other cities. In all, 12 northern states – Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara - were affected.<sup>2</sup>

Everywhere the cause of the disturbance and the pattern of killings were the same. Angry Muslim youth formed themselves into gangs and screaming curses at the PDP, put up barricades on highways and then spread out in search of Christians and southerners to kill. In Giade, a rural town in Bauchi state, rioters chased members of the

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<sup>1</sup> See John Campbell, 'Nigeria: The Morning After,' New York Times, May 2, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Watch, 'Nigeria: Post Election Violence Killed 800,' May 16, 2011

National Youth Service Corp who served as ad hoc election staff into a nearby police station. They killed the policeman on duty, burnt down the station and raped two female corps members before hacking them to death with machetes. Five male corps members were also killed. In total, ten youth corps members were killed in Bauchi state.<sup>3</sup> The disturbance lasted three days before army and police contingents managed to disperse the mobs from the streets. It is estimated that about a thousand people lost their lives. Kaduna, a city perennially rocked by religious and ethnic conflict since the end of military rule in 1999, bore the brunt of the killings. About 100,000 people were displaced in the northern cities and towns affected by the protests.

### **Democratisation in multi-ethnic Nigeria**

Since Nigeria began her democratization journey in May 1999 following the election of Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian southerner, as President, the country has managed to avoid the prediction of democratization scholars who see democratic transitions in multi-ethnic states as the moment when political elites turn to ethnic mobilization to win power at the expense of elites from rival ethnic groups, triggering inter-ethnic violence. These scholars see the democratization process as providing a vent through which group grievances and rivalries, suppressed by the departing authoritarian government, are given free expression. Elections provide the opportunity for competing elites from different groups to tap ethnic symbols and this process sometimes leads to post-election inter-ethnic violence.

Columbia University Professor Jack Snyder examined the link between democratization and ethnic violence and argued that in multiethnic countries, the period of transition from authoritarian rule to elected government is usually exploited by politicians as a convenient way of transforming their various ethnic groups into an electoral majority. Violence results when rival elites adopt this strategy and resort to mobilizing their ethnic group to attack their rivals when the election results fail to favour them. Democratization, according to Snyder is difficult to achieve in multi-ethnic states because the process is usually ambushed by inter-ethnic violence during or shortly after elections.<sup>4</sup>

However, following successful elections in multi-racial South Africa in 1994, quickly followed by multi-ethnic Kenya and some other countries, another set of scholars began to question the inevitability that characterized the Snyder 'After elections, violence'

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<sup>3</sup> Collins Olayinka, Abosede Musari and Iyabo Lawal, 'Polls violence: Survivors narrate ordeal as demand for justice heightens,' *The Guardian*, 23 May, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratisation and Nationalist Violence*, New York: Norton, 2000.

school. The argument of this school is that democratic transitions in multi-ethnic states offer opportunities and redress mechanisms for inter-ethnic bargaining and demands, and that violence only occurs in countries governed by authoritarian rulers where these channels are blocked. In the book *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, edited by Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh and Will Kymlicka and published in 2004, the contributors agree that ethnic tensions tend to rise when a country embarks on democratization, but that many multi-ethnic states have been successful at developing a sense of common citizenship, inter-ethnic harmony and loyalty to a common state. They further argue that the pessimistic assumption that multi-ethnic states are incapable of democratization is not supported by empirical evidence.<sup>5</sup>

Nigeria, a multi-ethnic state, seemed to be headed towards democratic consolidation after elections were held in 1999 following the end of military rule. While youth-led ethnic militias emerged in the various regions, they were not powerful enough to generate massive inter-ethnic conflict and derail the democratization process. The Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) was established in the Igbo-speaking south east region shortly after President Obasanjo assumed office in May 1999, its founders claiming that the former had not appointed leading Igbos to important positions in his government. MASSOB officials stated that the solution to the persistent marginalization of the Igbo in national affairs was the resuscitation of Biafra, the short-lived independent nation they had established in 1967 before a bloody civil war put an end to it.<sup>6</sup> The O'dua Peoples Congress (OPC) had been operation in the Yoruba south west following the military government's annulment of the result of the 1993 presidential election that Moshood Abiola, a prominent Yoruba politician and businessman, won. Like MASSOB, OPC wanted an independent nation for the Yoruba and the fact that Obasanjo, a fellow Yoruba, had been elected president in 1999 did not stop its campaign. In the oil-rich Niger Delta the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA) and the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), led by young environmental and human rights activists drawn from the Ijaw ethnic group were calling for a Sovereign National Conference that would restructure the Nigerian federation and ensure that the Ijaw and other smaller ethnic groups in the region received a fair share of the oil revenue.

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<sup>5</sup> See Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh, and William Kymlicka, 'Ethnicity and Democracy in Historical and Comparative Perspective' in Bruce Berman, Dickson Eyoh, and William Kymlicka (eds) *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, Oxford: James Currey, 2004, p.13.

<sup>6</sup> See Ike Okonta, *Biafran Ghosts: The MASSOB Ethnic Militia and Nigeria's Democratization Process*, Uppsala: Nordic African Institute, 2012.

