



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

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## Africa Programme Event Summary

# Nigeria in 2012: Crises and Reforms

Sola Tayo

Associate Fellow, Africa Programme, Chatham House

Alistair Soyode

Founder and Chairman, Ben Television

Garba Sani

Arewa Association (UK)

Tom Burgis

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### **Sola Tayo:**

Sola opened the discussion by putting the recent turbulence and sometimes violent events into context. Public attitudes have been a key driver of these events, and the nature of online discourse is revealing here. Following news reports of violent and shocking incidents public comments tend to follow a general pattern; initial condemnation, followed by criticism, but then there are a small number of supportive, extremist comments (such as condemnation of 'Western infidels', for example). Sweeping generalisations about the North and the South of Nigeria are being made with increasing frequency by people in both parts of the country, and increasingly these extreme views are being expressed in response to everyday stories rather than shocking events. This is worrying because views expressed on cyberspace are representative of real-world sentiments and can also reinforce real-world opinion.

Alongside this increased animosity between the North and South, President Jonathan is increasingly isolated and out of touch. Nigeria seems to be continually on the brink, yet it never collapses. On the one hand this is indicative of Nigeria's strength; it manages to hold together. But on the other hand this chaotic status quo allows politicians to avoid making difficult changes. This is completely unfair to ordinary Nigerians who remain in poverty as a result.

The fuel subsidy is seen by ordinary Nigerians as the only benefit they receive from the country's oil wealth. Many former Presidents have tried and failed to remove it and whilst it may be true that the subsidy is economically wasteful, it has important political significance to the poor. Unfortunately the government got the timing of the fuel subsidy removal completely wrong. The removal was announced during a time of increasing costs of living and was done with little thought given to political strategy or negotiation. At its core the subsidy issue is a problem of trust: people don't believe the government will fairly use the money saved.

In spite of today's concessions from the government (agreeing to limit the price rise to 97 naira instead of 140), the strikes are likely to continue. Some have drawn parallels with the current situation and the Arab Spring, but this is an inappropriate comparison; public demonstrations have been limited and people have tended to stay at home. Meanwhile the military have flooded the streets of Lagos. Nigeria is not in a state of revolution but a state of emergency.

With regard to a potential role for the international community, this question is problematic. President Jonathan came to power democratically rather than, as with the majority of Nigeria's leaders, through a coup. Removing him would suggest that democracy has failed. Despite the tensions between ordinary people in Nigeria, one unifying factor is their impatience with the political elite. Nigerians need to listen to each other's concerns. A good strategy for President Jonathan would be to come out into the streets and listen to what the people have to say.

### **Alistair Soyode**

Part of the problem facing President Jonathan at the moment is the confusion and disagreement in his party over whether he should have been allowed to become President. Some would say that when Yar'Adua died he should have been replaced by a northerner for the remainder of his term in office as opposed Jonathan, a southerner.

One of the main problems with the removal of the fuel subsidies was the poor delivery of this announcement. Very little warning was given that the subsidy was being removed, and people felt particularly resentful that it was announced during the Christmas holiday period. However, the reality of fuel subsidies is that most of the benefit is captured by a cabal of business elites. Yet the subsidy is still important to ordinary people and their feelings that this move would adversely affect them are what mobilised the labour unions. Whilst a lower fuel price has been negotiated today, labour unions still feel that they could get a better deal and so strikes are likely to continue.

The core of the problem is that people have lost confidence in the government and so do not feel that they would gain any benefits from the money saved from removing fuel subsidies. To restore confidence people need to see developments on the ground, such as new infrastructure investment.

Nigeria plans to rank in the top 20 countries in the world by 2020. This would be achievable if the government could follow through with the removal of fuel subsidies and invest the money effectively. This time Nigerians have to trust the government and give them the benefit of the doubt; the alternative could be a chaotic break up of Nigeria.

## Garba Sani

Garba took a narrower and more focussed perspective analysing the issues facing Northern Nigeria and the role of Boko Haram. From the perspective of Northern Nigerians, ever since the days of colonialism Western style education and Christianity have been imposed upon them as a package from the south. The response to this has been a resistance to Western education and the Western way of life. However, this is not simply a cultural sentiment. The civil servants and politicians produced by this system are seen conspicuously wasting money. Poor Nigerians see their politicians flying abroad, shopping in Dubai, and sending their children to expensive Western schools. Consequently people feel that the leadership is devoid of justice, and when they call for the establishment of Sharia law it is not about religious piety but reflects a desire for a more just system.

