

The Rise of Radical and Asymmetric Armed Insurgents in the Central African Sub-Region:

A Causal Analysis

Nicasius Achu Check¹

This policy brief examines the recent surge of armed conflict in the central African sub-region, with a particular focus on the causes of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. Though most post-colonial states on the African continent have experienced some form of conflict or another, the current insurgency in the central African sub-region, including Nigeria, has taken on new dimensions in the past decade. The bestial manner in which Boko Haram has carried out most of its acts, especially against Christians and government institutions in Nigeria, begs for a more thorough approach towards quelling this insurrection. The fact that atrocities have also been committed against Muslims dispels the notion that Boko Haram is a radical fundamental Islamic group. The insecurity caused by Boko Haram has spread into northern Cameroon and southern Chad as well. This policy brief examines the causes of this insurrection as well as others in the form of, for instance, the recent sectarian violence in the Central African Republic (CAR), and proposes possible policy directions which the governments in the sub-region can take to address the crisis. Building on reports on two field trips to the sub-region, it goes on to analyse the causes of the armed conflict, which has spiralled out of its traditional location and is threatening the security of the entire sub-region. The unleashing of suppressed ethnic and regional ambitions has necessitated the adoption of novel strategies through which to address these forms of armed conflict. Generally asymmetric in nature, they have proved intractable and will need new forms of strategies to contain them.

Introduction

The post-colonial nation-building project on the African continent, it seems, has still not taken

firm root 50-plus years after independence. Successive sectarian conflicts in various African countries and the apparent lack of a strategic framework to address fundamental developmental

¹ Nicasius Achu Check is a Research Specialist in the Governance and Security Research Programme of the AISA – HSRC and Research Associate, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg)

challenges seem to confirm Africa's position as the underdog. These developmental challenges have been compounded by the volatile economic, social and political environments characterising the world's developed economies at present.¹ The unstable economic outlook in particular has led to the weakening of governance institutions, more especially in the developing world. Workable institutions and good governance are important for the competent, suitable and effective provision of public services, while checks and balances help ensure that governments are held accountable to the public.²

However, the emergence of new forms of conflict, characterised by their radical nature and, more importantly, asymmetric in manifestation, is even greater cause for concern, especially in the central African sub-region, including Nigeria. Of particular interest is the Boko Haram phenomenon in Nigeria and surrounding countries. Founded in 2002, Boko Haram is a movement that takes its name from a Hausa saying meaning 'western education is forbidden'. Initially, its focus was on making sure that western education is banned in all those Nigerian states that practise Sharia law. Recently, though, it has changed tactics by capturing towns in north-eastern Nigeria and turning them into Islamic caliphates.³

Boko Haram's recent activity in Nigeria and surrounds, the increasing number of hijacking and kidnapping incidents along the Gulf of Guinea and in and around the Bakassi peninsular that separates Cameroon and Nigeria, and the recent sectarian conflict in CAR between the SELEKA rebels and the Anti-Balaka group after the overthrow of Francois Bozize call for new thinking on how security challenges and the asymmetric nature of violent conflict on the African continent should be addressed. The conflict in CAR caused a humanitarian disaster, provoked fierce community tension and the systematic targeting of Muslims in Bangui, and destroyed an already declining economy.⁴ This policy brief examines these forms of conflict and assesses their causes and the manner in which they manifest themselves. It then goes on to put forth some policy recommendations on how such conflicts can be managed.

According to findings made by the United Nations (UN) in 2005, insecurity linked to armed conflict is possibly one of the greatest obstacles to human development. Armed conflict retards development, destroys physical investment, tampers with people's livelihoods and scars people's perception of one another beyond measure. The current state of insecurity in the

central African sub-region started developing long before the third wave of democratisation hit Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Several reasons account for the unravelling of the African political and security space: (a) the economic crisis of the 1980s and the drastic effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), (b) the demise of the bipolar world, which unleashed hitherto suppressed ethnic and regional ambitions, and (c) the proliferation of small arms and weapons in the area under consideration. Central to these is perhaps the inability of the post-colonial political elite to address the fundamental matter of state building in the sub-region. Suffice to say that the decolonisation process in the sub-region was devoid of any ideological foundation, prompting the post-colonial political elite to depend on their former colonial master for its *savoir faire* in statecraft, nation building and leadership in both the economic and political spheres.