Following repeated bloody clashes between ethnic Yoruba and Hausa traders in Lagos in 1999 and 2000 caused by the irredentist activities of OPC, Hausa youth in northern cities established the Arewa Peoples' Congress (APC) to counter the OPC, protect northerners resident in the south west, and generally advance the northern interest in a Nigeria now ruled by a southern President.<sup>7</sup> While APC styled itself as the militant youth wing of the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), established by prominent northern politicians and leaders of thought following growing perceptions in the north that the Obasanjo presidency was not being favourable to northern interests, its activities were generally peaceful and did not trigger bloody confrontations between northerners and their southern counterparts in their region.

Although there have been bloody politically-motivated riots in the north since the 1940s, the post-presidential election violence that occurred in April 2011 was the first major one in the region since the 1999 democratic transition and requires closer examination. This discussion paper examines this bloody episode against the background of deep-running social and political crisis in this vast and populous region of Nigeria. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section examines the count-down to the 2011 presidential elections following the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua, a Muslim northerner, in 2010 and the widespread demand in the north that another northerner be allowed to take his place since he had not served eight years in office like President Obasanjo, a southerner, before him. Section two highlights the activities of elected northern governors as they establish youth militias to intimidate their opponents and maintain themselves in power even as ordinary people insist that they have been badly served by these 'eating' politicians. In section three, we examine the findings of the Sheikh Ahmed Lemu panel, established by the Jonathan administration to investigate the remote and immediate causes of the April 2011 post-election violence. Concluding, we offer thoughts on ways in which northern youth can be engaged and transformed into rights-bearing citizens participating in the social and economic development of the region.

## **II. From Voting to Violence: The Price of Unfulfilled Expectations**

The count-down to the violence that enveloped 12 northern states shortly after the 2011 presidential election began with the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua while still in office in May 2010. Yar'Adua had been flown to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment in

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<sup>7</sup> Adigun Agbaje, 'The Historical Antecedent of the Phenomenon of Ethnic Militias in Nigeria,' in Tunde Babawale, ed., *Urban Violence, Ethnic Militias and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*, Lagos: Malthouse, 2003.

November 2009, leaving a vacuum in the Presidency because he had not formally transferred power to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan as required by the constitution. A cabal composed of several powerful ministers and the ailing President's closest advisers quickly emerged and frustrated every attempt to get Jonathan to step into his principal's shoes. The cabal's worry was that Yar'Adua would not recover from his illness and that presidential power would be effectively transferred to Dr. Jonathan, an Ijaw from the Niger Delta in the south. They viewed this possibility as unacceptable because they were determined that the north would 'enjoy' presidential power for eight years like Obasanjo, a southerner had done before handing over to Yar'Adua. The latter had only served for two years before he fell ill. It took concerted pressure from civil society organizations led by the Save Nigeria Group (SNG) for the National Assembly to eventually bow to the demand of ordinary citizens that Jonathan be empowered to serve as acting President and pass a resolution to that effect. Following Yar'Adua's death on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2010, Jonathan was formally sworn in as President.

Since the advent of Nigeria's Second Republic in 1979, democratic politics in the country has always functioned as a series of formal and informal elite pacts, ensuring that key offices are zoned to the various competing ethnic, regional and religious constituencies. The 1979 Constitution introduced the 'Federal Character' principle, requiring that top positions in the central and state bureaucracies are shared equitably between these constituencies. On taking power following the 1979 elections, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) replicated the Constitution and zoned party offices to politicians from the various ethnic groups and regions. A military coup in December 1983 ended the Second Republic, and ushered in yet another stretch of military rule dominated by northern generals. The annulment of the result of the presidential election convened by the military junta in June 1993 triggered massive civil unrest and caused prominent politicians in the Yoruba southwest, home region of Moshood Abiola, assumed winner of that election, to assert that northern generals and politicians had resolved not to allow a Yoruba to govern the country. Following the death of General Abacha, the dictator, and Abiola one after the other in 1998, the military government under General Abdulsalaam Abubakar began to prepare to hand over power to politicians.

There was an unstated understanding among northern generals and politicians that power be handed over to southerners, preferably the Yoruba, to placate the region following the death of Abiola. Two retired generals, Ibrahim Babangida, former head of state and Yakubu Danjuma, former army chief of staff, played important roles in ensuring that Olusegun Obasanjo, a Yoruba and a former military head of state, contested the April 1999 presidential election on the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and won. Prominent northern politicians also played a role in Obasanjo's

victory. Said Tanko Yakassai, a leading member of the Northern Elders Forum, a socio-political organization, 'It was the northerners who made Obasanjo to become President. He was in prison. He was not a founding member of PDP but the north instigated the process that made him the presidential flag-bearer of PDP.'<sup>8</sup>

Northern politicians claim that that there was an informal understanding in the upper echelons of the party that the south would govern for eight years after which the reins of power would be handed back to the north.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Obasanjo, after governing for the constitutionally-stipulated maximum of two terms of eight years, handed over to Umaru Yar'Adua, a Muslim northerner from Katsina State in May 2007. Muhammadu Buhari, a fellow northerner and former military head of state, had contested the election as the presidential candidate of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP). While the conduct of the election was condemned by local and international observers as deeply flawed and marked by widespread ballot rigging in favour of the ruling party, ordinary Nigerians accepted the results and there was no post-election violence in any part of the country.

