

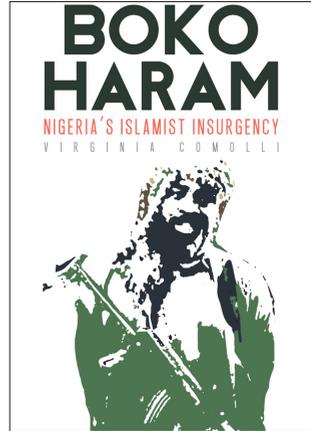
# REVIEW ARTICLE / OORSIGARTIKEL

## HOW NIGERIA'S ISLAMIST INSURGENCY BECAME THE WORLD'S DEADLIEST TERRORIST GROUP

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/jch.v4i1.10>

**V Comoli**, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist insurgency*. London: Hurst & Company, 2015. ISBN 978-1-84904-491-2. 239 pages (inclusive of index)

Towards the end of 2015, the Institute for Economics and Peace released its annual Global Terrorism Index (GTI), which attempts to demonstrate and measure the impact of terrorism on global peace. Contrary to expectations that the Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), would dominate the charts as the world's fiercest and deadliest terrorist group, the 2015 GTI report shocked its readers when it ranked Boko Haram at the top of world's deadliest terrorist groups in 2014, accounting for more than 6 600 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Boko Haram, a colloquial name from Hausa and Arabic words, which mean, "Western education is sin", pledged allegiance to IS in March 2015. As an IS affiliate, it adopted the name "Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP)", abandoning its official birth name *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati wal-Jihad* (loosely translated as the Group for the propagation of the Prophet's teachings and jihad). Statistics and GTI ranking are an indication, but hardly reflects the whole picture of Boko Haram's horror and its atrocities in Nigeria and the surrounding countries which reached their peak in 2014.



For an African group to feature at the top of the GTI chart is a clear indication of how fast and how deep the phenomenon has affected the continent. The story of Boko Haram raises questions around why a group, that has for long existed in obscurity, or what some have described as "humble beginnings", has suddenly parachuted itself into the fore of global politics? The search for an answer to this question has attracted a burgeoning body of literature on Boko Haram seeking to explain various dimensions of the group, including the circumstances that propelled

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1 See the 2015 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) Report, p. 14. Online, <<http://economicsandpeace.org/research/>>, accessed 18 November 2015. According to GTI, Boko Haram committed 6 644 attacks, while IS was responsible for just 6 073.

it to the global scene, its tactics, the various responses to its violence, as well as possibilities for resolving or mitigating the undercutting social, political and economic factors accountable for the group's escalation. The purpose of this review article is to critically assess the recent contribution to the literature by Virginia Comolli, *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist insurgency* and to evaluate the extent to which it contributes to understanding the Nigerian terrorist group and its rise to notoriety.

One of the main challenges for students on Boko Haram is the piecemeal approach of existing studies, whereby each author pursues a specific angle of thought to analyse or explain the group in a short and limited journal article. Even after reading many such articles and studies, the student is often bewildered by the sheer absence of coherence and the factual inconsistencies and lack of empirical evidence in the story of Boko Haram.

Through her recent publication, Comolli, a senior fellow for security and development at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), offers some remedy in connecting some of the missing dots in our understanding of Boko Haram. As one of the first major publications on the subject, the book has been hailed as an invaluable and comprehensive contribution to the knowledge and understanding of Boko Haram. Comolli has been lauded for her clarity and simplicity that neatly weaves together empirical research and lucid analyses, enriched by several years of focus on Nigeria's troubled history, insecurity and the interplay of politics and socio-economic factors. Her background in intelligence, and as a non-Nigerian, has strengthened her position to interrogate without fear the conventional wisdom and some of the widely held assumptions on Boko Haram. As a result, her tone in the book is at times callous, and at times constructive in her critique of Nigeria.

Comolli begins the seven-chapter book with an introduction in which she provides a general overview of the scope and major themes discussed, as well as the main objectives of the book. The *raison d'être* of the book is captured in her description, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, of the seriousness of Boko Haram's security challenges and their far-reaching ramifications on humanitarian conditions with respect to the millions of people that have been internally displaced and those forced into the drifting lives of refugees, as well as its severe and debilitating consequences on education, the economy and the social well-being of Nigerians. While most readers will share this conviction, casting the objective of the book in such moral intonations, however, has a tendency to lead to judgmental moral conclusions, rather than solid logical and empirical facts.

