

CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION IN NIGERIA

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Recently, it was widely rumored that the Nigerian Department of State Services (DSS) had [invited](#) the Archbishop of the Catholic Sokoto Diocese, Matthew Hassan Kukah, for questioning. This summons followed the Archbishop's comments during his Christmas sermon regarding the government's failure to resolve the country's rampant insecurity.

The president of the Youth Wing of the Christian Association of Nigeria (YOWICAN), Belusochukwu Enwere, has promised to mobilize "Christian youths across the country." Rather than troubling the Archbishop, who "committed no offence," Enwere suggested that government should "channel her energy in the fight to liberate the country from terrorists and bandits." The latter is no small matter. In Zamfara State, two-hundred people were recently murdered, with more being displaced. Enwere went on to contrast the unwarranted interest in Bishop Kukah to the relative impunity with which figures like cleric Ahmad Gumi apparently advocate for accommodating armed "bandits:" YOWICAN quoted Gumi as saying that people can develop "mutual relationship with the bandits without being harmed." Enwere has also accused Gumi of "fraternizing with the bandits," pointing out that, despite this, he has never been invited for questioning by the DSS, unlike the Archbishop.

And yet, for all this, the Director of Social Communication for the Diocese of Sokoto,

Reverend Fr. Christopher Omotosho, has described these rumors as unfounded. The Archbishop, it seems, has not been invited to answer questions after all. The reaction to these rumors, however, and their eminent plausibility, illustrate the degree of polarization in the country, and the desire to mobilize on the part of its Christians. It belies real dangers, and real tensions.

Persons critical of the current Nigerian administration have, indeed, been invited for questioning by the DSS in the past, with the Youth Wing of the Southern Kaduna People's Union (SOKAPU), suggesting a link between such invitations of government critics and their subsequent deaths, as in the case of Dr. Obadiah Mailafia.

Bishop Kukah would be a likely target, given that his Christmas sermon was not the first time he publicly criticized the President of Nigeria, Major-General Muhammad Buhari. In July of last year, the Bishop was invited to attend (albeit virtually) a session with U.S. lawmakers, where he said the following:

[R]eligious freedom for minorities in northern Nigeria has been an issue of very serious concern ... the feeling among the predominant segment of the Muslim population has been a need to insert or assert the supremacy of Islamic law ... Muslim militants have absolutely no qualms with the destruction of Christian churches at the slightest provocation ... [After] the killing of Osama bin Laden, for example, a significant part of Muslim extremists reacted ... by venting out their anger on the destruction of churches and so on ... events in the Northeast with the coming of Boko Haram have simply raised the stakes ... We have always ... taken Jesus' instructions very seriously that he has come that we may have life and have it to the full ... We have tried to reach out to let government understand our willingness and commitment to work towards the greatness of our country.

And crucially,

What is significant about the situation in Nigeria is that we are in a democracy, albeit very weak ... things have just unraveled in the last five or six years since the coming to power of General Buhari. He didn't make Boko Haram happen but the fact is that today the Northwest and North Central and literally the length and breadth of Nigeria have been invaded by bandits, herdsmen and killers of all kinds of people who have come from God-knows-where. And the fact is that the government just seems to be either helpless or almost uninterested in dealing decisively with these people ... the President has blatantly pursued ... policies that show a very clear preference for men and women of his faith. The entire security outfit now is in the hands of Muslims. The Chief Justice of Nigeria who was a Christian was replaced under very dubious circumstances. In the National Assembly ... for the first time in the history of our country ... the Senate President is a Muslim, the Speaker of the House is a Muslim, the deputy Speaker is a Muslim, the majority leader is a Muslim and these are all fine gentlemen but ... the point is that the level of anxiety amongst us as Christians and Muslims has been exacerbated. (Italics added)

Provocative words indeed, and to U.S. lawmakers, no less. The Bishop finished by pointing out that Hungary has provided real help, before turning to what the U.S. can do, namely get USAID to work with church organizations in promoting education in Nigeria, “because the only way we can fight Boko Haram is through education.”

Certainly, drawing negative attention to the government in so international and public a forum would not have endeared Bishop Kukah to President Buhari. We may be grateful that the latter's attempts to silence opposition voices occur, at present, through “invitations” that can, in theory, be rebuffed, at least for a time.

We should contextualize Bishop Kukah's speech. The fact that government ire should fall upon Christian critics, or that there should be a high proportion of critics who are Christian, bears further explaining. It seems an uneasy peace has been struck in Nigeria,

and the government is accommodating armed bands in that northwest corner of the country which, until recently, was a Boko Haram stomping ground.

This group's allegiance to ISIS caused a split, resulting in one faction retaining the old name (which means Western ways, *Boko*, are prohibited, *Haram*) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). With the fall from prominence of ISIS and its African spinoffs, however, Nigeria saw the rise of what have been described as "bandits" following a similar pattern of targeting Christians.