Trouble however started following the sudden death of President Yar'Adua in 2010 after only three years in power. Prominent members of the Northern Elders Forum and Arewa Consultative Forum, another northern-based political organization, urged Dr Goodluck Jonathan, now president, not to put himself forward for re-election in 2011; that another northerner should be drafted to contest as PDP presidential candidate and complete the north's term of eight years. Goodluck's supporters, mainly drawn from the south and his Niger Delta region in particular, however insisted that the President had the constitutional right to contest. The Northern Political Leaders Forum (NPLF), a new political pressure group led by Adamu Ciroma, a former minister in the Obasanjo administration, quickly emerged and began to mobilize northern opinion against a possible Jonathan candidature during the 2011 elections. The NPLF was successful in getting leading northerners, including General Babangida, who wanted to contest against Jonathan to step down for Atiku Abubakar, former Vice President during Obasanjo's tenure.

The PDP presidential primary was held on January 13<sup>th</sup>, 2011 amidst great tension. Political opinion was sharply divided, with northern politicians rooting for Atiku Abubakar and insisting that it was only fair that he win the ticket and go on to become president. Politicians and ordinary people in the south gave their support to Goodluck Jonathan. Jonathan, deploying the power of incumbency and the enormous resources of the

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Tanko Yakassai, Kano, 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Tanko Yakassai.

Federal Government, however won the primary. A breakdown of the results showed that he defeated Atiku in all six geo-political regions of the country – 615 to 9 in the president's native South-south region; 383 to 24 in the South West; 423 to 23 in the South East; 380 to 172 in the North Central; 301 to 155 in the former vice-president's home North East; and 422 to 365 in the North West.<sup>10</sup> While a few prominent northerners, including the Adamawa businessman Dr. Hassan Adamu congratulated President Jonathan on his victory, the overwhelming consensus in the north was that it had been an unfair contest and that Jonathan had used his position as president to beat Atiku. Northern Nigeria's leading journalist and political commentator, Mohammed Haruna, articulated the prevailing mood in the region thus: 'In the circumstance the president's cheerleaders should know that their victory at the primaries might yet prove pyrrhic. That is assuming the president is sincere about his commitment to ensuring that every vote counts at the general elections.'<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the general expectation in the north following Jonathan's crushing victory over Atiku, was that the region would rely on its population, far more than the southern states combined going by official census figures, to give victory to Muhammadu Buhari who had established the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), a new political party on which platform he was running for president against Jonathan. Buhari's relationship with mainstream northern politicians, who accuse him of leading the military coup that ended the northern-led Second Republic in 1983, has always been difficult. But there is no doubt that he enjoys the overwhelming support of ordinary northerners, particularly the young and poor who have come to see his brief stint as head of state in the mid 1980s as emblematic of the honesty and patriotism they say is lacking in the Fourth Republic led by the PDP. Buhari and CPC instantly became the symbol of northern hopes; the vehicle through which they would reclaim the leadership of the country from President Jonathan who was now regarded all over the region as an impostor.

Two other factors buoyed the hopes of northern youth. Since the first general elections in the country in 1959, the vast northern region has always determined who emerged victorious in the polls, going on to form the government in the federal centre. While the British handed over power to the northern-led Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC) in controversial circumstances, there is no doubt that northern politicians' ability to mould the ethnically and religiously diverse region into a solid voting bloc played an important role in garnering the required votes.<sup>12</sup> Northern youth were confident that they would be

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<sup>10</sup> Mohammed Haruna, 'Jonathan's victory; Nigeria's new dawn?' *The Nation*, 19 January, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Mohammed Haruna, 'Jonathan's victory; Nigeria's new dawn?'

<sup>12</sup> See Eghosa Osaghae, *Nigeria Since Independence: Crippled Giant*, London: Hurst, 1998, pp. 31-32.

able to mobilize this population advantage in Buhari's favour during the elections. Provisional voter registration figures released by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) also confirmed that the Northwest zone, Buhari's home region with seven states, had the largest number of registered voters – 18,900,543. This was 28 percent of registered voters in the country. The south-south, Jonathan's home zone, had 8,937,057.<sup>13</sup>

Northern youth also had another cause to feel confident that the election would go their way. Dr. Jonathan had, shortly after succeeding the late Yar'Adua, appointed Professor Atahiru Jega, an academic and respected human rights activist as INEC's chairman and charged him with the responsibility of conducting a free and fair election. Jega went ahead and strengthened the electoral commission's administrative machinery and also cleaned up and updated the voters register. The new INEC chairman was a northern Muslim noted for honesty and all over the north ordinary people felt that unlike the 2007 presidential election which was widely rigged in favour of the PDP candidate, this time INEC would ensure that CPC and Buhari had a fighting chance. Even so, the Adamu Ciroma-led Northern Political Leaders Forum, not willing to throw its weight behind Buhari, made a last ditch effort to stitch up a deal with President Jonathan wherein the north would back Jonathan and the PDP during the election on the understanding that he would serve only one term of four years and hand over the presidency to a northerner of their choice.<sup>14</sup> Nothing came of the initiative.