Through her analysis in chapter 2, Comolli attempts to trace the origin of Boko Haram, situating it largely within the context of the historical evolution of Islamic fundamentalism or, what some writers have referred to as, "Islamic

revivalism” which takes its modern roots from the “jihad” of Usman Dan Fodio, the Fulani cleric often credited for the creation of the Hausa-land or the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804. Like many scholars before her, Comolli argues that the history of Islamist fundamentalism, anti-establishment revivalism, conflict over religious identity expressed mainly in the tension between Nigeria’s two biggest religions – Christianity and Islam – have influenced the emergence of violent contestation and insurgency, such as Boko Haram.<sup>2</sup> The group’s doctrine and grievances are deeply rooted in the Salafist ideology and the desire to make Nigeria an Islamist state, which lends credence to the perception that the Islamic insurgency is a continuation of the age-old Christian-Muslim conflict in Nigeria. Indeed, since 1903, following the British abrupt dissolution of the Sokoto Caliphate, no single factor, beside military coups, has contributed more to Nigeria’s instability than religion. The desire to purify the practices of Islam and to stiffen the application of sharia is certainly not Boko Haram’s invention, but rather an Islamic creed, whose roots in Nigeria date back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Islam was first introduced in the north. The incredible zeal with which Boko Haram is pursuing it, is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of what some have described as a contemporary struggle against modernity.

Whether religion *per se*, or Islam, for that matter, is the driver or motivating factor of Boko Haram, is heavily contested. Islamic terrorism, in general, is perceived as a perversion of Islam, just like the anarchists’ perverted liberty and democracy in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries or, just like the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) has perverted the Tenth Commandments in Uganda. Terrorists are simply criminals who must adhere to a certain virtue, which could be religion or a grandiose ideology, in order to justify their crimes or mobilise support for such crimes. However, no terrorist activities in history have ever conformed to the tenets of the virtue that they professed. It is therefore probable that both theological and non-theological or non-religious etiologies are needed to explain Boko Haram. Comolli has done a good job in untangling many of the historical, political and socio-economic strings that may have spurred the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria. While she is right about the low education level in the north as being one of the triggers of the insurgency, her argument about the isolation or marginalization of the north can be made for almost every group or region in Nigeria. Indeed, the civil war of 1967 to 1970 was caused by the Igbos’ alleged claim of marginalization. The Niger Delta region, the breadbasket of Nigeria, has the oldest insurgency that began over claims of marginalization.

Some would argue that terrorism in the post-independent Nigeria did not begin in the north, but in the south with the declaration of the “Niger Delta Republic” (NDR) on 23 February 1966, by Major Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro (of ethnic Ijaw

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2 Comolli, p. 12.

descent).<sup>3</sup> The perception that Boko Haram is the result of the isolation of Northern Nigeria in the pre- and post-independent eras is a difficult one, because prior to the amalgamation of the country in 1914, the different regions that became Nigeria existed in silos as autonomous or self-ruled regions. It was British colonialism that brought these fiefdoms together. This is why the current security challenges to Nigeria have often been regarded as the result or symptoms of the unfinished nation-building project of a united Nigeria. The claim of northern isolationism is also undermined by the fact that elites from the region have had a significant presence in the federal administration of Nigeria. For example, of the 15 federal administrations that have ruled Nigeria since 1960 after independence, eight of them have been led by elites from the north; and of the 55 years of independence, the north has governed for 28 years, while the south has governed for 27. By the time the incumbent president Muhammadu Buhari completes his first four years term in 2019, the north would have governed for 32 years, as opposed to 27 for the south. So, the question is, who is isolating or marginalizing who?

In chapter 3, the author interrogates the genesis of the drivers of what she calls “radical movements” in Nigeria and how current groups, like Boko Haram, represent a progression from earlier violent extremist movements. Here Comolli argues that these movements emerged through several processes, notably through tactical-level drivers in the form of a, “trinity of splintering, transformation, and reform or modernization”.<sup>4</sup> She uses the example of Boko Haram to demonstrate how the phenomenon of splintering has helped to provide continuity of radical ideology and its progenitors. The example of Boko Haram splintering into *ANSARU*, reflects the group’s own historical path which she links to previous radical Islamic organisations, such as the *Maitatsine* Movement that rocked northern Nigeria in the 1980s and 1990s, *Jamâ’atul Tajdidi Islam (JTI)* in Borno State, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), *Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamâ’ah*, and *Ja’amutu Tajidmul Islami (MIR)*. While this observation is true, one could further argue that the rise of Boko Haram has helped to significantly reduce the frequent mass riots that were common with the *Maitatsine* and the recurrent clashes between Muslims and Christians, which means that Boko Haram has been able to exploit or subsume some, or most of the grievances and forces that had traditionally fueled radical Islamic riots and clashes in Nigeria.

