Religious Politics and Student Associations in Nigeria
The Case of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria

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Key Findings

- Religion is a major source of social currency at Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) and other campuses in Nigeria, as it is in broader society.
- Association with religious groups on campuses offers support for Nigerian university students during their university careers and post-graduation. Student religious groups, both Muslim and Christian, exert influence over religious dynamics and resources on campus, and they facilitate connections to influential actors beyond the university system.
- The influence and reach of religious student groups make them potential actors to foster broader community resilience and harmony on and off campus. Efforts to support organic activities to increase dialogue and discussion on campus could help to bridge divides between student groups and address vulnerabilities that might be exploited by violent extremists and others.
- Competition for followers and influence among student religious associations on some university campuses mirrors competition and tensions in Nigeria's broader society. This competition impacts religious dynamics on campus and interactions among students, in some cases aggravating grievances and contestations within Muslim associations and between Muslim and Christian associations.
- This study suggests that there is little evidence that violent extremism is a present threat at ABU and other Nigerian higher education institutions examined. However, uneven power dynamics and growing grievances among student groups can fuel interreligious and intra-religious divides.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In July 2017, the RESOLVE Network launched a research project in the Lake Chad Basin to assess the role of the state, civil society, and other non-state actors in shaping the political divides over the role of religion in education and community and state responses to extremism in Chad, Nigeria, and Cameroon. The RESOLVE Network offers an innovative means of helping USAID and other U.S. government partners interested in testing assumptions embedded in their theories of change about the effectiveness of P/CVE interventions in the educational arena.

For more on the project, please visit:
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Executive Summary

The rise and spread of Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Daʻwa wa-l-Jihad (Boko Haram) increased attention and demand to understand the drivers and impact of violent extremism and whether it relates to religious conflicts across the Lake Chad Basin. This is particularly so in Nigeria, where the group originally arose, metastasized, and evolved over the past decade. However, studies probing links between violent extremism and religious conflict on Nigerian campuses predate Boko Haram's rise in the region, suggesting that the group is not the only actor and violent extremism is not the only dynamic meriting consideration.[1] As a recent RESOLVE Network research report, "Campuses and Conflict," suggests, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners would do well to focus on certain trends related to religiously motivated contestations on university campuses, especially among those pursuing efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) in Nigeria at large.[2] The "Campuses and Conflict" research report found that religious dynamics and activism on university campuses in Nigeria and in the broader region do not have a direct correlation with violent extremism and conflict. It further found, however, that these factors can be—and in some cases have been—linked to violence and communal divisions. An additional and positive finding is that on-campus initiatives contributed to efforts to prevent and counter Boko Haram's influence and broader conflict dynamics in certain universities.[3]

Religious student groups exert significant influence on university campuses in Nigeria and have connections to broader social and political networks and opportunities off-campus.[4] However, available research on their role in shaping religious dynamics, narratives, cohesion, and resilience on campus remains limited. Based on findings from interviews and participant observation, this RESOLVE Network research brief, part of a series of publications on similar dynamics in the region, attempts to narrow that gap in knowledge by examining the activities and dynamics among religious student groups at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU).[5]

Religious student groups at ABU are an integral part of campus life; they provide services and support to Christian and Muslim students, as well as connections to the broader community. The groups facilitate orientation sessions for incoming students, provide tailored programs for students throughout their time on campus, arrange lectures on topics of religious significance, and facilitate connections to advance student prospects post-graduation. These groups play an important role in campus life as a key source of

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[1] See, for example: Ibrahim Jibrin, "The Politics of Religion in Nigeria: The Parameters of the 1987 Crisis in Kaduna State." *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 45/46, (1989), 65–82; and Iheanyi M. Enwerem, "A Dangerous Awakening: The Politicization of Religion in Nigeria," Institut français de recherche en Afrique, (1995).

[2] Alexander Thurston, "Campuses and Conflict in the Lake Chad Basin: Violent Extremism and the Politics of Religion in Higher Education." RESOLVE Network Research Report, no. 1, Lake Chad Basin Research Series, 2018, 6. https://resolvenet.org/research/campuses-and-conflict-lake-chad-basin-violent-extremism-and-politics-religion-higher

[3] Ibid.

[4] Stephanie Schwartz, "Is Nigeria a Hotbed of Islamic Extremism?" U.S. Institute of Peace, (2010).

[5] Field research was primarily conducted at ABU; however, this research brief also references dynamics on other university campuses in Nigeria, including the University of Ibadan (UI), Kaduna Polytechnic (Kadpoly), and the Modibbo Adama University of Technology (MAUTECH).

religious guidance, as a support system for student welfare on campus and post-graduation opportunities, and as a vehicle to facilitate community-university relations.

Research conducted for this brief found no specific direct relationship between violent extremism and religious activism at ABU; neither did the limited research conducted on other university campuses.[6] However, the research did find that divisions among religious student groups do exist on campus. At times, episodes of violence among students on Nigerian campuses have bled into surrounding communities. At ABU, power inequities among religious groups have heightened competition for influence. ABU policies give significant control over religious matters and resources to only two religious student groups on campus: the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria (MSS) and the Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS). The policy has sparked significant grievances among other religious groups (Muslim, Christian, and others). These other groups perceive themselves as marginalized and unrepresented by MSS and FCS; they consider the actions of the MSS and FCS to be exclusionary and unfair.

Debates over religious doctrine and the role of religion on campus have further increased friction among student groups. Findings from this research suggest that the competition for influence has fueled these interreligious and intra-religious divisions. This increasing polarization in religious views has the potential to further disrupt university life.