The question of how power is organised and how it tends to fragment resistance in contemporary Africa is critical in assessing the current security debate on the continent. Power, it should be understood, is still very much organised along patriarchal lines, and any attempt to defragment it has been resisted. While we live in a global village, the process of de-Africanising the African political sphere is still experiencing some resistance, and the presence of asymmetric armed conflict cannot be removed from this process of de-Africanisation. The inability of western-inspired governance structures such as democracy to take root in the sub-region affirms the difficulties which global governance structures are having with countries of the sub-region. The absence of strong institutions to the detriment of 'strong men' has made any credible attempt at redressing the security situation difficult.

Conceptualising Asymmetric Armed Conflict in the Central African Sub-Region

The Geneva Convention defines armed conflict as a situation in which two or multiple states resort to armed force to settle disputes. It also refers to armed conflict as protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organised armed groups, or between such groups within a state. The critical question is: should international humanitarian law be applied in such circumstances? The International Court of Justice has confirmed that the lack of recognition of international humanitarian law by either party

to a conflict would not impede its application, so long as two contracting states are involved.⁵

Armed conflict is internal when it is an armed struggle between protagonists within a state and international when part or some members of the belligerent side are outside the state. Be it internal or international, armed conflict in Africa has undergone fundamental changes since the 1960s. From the Biafra secessionist war to the Casamence question in Senegal via Katanga, internal armed conflict has reconfigured and refashioned the manner in which state structures respond to agitation in Africa. Of fundamental importance is the fact that if measures are not put in place to address critical issues concerning group grievances, the outcome could be disastrous, as happened in the conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea and between Sudan and South Sudan.

Asymmetric armed conflict usually refers to a war in which the military power of the opposing sides differs significantly. It can also refer to a protracted armed conflict between two or more belligerents with a significant disparity in power. Power in this sense is broadly understood to mean materials. Asymmetric armed conflict can equally describe a conflict in which the resources of the two belligerents differ in essence and in nature.⁶ The general goal is for the belligerents to exploit each other's characteristic weaknesses in order to inflict heavy casualties on their adversary. Such struggles often involve strategies and tactics characteristic of unconventional warfare, whereby the weaker combatants attempt to use strategy to offset their deficiencies in quantity or quality.⁷

The term 'asymmetric armed conflict' was first articulated in the 1970s by Andrew Mack in an article entitled 'Why big nations lose small wars: The politics of asymmetric conflict', where it referred simply to a significant disparity in power between opposing actors in a conflict.⁸ Though Mack's analytical narratives were ignored at the time, the end of the Cold War sparked renewed interest among academics in his asymmetric warfare paradigm. After the demise of the bipolar world and the emergence of new forms of conflict in Africa, Mack's take on asymmetric warfare received considerable attention from the United States' military. Today, asymmetric warfare is the most prominent and perhaps the most rapacious type of armed conflict which the major powers are having to deal with. The activities of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and ISIS in Iraq and Syria are just some of the manifestations of asymmetric warfare which the international community is being confronted with. Thus, its

importance as a source of destabilisation of the world cannot be overemphasised.

With regard to the conceptual underpinning of Boko Haram, many analysts have argued that this phenomenon is not new and that a deeper reflection on the very foundation of the modern Nigerian state is called for. Armed violence with a distinct Islamic favour is not uncommon in the northern part of Nigeria. Usman Dan Fodio, the father of Islam in West Africa, conquered the northern part of Nigeria at the beginning of the 1800s. His activities were only checked by colonialism, which prevented the spread of Islam to other parts of Nigeria. The post-1960 political elites failed to manage and integrate the power of the emirs in northern Nigeria into the mainstream political system. This failure stemmed from the fact that the northern political elites do not want to destabilise the power of the Islamic system which the emirs have put in place. In essence, post-independence northern Nigeria had two distinct state systems: the mainstream state; and the caliphates, controlled by the emirs.

