

Hundreds die as factions struggle for power in Nigeria

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As many as 500 people may have died in the latest round of communal violence in Nigeria's Plateau State. The sharpening tensions in the region reflect the political vacuum that has been created by the prolonged illness of President Umaru Yar'Adua. Rival factions are vying for power and are using communal violence to this end.

Plateau State is a microcosm of Nigeria and shares the mixture of ethnic, religious and tribal groups found in the rest of the country. It serves as a barometer of the political pressure that is building up on a national scale. The antagonisms that broke out in the villages around the Plateau capital Jos are expressed in more covert forms in the relations between antagonistic sections of the ruling elite in Abuja.

The faction around First Lady Turai Yar'Adua is struggling to maintain its grip on power. Her power base is in Katsina State, where her husband served two terms as governor before becoming president. In February, President Yar'Adua returned suddenly from a three-month absence in Saudi Arabia where he was undergoing medical treatment for a heart condition and kidney failure. He has not been seen in public since, and even top officials have not been allowed to see him. His precipitate return seems to have been in response to the Senate declaring Vice-President Goodluck Jonathan acting president. Since his return, Yar'Adua's faction has succeeded in getting the state governors to block a vote calling for his resignation on health grounds.

The conflict between Yar'Adua's northern faction and that of Jonathan from the south is a legacy of British colonial rule, when Muslims from the north were recruited as soldiers and used to destroy the states that existed in what is now southern Nigeria. After independence in 1960, the military elite created by the British came to dominate the new country. With the discovery of oil, they enriched themselves by plundering

the state's revenue and built up a network of patronage through which they have exercised power ever since.

During the Cold War, the United States was willing to countenance military dictatorships that remained loyal to the West. But since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, successive US administrations have attempted to limit the share of oil profits going to the Nigerian elite. Since President Barack Obama came to power, the US has felt free to intervene publicly in the internal affairs of Nigeria. Obama pointedly snubbed Nigeria by not visiting Africa's most populous nation and second largest economy on his first trip to Africa as president.

The State Department has kept up a barrage of public statements about Nigeria. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson warned, "We hope that President Yar'Adua's return to Nigeria is not an effort by his senior advisers to upset Nigeria's stability and create renewed uncertainty in the democratic process."

Following the recent massacres, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted, "The Nigerian government should ensure that the perpetrators of acts of violence are brought to justice under the rule of law, and that human rights are respected as order is restored."

This was the latest in a series of statements from Clinton criticising the Yar'Adua government. The failed attempt of Nigerian student Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to blow up a plane over Detroit has been the occasion for a serious deterioration of relations between the US and Nigeria. Clinton took the opportunity of a massacre of Muslims in Jos earlier this year to blame the Nigerian government for the radicalisation of youth. The latest massacre of Christians seems to be in retaliation for that earlier incident and she has used it to criticise the government.

The growing intercommunal violence allows Clinton to intervene directly in the factional struggle within the Nigerian elite to which she and her husband have close ties. Bill Clinton's charitable foundation has received

donations from Gilbert Chagoury, a Nigerian businessman who was an associate of the military dictator Sani Abacha. Other members of the Chagoury family helped finance Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign.

Britain, the former colonial power, has loyally supported US policy in Nigeria. High Commissioner Bob Dewar called for "clarification on leadership" when Yar'Adua returned to Nigeria. He stressed the need to avoid "uncertainty" and that it was "important at this time to avoid any political or constitutional confusion that could put at risk the integrity and transparency needed in the conduct of public affairs."

Britain and the US are said to be considering putting sanctions on leading Nigerian figures close to Yar'Adua. Nigeria has a strategic significance because of its vast oil reserves and its role as the West African regional hegemon.

As China develops ever more extensive interests in Africa, the US risks losing its once undisputed hold over the Nigerian elite. The latest manifestation of China's penetration came in February with the privatisation of the state-owned telecoms company, NITEL. The company was sold to the New Generation Telecoms Company, a consortium that includes Hong Kong-based China Unicom. The Chinese company initially denied taking part in the auction, but later admitted that its European subsidiary was involved in the bid. Vice-President Jonathan has ordered an investigation into the sale and has suspended the head of the Bureau for Public Enterprises.

Control of telecommunications will prove vital to the further development of Nigeria's offshore oil industry. Some 140 new platforms for deep-water exploration are to be delivered this year. The move into previously unexploited deep-water fields is in part the result of the more easily accessible resources being depleted. But it is also a response to the continuing popular opposition to the oil companies in the Niger Delta. Deep-water platforms are regarded as less open to the kidnapping of foreign oil-workers, which has been a recurrent problem for the industry. Despite the move to deeper waters, the oil companies expect to use the port of Lagos as a hub for the growing oil industry and are dissatisfied with government attempts to suppress opposition. They are also concerned that the draft Petroleum Industries Bill would increase the cost of their operations in Nigeria.

Clinton's repeated interventions into Nigerian domestic politics are an expression of the urgent desire of the oil companies to restructure the government along lines that will ensure they maximise their profits. Last year,

Yar'Adua received a letter from the Chinese state-owned oil company CNOOC expressing an interest in the 23 prime offshore fields where Shell, Total, Chevron and ExxonMobil currently operate. He rejected China's initial bid, but, when the letter was leaked to the press, confirmed that negotiations were ongoing. China has already signed oil deals with Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo. If the Nigerian deal were to go through, it would double China's oil reserves in sub-Saharan Africa and mark a significant change in policy for the Nigerian government.

The population of Nigeria are the victims of the heightened factional conflicts within the ruling elite. The poverty in which most live in this resource-rich country creates an environment in which one community can be turned against another. Only 1 percent of the population benefit from oil revenues, according to World Bank figures. Some 92 percent of the population live on less than \$2 a day and more than 70 percent on less than \$1. The United Nations estimates that the poverty rate rose from 46 percent in 1996 to 76 percent in 2009. Many of the northern states have worse human development indices than any region that is not at war. Nigeria has the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world. Approximately 2 percent of the world's population live in Nigeria, but 10 percent of maternal deaths occur there. One in five children dies before the age of five.



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