Although the author has done a credible job in retracing the institutional evolution and forbearers of Boko Haram, her argument that the formation of these groups has been predicated on the Shia-Sunni divide is overly exaggerated.<sup>5</sup> The

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3 See, for example, Martin Ewi, “Was the Nigerian 2015 presidential election a victory for Boko Haram or for democracy?”, *African Security Review* 24(2), June 2015, p. 218.

4 Comolli, p. 25.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

popular view in Nigeria is that religion is being politicized and that terrorism in Nigeria has been sustained by colonialism and military rules through, “political and intellectual elites in order to continually maintain a system of disequilibrium that gives them much advantage over others”.<sup>6</sup> The author does acknowledge this view.<sup>7</sup> Others have argued that Boko Haram is, “largely a product of widespread socioeconomic and religious insecurities, and that its ideology resonates among certain communities because of both historical narratives and modern grievances”.<sup>8</sup>

Another tactical-level driver of Boko Haram’s evolution is its constant transformation and adaptability. Comolli’s analysis here is not very clear to the reader, but one fact that emerges strongly from her discussion is that changes in leadership in Boko Haram have helped to transform the group, over time, from its “humble” beginnings to its current permutations, or from its first leader, Abubakar Lawal through Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf, who redefined and transformed Boko Haram into *Yusufiyya*, to its current leader, Abubakar Shekau, who has further radicalized the group. She argues that from a tactical and operational standpoint, Boko Haram has shown a propensity for modernization, sophistication, and evolution since its formation.<sup>9</sup> The chapter further demonstrates that, though Islamist groups in Nigeria may have different identities and objectives, they share many commonalities, predicated on the Shia-Sunni divide. The author, however, falls short of clarifying why is it that in Nigeria, where hundreds of Islamic groups (such as Ansaru Islam Society of Nigeria founded in 1942, and *Jama-atul Islamiyya* of Nigeria based in Kaduna),<sup>10</sup> whose principal aim is to promote the well-being of Islam in Nigeria, exist or have existed, while only a few like Boko Haram have pursued violent radicalization. Such a discussion would have provided the reader with a balanced view that groups such as Boko Haram are exceptions.

This book’s core argument is centered around chapter 4, which seeks to explain Boko Haram as a group and as a phenomenon, a subject that is as elusive as the group itself. Any account on Boko Haram is fraught with difficulties, as there is hardly any consensus among scholars about what occurrences constitute part of the

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6 See, for example, Eke Chijioke Chinwokwu, “History and dynamics of terrorism in Nigeria: Socio-political dimension”, *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development* 1(11), December 2012, p. 433. Online, <[www.ijird.com](http://www.ijird.com)>, accessed 15 December 2015.

7 Comolli, p. 4.

8 See, for example, James JF Forest, “Confronting the terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria”, JSOU Report 12(4), May 2012, p. 1. Online, <<http://jsou.socom.mil/PubsPages/2012JSOUPublications.aspx>>, accessed 12 November 2015.

9 Comolli, p. 33.

10 For a comprehensive list of Islamic organisations in Nigeria, see the website of the Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, <<http://www.nscia.com.ng/index.php/info-portal/islamic-organisations>>, accessed 19 August 2015.

history and evolution of the group.<sup>11</sup> For example, the date of the creation of Boko Haram is heavily disputed and scholars are divided as to whether the group was founded in 1995, 1999, 2002, 2003, or 2004. And, any of the dates would provide a different account of how and where Boko Haram has evolved. The sheer absence of a solid empirical research on Boko Haram bears the greatest responsibility for the variation in scholarly explanation of a group that many believe was founded by Ustaz Mohammed Yusuf in 2002. But once names like Sheik Ja'afar Adam, the late Kano based erudite Islamic scholar, and the late Abubakar Lawal, believed to be the ideological architect, are thrown into the equation, the history and genealogy of Boko Haram become fuzzy.

