

Nigeria edges towards civil war

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Following last week's violent clashes between Muslim and Christian gangs in Nigeria's northern towns, this week saw a further round of bloodletting in the southeast of the country. In what were described as revenge killings, youth from the Igbo tribal group attacked the minority Hausa population in the city of Aba. As many as 450 people were killed, with reports of bodies strewn along the road from Aba to Port Harcourt, as fleeing motorists were pulled out of their cars and hacked to death. Other bodies lay around the main market and the burnt-out mosque. Riots were also said to have started after funeral processions were held for Igbos killed in the northern clashes.

Hausa people come from the predominantly Muslim north of Nigeria, where plans to introduce strict Islamic Sharia law in the state of Kaduna sparked off the ethnic violence. Some of the Christians attacked in Kaduna were reported to be Igbo traders. It was attacks on minority Igbos in the north that led to the predominantly Igbo southeastern region forming the breakaway state of Biafra in the civil war of 1966-70.

On February 28, President Olusegun Obasanjo convened a Council of State including the governors of all of Nigeria's 36 states to discuss the mounting ethnic tensions. The governors from the northern states apparently agreed to suspend Sharia law—including in Zamfara state, where it has already been introduced, and in others such as Niger, Sokoto and Kebbi where legislation has been passed to bring it in. Whilst Zamfara is overwhelmingly Muslim, the other states contain many Christians, and in Kaduna there are equal proportions of Christians and Muslims. The vice president of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar, standing alongside the northern governors, announced to reporters that “we will return to the status quo ante”.

But after their return to the north, the governors of Zamfara, Sokoto and Kebbi agreed on March 1 to ignore the decision and continue with the

implementation of the Sharia laws. The governor of Zamfara, Ahmed Sani, made a radio broadcast in which he made no mention of the Council of State decision. It is not clear what position the governor of Kano, the major city in the north, will take. Thousands of Igbos are reported to be fleeing Kano and returning to the east, with expectations of violent clashes after the Council of State's decision. There are also fears of a repeat of the Kaduna clashes in the towns of Ilorin, Bauchi and Jos.

Obasanjo visited the Kaduna area, where he spent much of his adult life. He is reported to have broken down and wept, saying, “Are you people sure this is Kaduna? Can this be Nigeria?” Obasanjo later made a speech to the nation on March 1 appealing for calm, announcing that “law enforcement agents have been instructed to deal decisively with anyone or group who disturbs peace or order”. He was granted powers by the Nigerian Senate to impose a state of emergency on any area where it was deemed necessary. He also apologised to foreign investors, whom he fears will be put off by the clashes.

Up to 2,000 people have been killed over the last 10 days of violence. This includes more than 1,000 in Kaduna and 65 people in the neighbouring town of Kachia. A British reporter for the BBC who got to Kaduna over a week after the conflict reported that bodies were still lying in the streets. He reported the local hospital's inability to cope with all the casualties—it has run out of antibiotics, bandages and drips.

Whole areas of the city have been burnt down, and people are still fleeing the area. The army is on patrol, increasing fears that it will take repressive measures. After clashes in Odi, in Bayelsa state, last November, the army massacred hundreds of defenceless people in the town.

As well as the riot in Aba there are reports of tensions

in the neighbouring city of Owerri and the market town of Onitsha. Other reports refer to sporadic violence in the southeastern cities of Umuahia and Uyo. In Aba the police have apparently abandoned control of the city.

The day after the clashes, the Nigerian newspaper *PM News* reported that the streets were being patrolled by youths armed with knives, cutlasses and clubs. They were searching for vehicles containing Hausa Muslims in order to kill them. *PM News* said they were unable to take photographs, as a television cameraman who attempted to cover the issue was severely beaten.

There is now every likelihood that Muslim politicians in the north as well as separatist agitators in the south and east will whip up more violence. Another potential source of conflict will come from a court case being pursued by a human rights group regarding the constitutional validity of Sharia law. It will commence on March 9 at Gusau, the capital of Zamfara.

A report in the Nigerian newspaper *Tempo* gave some information on the political and business influences behind the move to adopt Sharia laws in Kaduna. Muslim youths have been allegedly armed by Alhaji Ahmadu Chanchanghi, a wealthy owner of a transport business and an airline. Rioting youths were also said to be mobilised by Alhaji Sule Baba, a former minister of state in the region.

Because the present Sultan of Sokoto, the supreme head of Muslims in Nigeria, is opposed to the introduction of Sharia law, the wealthy deposed Sultan Alhaji Ibrahim Dasuki is said to be providing huge funds to back the pro-Sharia movement. He placed an advert in a local newspaper thanking the governor of Zamfara, Ahmed Sani, for being “bold enough to proclaim the Islamic legal system”.

Tempo also reports that the former military rulers General Ibrahim Babangida and Abdulsalami Abubakar are channelling funds into pro-Sharia groupings. As well as the whipping up of Muslim gangs, *Tempo* said that Igbo leaders in the area had held a meeting with former Biafran leader, Chief Odumegwu Ojukwu. Igbo youths had been arming themselves for some time before the eruption of violence.

Nigeria faces growing youth unemployment and alienation from the national political leadership, which is largely associated with the years of military dictatorship and repression. Regional political groupings have increasingly introduced religious and

tribalist demagoguery in pursuing their separatist agendas. Obasanjo's pro-IMF policies, his financial restraints and drive to attract Western investment have only inflamed their ambitions. All this is combining to create the conditions where a drift into civil war is entirely possible.



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