Northern youth went into the election with a firm resolve: to get Muhammadu Buhari, presidential candidate of the CPC, elected president. On election day, April 16, 2011, they turned out in large numbers all over the north to vote. It was a peaceful event and no incident of violence was reported in any of the northern states or elsewhere in the country. However, as April 17 dawned and INEC officials began to announce the election results and it became clear that President Jonathan had won, these youth surged into the streets and began to protest. According to the official results released by INEC, Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP scored a total of 22.5 million votes. His closest rival, Muhammadu Buhari of the CPC obtained 12.2 million votes. Malam Nuhu Ribadu of the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) got 2.1 million votes while Malam Ibrahim Shekarau of the All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) got 0.9 million votes.<sup>15</sup> The relative distribution of the votes showed that Jonathan won in 23 states: 16 in the south and 7 in the north. He got 25 percent, or more of the votes cast in 32 states and the Federal

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<sup>13</sup> Ike Abonyi, 'With 18.9m registered voters, Northwest holds the ace,' Thisday, 22 February, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Chuks Okocha, 'Ciroma group gives Jonathan pre-condition,' Thisday, 22 February, 2011

<sup>15</sup> Edwin Madunagu, 'Provisional report on Election 2011,' The Guardian, 28 May, 2011.

Capital Territory, Abuja. Buhari won in 12 states, all of them in the north. He scored 25 percent, or more in 16 states (all in the north and the Federal Capital). Nigerian electoral law requires that the winner score at least 25 percent of the votes in the majority of the states, an indication that she or he is broadly acceptable to the electorate all over the country.

The elderly northern politician Tanko Yakassai has stated that the youth who hit the streets in 12 northern states to protest Jonathan's victory were instigated by 'opposition politicians' who had refused to accept the results announced by INEC.<sup>16</sup> However, the vast majority of northern youth leaders we spoke to in the course of researching this paper asserted that the protest was spontaneous and that it was in reaction to 'clear evidence' that the presidential election was rigged in favour of President Jonathan. Said Malam Abba Suleiman, a youth leader and politician based in Kano:

'Unfortunately, some people in the south believe the violence was predetermined and planned. This is entirely false and misleading. I was in Kano and I will tell you the reaction was spontaneous...It was spontaneous anger expressed by the ordinary people on the street. But why? The elections conducted, particularly the presidential election, was flawed. People had high hopes that the elections would be different from previous elections. The most important factor was that with the antecedent of Professor Jega, people had thought a credible election would take place...Unfortunately, when the results were declared, people could not reconcile their vote with what was announced. People saw the elements of what had happened in 2003 and 2007 – the election rigging and malpractices – happening again in 2011.'<sup>17</sup>

It is however significant that Suleiman and the other youth leaders we spoke to were unable to provide solid evidence to back up their charge that Jonathan won the election through electoral malpractice. Even more worrying is the fact that these youth leaders in Kaduna, Zaria, Katsina and Kano were unanimous on their position that INEC and Attahiru Jega, a 'fellow northerner,' had 'failed' the region.

### III. Stalled Democratization, 'Eating' Governors and Violent Militias

Two weeks after the 2011 presidential election Dr. John Campbell, former US ambassador to Nigeria wrote an article in the New York Times in which he criticized the international community's positive response to the results, pointing out that the election had polarized Nigeria and resulted in likely underreported bloodshed in the northern parts of country. Wrote Campbell, 'Northern popular rage against the PDP

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<sup>16</sup> Tanko Yakassai, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Malam Abba Sulieman, youth leader and politician, Kano, 26 May, 2012.

establishment, which is widely seen as corrupt and responsible for Nigeria's poor governance, recalls aspects of the "democratic wave" in parts of the Middle East, though it does not appear to have been as coherent or well-organised.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, rather than condemn the spate of violence that engulfed the north following the election, the widespread sentiment among youth leaders, intellectuals, and opposition politicians is that the protest was the response of northern youth to bad governance by PDP governors in the north which has resulted in widespread poverty and social unrest in the region. As in other parts of the country, the PDP has consistently produced the governors in the majority of the northern states since military rule ended in 1999. Elections in 1999, 2003 and most spectacularly in 2007 were marked by ballot snatching, intimidation of political opponents and sometimes outright violence in most northern states, leading to the emergence of governors who did not enjoy legitimacy or the support of ordinary citizens.

To continue to maintain themselves in power some of these unpopular governors resorted to establishing youth militias to cow the populace and make it difficult for the latter to organize for their removal from office. Politicians in the north-east, particularly Borno, Yobe and Bauchi have been reported in the press as having colluded with the leaders of Boko Haram, the violent Islamic sect that is now terrorizing the northern part of the country with bombings and killing of innocent people, in a bid to secure their grip on power. Ali Ndume, a senator representing Borno South senatorial district on the platform of the PDP; Ali Modu Sheriff, former governor of the state; and Saidu Pindar, former ambassador to Sao Tome and Principe, were all reported to have links to Boko Haram in a confessional statement made by Sanda Umar Konduga, a spokesperson of the sect.<sup>19</sup> Ndume and Sheriff have denied these allegations.