Comolli rightly puts this debate in perspective, although without attempting to reconcile the confusion that exists in the extant literature. Her central argument that Boko Haram's tactical and ideological evolution is the result of an isolated, mostly peaceful, religious community, however, will find little agreement among other scholars. Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, for example, postulates the view that the group, "grew out of socio-economic flux that came with a process of democratic transition, coupled with the consequences of decades of mismanagement resulting from military rule and corruption".<sup>12</sup> Other authors have espoused different causes or drivers of Boko Haram, including corruption,<sup>13</sup> globalization, politicization of religion,<sup>14</sup> and poverty.<sup>15</sup> Scholars do, however, agree about the elusive, complex and multidimensional nature of the Boko Haram phenomenon in Nigeria, and that no single factor can fully explain it. Comolli seems to share this view in her assertion that, "Boko Haram or Ansaru is not a monolithic homogenous grouping".<sup>16</sup>

Comolli's discussion of the timelines of the occurrence of key events that have shaped the evolution of Boko Haram, such as the 2002 founding date, the fishing incident in December 2003, the July 2009 riots and the extrajudicial killing of Mohammed Yusuf, the proclamation of Boko Haram's leadership by Abubakar Shekau in 2010, and the declaration of a state of emergency in three northern states in May 2013, is consistent with the mainstream literature on Boko Haram. The chapter also contains a rich discussion on those who are behind the masks of Boko

11 This view is echoed by Gérard Chouin, "Foreword". In: Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (ed.), *Boko Haram: Islamism, politics, security and the state in Nigeria*. West African Politics and Society Series, Vol. 2. Leiden: African Studies Centre, 2014, p. viii.

12 Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, "Nigeria's interminable insurgency? Addressing the Boko Haram Crisis", *Chatham House Research Paper*, September 2014, p. 4.

13 For example, see Ibrahim Sada Ladan-Baki, "Corruption and security challenges in developing countries", *International Journal of Politics and Good Governance* 5(5.2), Quarter II, 2014.

14 Daniel Egiegba Agbiboa, "No retreat, no surrender: Understanding the religious terrorism of Boko Haram in Nigeria", *African Study Monographs* 34(2), August 2013.

15 See, for example, Abimbola Adesoji, "The Boko Haram uprising and Islamic revivalism in Nigeria", *Africa Spectrum* 45(2), 2010, pp. 95-108.

16 Comolli, p. 77.

Haram, highlighting the *almajiri* phenomenon and the latter's role as reservoir for the group's recruitment. The identity of Boko Haram cannot be complete without reference to its ethnic origin, which many believe to comprise Kanuri, Hausa and Fulanis. Forest, for example, notes that, "[m]embers of Boko Haram are drawn primarily from the Kanuri tribe",<sup>17</sup> an observation that Comolli takes with reservation, because it has not been empirically confirmed.<sup>18</sup> As Comolli notes, the dominance of the Kanuris has also resulted in divisive ethnic politics within Boko Haram, particularly the contempt of the Hausas and Fulanis.<sup>19</sup>

The section on "Who are these men?" seems incomplete without a discussion on Boko Haram's organization and structure, which are not discussed anywhere else in the book, though the author selectively discusses some of the Boko Haram leaders. This creates a conspicuous gap in Comolli's narrative of Boko Haram.

Nonetheless, Comolli's discussion of the men behind the Boko Haram story seems to align with what a number of scholars have observed, that, "Boko Haram has been able to draw upon a considerable base of local sympathy and support largely from the ranks of uneducated, unemployed and impoverished youths in northern Nigeria".<sup>20</sup> The author's attempt to explain Boko Haram's tactics is not exhaustive. The emphasis given to splintering, factionalisation, kidnappings and suicide attacks does not give a full picture of the horror that Boko Haram has inflicted on Nigeria. It is understandable that kidnapping and suicide attacks have been the most dramatic activities of the group. And here, one can even argue that it was the 14 April 2014 kidnapping of nearly 300 Chibok schoolgirls that catapulted Boko Haram to international limelight. It would have been useful, however, to dedicate a full chapter to the tactical and operational evolution of Boko Haram. This would have also enabled a rich discussion on the patterns and politics of target selection, the preferential use of young girls for suicide attacks, as well as the group's growing expertise in making bombs, improvised explosive devices (IED), rockets and guns, and its links with other transnational organized crimes such as drug and human trafficking.

Similarly, Comolli might also be accused of a shallow discussion on the funding sources of Boko Haram. While this is understandable, given the plethora of unfounded reports about Boko Haram funding, as well as the perennial difficulties of accessing the group's members, attempts should have been made to reach out to intelligent sources, which have documented instances of seizure of funds belonging to Boko Haram. There are various reports, for example, claiming that Osama bin

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17 Forest, p. 1.

18 Comolli, p. 67.

19 *Ibid.*

20 See, for example, Akinola Olojo, "Nigeria's troubled north: Interrogating the drivers of public support for Boko Haram", *ICCT Research Paper*, October 2013, p. 1. Online, <[www.icct.nl](http://www.icct.nl)>, accessed 20 June 2015.