The emirs' *dangorou*, otherwise known as the Army of the Emirs, has been used by some political elites to intimidate their opponents and win political battles. After 1999, the *dangorou* became a core feature of the political battles in northern Nigeria. The Borno state, which is at the centre of the Boko Haram insurgency, was the state in which the *dangorou* made and unmade politicians. Over the years and particularly since 2009, the leaders of the *dangorou* began to play an important role in the activities of Boko Haram. Boko Haram could therefore be conceptualised as a transfusion between political exigencies and the complex role Islam has played and will continue to play in northern Nigeria.

Armed Conflict in the Central African Sub-Region: A Causal Approach

The central African sub-region has, in the last decade, witnessed two diametrically opposed radical and asymmetric armed conflicts. Firstly there is the situation in Nigeria and the recent crisis in the CAR. The Nigerian asymmetric conflict can be divided into two parts: the Niger Delta uprising in the south-eastern part of the country; and the deadly Boko Haram insurgency in the north-east. As for the latter, it is widely assumed that it started about a decade ago with the spread of a fundamental ideology that 'western education is forbidden'. Boko Haram are

known to attack churches, government buildings and, ironically, mosques.

It is important to note that Nigeria is home to nearly 70 million Muslims, who account for almost half the country's total population. Known to crave political power to make up for their lack of economic muscle, Muslims in Nigeria would do anything to maintain their grip on state power. However, Islamic radicalisation has taken two paths in Nigeria: (1) an illegal and violent route perpetrated by the current Boko Haram, and (2) a legal and constitutional route exemplified by some northern states' imposition of Sharia law, echoing the communicative form of radical Islamist discourse.⁹

Both forms of radicalisation inspire violence among Muslims, and between Muslims and Christians, leading to a state of instability that is currently threatening the viability of the Nigerian state. Central to this is pressure from external factors such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb, and Al-Ashabaab, coupled with competition for resources and environmental degradation in the northern part of Nigeria – especially the advancement of the Sahara Desert and the drying up of Lake Chad, which has deprived millions of Nigerians of their livelihoods. It is important to note that it is the modus operandi of radical Islamists to encourage the formation of groups which act violently against the state, exacerbating any existing fragility and furthering conflict among communities in countries that suffer from poor social cohesion and integration. Nigeria, a state with weak social cohesion, is particularly prone to influences that undermine the social fibre of society. Boko Haram's political objective, which has been argued, is to bypass the state by ideologically driving individuals to dream of economic, political or cultural systems which transcend the state, while submerging the latter with violent movements that are making unrealistic claims.

The Nigerian President, Goodluck Jonathan, recently contended that members of Boko Haram can be said to be individuals, be they part of government or otherwise, who are insensitive to the plight of the common man and possess the weaponry to inflict hardships on the populace. This definition echoes Goodluck's assertion that there are members of Boko Haram in his government, including his cabinet – which, if true, would contradict the teachings of the group, of course, whose central rally point is that western education is bad, while all of Goodluck's cabinet members are beneficiaries of a western education.

From the author's interactions with youths in the north-eastern part of Nigeria and northern Cameroon during a research visit in 2008, it became apparent that four principal reasons have contributed to the Boko Haram uprising:

1. Religion, a crisis in leadership, and the absence of the state in the peripheral regions of the country;
2. Corruption, and a lack of credible and acceptable governance institutions and traditions;
3. Poverty and the widening income gap in the country; and
4. A class struggle and competition for resource control, and the complex nature of the Nigerian state in this regard.

One of the fundamental reasons for the current Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria could be traced back to the 1989 Abuja Declaration of the Organisation of Islamic States in Africa (OIC). At the end of one of its meetings it was resolved that member countries of OIC should 'win Africa for Islam'. It stated in categorical terms that Africa should become completely Islamic.¹⁰ Thus, the sustained asymmetric Islamic aligned Boko Haram insurgency in the northern part of Nigeria could well be attributed to the actualisation of the 1989 Abuja Declaration. The Islamisation of Africa, the declaration maintains, is a just cause, regardless of the means by which it is accomplished.