To address these issues, policymakers and practitioners should consider opportunities to support and interact with actors in Nigeria's higher education system and student groups on campuses. Recommendations for engagement include:

- Partnering with university administrators and student groups to develop and implement non-exclusionary policies and more equitable distribution of religious resources on campuses.
- Creating conditions for dialogue among religious student groups on campuses and within faith groups to promote conversation and collaborative efforts.
- Supporting and engaging religious and non-religious student groups as partners in shared P/CVE and conflict resolution initiatives, particularly those to promote unity on and off campus.

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[6] The authors consider violent extremism, in this context, to be resorting to violence to resolve issues or to acquire or maintain influence and effect change against the rule of law or outside of established regulations wherein the use of violence is motivated, justified by, or enshrined in a set of beliefs.

Introduction

Like many societies, religion in Nigeria is heavily intertwined with the social, economic, and political aspects of life. Over past decades, the geographic and historic legacies of competition impacted by or rooted in religious terms have contributed to the development of religion as both a source of social currency and a source of conflict. Attention to the role of religious divides in the country has increased since the violent and destructive rise and spread of Ahl al-Sunna li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Jihad (Boko Haram) in Nigeria's northeast and the expansion of its violent extremist activities and rhetoric. Local and international policymakers and practitioners seeking to address the roots of the Boko Haram insurgency and other potential conflicts in Nigeria need a greater understanding of the religious dynamics often attributed to increasing polarization and radicalization.

Much focus is placed on understanding religious schisms in broader Nigerian society and among groups susceptible to, or already active in conflict. Less attention, however, is placed on understanding how religious politics and dynamics impact the everyday lives of the Nigerian youth, particularly at the university level. As noted in a recent RESOLVE Network research report, "Campuses and Conflict," certain trends related to religiously motivated contestations and interactions on university campuses merit further attention.[7] In Nigeria, specifically, religious dynamics and activism on university campuses have been linked to cooperative efforts to boost interreligious and intra-religious community, as well as to address violence and communal divisions.[8]

To further analyze the complexities of religious life, engagement, and conflict, this research brief takes a deeper look at the ongoing dynamics and relationships within and among religious student organizations on Nigerian university campuses. It focuses specifically on the dynamics at ABU in Zaria, supplemented by findings from interviews and media reports on religious life and interactions at the University of Ibadan and other higher education institutions in the country. In the university system, student religious associations are key actors and exercise significant influence on campus. They represent different religious ideologies and provide a sense of community and opportunity for their respective student populations. However, this research brief further reports that these associations also engage in competition for influence, resources, and followers. In this competitive environment, tensions often arise that mirror those in broader Nigerian society, creating conditions likely to result in conflict, grievances, and even violence.[9] Findings in this research brief provide an important context for those looking to engage in the university space to address religious schisms and further involve Nigerian youth and religious actors. The findings also enhance analysis and understanding of how broader conflict dynamics and violent extremism trends can interact with student movements and activism on campuses.

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[7] Thurston, 2018a, 6.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

Methodology

This research brief is based on a series of interviews supplemented by participant observation and direct interaction that took place over 13 weeks, from February–May 2018, at ABU in Zaria in the north-central state of Kaduna. Researchers conducted interviews mainly with students and graduates on and off campuses (including Samaru and Kongo) and in Zaria, Ibadan, Abuja, and Kaduna city. Additional interviewees included university lecturers; heads of academic departments; and leaders and members of prominent student religious organizations, including the Muslim Student Society of Nigeria (MSS), the Nigerian Federation of Catholic Students (NFCS), the Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS), the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), and the Tijjaniya Muslim Students Association of Nigeria (TIMSAN).

The researchers conducted supplementary interviews with students of Kaduna Polytechnic (KadPoly) in Kaduna and Modibbo Adama University of Technology (MAUTECH) in Yola, past and present leaders of the ABU and KadPoly Student Representative Councils (SRC) and the Hall Governors[10] of student residence halls, journalists working on politics and religion in northern Nigeria, and other members of the university community. Overall, the study analyzes the views and statements from 25 formal interviewees, and included input or observations from 120 key stakeholders. Interviewees identified themselves as Muslim, Salafi, Tijaniyya, Shia, Protestant, or Catholic. Some chose not to disclose any religious affiliation.

The researchers selected ABU as the major site of fieldwork for this study to better understand the religious dynamics on a very local level that impact the lives of university students and their broader communities; the researchers supplemented the findings from interviews with those from individuals from other universities. ABU and the other universities listed have experienced controversies involving religion on and off campus. Understanding these dynamics at ABU provides insights into how religious schisms can affect populations not immediately affected by the presence of Boko Haram. This understanding is useful in ascertaining the impact of the religiously oriented rhetoric, presence, and violence on broader aspects of Nigerian society.

To determine whether findings elicited during fieldwork resonated with dynamics associated with religion on university campuses elsewhere, this brief incorporated information from the media and previous studies on Kadpoly and MAUTECH. The researchers utilized interviews, coupled with participant observations, at events organized by student religious associations to examine interactions and perceptions within and among student religious associations in practice beyond their public statements and interview responses. The research also drew on visual materials, such as posters, used by student groups on campus to disseminate information and ideas. As noted throughout this research brief, secondary data sources, print, online and media publications—newspapers, historical texts, and academic journals—supplemented the research. This pool of materials provided a comprehensive view of religious interactions on campuses and the goals, aspirations,

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[10] Student representatives of different residence halls (hostels) on campus. Members of the Hall of Governors are elected by the student body. Their election often entails campaigning and the involvement of religious student associations.

and influence of individual associations on campus and in the community, as well as of the broader political dynamics.

