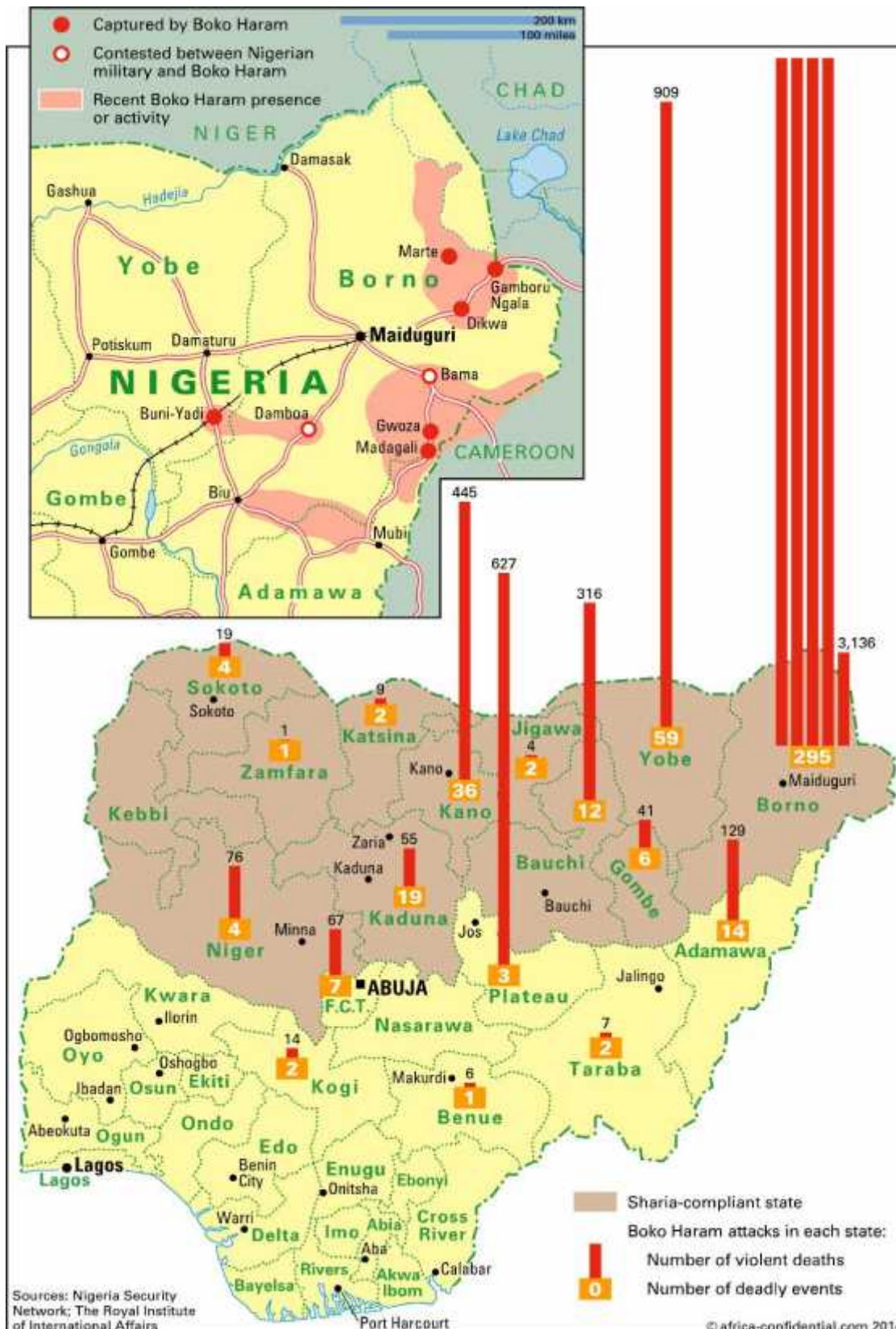


NIGERIA -How terror twists the vote

Accusations that a former state governor and army chief have been sponsoring the Islamist insurgents have fired up the election campaign

12th September 2014

Almost in concert with the political parties' calendar for choosing their presidential candidates, the *Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah Lidda'awati wal Jihad*, widely known as *Boko Haram*, is stepping up its military campaign in the north-east and threatening to disrupt next February's elections. Politicians have vacillated between trying to ignore *Boko Haram's* Islamist insurgency and using it against their rivals. With *Boko Haram* fighters seizing several towns and villages in north-east Nigeria and credibly threatening to attack Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, it is clear that the insurgency will be a critical electoral issue.



But it is less obvious which party will win the argument. The governing People's Democratic Party (PDP) claims the opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) is sympathetic towards, if not actively supportive of, *Boko Haram*. In turn, the APC accuses the PDP

government and President [Goodluck Jonathan](#) of serial incompetence and disregard for northern Nigerians.