Laden dispatched US\$3 million to Boko Haram in 2002,<sup>21</sup> which the book should have interrogated. Comolli is also silent on the alleged links between Boko Haram and transnational organized crimes, including drug and human trafficking, as well as arms smuggling which have been described as key sources of revenue for Boko Haram.<sup>22</sup>

Chapter 5 explores the regional dimension of Boko Haram or, what the author refers to as, “the internationalization” of Boko Haram. The fundamental argument here is that Boko Haram has been able to expand to Nigeria’s neighbouring countries, such as Cameroon, Chad and Niger, through cultural, ethnic and religious affinities. Comolli is right in her assertion that, “Nigeria’s immediate neighbors have played an important role in the history of Boko Haram from the very early days of the sect”.<sup>23</sup> Boko Haram has clearly exploited the historical, ethnic and religious links among the Hausas, Fulanis and the Kanuris who live across the borders from Nigeria, to insulate the group and to ensure long-term sustainability in relation to recruitment and popular support. Historically, this kinship has facilitated cross-fertilization of radical Islamist tendencies among the countries. For example, a radical Cameroonian cleric, Muhammadu Marwa was able to cross over to northern Nigeria to preach and spread the *maïtatsine* doctrine, which fomented radical Islamic thoughts in Nigeria. It cannot be accurate to say that Marwa introduced the *maïtatsine*, as some scholars have contended, because similar ideologies were already evident in northern Nigeria with similar riots recorded in Sokoto in 1949, 1956 and 1965.<sup>24</sup> Marwa may have also taken advantage of religious developments in Nigeria, particularly the 1977 mass protests of Christians against the proposal to create the “Federal Sharia Court of Appeal”, which was interpreted as a deliberate effort to Islamize Nigeria.<sup>25</sup> This Islamization tendencies became even more apparent in the creation in 1978 of the Wahhabi group formally known as the *Jama’at Izalat al-Bid’a wa-Iqamat al-Sunna* (roughly translated as Group for the Eradication of Innovation and the Upholding of the Sunna), known in its short form as *Izala*,<sup>26</sup> which Comolli has amply discussed in pages 36, 37

21 See, for example, Eli Lake, “Boko Haram’s Bin Laden connection”, *The Daily Beast*, 5 November 2014. Online, <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/05/11/boko-haram-s-bin-laden-connection.html>>, accessed 10 May 2015.

22 See, for example, Money Jihad: Combating terrorist financing. Online, <<http://moneyjihad.wordpress.com/tag/boko-haram/>>.

23 Comolli, p. 86.

24 See, for example, Abiodun Alao, “Islamic radicalisation and political violence in Nigeria”. In: James Gow, Funmi Olonisakin and Dijkhoorn Ernst (eds), *Militancy and violence in West Africa: Religion, politics and radicalization*. London: Routledge, 2013.

25 See, for example, John Hunwick, “An African case study of political Islam: Nigeria”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 524, Political Islam, November 1992, p. 149.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

and 38. By its name, objectives and mission, *Izala* is perhaps the closest forbearer of Boko Haram.

Given its elusive nature and complexity, the fight against Boko Haram has been a daunting task for the Nigerian government. Comolli's earlier remark in the introduction that, "civilians find themselves stuck between two brutal opponents – Boko Haram and the security force",<sup>27</sup> captures well the conundrum that the crisis has created in Nigeria. Ordinary Nigerians are paying an unquantifiable price for the insurgency. The responses of the Nigerian government, discussed in chapter 6, show mixed results and, therefore, underscore the dire need for a critical interrogation. One would think that the government has drawn lessons from the long history of Boko Haram or the several decades of Islamic radicalism that has punctuated Nigeria's post-independence history, but the impression is that the government is only now coming to the party.

One key problem in the rise of terrorist groups, such as Boko Haram, has been the continuous negligence on the part of the Federal and States' governments. Despite the perilous history of religion, characterized by catastrophic episodes of the *maitatsine uprising*, violent riots and inter-religious clashes, the 1999 Federal Constitution did little to address the issue of religion and Islamic radicalism. Despite providing for a secular state, religious freedom, and banning any form of discrimination on religious basis, as well as establishing the legal mechanisms for Islamic law; the Constitution has very little provisions to contain religious intolerance, incitement, or the selective interpretation of religious texts for the purpose of committing violence. Chapter 6 documents some of the diverse measures that the Nigerian government has adopted to resolve the Boko Haram quagmire, from the formal proscription of Boko Haram as a terrorist group, the military responses (creation of the Joint Task Force and later the Army 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division), the establishment of a counter-radicalisation programme, the attempted negotiations with Boko Haram, to the creation of the multinational joint task force (MNJTF) and the imposition of the state of emergency in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa.