Youth militias involved in partisan politics in the north began during the late colonial period when the Northern Peoples' Congress (NPC), backed by the British colonial government, was battling the Northern Elements Progressive Union (NEPU), led by Malam Aminu Kano, for control of the region. At first the NPC, the political party of the emirs, unleashed the Native Authority police on NEPU members who were largely poor commoners who resented the taxes and other oppressive practices of the dominant feudal elite. According to Yunusa Zakari Ya'u, 'when these failed to achieve the objective, the NPC had to look elsewhere to extend its repressive machinery. It was in this context that it cultivated a core of political thugs to terrorize NEPU members and supporters. These political thugs were later to acquire the name *Yanbanga* (a Hausa

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<sup>18</sup> John Campbell, 'Nigeria: The Morning After,' New York Times, May 2, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent Obia, 'New Initiative to Secure the North,' ThisDay, August 19, 2012.

adoption of the English word “vanguards.”)<sup>20</sup> The epicenter of these political struggles was Kano city.

*Yanbanga* played a key role in consolidating the rule of the NPC during the First Republic (1960-1966). They were disbanded following the coup d'état of January 1966 and military rule commenced in the country, but found a new lease of life during the short-lived Second Republic as the successors of the NPC and NEPU, National Party of Nigeria and Peoples Redemption Party respectively, again struggled to dominate the politics of Kano and the north. The National Party of Nigeria (NPN), which also formed the government in the federal centre, used *Yanbanga* liberally all over the north to oppress the political opposition and ensure that NPN governors won elections unchallenged. As Nigeria went into economic recession in the early 1980s, followed by the introduction of the harsh IMF-inspired Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) by the government of General Ibrahim Babangida in 1986, there was an explosion in the population of unemployed youth. When the armed forces retreated and electoral politics re-commenced in 1999, these youth further swelled the ranks of *Yanbanga* in the northern states, offering their services to PDP governors who began to use them to rig elections and harass the political opposition.

These political gangs have since proliferated in the region. In Sokoto and Kebbi states they are known as ‘Area Boys,’ a name borrowed from Lagos, Nigeria’s most populous city where violent street urchins who harass citizens and take away their belongings by force are also known by the same name. The Kebbi gang is said to be run by the former PDP state governor, Adamu Aleiro. In Bauchi State, the *Sara-Suka* gang is believed to owe allegiance to Isa Yuguda, the governor. *Kauraye* is run by prominent PDP politicians in Katsina State. *Jangaliya* operates in Kano and is said to be sponsored by Ibrahim Shekarau, former governor of the state. *Kalare* is based in Gombe State and is associated with Danjuma Goje, former PDP governor of the state.<sup>21</sup>

Leading northern opposition politicians see the PDP governors as an imposition, held in power by the combined forces of the central government in Abuja and the youth-led political gangs in the various northern states. The general expectation in the region, particularly following the establishment of the Congress for Progressive Change by Muhammadu Buhari and his lieutenants in 2010, was that CPC would be able to wrest power from the PDP governors in the region and chart a new political and economic

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<sup>20</sup> Yunusa Zakari Ya’U, ‘The Youth, Economic Crisis, and Identity Transformation: The Case of Yandaba in Kano,’ in Attahiru Jega, ed., *Identity Transformation and Identity Politics Under Structural Adjustment in Nigeria*, Nordic African Institute, Uppsala, 2000, p. 170.

<sup>21</sup> Vincent Oba, ‘New Initiative to Secure the North.’

course for the north. Instead, the governors, relying on massive support deployed by the central government, were able to not only help Goodluck Jonathan defeat Atiku Abubakar in the PDP presidential primary but also ensure that they themselves, along with Jonathan were returned to office in 2011. Professor Ango Abdullahi, former Vice Chancellor of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and coordinator of the Northern Elders Forum is particularly dismissive of the northern PDP governors and sees a symbiotic relationship, founded on coercion and blackmail, between them and Abuja. Said Prof Abdullahi, 'Former President Obasanjo and his group in the south decided that since Goodluck Jonathan was on Umaru Yar'Adua's ticket he should be allowed to continue. Of course corruption and threats took over and these lousy northern governors sold out and were given a form to fill during the primaries that if they did not support Jonathan's ambition, they would not secure a second term. This was why the northern part of Nigeria felt cheated.'<sup>22</sup>

Allegations of corruption and misplaced priorities have also been leveled against these northern governors. *Analysis*, a Zaria-based magazine studied public expenditures in Adamawa State for the period 2001-2003 and concluded that public officials used the budget to allocate resources to themselves rather than to serve the public interest. The magazine established that the personnel and overhead costs of three departments – Government House, Office of the Secretary to the State Government and the State House of Assembly – accounted for a disproportionate share of the expenditure, leaving education, healthcare, housing, agricultural development and public works starved of funds. Observed the Centre for the Development of Civil Society, an Abuja-based NGO that also studied the expenditures: 'During the period under review, the government of Adamawa state showed more interest in the purchase of furniture and cars rather than in health and water supply.'<sup>23</sup>