The resentment fostered among the youth of Northern Nigeria is where Boko Haram has its beginnings. Whilst Boko Haram started as a non-violent breakaway group, persecution and aggressive crack-downs from the security services brought a violent response. Boko Haram was at first a small and controllable problem, but the issue escalated in 2009 after heavy crackdowns were ordered by President Yar'Adua. The crackdown was brutal and disproportionate; around 700 innocent people were killed, some of them publicly executed on suspicions that they were member of Boko Haram.

Following the killing of their leader the movement went underground but emerged a year later with renewed attacks. Even at this point the situation was controllable, yet the government response was again heavy-handed. Local people felt more intimidated by the soldiers deployed to fight Boko Haram than they did by Boko Haram itself. This sentiment was compounded by the violent and indiscriminate responses of the security forces, which frequently caused the destruction of property and the loss of innocent lives. It is quite possible that the Boko Haram situation may have been encouraged by the Federal Government to undermine the North. The fact that the government refuses to negotiate with the group fuels these suspicions.

With regard to international actors and what helpful role they may play, the main problem is that internationally the current situation in Nigeria is seen very simplistically. It would be helpful for international actors to instead look at the problem from a local perspective. For example, calls for Sharia law and Jihad are exaggerated in the Western discourse. There is also no affiliation between Boko Haram and Al Qaeda. Rather, the statements made by Boko Haram's leaders reflect local grievances and in this sense there is some sympathy for the group in the North. That said, Boko Haram is not

representative of Islam and has been condemned by Muslims in northern Nigeria. Both the international community and the federal government should proceed with caution – they need to understand the local nature of the problem. A good start would be to consult diasporas from the northern communities.

### **Tom Burgis**

One of the core themes of this discussion has been the breakdown in trust between the rulers and the ruled – a classic phenomenon of oil rich states – and both the fuel protests and Boko Haram’s activities are emblematic of this breakdown. In many ways, events in Jos represent a microcosm of Nigeria as a whole, in terms of the battles between different ethnic groups for flows of patronage and access to particular resources. Nigerians are faced with a choice between accepting poverty or battling for sources of patronage.

The reality of the fuel subsidy situation is that few ordinary Nigerians have actually benefitted from the subsidies. Instead a business cabal appropriates benefits. Outside of Lagos, the majority of ordinary Nigerians buy their fuel on the black market at prices far higher than the official subsidy level. Rather, the protests are symptoms of a broader anger of the poor against the subsidised rich. Negotiations over fuel prices miss the point. In the face of this ‘business cabal’ President Jonathan is doing something fiscally responsible (fuel subsidies cost around four times more than the national healthcare budget), but the timing of his actions were bad. The fuel debate revealed how big the patronage system is, but the key question is whether the ruling class can be expected to dismantle this patronage system.

In respect of the situation in the North, the Western press has largely characterised Boko Haram as a religious jihadi group but the reality is different. Nevertheless, the poor economic conditions in the North make a fertile recruiting ground for Boko Haram. And in general, there is an increasing divide between the North – characterised by mass poverty – and the richer South.

Finally, a pertinent question is the possibility of a military coup. Fears of another coup were at their height in 2010 when Yar’Adua was in hospital in Saudi Arabia, but those fears did not play out. This would suggest that the current situation would have to worsen considerably before a coup becomes likely.

## ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

**Sola Tayo** is an Associate Fellow of the Africa Programme at Chatham House. Her main area of interest is the politics of Nigeria. Her background is in broadcast journalism - an area in which she has worked for ten years. She is a producer on the BBC's Hardtalk programme and has also worked as a producer for Al Jazeera and the Qatar Foundation's Doha Debates.

**Alistair Soyode** is the Founder and CEO of BEN Television, the first Black-oriented television channel in the United Kingdom and Europe. He is also the founder of a number of other organisations such as African Diaspora, Nigeria Arise, Nigerians Decide and is the former Chairman of the Nigerians in Diaspora Organisation Europe (NIDOE).

**Garba Sani** is Finance Director at Urban Futures London Ltd. and Managing Director of DuniyaCom Ltd. He was also a Founding Chairman and Policy Analyst at the Foundation for Good Governance & Development in Nigeria (a UK based NGO). He is Deputy Amir on the Council of Nigerian Muslim Organisations, and Former President of both the Nigerian National Union and the Arewa Association (UK).

**Tom Burgis** is a reporter with the Financial Times and has covered Africa for the paper for six years. Most recently, he was the West Africa correspondent, based in Lagos. Previously, he was Johannesburg correspondent, covering Southern Africa. He is currently working on a book on the resource curse in Africa.