Certain operational and methodological limitations affected the findings. The unwillingness of interviewees to discuss highly sensitive topics associated with religion on campus and in broader Nigerian society sometimes impeded the researchers' ability to elicit in-depth information on the topic. This unwillingness was also the case in discussions regarding funding for student religious associations. Because the research mainly focused on one university campus, ABU, the external validity of the findings is not fully known. Where possible, researchers used findings from additional sources, including scholarly literature and media reports, to supplement findings from the field work. The findings provide an important window to see how religious politics are transforming Nigerian universities; they probe the relationship between on-campus religious dynamics and the broader realities of politics and conflict, and they identify gaps for future study and policy programming and interventions. Although the findings provide insights based on researcher observation and anecdotal evidence, greater investment in research is needed to more fully elucidate the ongoing dynamics on ABU and other Nigerian campuses.

Context

COMPETITION, RELIGION, AND GRIEVANCES IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is home to about 500 different ethnic groups. The country is "Islamo-Christian," with almost equal percentages of Muslims and Christians. Nigeria can be divided into three regions based on the three most-identified religious groupings: 1) the north, with a large Muslim majority; 2) the southeast, populated mainly by Christians; and 3) the southwest, with a nearly balanced Muslim-Christian population. Religion is an integral part of daily life in Nigeria, and identification along religious lines is among the highest in the world.[11]

From its inception as a colonial state, Nigeria has faced a perennial crisis of territorial or state legitimacy, challenging its efforts at national cohesion, democratization, stability, and economic transformation. Social tensions are often expressed along ethnic and religious divides, some of which have proven immensely violent. Soon after independence from British colonial rule in 1960, the country was plagued with political and ethnic violence that pitched the mainly Muslim north against the mainly Christian southeast. The resulting secession of the southeastern region to form the Republic of Biafra led to the Nigeria civil war of 1967–70. The Biafra war was not necessarily religious in nature or cause, but propaganda during the war often presented the conflict as religious.[12]

Reverberations stemming from the legacy of conflict and the ethnic and religious divides across territories still echo in Nigerian politics and society today amid grievances, agitations for resource control, and complaints of political exclusion by the various ethnic groups. Over the years, marginalized groups in Nigeria have used these grievances to justify armed uprisings. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) and the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA), for example, have attacked oil installations and kidnapped oil workers as part of their perceived marginalization. Boko Haram, the most infamous of violent groups in the region today, began its journey into violence as a group fighting for the poor and marginalized in Maiduguri, protesting the corruption of the political elites, societal deprivation, moral decadence, and inequitable distribution of government resources.

Boko Haram's opposition to societal ills and the political state, however, carried with it a decidedly conservative, distorted religious justification for its violence, an ideology spawned by the long process of fragmentation within Islam in Nigeria. Throughout decades of religious conflict and violence, a competitive marketplace emerged around religious practice and ideologies in the country.[13] The individualization of religious affiliation and competition for followership among *ulama* (clerics) has led to the fragmentation of

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[11] PEW Research Center, *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, April 15, 2010, accessed on July 12, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2010/04/sub-saharan-africa-full-report.pdf.

[12] https://www.cfr.org/blog/distorted-memory-biafra.

[13] Thurston, 2018a.

Muslim identities[14] and resulted in the proliferation of different religious groups. Groups emerging from this context include the Sufi, such as the Qadiriyya and the Tijaniyya; the Salafi, such as Jama'atu Izalatil Bid'a wa Iqamat al Sunna (Izala or JIBWIS); the Shiite, notably the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN) led by Sheikh El-Zakzaky and its splinter group Jamat al-Tajdeed al Islami (JTI), the Yoruba mosques, prominent of which is the Nasrul-Lahi Fathi Society of Nigeria (NASFAT); and other marginal sects such as the Maitatsine and Kala Kato. The proliferation of religious groups by no means implies a violent extremist risk; however, understanding the extent to which an "increasingly energized search for new authorities and new identities"[15] has given rise to competition among them and how they interact with broader political dynamics is needed to develop more effective strategies to address the rise of violent groups and other related conflicts. This search for new authorities and identities—a major feature of the politics of religion in the country—extends to campuses and manifests itself through competition among student associations, both Muslim and Christian, for influence and resources.

CONFLICT AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Muhammad Yusuf, former leader of Boko Haram, founded the organization in Maiduguri, northeastern Nigeria. Students from the University of Maiduguri were among his many followers; they gained particular notoriety when, as some reports noted, they tore up their university certificates to join the movement that denounced secular education.[16] The brutal and violent emergence and evolution of Boko Haram underscores the need to further investigate any potential broader links between youth, including students, and religious conflict and violent extremism in the Lake Chad Basin region.

Although the rise of Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria increased the focus on the dynamics related to youth, religion, and violent extremism in the country—particularly within primary and secondary schools—research on any relationship of these factors to higher education remains limited. Available research relies mainly on assumptions about increasing religiosity and international influence and their supposed correlation with increased recruitment and radicalization among students.[17] These assumptions leave policymakers and practitioners with little to improve their understanding of the relationship between religion and conflict on Nigerian campuses. Moreover, the studies that sought to analyze the influence of religion on campus fall short of providing a systematic analysis of the competitions, rivalries, conflicts, and forms of intolerance that emerge in those settings.

Amid the competition for religious influence on campuses, universities have become the site of religion-inspired violent confrontations, some of which spilled over from and

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[14] A. R. Mustapha and Mukhtar U. Bunza, "Contemporary Islamic Sects and Groups in Northern Nigeria," in Abdul Raufu Mustapha, editor, *Sects and Social Disorder, Muslim Identities and Conflict in Northern Nigeria,* (Rochester: James Currey Publishers, 2014), 55.