Following on the heels of the religious motive is the complex and perhaps ineffective rearrangement of Nigerian politics after the army returned to the barracks in 1999. It is understood that a tacit agreement was reached by the main political elites to rotate the presidency between the grand north and the grand south. When Obasanjo stepped down in 2007, a northerner was elected as president in the person of Musa Yar'Adua. Unfortunately, he died a few years into his first term as president. Northern political elites maintained that the presidency should stay with them in accordance with the agreement. However, according to the constitution of Nigeria, the vice-president (Goodluck Jonathan at the time) had to assume the presidency and complete the term of the late president. Upon completion of that term, it was understood, Goodluck Jonathan was to return the presidency to the north. He reneged on this and is campaigning to run for president again in 2015. This has angered many northern political elites. It is through Boko Haram, many have argued, that they are voicing their displeasure with the current

political leadership's reneging on the rotational principle of the presidential office.

Very few post-colonial Nigerian leaders have the necessary leadership acumen to endear themselves to the populace. After the 1965 *coup d'état* that saw the death of most of the de-colonial leadership, Nigeria's political leadership space became more and more wanting in terms of credible people. The political leadership crisis was compounded by the involvement of the military in the political processes of the country. This further entrenched regionalism, factionalism, corruption and pre-bendalism. As the leadership crisis became apparent at the national level, the state became more and more absent in the peripheral regions of the country. In most states the absence of basic services such as hospitals, schools and pipe-borne water is alarming and has increasingly distanced the people from the state.

Corruption, perhaps the most troubling issue in post-colonial Nigeria, has eaten deep into the fibre of most sectors of Nigerian society. From the ruling elite to the clerks in the offices, corruption has become a way of life, and the government is yet to come up with a workable strategy to combat it. The corruption phenomenon has been compounded by years of economic stagnation in a country blessed with abundant natural resources, enough to cater for all Nigerians; but a few elites have arrogated it all to themselves. The magnitude of corruption in Nigeria can be illustrated by the embezzlement of close to US\$550 million by the Abacha family. It is equally important to note that Nigerian lawmakers are perhaps the highest paid in the world, making a mockery of the plight of millions of Nigerians who go to bed hungry and without electricity. The ambivalent attitude of the Nigerian political elites towards corruption could be clearly seen when, upon the former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria, Sanusi, raising concerns about missing millions in oil revenue from the Nigerian Treasury, he was placed on special leave and eventually sacked instead of his claims being investigated.

The fact that Goodluck Jonathan's administration had to question the credibility of the Governor of the Central Bank added fuel to the fire as regards the credibility crisis which many Nigerian institutions are facing. Not only the Central Bank's credibility took a knock from Jonathan's questions; other institutions also suffered in the process, including the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which was unable to investigate Sanusi's claims of embezzlement at the Nigerian Petroleum Company. The legislature has not been spared either.

Nigerian senators' high level of remuneration, many have argued, is to ensure that they do not take the politicians to task.

Though Nigeria is very rich in terms of its natural mineral endowments, many of its citizens count among the poorest on the African continent. The oil wealth of the country does not trickle down to the common man on the street. Most is embezzled by top political role-players. This makes the gap between the rich and the poor very wide; it is perhaps one of the widest on the continent. Conversely, many have seen the poverty problem through the class lens. In the general sense, many have seen the Boko Haram insurgency as a class war, making it very difficult to contain and manage. Add to this the intricate nature of the Nigerian state, which is yet to find a common vision since the 1916 amalgamation of its northern, eastern and western regions to create a federation. Nigeria today still finds itself divided along the old ethno-religious lines that defined the colonial Nigerian state. Various nation-building projects have failed to galvanise the people to look in the same direction for their own common good.

As with the Niger Delta insurgency, it has been argued that the Nigerian one was born out of the need for the Federal Government of Nigeria and multinational oil companies to respect the environment in which oil is drilled, to provide jobs for the inhabitants of the area, and to see to it that the oil wealth is fairly distributed to the indigenes of the area. Neither the Government nor the multinationals involved have been able to address these fundamental concerns, and this has led to the formation of various armed factions and pressure groups, including the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). MEND has carried out a series of bombings and abductions of oil workers in the Niger Delta. Most of the abducted workers were released after their companies paid huge ransoms. Another way in which MEND has voiced its discontent is through oil bunkering. Recently, other groups operating in the Niger Delta and in the Gulf of Guinea have also started kidnapping foreign oil workers and hijacking ships. Likewise, sporadic skirmishes have been reported between armed groups and the Cameroon Army on the Bakassi peninsula. On the whole, the armed attacks in the southern part of Nigeria have been uncoordinated, and it is difficult to say with certainty what the reasons for their attacks are, apart from being petty banditry.