Shehu Sanni, a leading northern social critic and director of Civil Rights Congress, an NGO based in Kaduna, has observed that the democratization process has stalled in northern Nigeria and in the larger country, and that election rigging and lack of accountability on the part of governors are the leading causes of social unrest in the north. State governors, according to him, have become all-powerful even as they do little to generate economic activity that would generate employment and wealth in their various states. Said Sanni, 'Both states and local governments are only busy collecting monthly allocations from Abuja. There is really no state governments because the governors are all-powerful. The governor is all. He pockets the State Assembly and

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Professor Ango Abdullahi, coordinator, Northern Elders Forum, Zaria, July 20, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Centre for the Development of Civil Society, *Socio-Economic and Development Rights CSOs in Northern Nigeria*, Abuja: Centre for the Development of Civil Society, 2011, p.57.

decides when to conduct local government elections. I really do not see this present arrangement serving any part of the country well. It is not just the north that is in trouble.’<sup>24</sup>

#### **IV. Sheikh Lemu’s Burden: Poverty, Almajirai and the Deepening Northern Crisis**

Shortly after the post-presidential election violence in April 2011, President Jonathan established a panel to investigate the causes of the disturbance. The panel, headed by Sheikh Ahmed Lemu, a prominent Muslim cleric, submitted its report on October 10, 2011. The report blamed Muhammadu Buhari, presidential candidate of the Congress for Progressive Change, for partly instigating the violent riots that engulfed northern Nigeria for several days through unguarded statements he made while the presidential election was still in progress. Stated the Lemu Panel report: ‘Provocative utterances by many individuals and the widespread charge by prominent politicians including the CPC presidential candidate to the electorate to “guard their votes” appeared to have been misconstrued by many voters to include recourse to violence which they did.’<sup>25</sup>

The panel, however, admitted that Buhari himself was also a victim of the mobs who vandalized his car and other property in Kaduna. Yinka Odumakin, the CPC presidential candidate’s spokesman objected to the findings of the panel, describing it as a part of the PDP’s ongoing efforts to tarnish the image of the CPC. Said Odumakin, ‘When the members of the Lemu panel met General Buhari they praised him for being a statesman and a patriot. Some of them betrayed their emotions when they met Buhari. Their report is now the opposite. I wish them good luck.’ The panel also pointed out that an important cause of the post-election violence was the failure of past governments to prosecute persons involved in similar public disturbances in the past, thereby creating a climate of impunity. The panel examined political trends in the country and highlighted the attractive remunerations of political office holders and their determination to perpetuate themselves in power using thugs and private militias even in the face of widespread desire of ordinary people for a new political regime that would address poverty and lack of social amenities in the country. Said the panel, ‘the true state of affairs could escalate to social revolution if preventive measures are not taken in time.

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<sup>24</sup> Shehu Sanni, director, Civil Rights Congress, Kaduna, Interview June 8, 2012, Kaduna.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Ikuomola, ‘Lemu Panel Indicts Buhari over post-election violence,’ The Nation, 11 October, 2011

In fact, the current sporadic demonstrations in educational institutions and by labour unions are all considered to be signals of more serious negative events to come.<sup>26</sup>

Another factor that led to the post-election violence, according to the Lemu panel report, was deepening poverty in the northern part of the country, stating that 'easy access to drugs, serious general poverty at the grassroots level and youth unemployment in particular are providing many foot soldiers ready for recruitment.' Available statistics on poverty in the country support the panel's position. According to a 1996 World Bank report on poverty assessment in Nigeria, 'the states with the highest percentage of poor people in Nigeria are in the middle and northern zones namely Kano, Sokoto, Bauchi, Niger, Plateau and Borno. About one-third of all poor people in Nigeria are in Sokoto, Kano and Bauchi.'<sup>27</sup> In 1997, when the Federal Office of Statistics examined the national distribution of poverty along sectoral lines (using the rankings – extreme poor, moderate poor, and non-poor), the results showed that an approximate 39 percent of the extreme poor were mostly concentrated in the north.

Leading northern intellectuals and public figures have been addressing their minds to the lethal mix of poverty, youth unemployment and social unrest in the region. In an interview he gave to the London-based Financial Times in January 2012, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, governor of the Central Bank stated that there was link between rising violence in the north and the region's relatively low monthly financial allocation from the central treasury compared to the states of the south-south region. Said Sanusi, 'there is clearly a direct link between the very uneven nature of distribution of resources and the rising level of violence,' adding that the time had come to focus funds on regenerating other regions if the country's leaders wanted to ensure long term stability.<sup>28</sup> Oil producing states in the southern part of the country are given 13 percent of oil revenues, in addition to the federal allocations they and the other states receive. International oil prices have risen since this came into effect with the 1999 Constitution, further widening the financial gap between the oil-endowed states and their northern counterparts. Explained Sanusi: 'When you look at the figures and look at the size of the population in the north you can see there is a structural imbalance of enormous proportions. Those states simply do not have enough money to meet basic needs while some states have too much money.'

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<sup>26</sup> Vincent Ikuomola, 'Lemu panel indicts Buhari over post-election violence.'

<sup>27</sup> World Bank, *Poverty in the Midst of Plenty: The Challenge of Growth With Inclusion; Poverty Assessment in Nigeria*, Washington DC: World Bank, 1996, p.36.