[15] Thurston, 2018a.

[16] I. U. Gusau, "Boko Haram, How It All Began," *Daily Trust*, August 2, 2009, 15.

[17] Thurston, 2018a.

into the broader community.[18] A cogent example took place as far back as 1987 during the Kafanchan crisis—an episode of widespread violence and destructive riots that pitted Muslims against Christians in Kaduna state and resulted in multiple deaths in cities and on university campuses.[19] The roots of the crisis are attributed to the long history of rising fundamentalism alongside the politicization of religion as a means to compete for power among different actors in Nigeria.[20] In 1988, ABU's campus was the site of a similar confrontation following student union elections.[21]

More recently, while the authors were conducting research for this research brief, religious tension at MAUTECH erupted in violence.[22] During the riots on campus in February 2018, students set fire to university buildings, and one student was killed. The Nigerian government deployed soldiers and riot police to the campus shortly before it was closed to deescalate the situation. The accounts of what incited the violence vary, but most blamed the violence on underlying religious divisions between Christian and Muslim students. One version of the events states that the university was shut down following Muslim student protests over an alleged blasphemous statement[23] made by a Christian student against the Prophet Muhammad[24] and posted in a WhatsApp group.[25] Another version suggests that tensions between Muslim and Christian students arose following the recent student union elections in which a Christian student was elected, despite the fact that Muslim students had held the seat in previous years.[26]

Violent confrontations along religious lines on campus are not isolated. The cited examples of such violence—just a few of many over the past decades—are not exclusive to a single campus. At the center of much of this violence is a legacy of student activism on Nigerian campuses and increasing debates over the place of religion and religious codes of conduct—such as dress codes or prohibitions of "blasphemous" activities and speech—in campus life. The extent to which these factors provide space for violent actors to gain footholds on campus, however, is, as yet, poorly understood.

STUDENT RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS: A SOURCE OF COMMUNITY AND DIVISION

In most Nigerian universities, religion is linked to all aspects of life, extending to politics, academics, and student life. This pervasive influence is facilitated through the programs

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[18] Ibrahim, 1989, 65–82.

[19] Boyle and Sheen 2013 Kevin Boyle and Juliet Sheen, *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report* (London: Routledge, 2013); Ibrahim, 1989.

[20] Ibrahim, 1989.

[21] Enwerem, 1995. Read more at: https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/06/contemporary-ethnic-and-religious-crises-in-kaduna-state.

[22] "Violence" here is not to be equated with "violent extremism."

[23] https://dailynigerian.com/inside-story-of-blasphemy-riot-at-modibbo-adama-university/; https://www.thetrentonline.com/muslim-christian-students-clash-yola.

[24] https://www.pulse.ng/communities/student/one-killed-as-students-fight-over-blasphemy-in-mautech-id7942916.html.

[25] https://dailynigerian.com/inside-story-of-blasphemy-riot-at-modibbo-adama-university.

[26] Dan Fulani, "Student Killed as Federal University in Yola Closes Indefinitely," https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/nnorth-east/257584-student-killed-as-federal-university-in-yola-closes-indefinitely.html, February 5, 2018.

and activities of student religious associations, including new student orientation programs,[27] tutorial classes in preparation for examinations,[28] and studies and seminars on religious texts. These programs provide an important source of community, support, and post-graduation opportunities for university students, given their ties to influential leaders and organizations outside of the campus environment through their patrons and alumni networks. The ability to merge academic and religious activities also helps these associations to gain influence in the lives of students beyond the walls of chapels or mosques.

Religion's extended influence also fuels campus competitions, contestations, and even conflicts, often along interreligious and intra-religious lines. Campuses in the Lake Chad Basin are experiencing increasing religious diversity among their student populations, "with representation from Muslims and Christians, Salafis and Pentecostals, Islamists and quietists."[29] Findings from this brief elucidate the nature and implications of these campus dynamics at ABU.

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[27] MSS official interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 25, 2018.

[28] FCS official interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 24, 2018.

[29] Thurston, 2018a, 16.

Findings: Religious Dynamics at ABU

RELIGION AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUS LIFE AT ABU

"Religion controls everything on campus," noted one ABU student interviewee.[30] To some extent, this is a product of religious student associations that gained increasing prominence in university life, and to a degree, university administration, on ABU and other Nigerian campuses. One interviewee at ABU noted that each church strives to have a student wing on campus, as does each mosque.[31] The three most prominent and widely recognized student religious associations across Nigeria's higher education institutions and at ABU are MSS, NFCS, and FCS. These three essentially function as faith-based umbrella bodies on campuses for the Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant faiths, respectively. Other associations such as TIMSAN and BLW are often treated as suborganizations of those umbrella bodies.[32]

Established in 1954,[33] MSS, for example, spread from universities in southwest Nigeria to other parts of the country. MSS at ABU started as an umbrella body for Muslim students who sought a space for religious practice. Its Christian counterparts, NFCS and FCS, had similar trajectories and missions. NFCS was established at the University of Ibadan in 1956 with a mandate to encourage students to "live a (sic) spirituality in action, linking faith, intellect and service of others through praying, reflecting and acting right at all levels of society."[34] FCS was established in 1957 to promote "the transformation of lives of children, students, and other youths, through evangelism, discipleship, and family life development."[35] The two groups operate with governing bodies at the national and local levels; each university has its own chapter.