Conversely, the situation in the CAR relates principally to the manner in which the post-colonial state is built. The lack of a nation-building project and the apparent seeking by CAR political

elites of approval from France have made any genuine effort at developing the country difficult. The concentration of development initiatives in the urban areas has totally alienated the rural population from the state's machinery. Coupled with regional and ethnic politics, the situation in the CAR is dire, and by the beginning of 2010 a robust socioeconomic and political intervention among the rural masses was needed to avert an uprising. That explains why, when the March 2013 overthrow of Francois Bozize did not bring any of the profound changes the people wanted and wished for, they picked up arms against the SELEKA coalition. The anti-Balaka militia which spearheaded the uprising against the SELEKA government was born out of a desperate yearning for change in a country that has witnessed less than 15 years of democracy, 54 years after independence.

The current tension in the CAR between the Muslim SELEKA and predominantly Christian anti-Balaka could equally be situated within the wider context of conflicts and foreign interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the sub-region. The support that the Chadian government gave to the SELEKA rebels that overthrew the government of Bozize and many other rebel movements in the CAR is legendary. It is understood that the Justice and Equality Movement in the Darfur region of Sudan also supported the SELEKA coalition. The involvement of these outside actors, which was generally meant to create a safe harbour in the CAR should the security situation in their country become untenable, has been the main trigger of the recent anti-Muslim violence in the CAR.

The involvement of the military in the political affairs of the CAR has not helped with the nation-building project of the country. The various military governments of Jean Bendel Bokassa, Andre Kolingba, Francois Bozize and Michel Djotodjia have for the most part eroded the national unity and social cohesion which the post-colonial government implanted in the country. Relying solely on cronyism, nepotism, regionalism and ethnic politics, the military has offered the CAR little in terms of development and nation building. They are at the centre of the wide economic gap between urban and town dwellers and the rural poor.

The high propensity for armed asymmetric conflict in the CAR can be attributed to the proliferation of small arms in the country, following the demobilisation of the thousands of militiamen who helped Francois Bozize topple Ange Felix Patasse in March 2003. Soon after the overthrow of Patasse, amidst growing economic

hardship, Bozize demobilised the approximately 5 000 militiamen who had supported him to come to power. Many of the men were not happy with this, and a sizable number, with their weapons, joined other rebel movements operating in the country. Others engaged in highway robbery, further complicating the security situation in the entire sub-region. Of critical importance in the spread of small arms in the central African sub-region is the porosity of international borders, which has proved to be very difficult to monitor and control. The artificiality of the ethnic and political institutions along the borders is something which African multilateral institutions need to address in order to stem the illicit flow of people and weapons across international borders.

Peace in the sub-region is also threatened by the devastating impact of climate change on the fragile ecosystem in northern Cameroon, Nigeria and the northern part of the CAR. The rapid advancement of the Sahara Desert and the resultant destruction of the livelihoods of the people in the region, especially with regard to the drying up of Lake Chad, has had a ripple effect on the population. The drying up of Lake Chad has compelled fishermen and farmers to look for alternative sources of livelihood. In most cases these fishermen and farmers join armed groups operating in their region in order to sustain their families, considering that groups such as Boko Haram offer monetary rewards to recruits.

Way Forward and Policy Recommendations

The prevalence of armed conflict on the African continent begs for a re-evaluation of the state structures which Africans inherited from the colonialists. Critical methodological approaches need to be adopted to address the fundamental question of the state in Africa, primarily because most of the armed conflicts on the continent have distinct ethnic and regional undertones. The question many analysts have asked is whether the ethnic configuration of African states respects the pre-colonial nation-building system, and the answer is 'no'. The recurring secessionist movements around the continent attest to the problems surrounding the manner in which ethnic groups were grouped together to form states. There seem to be more problems regarding the nation-building project on the continent than solutions. However, this policy brief maintains that for peace to reign in the central African sub-region, including Nigeria, the following policy

recommendations should be considered firstly by the countries in the sub-region and secondly by sub-regional organisations.

