

## Book review

# *Overcoming Boko Haram: Faith, Society & Islamic Radicalization in Northern Nigeria*

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu and Kate Meagher eds. 2020

*New York and Oxford, James Currey; Abuja, Premium Times Books. 335 pp.*  
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In March 2020, yet another book on Boko Haram appeared in print. Under the title *Overcoming Boko Haram: Faith, Society & Islamic Radicalization in Northern Nigeria*, this work was posthumously edited and published by Kate Meagher, three years after the untimely death of Raufu Mustapha in 2017. While this new publication conjures up an image of what Meagher has described as ‘the deluge of 25 books on Boko Haram since 2014’, and an opinion of an over-researched area, a comparative closer examination of the texts reveals a different picture.

In this edition, the third in a series of well-researched and -argued research projects, one finds incisive insights into the deeply complex questions:

who is Boko Haram; why do they emerge in Borno state, and therefore, what new pathways can be developed to confront and reverse Islamic radicalisation? In attempting to answer this series of questions, this book is the outcome of a project of Mustapha's Oxford-based, Nigeria Research Network. The research contract for this project was awarded in 2013 by the Nigerian Security and Reconciliation Program (NSRP) that is overseen by the National Security Adviser in the Nigerian Presidency. The project was funded by the British Department for International Development (DFID), an organisation concerned with eradicating extreme poverty in global areas, especially those most affected. The request was for Mustapha to undertake evidence-based research on why Islamic radicalisation had taken root in Borno state, for the purpose of informing key policy makers who were required to adopt an alternative 'soft approach' to the default and often preferred military option for countering terrorism. The strength of his selection for the project lay in his previous works before his untimely death in 2017. He had researched and published edited versions in the genre of policy focussed reports, *Sects of Social Disorder: Muslim Identities & Conflict in Northern Nigeria* (2014) and *Creed & Grievance: Muslim Christian Relations & Conflict Resolution in Northern Nigeria* (2018). This last one (reviewed in Vol. 18, No. 1 of our journal) was cast in the mould of the renowned *Greed and Grievance in Civil War* by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2000) (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 2355).

*Overcoming Boko Haram ...* is organised in three broad themes, beginning with investigating the Macro-Social Context, followed by the more community focussed Micro-Social Relations, and finally, the Way Forward. The three parts contain 11 Chapters by different authors. The key messages emerging from Part I include: isolating and defining the role played by the teachers, the *Ulamas* – Islamic scholars in charge of the youths in the madrassas. They have been found to be the initial agents of radicalisation in contemporary Nigeria, 'sharing their opinions stretching over decades related to constructs of Muslim victimhood' (p. 36), which then delineate, in the minds of the young people, Muslim individual and collective religious identities, and tensions with other religions. Part II answers

the question, why Borno state? This articulates the history, geography and sociology of the former Kanem-Bornu Empire which straddled the current sub-region stretching from Libya in the north, through Niger and Chad, to parts of Nigeria and Cameroon in the south. The modern Borno state, although the largest, is the least developed of all Nigeria's 36 states, lacking infrastructure investment and any meaningful post-colonial state attention. Instead of developing Borno state, however, the federal state only sends armed elements to pay occasional visits when law and order breaks down and violently re-asserts the status quo through brutal repression, e.g. the events of 2002. Researchers argue that by 2011 over 60 000 people had been killed, which laid a foundation for the sub-regional pathways to radicalism. According to the findings, the *Ulamas* are inculcating 'perspectives of injustice and feelings of relative deprivation' (p. 37) in the youth as a legacy to Borno state for the present and the future.

Finally, in responding to the central question of coming up with appropriate policy options, the book suggests a 'whole of society approach'. This would, on the one hand, critique the flaws and limitations of liberalism, a concept that ignores international and structural corruption as it relates to the common people and the community. On the other hand, it would advocate for approaches that embrace indigenous political inclusion. In other words, it would promote long-term socio-economic approaches in which the local population are invited to play decisive roles in creating and upholding solutions.

Given the broad thrust of the research on faith, society and Islamic radicalisation in Northern Nigeria and its recommendations, the most apt commentary is contained in the foreword, provided by the erudite Islamic devotee, scholar, bureaucrat and cultural leader, former Emir of Kano, Muhammad Sanusi Lamido II (June 2014-March 2020) and former Governor of the Nigerian Central Bank (2009-2014). In his view, the work by Mustapha and colleagues has arrived at the correct conclusion, arguing that Boko Haram is a product of the social conditions and the Salafi interpretation of the Qur'an according to which political action may be (mis)appropriated as a legitimate tool. In Sanusi's view, the violence that

ensued in Northern Nigeria is therefore the result of the failure of the state to equitably provide inclusion and services while, instead, it responded with violence in order to maintain the status quo. Given his experience as a former banker and faith-based Emir and cultural leader, Sanusi also argues for a broad-based socio-economic approach towards gradually addressing the scepticism and historical misperceptions and moving towards the psychological and economic reintegration of Nigeria's current neglected 36<sup>th</sup> state.

Amongst the many books that have been written on the history, evolution and the Islamic radicalisation characteristics of Boko Haram, this one, given its ground breaking methodology of engaging with communities and the *Ulamas* in Borno state, stands head and shoulders above most of the others. It occupies a strong position in the genre of well-researched policy papers, and its academic rigour is sufficiently robust to have propelled it towards publication in book form. Consequently, the book represents a must read for policy makers, the media and other players concerned with finding lasting solutions. Innovative means of de-radicalisation, including application of the whole-of-society approach, will create the substantive conditions for a sustainable peace.