A SITE FOR COMMUNITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

Student religious associations conduct various activities on Nigerian campuses. Some stand alone; others are woven into academic life. At ABU, for example, MSS has a forum for religious practice through prayers and preaching (*tafsirs*). Interactive sessions, such as Campus Discourse, an MSS program, is intended to familiarize Muslim students with religious and non-religious debates and provide them with the tools to craft arguments based on Islamic teachings.[36] The FCS conducts fellowship meetings in the school chapel

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[30] Reported by a Christian student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 24, 2018. (Sounaye, forthcoming)

[31] Reported by a Christian student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 24, 2018. (Sounaye, forthcoming)

[32] MSSN was founded in Lagos, Nigeria, on April 18, 1954, to help Muslim students to practice their faith. NFCS promotes Catholic ideals and peaceful and harmonious coexistence between Muslim and Christian; the FCS is an interdenominational association primarily representing non-Catholic Christian students.

[33] Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 64.

[34] https://nfcsuniben.wordpress.com/about/brief-history.

[35] https://fcsnigeria.org/, accessed September 10, 2018.

[36] MSS official interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 25, 2018. For testimonies on this program, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm4Jf6f16iA. Campus Discourse programs are not limited to the ABU campus.

three times a week. Such events provide opportunities for student religious organizations to attract new members and communicate their values. They also provide important opportunities to build communities of support through facilitating interactions among students and promoting balance in students' academic and religious lives.

Religious associations have also developed strategic programs tailored to students throughout their time at university. Orientation programs for new students represent one such program. Organized at four levels (class, departmental, faculty, and campus), the orientation programs position religious associations as the first point of contact for students. For MSS, the orientation program begins with a prayer, followed by a recitation of the Qur'an; a public lecture (*ta'alim*); and a general introduction to important university buildings, the academic calendar, and university rules and regulations. Most orientations conclude with an overview of MSS program for the year and a list of phone numbers and contacts for MSS officials in university faculties and residences. This information is particularly important for newcomers in case they need help with registration; accommodation; dress codes; counseling on personal, sexual, or other forms of harassment; or any other issues. The NFCS and FCS orientation programs follow similar patterns. The orientations do help students to transition to their new social and academic environment; however, in the course of conducting the fieldwork, the authors found that one apparent goal is to expand the follower base in a highly competitive religious context. Through the provision of services, religious associations gain visibility on campus and become an important source of support and guidance for students, many of whom are living outside of their home communities for the first time. According to one MSS student leader, the orientation program guides students and prevents situations where "everybody will be left languishing, to take his own decision."[37] This is an important function, given the extent to which religion serves as a key institution and social structure in Nigeria. By creating a supportive community and facilitating opportunities on campus and post-graduation, MSS can serve as an important bulwark against the influence of broader conflict dynamics.

Similarly, FCS periodically organizes seminars and workshops that bridge religion with non-religious topics. The authors observed one of these workshops organized during the field research. The workshop focused on "Politics and Governance" and sought to educate members on their rights during elections and the need to participate in elections both inside and outside their organizations. Like many student religious events, it emphasized the importance of civic participation, good morals, and leadership. In conversations with the authors, before and after the event, organizers emphasized the perceived imperatives of increasing awareness of the moral and political challenges that students, and Nigerian society more broadly, face. Participants, both men and women, noted the value of this and similar events intended to prepare them to live their faith and meet their social responsibilities. The authors observed that religion heavily influenced the event and discussion. Those gathered often punctuated the discussion with enthusiastic proclamations of "Amen!" and engaged in moments of prayers and music of praise and worship. Participants often used biblical examples to illustrate the religious imperative and duty of participation in politics and political leadership. Much of the discussion centered around the notion of leadership and morality, specifically religious morality, as an important means of combatting corruption, suggesting that the involvement of moral

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[37] MSS official interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 25, 2018.

Christians in politics was needed to improve governance. Although not directly stated, comments throughout the event took on a competitive tone, seeming to suggest that more Christian involvement and leadership in politics was needed to compete with the more active participation of Muslims, both on- and off-campus. Again, however, the event itself emphasized the community-building significance of student religious associations. Attendees engaged in the discussion and activities and, as noted, seemed to derive real value from their participation.

These types of activities, particularly those focused on building political leadership skills and capacities, are not exclusive to Christian organizations. Numerous flyers and posters spread on trees, in lecture halls, and on the walls at ABU, as well as conversations with Muslim students and organizations, also advocated for religiously aligned political leadership and participation. This topic of religion, leadership, and politics is particularly noteworthy. Increasingly, at both state and federal levels, political leaders outside of the university system have courted students' associations, especially during election campaigns. Evidence collected at ABU additionally demonstrated that these associations function as a base of support for politicians, public figures and movements, especially for those political leaders who were formerly members of the respective associations. In short, while the religious associations serve the purpose of providing support and a sense of community, they also serve the function of political centering. Students construct their political identities and become politically conscious and engaged, often for the first time, within these groups.

CONTESTED CATEGORIES, RESOURCES, AND INFLUENCE

While holding events on campus helps student religious organizations to consolidate their social base, establish a strong sense of in-group community, and assert their presence in a competitive environment, religious activities often exacerbate controversy, contribute to tensions, and increase the risk of open conflicts. Feeding into the competition among religious groups in the Nigeria higher education sector are policies that impact and predefine the extent of their influence and official recognition on campus. ABU, Kadpoly, MAUTECH, and many other institutions in Nigeria officially recognize only two religious groups (one Muslim, one Christian), although they authorize three religious associations to represent the student body. MSS, FCS, and NFCS serve as the three representative associations at ABU.[38] MSS and FCS represent the two distinctly recognized religious groups; NFCS is recognized as an appendage of the FCS and a representative association. This policy of recognition shapes the politics of religion on the ABU campus, creating contested categories and centers of power. As the only recognized Muslim association on campus, MSS has significant influence over religious practices and activities across the university; however, there are 17 other Muslim religious associations at ABU.[39] TIMSAN and the "Shiite student group," as it is known, are by far the most significant of the Muslim student groups that have not received official recognition. Both have grown critical of MSS and have regularly challenged its authority, accusing its leaders of serving a Salafi agenda and of being both anti-Shia and anti-Sufi. As noted by interviewees, the 1-and-2

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[38] Institutions recognize official associations based on their own specific dynamics. Thus, official associations vary on campuses where the 1-and-2 policy is in effect.