<sup>28</sup> William Wallis, 'Nigerian central banker calls for end to imbalances,' Financial Times, 26 January, 2012.

Sanusi's position was echoed by Mu'azu Babangida Aliyu, governor of Niger State and chairman of the Northern States Governors Forum. At the occasion of the inauguration of a foundation named for Ahmadu Bello, the late premier of the Northern Region in February 2012 Governor Aliyu stated:

'The north today is in a very grave situation where illiteracy, poverty and general backwardness are on the rise in the face of unfavourable federal allocation structure in which the northern states are at disadvantage. In Niger State for instance, we receive N4.2 billion to N4.5 billion annually and spend over N2.1 billion on wages and salaries, leaving behind the balance of N2 billion to be spent on a population of 4.1 million people, including other exigencies like social services, hospitals and road construction. This is unlike the situation where some states collect twenty times more than what we collect with their small population. According to the Constitution, the federation allocation formula is expected to be reviewed every five or ten years and we are expecting that there would be a review this year. Revenue from oil wells within 200 kilometers of the continental shelf ought to be for the whole country, but the revenue goes to some states. What is happening will not serve equity and therefore we will continue the discussion until there is equilibrium.'<sup>29</sup>

Journalists, community leaders and politicians in the south have taken issue with Sanusi and Governor Aliyu, pointing out that in a proper federal system the federating units ought to generate their own income and not rely on the centre for monthly hand-outs. Others have also drawn attention to the fact that the northern part of the country provided the leadership of the country far more than other regions since independence in 1960 and used that opportunity to do away with the provisions of the 1960 Constitution which ensured that 50 percent of revenue generated in a region was spent by that region as it saw fit.<sup>30</sup> Human rights activists and civic leaders in the oil rich Niger Delta have also taken issue with Governor Aliyu's statement that the region was taking income meant for the entire country, arguing that the oil was produced in their region and that it was therefore only fair that they be financially compensated for environmental pollution and other hazards associated with the industry.

Within the north itself a younger generation of civil society leaders and social critics are asking searching questions about how northern leaders, and the governors in particular, have been using the monthly allocations they receive from the Federal Government, 'modest as they are'. Following a round of meetings in February and March 2012 on the

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<sup>29</sup> Simon Kolawole, 'This Revenue-sharing thing again,' Thisday, 26 February, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Ross Alabo-George, 'Deprivation and Derivation Principles: Why the North is Poor,' The Punch, 8 March, 2012.

northern crisis convened by leading northerners including former military head of state General Abdulsalaam Abubakar, a youth led civil society organization, Arewa Civil Societies Forum, accused these leaders of unwillingness to frontally tackle the region's political and economic problems. Said Mohammed Murtala, the Forum's chairman in a press statement, 'As critical stakeholders, we want to draw your attention to the fact that we, the neglected youth of northern Nigeria, are not impressed by these rituals of frequent meetings that have never produced any positive results in our lives.'<sup>31</sup>

Shehu Sanni has also taken issue with Governor Mu'azu Aliyu's request that the region's monthly federal allocation be increased. According to the youth leader and social critic, the real challenge confronting northern governors was how to leverage the region's human capital to generate jobs and provide social amenities for the people. Sanni said: 'The call by Niger State Governor Babangida Aliyu who is chairman of the Northern Governors Forum on the need to reexamine the revenue sharing formula of the Federation with a view to reducing the allocation to states in the Niger Delta and increasing same to northern states is ridiculous. Governor Aliyu and his cohorts should be thinking of how they can harness the human and natural resources of the region to improve the quality of life of its people and make the region less dependent on federal charity. It is an irony that Governor Aliyu, who has consistently loathed the begging culture of Almajiri, has now elevated it to the art of statecraft.'<sup>32</sup>

Emblematic of the deepening political and social crisis in the north is the Almajiri culture – a practice whereby poor parents in the north send their male children to be educated by malams (Islamic scholars) in the cities and who in turn send them out into the streets to beg for alms. Living standards and disposable incomes in the north have dropped sharply since Nigeria went into economic recession in the early 1980s. Hitherto well-off households are no longer able to give alms to these itinerant students and this has led them to pursue other activities – some bordering on the criminal – to provide food and clothing for themselves. A good number of the youth who spilled out into the streets of northern towns and cities in April 2011 violently protesting President Jonathan's election victory belong to this burgeoning social category.

Mainstream northern leaders are still searching for solutions to the Almajiri threat and the wider northern crisis. Some like Professor Ango Abdullahi have latched on to conspiracy theories, telling our interviewer that the region's declining economic fortunes should be blamed on former President Obasanjo who had threatened to reduce the

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<sup>31</sup> John Shiklam, 'Northern Elite and the Boko Haram Challenge,' *ThisDay*, 18 March, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Omololu Ogunmade, 'Northern Governors' Call for Review of Revenue Formula Generates Anger,' *ThisDay*, 5 March, 2012.

north to poverty because Sani Abacha, the late military dictator and a northerner, had unjustly imprisoned him during the 1990s. Yet others see the advent of Boko Haram and the 'partisan' manner in which the Federal Government is tackling the violent Islamic sect, as a deliberate ploy to render such key northern economic centres as Kano, Kaduna, Jos, and Maiduguri destitute. They produce neither hard evidence nor rigorous analysis to back up these allegations.

