Violence increases as Nigerian elections approach

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The four leading candidates in the election are all generals, whose differences centre on which section of the Nigerian establishment they favour. The harsh social problems in Nigeria are not being discussed since none of the candidates have any solutions. At a recent debate amongst the 19 candidates for the presidency, the speakers largely agreed that the way to deal with the increasing violence was to strengthen the police and other agencies of the state. There were only a few token phrases on the need to "eradicate poverty", and no specific policies on this were put forward.

The main sources of these social problems are the external exploitation by Western banks and businesses, together with the internal exploitation of the vast majority—who survive on one dollar a day or less—by the narrow layer who benefit from the sale of oil.

A paper published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in July 2002, entitled "Poverty in a wealthy economy: the case of Nigeria" [1] details the growing gap between the rich and poor during the years 1985 to 1992. Its introduction states that "The benefits of government and foreign investment have only reached a relatively narrow strata of the population, while the majority of the people have not benefited from higher productivity or increased real wages."

The paper shows that:

* Average spending in non-poor households was four to five times as much as in poor households, despite the latter having more children.

* Rural households were significantly poorer than urban households.

* Between 1985 and 1992, poverty was most prevalent in the north of Nigeria and less so in the south.

Since 1992, conditions have grown worse for the majority of Nigerians. Real incomes have fallen consistently, and diseases such as AIDS and malaria have spread. Around five percent of Nigerians now suffer from AIDS. Malaria kills around 800,000 Nigerian children every year, and is the cause of death for 20 to 30 percent of children who die under one year of age. Nigerian hospitals are in an advanced stage of decay.

The conditions of poverty, underdevelopment and disease, together with the growing use of religious and ethnic divisions to divert attention from these problems, are giving rise to a vicious circle of attack and counterattack throughout the whole of Nigeria.

During one weekend at the beginning of March, more than 100 people, including 10 policemen and a soldier, were killed in clashes between nomadic Fulani cattle-herders and settled farmers of the Yungar ethnic group, in Adamawa state, in the east of Nigeria. A team from the Red Cross went to the area to assess the effects of the clashes. They estimate 110 dead, 500 injured and 21,000 people displaced from their homes.

The BBC quoted the police as saying this was the "latest round of a tit-for-tat battle that's been escalating for months", in which "the Fulani attacked the Yungar settlement of Dumne, burning houses and killing men, women and children." In September and December 2002 the Fulani were reported to have suffered heavy losses during attacks upon them.

This is the worst outbreak of communal violence this year. More recently, similar clashes have occurred in Plateau State in central Nigeria with more than 30 killed and some communities cut off for days at a time. The Reuters report on the violence, dated March 12, stated that "mostly Christian and animist farmers jostle for land with nomadic herdsmen, most of them Muslim. Their rivalry has been fuelled by political differences." It is likely that the US declaration of a "war against terrorism" and the targeting of Muslims have played a part in escalating the violence.

Communal and religious clashes have cost well over 10,000 lives since President Obasanjo came to power in February 1999 and the situation is deteriorating all the time.

The upcoming elections are the occasion for several factions of the Nigerian elite to promote their chances of election and access to the country's huge oil wealth by spreading ethnic and religious hatred amongst the people in

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their own power base. One of the four generals standing in the election, Emeka Ojukwu, of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA)—former leader of the breakaway state of Biafra in the east of Nigeria—spoke only in Ibo at a recent rally, in contrast to other speakers who used English. Many of the candidates use implicit or explicit signals to show their intention to favour some at the expense of others.

A recent report by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) [2] details both the murderous activities of the Yoruba nationalist party, the OPC (Oodua People's Congress) in the south of Nigeria, and the way these activities are used by the state forces to justify repression against the whole populace. In a section of the report entitled "Human rights violations against real or suspected OPC members," the report states, "Since the government of President Obasanjo came to power in May 1999, hundreds and perhaps thousands of people in Nigeria have been arbitrarily arrested, detained without charge or trial, ill-treated, tortured, or extrajudicially executed by the police. Among them were many OPC members, including some of their leaders, but also other individuals wrongly presumed to be OPC members."

In the north, the issue of Sharia law is being used to deepen the divide between Moslems and non-Moslems.

If the elections do take place, they will be the first civilian transfer of power in Nigeria's post-independence history. But events are proving that the elections will be anything but free, fair and democratic. In Nigeria, as in many African countries, the facade of democracy is impossible to maintain when the whole fabric of society is so close to breakdown.

In addition to the whipping up of ethnic tensions, an increasing number of political assassinations are now occurring, the most recent being that of All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) National Vice Chairman Dr Marshall Harry. Harry was the third politician to be killed within one month. As a leading figure in the party that is likely to mount the most serious challenge to Obasanjo in the upcoming elections, Harry's death has major political implications. He left the ruling PDP last year and had been organising the campaign of the ANPP presidential candidate, former military ruler Muhammadu Buhari. With the backing of Harry's supporters in the oil producing Rivers State, it was thought that Buhari stood a good chance of gaining control of this economically vital region.

ANPP politicians blamed the killing on Obasanjo and made thinly veiled threats of retaliation. Obasanjo denied that the murder was political and paid tribute to Marshall, calling him "our friend and until recently a staunch member of our party".

The assassination is reported to have happened the day after he sent a letter of complaint to the Inspector-General of Police charging that Peter Odili, the PDP governor of Rivers State, had been stockpiling arms and training gangs of thugs. In the letter, Harry had accused Odili of trying to stop ANPP supporters from launching their election campaign in the Rivers State's capital, Port Harcourt, saying, "Since we started preparation for the presidential campaign flag-off, we have noticed a high spate of arrest, intimidation, harassment and maiming of our party officials, candidates and supporters."

The Inspector-General of Police, Mr. Tafa Balogun denied receiving the letter.

Obasanjo's administration is using the current violence to argue for increasing the powers of the army and police. The Director General of the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Tonnie Iredia, condemned the violence and assassinations, and warned that it was "an invitation to the military", a reference to a danger of a military coup.

[1] "Poverty in a wealthy economy: the case of Nigeria" IMF Working Paper by S. Thomas and S. Canagarajah, July 2002. Available at http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2002/wp02114.pdf

[2] "The O'odua People's Congress: Fighting Violence with Violence" HRW Publication, Vol. 15, No. 4 (A), February 2003. Available at http://hrw.org/reports/2003/nigeria0203/

See Also:

Nigeria: Death toll from inter-communal violence mounts [29 November 2002]

http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/nov2002/nige-n29.shtml

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