[39] MSS official interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 25, 2018.

policy (explained further in the next section) and governance scheme have left groups like TIMSAN and Shiite groups feeling victimized and delegitimized.[40] Perspectives expressed by Tijaniyya and, to some extent, Shiite, respondents regarding the dominance of MSS and Salafi actors and views suggest that these grievances are increasing.[41] Similarly, discussions with the Christian NFCS uncovered grievances; some perceived that they received unfair treatment at student residences (campus hostels) on the ABU campus because of their religious affiliation. A case reported by one Christian interviewee involved a student who had been denied access to the water faucet at the ABU central mosque supposedly because of her religious affiliation.

Intrareligious disputes

The 1-and-2 policy stipulates that religious associations that are not recognized by ABU and other universities utilizing this policy should operate under the associations that are officially recognized. This policy bestows substantial influence and authority on MSS over Islamic activities on campus, and has, in some cases, created friction between MSS and other Islamic student associations. For example, TIMSAN needs MSS's approval to access university mosques and perform its *wazifa* (a Tijaniyya prayer). However, viewing this prayer as sectarian in nature, a ritual that is "grounded neither in the Qur'an nor in the Sunna,"[42] MSS has, in the past, denied TIMSAN access to the mosque for this activity.

One MSS official argued that to avoid sectarianism and fragmentation, and therefore conflict, the group does not allow "Tariqa [Sufi organizations], Izala, Shia or any other sectarian leanings in the association."[43] Tensions have risen between MSS and TIMSAN as a result of this and similar situations and these tensions often necessitate the intervention of the Student Affairs Division (SAD)'s deputy dean[44] and the Vice Chancellor.[45] Nevertheless, even with mediation by administrators, animosity between the groups remains. For example, one of the most high-profile events at ABU is MSS's annual Jihad week.[46] A show of religious devotion on campus, the event brings together current and former members of MSS for lectures that often include taking positions on sensitive issues in the university and society.[47] Many students and instructors, however, complained about the Jihad Week, charging that it is threatening, disruptive, and sectarian. As stated by a TIMSAN student leader, MSS members "go about the campus chanting '*La-illah Illahlah*' and '*Allahu Akbar*' in combatant voices, disturbing the peace of Muslims and non-Muslims alike; if you were not a Muslim, the procession would actually make Islam unattractive to you."[48]

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[40] TIMSAN student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

[41] Interviewees expressed the perception that Salafist actors and ideas are increasing within MSS.

[42] TIMSAN student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

[43] MSS official interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 25, 2018.

[44] M. Kabir Aliyu, former Dean of Student Affairs, ABU, Zaria, interviewed at University of Abuja campus, March 26, 2018.

[45] TIMSAN student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

[46] https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/daily/education/24696-islamic-and-contemporary-knowledge-are-guides-for-success.

[47] An example of this is a public lecture, "MSS: Misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam by the Media" and the "Inter-Ethnic Marriage: A Solution to Low Marriage Counts Among Youth," organized on April 5, 2018.

[48] TIMSAN student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

TIMSAN members referred to their MSS counterparts as "politicians who have strayed from '*pan-ummahtism*' (one *ummah*)"[49] and whose actions "cause hatred and disunity among Muslims."[50] TIMSAN leaders have even described MSS as "heretical" in its efforts to maintain its hegemonic position.[51] Unresolved grievances expressed by both MSS and TIMSAN risk escalating further their comparative disparities in resources, support, and status, and have broader implications for religious life on campus. In 2017, the Suleiman mosque, located in one of ABU's male hostels, was shut down for one month following a dispute between TIMSAN and MSS over TIMSAN's attempted use of the mosque to celebrate the *Maulud* (the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad).[52]

To balance Muslim representation, TIMSAN has been advocating for the same recognition status as the NFCS. ABU officials insist that recognizing more associations would make regulation unwieldy and more complex, necessitating increased efforts to satisfy the interests of more groups on campus.[53] However, as TIMSAN and other groups, including the Shiite, acquire more influence, their frustrations could lead to greater contestations and possibly trigger violent confrontations. Similar dynamics exist beyond ABU, where contestations among different religious associations for influence and access exist.[54]

Not all Nigerian universities adopt the 1-and-2 policy. The University of Ibadan, for example, maintains a more open policy that recognizes a multitude of religious associations. Based on the researchers' experience and interviews while visiting the university, tensions among religious groups seemed less of a topic of discussion or source of discord—although the extent to which this is due to the lack of the 1-and-2 policy is unclear. In the absence of reform, the 1-and-2 policy adopted by many Nigerian universities could engender more disunity and dysfunction, contrary to its intent.