Still, these allegations, viewed against the wider background of a north desperately casting about for answers to its mounting problems, suggests that this vast region and its people realize that they are in the midst of a serious existential crisis. The challenge is to think calmly and rigorously about solutions.

## **V. Conclusion: Engaging Northern Youth, Rethinking Northern Politics**

On the occasion of the 2012 International Youth Day with the theme 'Youth Political Participation: Setting an Agenda for Good Governance and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria' in Abuja on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2012, the Country Representative of the United Nations Development Programme Daouda Toure remarked that Nigerian youth had been deliberately excluded from the political process. Said Toure, 'the youth constitute over 50 percent of the voting population in Nigeria. However, inadequate and deliberate measures to actively engage them in the electoral process have largely hindered their input in the nascent electoral democracy in Nigeria.'<sup>33</sup>

It was the northern segment of these excluded youth that exploded in anger and violence following the presidential election of April 2011. The Adamu Ciroma-led Northern Political Leaders Forum had battled, following the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua in mid 2010, to prevent Goodluck Jonathan from running for an office it felt was still meant for the north for another five years. It failed. But Ciroma and his colleagues failed in a deeper respect – to appreciate the depth of the rage and resentment of a younger generation of northerners who not only believe they have come of age to participate in the affairs of their region and the wider country, but also that leaders who they looked up to to safeguard the interests of the north had failed them. The assault on the homes of the Sultan of Sokoto and the emirs of Kano and Zaria, easily the most revered traditional personages in the region, point to a wider crisis of political leadership and civic responsibility in Nigeria's northern region.

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<sup>33</sup> Oghogho Obayuwana and Collins Olayinka, 'Ban, UNDP want Nigerian youths in leadership,' The Guardian, 10 August, 2012.

This crisis was framed graphically by a young northern scholar whose blog article, 'A People in Terminal Decline' went viral on the internet in February 2012. Wrote Ms. Zainab Usman in the article: 'the most obvious problem is the serious leadership deficit in the north which became magnified before and after the 2011 general elections. There is almost a general consensus that northerners who were at the helm of affairs in the country for several decades did little to better the life of ordinary people in the region in terms of provision of healthcare, education, and other infrastructure...The leaders are seen to have enriched themselves and their cronies while using an adept mixture of religion and ethnicity to keep people subjugated in the shackles of illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and misery.'<sup>34</sup>

It was perhaps in recognition of this leadership vacuum that a flurry of new civic and political organizations began to emerge in the region following the 2011 post-election violence, to complement the work of such organizations as the Arewa Consultative Forum and the Northern States Governors Forum. Apart from the Northern Political Leaders Forum, two other groups have been established. The Coalition of Concerned Northerners is led by Dr. Junaidu Mohammed, a politician from Kano. It has set up ten committees comprised of leading northern politicians, community leaders, academics and journalists to find solutions to the region's myriad social, economic and political problems and also prepare the region in the face of calls by southern politicians for a sovereign national conference to renegotiate the country's political structure. The Northern States Committee on Reconciliation, Healing and Security (NSCRHS) is a larger forum, whose remit, as its name suggests, is to find answers to the violence and insecurity presently afflicting the region.

At the heart of these problems, as already has been noted, is the exclusion of northern youth from a political process that seems to reward only corrupt and sit-tight PDP governors and their coterie of hangers-on including violent militias. There is need to redesign the political system so that it is more inclusive, finding room for energetic youth and their civic concerns. Further, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) needs to work harder to engage northern youth and show that elections are becoming cleaner and more transparent in the country, a major complaint of the youth leaders we spoke to in the course of researching this paper. Third, while there is no doubt that the increasingly impoverished north require additional financial resources to enable it meet its obligations to its teeming inhabitants, greater social investments need to be made in young people to promote active citizenry and develop tolerance to opposing political views. Forth, serious attempts have to be made to reeducate northern

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<sup>34</sup> Zainab Usman, 'A People in Terminal Decline,' <http://www.zainabusman.wordpress.com>. /Accessed 15 November 2012.

youth on the realities of contemporary Nigerian politics. With the end of military rule and the advent of President Obasanjo in 1999, the era of total northern dominance of Nigeria's political affairs has ended. The north will continue to retain significant influence in Nigerian politics given its geographical size and population, but the days when northern politicians and generals took turns in governing the country to the exclusion of political players from other parts of Nigeria are effectively over.

The great challenge of the moment is to work out new terms of northern political and civic leadership in which the pressing issues of economic depression, de-industrialisation and violent Islam driven by mass poverty and religious and political intolerance and creative ways to tackle them is fore-grounded. Northern youth should be assigned an active role in the task of working out the solutions. For instance, youth leaders and their civic organizations should be given specific responsibilities in the process of designing programmes and projects aimed at the social, economic and political regeneration of the north. Their continued exclusion from the region's public affairs benefits no one, and will only make the fire next time more violent and destructive.