The current reliance on military, rather than criminal justice responses to Boko Haram has not been without devastating consequences; to the extent that the military has become an adjunct to Boko Haram terror and intimidation of civilians. Comolli has discussed this in the context of its horrendous humanitarian and human rights toll on civilians. A discussion, which ties up neatly with several damning reports of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International – accusing both Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces of serious crimes against humanity, including

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27 Comolli, p. 3.

torture, rape, mass murder, assassinations and extra-judicial killings.<sup>28</sup> Even with the intervention of Western powers, such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Canada, the fight against Boko Haram has not improved the lives of ordinary Nigerians living in the north. With this glaring truth, one would expect that the author would bring to question the involvement of the West, which has at best been half-hearted and packed with political and historical intrigues. The question many Nigerians are asking, is whether Boko Haram is more powerful than the US, the UK and other Western countries that have intervened?

The chapter also glaringly leaves out the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and the role that they could have played or could play in the fight against Boko Haram. The AU and ECOWAS played a strong role in encouraging Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon to form a regional multinational joint task force (MNJTF), and mobilizing the funds for the operationalization of the force in November 2015. Leaving out France and the European Union (EU) is one of the biggest weaknesses of the chapter, as key dynamics of the evolution of the fight against Boko Haram are unfortunately left out without justification. France played a pivotal role in the holding of the first summit of heads of state and government of the Lake Chad Basin countries and Benin, which formally brought Chad, Cameroon and Niger into the fight against Boko Haram.

In her conclusion, the author adds more confusion by describing Boko Haram as, “a violent Islamist movement waging an insurgency campaign that includes terrorist tactics such as suicide attacks”,<sup>29</sup> and provides no justification or definition of these terms. One may, for the benefit of the doubt, agree with Comolli on the point of insurgency when understood in its generic meaning as a rebellion, but once we start getting into the technicalities of the term, the notion of insurgency becomes complicated. The Taliban is probably the best organization that fits into the definition of an insurgency, because of their organizational design purely to overthrow the current regime and to implement their version of Islamism. Apart from its short lived territorial control in 2014 and part of 2015, Boko Haram has hitherto not shown interest in territorial control. There is almost unanimity among scholars that Boko Haram is a terrorist group, which in my view describes a higher form of crime. An insurgency can be prosecuted both as a criminal act and a political crime like treason, while terrorism cannot. The inclusion of an epilogue does help to bring the pieces of the book together and to strengthen coherency of the author’s arguments. The author does not, however, predict the next phase of

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28 For some of these reports see, <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/africa/nigeria/>>, accessed 10 November 2015, and <<https://www.hrw.org/africa/nigeria>>, accessed 10 November 2015.

29 Comolli, p. 153.

Boko Haram – as to whether the eventual deployment of the multinational joint task force comprising troops from Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Benin will defeat Boko Haram or not. I, for one, believe that Boko Haram cannot and will not be defeated in this decade, but that there will be periods of quietness and slow activities and periods when the group's attacks will not be concentrated in Nigeria.

Despite a number of contextual and organizational gaps, and the occasional tendency to be morally judgmental, the beauty of the book as a solid research work on a complex and elusive subject remains untainted. I believe it is currently the book that comes close to explaining how Boko Haram became the world's leading terrorist organization. I have read most of the new books published since 2012 on Boko Haram and Comolli's *Boko Haram: Nigeria's Islamist insurgency* remains one that I am likely to be caught reading again and again. The clarity and simplicity of her style, without compromising details, makes it a very reader-friendly book that every student on Boko Haram and on religious radicalization should have on their shelves.

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## BOOK REVIEW / BOEKBESPREKING

**Steven Gruzd and Yarik Turianskyi (eds), *African accountability: What works and what doesn't*.** South African Institute of International Affairs, Jan Smuts House, 2015. ISBN 978-1-919969-90-9. 230 pages

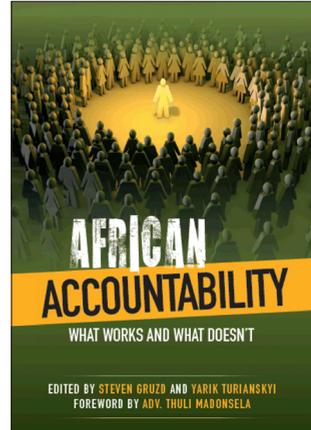
<http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/jch.v41i1.11>

*African accountability: What works and what doesn't?*, a book edited by Steven Gruzd and Yarik Turianskyi, is a story about the struggle for democracy in Africa. It tells the story not so much through the lives of heroic individuals and decisive events, as through institutions. And institutions, by their nature, are rather dry. Nonetheless, the book is important, because it is precisely the weakness of institutions that has been the great failure of democracy, accountability and good governance in Africa. Understanding their strengths and weakness is crucial to understanding the successes and failures of democracy and accountability.