Interreligious Disputes: Grievances and Violence

Religious tensions on Nigerian campuses, whether along religious student association lines or not, continue to impact student life and social divisions. Beyond the campuses themselves, the communities where campuses are located have a decisive impact on student life and perceptions of student groups and their impact on campus.[55] At ABU, MSS benefits from Zaria's Muslim majority, northern heritage, traditional aristocracy, and political configuration,[56] at times to the detriment of interreligious and intra-religious harmony on campus. Social, political, and religious dynamics in surrounding communities can impact the perceived and actual influence of religious associations on campus,

[49] TIMSAN student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

[50] TIMSAN student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

[51] TIMSAN leader implies this when he describes Jihad week, interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

[52] TIMSAN student interviewed at ABU, Zaria, February 27, 2018.

[53] M. Kabir Aliyu, Former Dean of Student Affairs, ABU, Zaria, interviewed at University of Abuja campus, March 26, 2018.

[54] Similar dynamics were also found at MAUTECH during conflict that broke out on campus in February 2018.

[55] Brandon Kendhammer and Adama Ousmanou, "Islam, Higher Education, and Extremism in Cameroon," RESOLVE Network Lake Chad Basin Series Research Brief No. 1, February, 2019. https://resolvenet.org/research/islam-higher-education-and-extremism-cameroon

[56] This configuration is not specific to ABU and could be found on other campuses. Interview with lecturer at the University of Ibadan, February 27, 2018.

with the effect of elevating grievances among different religious student populations. The imposition of a dress code at ABU in 2005 serves as an illustrative example of this dynamic. When the dress code took effect, some members of the student body insisted that the university implemented the policy at the request of MSS and interpreted the change as a means of "Islamizing" the university.[57] Many argued that the signposts used to publicize the new dress code carried Islamic symbols, such as hijab and veils, further buttressing the assumptions of MSS's involvement in the matter.[58] This triggered debates and the destruction of the signposts and other school properties.[59] To prevent the crisis from escalating, ABU was closed for one week.

VIOLENT EXTREMISM'S REACH: ASSESSING THE IMPACT AT ABU

Interviews with students conducted during one of the authors' previous research on ABU's campus revealed insights to the perceived connection between universities and groups like Boko Haram. During those interviews, some students suggested that when Mohammed Yusuf, the founder of Boko Haram, began propagating his doctrine, his disciples visited universities such as Bayero University, Kano;[60] ABU, Zaria; and the Ramat Polytechnic, Maiduguri. Students interviewed echoed the belief that Boko Haram infiltrated the university religious student associations and promoted a militancy that culminated in some members renouncing Western education, tearing up their certificates, and joining the new order.[61]

It is unclear whether these claims are true or a product of increasing animosity among different religious actors on university campuses. However, the narrative that remains vivid in the minds of students and administrators is significant. First, it points to a perception among students that universities have, at least in the past, connections to recruitment into violent extremist organizations. Second, it speaks to the instrumentalization of violent extremism on campus as a means to stigmatize or challenge religious associations in competition for resources, power, and influence.

Significantly, findings from this study reveal that religious associations on campus sometimes use the term "extremist" to describe rival or competing student religious associations as a means of de-legitimizing their opponents—regardless of whether they were actually "extremist." The implications of this trend could lead to increased stigmatization and conflict among religious student associations. For policymakers and practitioners seeking to engage in the higher education space, the trend carries additional implications.

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[57] Former SRC official interviewed at Garki, Abuja, April 2, 2018.

[58] Former SRC official interviewed at Garki, Abuja, April 2, 2018.

[59] Kabir Danladi, "When Indecency Becomes Fashion," http://kabirudanladi.blogspot.bg/2009/03/when-indecency-becomes-fashion.html, Friday, March 13, 2009.

[60] Interview with BUK student in Kaduna, August 14, 2016, cited in Medinat Abdulazeez, "Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria: A Study of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the Maiduguri Area of Borno State, 2000–2015," Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2018.

[61] Interview with BUK student in Kaduna, August 14, 2016, cited in Medinat Abdulazeez, "Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria: A Study of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in the Maiduguri Area of Borno State, 2000–2015," Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2018.

- First, the trend suggests that given the context on campuses that exists around words such as "extremism, the introduction of discourse and programming explicitly referring to "violent extremism" could cause further polarization and provide the means for some groups to demonize others on campus.
- Second, the casual use of the term "extremism" to refer to the views of other religious student groups can lead to the adoption of inaccurate, weaponized, or misleading assessments of the nature and extent of violent extremism on campuses. At best, such assessments could result in the implementation of unnecessary policies and practices. At worst, false assessments could lead to policies and practices that undermine and demonize rival student groups and populations on campus for political ends. This, in turn, risks inducing further social polarization leading to the demonization and ostracization of certain groups deemed by others as "extremist" on campus and within the broader community. The result could be situations that actual violent extremist groups could easily exploit.

However, as with research conducted for RESOLVE studies in Cameroon and Chad,[62] despite finding that the term "extremist" is being used by some groups to gain a competitive edge, research conducted for this research brief found no current evidence of direct links to violent extremist actors or support at ABU and other universities examined. This finding is not all-encompassing. It is indeed possible that certain segments of the student population at ABU or elsewhere have connections to or are supportive of violent extremist beliefs and groups; however, there was no evidence to suggest that violent extremist groups are either actively present on campus or that violent extremism is supported by student populations at ABU. That said, certain dynamics related to conflict and competition among religious groups present an important issue related to social cohesion and resiliency moving forward.