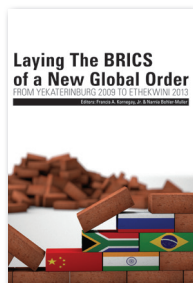
- The fundamental nation- and confidence-building measure in any country is the involvement of ordinary people in the development process of the country. This policy brief maintains that any effective process to defeat Boko Haram and other sectarian conflicts in the sub-region should be focused on inter-community dialogue. Community-based organisations, such as women organisations and youth groups, should form part of the nation-building process in the sub-region. This will ensure that the security of the people is assured by the people themselves, with the state playing the role of facilitator in the security realm.
- The porosity of the Nigerian border, economic hardship and religious tensions combine to make these Islamic groups vulnerable to recruitment into dangerous terrorist networks, thereby threatening the security of the country. Nigeria needs to address the porous nature of its borders, especially those with Niger, Cameroon and Chad. Most of the radical elements within the Boko Haram group are not Nigerians. The earlier the Nigerian immigration laws are reviewed, the better.
- Nigeria needs to put in place comprehensive poverty alleviation strategies that address the needs of the rural poor and the marginalised in society. Proper agricultural projects need to be devised so that the rural poor can sustain their own livelihoods.
- Participatory democracy as an instrument for settling political disputes should be upheld and effectively adopted as a means through which the political leadership crisis in Nigeria can be resolved. The principle of rotating the presidency between the grand north and the grand south should never have been agreed upon and should not be enforced, as it excludes other regions and the constitution of the country prohibits exclusion. The people of the country should freely choose their leader without intimidation or threats. This will ensure that no single part of the country monopolises the presidential office.
- The governments of the countries in the sub-region should put in place strong democratic institutions. The principle of equality before the law should be respected. A well-functioning civil service, and a republican army and well-disciplined police force should be encouraged. The governments should put

in place institutions and processes that will enhance the capacity of the state to provide in the basic needs of the people, such as schools, hospitals with affordable medicines, and pipe-borne water.

- The governments of the sub-region should establish measures to eradicate extreme poverty in their countries. The governments should also put in place measures to protect the sources of people's livelihoods in the face of the adverse effects of climate change and insecurity. This will only work if the governments in the sub-region establish a well-coordinated intelligence-gathering system and an effective and appropriate early warning system.
- Equally important is the need for all the governments in the sub-region to enjoy high levels of legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate. The presence of the state in all the nooks and crannies of a country is a pre-requisite for effective governance. The phenomenon of the absence of the state beyond the capital cities of these countries should be discouraged.

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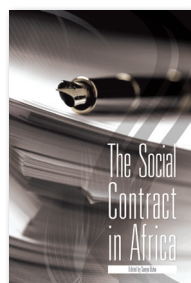
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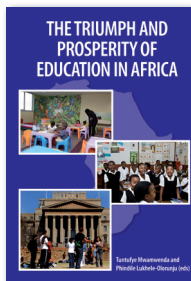
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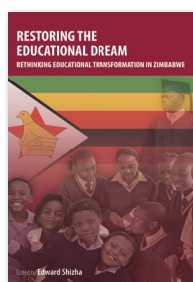
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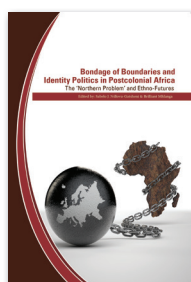
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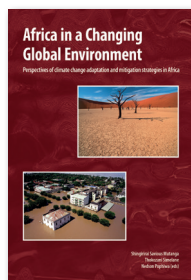
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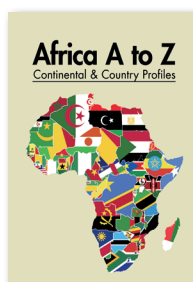
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