Anyway, it is also true that it would be difficult to tell this story through the lives of heroes, because this continent, while it can boast many liberation heroes, can show few heroes of democratisation. That in itself is an important part of the story. If there are such heroes, they are mostly unsung and rather anonymous, ordinary people, including civil society activists who struggle against the authoritarianism of their leaders, some of them liberation heroes.

The editors, Gruzd and Turianskyi of the Governance and APRM Programme at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), say in their introduction that they are neither Afro-pessimists, nor Afro-optimists, but Afro-realists; which is the correct thing to say for anyone aspiring to objectivity. The picture that emerges is indeed rather mixed. Taking the long view, Africa has become more democratic over the last few decades. Especially since the end of the Cold War and the replacement of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU) by the African Union (AU) in 2002, institutional democracy has proliferated.

Today most African countries have regular elections, (independent?) electoral commissions and parliaments, ombudsmen, public protectors, human rights commissions, constitutions, and courts. At the continental level, the AU Charter enshrines the new norms of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and good



governance. There is the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) through which governments may scrutinise each other's governance, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), which articulates the AU's norms. There is also the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, the African Court and other regional tribunals. There are also ambitious programmes like the AU's Agenda 2063, aimed at transforming Africa into a continent of peaceful and prosperous democracies by that date.

These are the institutions which the 12 authors of this book examine, and their overriding question, of course, is how real and effective are these institutions? Do they contribute to democracy and accountability? Or are they mostly just paper tigers, with much more growl than bite?

This book clearly leans to the latter view. As the editors note in their introductory chapter, in 2000, Freedom House – the United States of America (US) non-governmental organisation (NGO), which has been tracking political freedom and civil liberties across the world for several decades – classified nine of the then 53 African states as “Free”, 26 as “Partly Free” and 18 as “Not Free” (p.2). Gruz and Turianskyi note, “Thirteen years on, little had changed, [where] ten states were classified as ‘Free’, 22 as ‘Partly Free’ and 21 as ‘Not Free’”. This actually shows more regression, than improvement” (pp. 2-3).

The conventional wisdom – which is shared by some of these authors – is that the AU's decision to outlaw *coups* has been one of its greatest achievements. Now the challenge is the “new *coups*”, as they have been called; the vigorous attempts by incumbent leaders to cling to power by gerrymandering term limits in their countries' constitutions.

Yet, even *coups* are far from being behind us, as the editors point out. They quote a recent study which shows that the rate of *coups* between 1946 and 1999 was 3,83 a year compared to 3,03 per year between 2000 and 2012, hardly a spectacular improvement (p. 3).

The reasons for the general failure to translate institutions into real accountability practices are varied. Part of the problem is that many of the institutions are structurally flawed. John Mubangazi writes in chapter 10 on ombudsmen, that the oldest official ombudsman institution of the 39 in Africa is Tanzania's, which was founded in 1966. Yet, Tanzania's ombudsman may not investigate the president of Tanzania or Zanzibar. And the president may order the ombudsman to investigate or not investigate any matter or functionary. “These are serious limitations on the independence and impartiality of the Commission and would obviously have a significant impact on its effectiveness” (p. 159), Mubangazi correctly observes.

But the real problem – and this runs right through all the chapters of the book like a tarnished golden thread – is that even democratic institutions which are theoretically well-constituted have mostly proved powerless in practice. This is

because presidents and other powerful politicians have simply ridden rough-shod over them. They have used whatever means are at their disposal to do this, including squeezing the ombudsman's budget or launching spurious investigations into the propriety of the incumbent.

Mubangazi describes South Africa's Public Protector (in effect an ombudsman), Thuli Madonsela, as the "leader of the pack" of African ombudsmen. Nevertheless, he notes that even she has come under considerable pressure from the ruling party, mainly because of her adverse findings against President Jacob Zuma over an expensive upgrade to his private Nkandla residence.