Most of that seems to wash over [Abubakar Shekau](#), the public face of the *Boko Haram* leadership, whose video addresses make much of his detestation for democracy, which he views as 'worse than sodomy'. Shekau spews his contempt for politicians fairly evenly between the rival parties, but seems to reserve the harshest abuse for northern politicians of any stripe. Indeed, an attempt to set a car bomb near [Muhammadu Buhari](#), the APC's probable presidential candidate, in Kaduna in July, was blamed on *Boko Haram*.

Without doubt, General (retired) Buhari, a devout Muslim who didn't grossly enrich himself when he was military head of state, remains one of the most popular politicians in northern Nigeria. And his condemnation of *Boko Haram* as a 'bunch of criminals' has a particular resonance with the *talakawa* (common people) in the north. His opponents, however, have capitalised on his image as an extremist in the more prosperous southern states. In a paper for the **British Conservative Party's** Bow Group, **Jacob Zenn**, an **American** academic writing a book on *Boko Haram*, describes the APC as 'an Islamist-leaning party'.

Political gain

He adds that its 'likely presidential and vice-presidential candidates, [Muhammadu Buhari](#) and [Bola Ahmed Tinubu](#), would constitute what many Nigerians consider to be a pro-*Sharia* Law 'Muslim-Muslim'. Such interpretations were strongly rejected by the **Lai Mohammed**, the APC's National Publicity Secretary, at a meeting at Britain's Parliament on 8 September where he argued the Jonathan government was exploiting the insurgency for political gain.

Balancing the Islamist barbs against the APC is the widespread dismay with the government's failure to contain, let alone, defeat *Boko Haram*, as well as concern for the fate of the more than 250 schoolgirls abducted from Chibok in April. Cackhanded attempts by the government in Abuja to undermine the #bringbackourgirls campaign led by former Education Minister **Oby Ezekwesili** have backfired. A particularly crass idea – to launch a

#bringbackGoodluckin2015 campaign to fire up support for a second term for Jonathan – was hastily abandoned on 11 September in the face of public protests.

The latest furore follows accusations from **Stephen Davis**, an **Australian** security consultant, that **Ali Modu Sheriff**, a former governor of Borno State, and Lieutenant General **Azubuike Ihejirika**, a former Chief of Army Staff, were sponsors of *Boko Haram*.

Davis, who has worked for several years with Royal Dutch Shell and with former President [Olusegun Obasanjo](#) and Britain's Coventry Cathedral on a peace initiative in the Niger Delta, knows Nigeria well. He says he was in contact with senior commanders in *Boko Haram* in efforts to negotiate the release of the abducted schoolgirls. Such accusations against Sheriff are helpful for the opposition because he recently defected to the PDP from the APC, which had subsumed his old party, the All Nigeria People's Party.

Ignoring the clamour, Jonathan's office released a photograph showing Sheriff sitting alongside Jonathan and **Chadian** President **Idris Déby Itno** at the Presidential Palace in Ndjamena on 8 September. As criticism mounted, the security services announced that they would be interviewing Sheriff.

But the State Security Services Spokeswoman **Marilyn Ogar** vigorously rejected the accusations against Ihejirika, a Christian from the south-east, whom she described as being at the forefront of the struggle against *Boko Haram*. Critics of the military argue that Ihejirika should be interrogated as part of a wider probe into the military's management of the security budget, averaging over US\$6 billion a year for the past four years, which has swelled in line with the deepening security crisis in north-east Nigeria.

The Maiduguri-based Seventh Division, which was formed specially to fight the insurgency, is the least well equipped and trained in the country. Last month Amnesty International published a raft of allegations of human rights abuses by government soldiers in the north-east as well as detailing atrocities meted out on women and children by *Boko Haram*.

Abuja has repeatedly dismissed such critiques of its soldiers, but local security experts are puzzled at the High Command's reluctance to use the First Division in Kaduna, the best equipped in the country, against the insurgents. A commonly held view in the north is that the government is unconcerned about the weakening of the army as its focus is mainly on securing the oil and gas reserves in the south where security is now partly in the hands of former militia leaders from the Niger Delta.

Sheriff's associations with *Boko Haram* go back to his time as Governor of Borno State and he had promised to impose *Sharia* law, with *huddud* punishments (amputations and stonings) throughout the state but failed to deliver. His Commissioner for Religious Affairs, **Buji Foi**, was widely seen as close to *Boko Haram* and was arrested during the police crackdown on the group in 2009 during which its founder, **Mohammed Yusuf** was killed. Foi also died in police custody.

A senior APC official told *Africa Confidential* that he had a credible eye-witness account of Sheriff's continuing links to *Boko Haram* and its abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls. He said that the security services had shown no interest in interviewing any of the schoolgirls who has escaped from the insurgents' camp in the Sambisa Forest, so he had little faith in a thorough investigation of the claims against Sheriff.

Whichever party gains the advantage in arguments over *Boko Haram*, the insurgency has entered a more destabilising phase with its fighters controlling territory and local resources. Should it be able to consolidate control in the north-east and continue with attacks elsewhere in the country, the question of who will fight and win the elections could become increasingly irrelevant.