Commenting on the current, post-Boko Haram situation in the mid-western state of Benue, Bishop Wilfred Anagbe, of the diocese of Makurdi, has referred to attacks on Christian farmers by armed Muslim herders as a religious war:

It is not just about issues of grazing. For me, this is a religious war ... They have an agenda, which is the Islamisation of this country. And they are doing that by carefully eliminating all the Christians and occupying the territories. If it was about grazing, why kill people? And why burn their homes?

This agenda would ultimately be that of the state, which the Bishop sees as excluding Christians: "all the service chiefs, from the navy, army, air force and police are Muslims," the beginnings of which Bishop Kukah warned of in his speech.

The spiritual imperative to resist religiously motivated violence comes through in the words of Fr. Oliver Dashe Doeme, Bishop of Maiduguri, a city in Borno, the one-time stronghold of Boko Haram. Bishop Doeme has [urged](#) the faithful to pray the Rosary for the terrorist group's end. He reports a vision in which Jesus appeared to him, holding a sword. As the bishop reached for it, the sword became a rosary in his hand, and he thrice heard the words "Boko Haram is gone" pronounced by Christ. The result were Rosary crusades organized throughout the region. Currently, Maiduguri hosts over one million internally-

displaced persons, many of whom depend entirely on humanitarian aid and services provided by the Church.

And it is not only Christians who bear the brunt of the violence. The situation can be described as one of *ethnic* cleansing, albeit this is often an overlooked factor, with a clear precedent in Boko Haram. As Kirk Ross emphasizes, [writing](#) in 2015:

Perhaps because of the passionate use by Abubakar Shekau—Boko Haram’s leader—of anti-colonial, anti-Western, anti-secular, and jihadist rhetoric, observers have paid a great deal of attention to the insurgency’s sectarian dimensions—Boko Haram’s attacks on Christians and so-called apostate Muslims. A comprehensive examination of Boko Haram’s attacks, however, reveals that inordinately, ethnic minority groups, regardless of their religious affiliation, are Boko Haram’s most common target. (Italics added)

Most Boko Haram members, it seems, were of Kanuri origin, whereas,

Overwhelmingly, the majority of attacks carried out by Boko Haram in [the northwestern state of] Borno and on its borders have been carried out in areas inhabited by small ethnic minority groups ... with relatively few attacks carried out in areas populated by the Kanuri. An analysis of more than 200 Boko Haram attacks in Borno from 14 May 2013 ... to 31 August 2014 suggests that ethnicity—non-Kanuri ethnicity—rather than religion, is the dominant characteristic identifying Boko Haram’s victims.

The prelate of the Methodist Church of Nigeria, Samuel Uche, also [identified](#) Boko Haram

with ethnically motivated Kanuri and Fulani aspirations. The situation is not so different in neighboring countries, where Islamist groups have seen their ranks composed largely by Fulani men, to the point that some have spoken of a “Fulani Jihad.” This has led to attacks on innocent Fulani. It seems, however, that the incentive to join Islamic groups has been largely economic, with a period of cattle epidemic and onerous government fees leaving many Fulani in a financially desperate situation. The ethnic dimension is such that Fulani membership in the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa was spurred by a need to defend themselves against the fellow Muslims of the Tuareg Azawad National Liberation Movement in Mali.

The director of the Denis Hurley Peace Institute of South Africa, Johan Viljoen, describes the situation as a “concerted, well-planned occupation. This is all happening under the cover of Miyetti Allah, of which President Buhari is the patron,” Miyetti Allah being an organization whose purpose is ostensibly to defend the rights of Fulani herdsmen. Viljoen goes on: “I don’t think the army is trying to solve anything. If anything, they would try to promote it.”

Fr. Joseph Fidelis describes developments as follows:

It is not a clash, it is a slow genocide. To displace people from their ancestral homeland, deprive them of their livelihood and butcher them is a form of genocide.

The situation is similar to that of Salafist terrorism in the near east (the highly cosmopolitan nature of ISIS notwithstanding), in that the latter worked to render regions composed of anciently entrenched communities *legible*, to homogenize them culturally and religiously, from kidnapping Yazidi women to causing Christians to flee in large numbers. Caliphal aspirations aside, for those governing in the wake of such violence, there is an obvious political advantage to be gained from having eliminated local identities and established the hegemony of one’s “voter-block,” so to speak. Indeed, such a project can

be advanced precisely through economic failure, as we saw in the case of impoverished Fulani herdsmen, and so can be used to postpone genuine political solutions.

Rather than a conclusion, however, we should end on the following: the numbers of Nigeria's dead and displaced on account of this violence vary widely, but in October of last year, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN International) was [reporting](#) anywhere between 3,000 and 36,000 people had been murdered.