In chapter 9 on elections in West Africa, Adele Jinadu describes a wide range of electoral management bodies across that region and across Africa, from those that are fully state agencies, appointed by the president, through some hybrid institutions, to fully independent electoral commissions appointed by parliament. The degree of institutional independence often does affect the degree of independence in practice. Yet Jinadu also observes that the institutional strength of an electoral commission is not always a good indicator of its independence in practice. Some government electoral commissions have performed better than supposedly independent ones.

With parliaments, the story is similar, as Lia Nijzink describes in the chapter on this form of institution. Their powers vary; only some possess what one might have thought was the *sine qua non* of a parliament; the power to remove the government by a vote of no confidence. Yet, even those with such powers have hardly ever exercised them or have held the executives to account in any other way. They remain beholden to the executive by various devices. In South Africa, for example, the party list system means MPs owe their jobs to the ruling party and so are unlikely to cross it.

In chapter 7 on courts and civil society, Nicole Fritz, founder of the Southern African Litigation Centre, describes how regional rule of law activists have successfully used the courts to advance democracy and accountability, including by winning a court order for police to investigate torture allegations against senior Zimbabwe ministers and officials. They have also managed twice to block the International Criminal Court (ICC)-indicted Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir, from visiting South Africa. Yet, even in South Africa the government flagrantly disobeyed an order by the High Court to detain al-Bashir when he visited in June 2015 for the AU summit.

At the continental level, as the editors note, the picture is also not very encouraging. Only 35 African nations have signed up to be peer-reviewed through the APRM; only 17 have in fact submitted to peer review, and very few of the exhaustive lists of recommendations emerging, have been implemented. The AU, for all its worthy values, has been extremely reluctant to enforce them, most

notably at present, by sanctioning the many presidents who are manipulating their countries' constitutions to cling to power.

In chapter 2, Khabele Matlosa notes that the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG), though much less known than the APRM, has, in theory, more power, as its prescriptions are binding on those nations which have ratified it. Yet only 24 have done it so far. "The fact that fewer than 50% of the AU's 54 member states have undergone APRM and ratified ACDEG respectively is a grave indictment of the ostensibly low political appetite for democratisation by African states" (p. 27). More optimistically, George Mukundi, in chapter 3, describes the elaborate AU "African Governance Architecture" and says it has the potential to expand the scope and reach of the APRM reviews, because of its binding nature.

More broadly still, in chapter 4 on "The AU at 50", Turianskyi and Hengari commend the organisation for the relative success of its peacemaking efforts, but lament that its many democracy and good governance efforts have been less so. Tim Murithi explores the AU's ambitious Agenda 2063 programme to achieve peace and prosperity in 50 years, and commends the body for clearly articulating the right norms for the continent. But he also notes that, "The AU will need to seriously re-orient the political leadership of the continent and take decisive and necessary action", if it really wants to implement Agenda 2063 (p. 14).

In his chapter, J Shola Omotola similarly suggests that the AU could make a greater contribution to democracy by being less indulgent of incumbent leaders in its election monitoring, and should make greater use of local election monitors who understand the local terrain better. Ivan Crouzel makes the very pertinent observation in his chapter on elections and instability that, although elections have become the height of political fashion in Africa, this does not always translate into either democracy or stability. Many authoritarians manipulate elections to justify their position in power, and elections often spark violence.

Mubangazi observes, "There is no doubt that a democratic environment and a state based on the rule of law are preconditions for the proper functioning of an Ombudsman institution" (p. 158). This goes to the heart of the matter. One could replace "ombudsman" with any one of the other institutions analysed in this book and this observation would remain as true.

Most of the chapters articulate the same maddening circular logic of African politics; in order for institutions of democracy and accountability to function, you first have to have a democratic and accountable environment. Put differently, you need the political will for democracy and accountability; you need democratic leaders. As the editors observe in the concluding chapter 12, notwithstanding a growing panoply of institutions, "[d]emocracy is not possible without democrats" (p. 196).

Yet, the book also makes clear that Africa is in fact inching its way towards democracy and accountability. In most countries, most of the institutions analysed, for all their ultimate imperfections, have registered progress. Establishing democratic institutions, at the very least, raises the bar for those undemocratic executives who thwart them. Tampering with democratic institutions risks, if nothing else, popular uprisings, as Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaore discovered to his cost in 2014.

This book should be read by all Africanists, both as a story, from the institutional perspective, on the struggle for democracy and good governance on this continent, as well as a useful reference to the many institutions it so perceptively examines.

The editors, in any case, remain doggedly optimistic, concluding that, "in spite of existing problems the continent overall is in a better shape than it was 50 years ago. The key to the next half century is improving the efficiency of reforms and positive change. Africa needs to keep working at advancing accountability, to achieve its development dreams" (p. 201).

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