These dynamics, however, should not discount the efforts taken by universities and students to combat the rise of religious conflict. As noted in "Campuses and Conflict,"[63] many actors within Nigeria's higher education sector have launched initiatives to increase resiliency and to counter the divisive narratives of Boko Haram. For example, the American University of Nigeria partnered with the North East Regional Initiative (NERI) to develop and test a community-centered violence risk assessment tool with aggregated risk factors that local women can use as part of an early warning system and violence prevention architecture.[64] Similarly, the University of Maiduguri, the site of numerous Boko Haram attacks, established the CVE Resource Centre in June 2018, with funding and support by NERI, to conduct research and inform counternarratives addressing violent extremism in the region.[65]

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[62] Remadji Hoinathy and Daniel Eizenga, "The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education: Testing Perceived Ties to Violent Extremism," RESOLVE Network Lake Chad Basin Series Research Brief No. 2, March, 2019. https://resolvenet.org/research/state-secularism-chadian-higher-education-testing-perceived-ties-violent-extremism

[63] Thurston, 2018a.

[64] https://www.aun.edu.ng/index.php/news-events/news/aun-neri-train-select-women-to-counter-violent-extremism-in-northeast-nigeria.

[65] https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/nnorth-east/274285-boko-haram-unimaid-launches-center-for-counter-terrorism.html.

Conclusion and Future Research Priorities

In a country where conflict regularly falls along religious lines, better understanding of the interactions among and within different religious communities, especially among youth, is key to the ability to craft more effective and proactive policies and practices. This research brief examined the role of and interactions among organized religious communities at ABU to facilitate the analysis of the dynamics among religious student associations and their effects on student life in Nigeria. The findings provide important insights into campus dynamics and how they mirror religious trends and competition in the broader Nigerian society.

Religious student associations and activities on campuses, as shown in the case of ABU, can build supportive communities and important connections for students and alumni. By providing activities, guidance, counseling, and support during and after students' university careers, these religious associations play an important role in creating career opportunities and shaping the values of youth.

However, this research also illuminated important religious schisms at ABU and other campuses. University policies on the representation of religious groups and ongoing interreligious and intrareligious divides can further competition, polarization, and violence among different religious student populations. A stratified and competitive religious market place at ABU, for example, risks continued conflict over influence, power, and religious expression. As suggested by supplementary research for this study, these findings are somewhat mirrored in other Nigerian universities, where dynamics related to religions competition and conflict has, in the past, resulted in violence and fatalities. Competition for influence among religious groups on campus, exacerbated by university policies—such as the 1-and-2 policy—that grant authority to select religious student associations over others, complicates the situation. Greater efforts to address these dynamics are necessary moving forward because they have implications for intervention outcomes. These efforts are especially important if those interventions are perceived to benefit certain groups in ways that increase disparities—whether real or perceived—in the distribution of resources or influence. Policies and practices should be sensitive to these ongoing schisms among student populations and wary of unintentionally exacerbating them.

An additional problematic finding from this study was the use of the term "extremist" to demonize rivals by student religious associations at ABU. This trend has implications for understanding the true nature of the threat of violent extremism on campuses in the absence of in-depth research. Moreover, it polarizes student populations and creates false alarms within the community regarding the nature of those groups deemed "extremists" by other groups vying for influence. Still, the study did not find any overt connections to violent extremist organizations such as Boko Haram outside of general speculation or accusations from the interviewees.

Based on the findings from this study, the authors recommend the following for policymakers and practitioners to consider as they address ways to decrease conflict and increase social cohesion in Nigerian higher education and beyond:

- Work with university administrators and student groups to develop and implement non-exclusionary policies for the regulation of religious resources and affairs on campuses. For example, the 1-and-2 policy, which is based on the official recognition of only a few religious student associations, might benefit from an expansion. Treat students as key partners in any such expansion, and include their voices in the process.
- Create conditions for dialogue among religious student groups on campuses and within faith groups to promote conversation and collaboration. Creating regular, safe, and neutral spaces and opportunities for interreligious and intrareligious dialogues and exchanges among members of different organizations can improve understanding and tolerance among different student religious groups on campuses. Center the topics for these dialogues around facilitating respectful discussion to achieve shared goals. Focus potential dialogue initiatives on shared values and common goals, both on and off campus, to facilitate interaction and understanding.
- Support and engage religious and nonreligious student groups as partners in shared and sustainable on- and off-campus efforts to promote unity and prevent and counter violent extremism. Numerous efforts to counter and prevent violent extremism on university campuses in Nigeria have occurred.[66] Expand participation in such activities to help to unite otherwise disparate student religious populations around a common cause and foster a sense of community and resiliency.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings from this research speak to the nature of and dynamics among student associations, the university administration, and the broader community at ABU. Further research is needed on additional campuses to gauge the extent to which these findings apply across Nigerian higher education institutions. Similar studies should be replicated across Nigerian university campuses, including those directly affected by violent extremist dynamics.

In addition, research for this brief uncovered important dynamics related to external connections to student religious associations at ABU through alumni connections and external university and student religious association patrons. However, the research was not able to elicit in-depth information on these trends due to constraints related to access to information and willingness of individuals to speak on issues of funding or external influence. Further study and attention are needed to better understand how external actors influence religious dynamics on university campuses and vice versa.

Finally, this research brief elicited information on specific student religious associations on campuses—most notably, MSS, FCS, and TIMSAN. However, the researchers were unable to gather information on other organizations, including religious associations such as the IMN and secular organizations on campuses. Further study of interactions and

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[66] Including through EdVenture's Peer to Peer Facebook Global Digital Challenge, which challenges students to create social media-based campaigns to counter hate speech and extremism. Over the years, various Nigerian university teams have participated. For a list of those teams and more on the Challenge, see: https://edventurepartners.com/peer-to-peer-facebook-global-digital-challenge.

perceptions among organizations not represented in these findings is needed to better understand the complexities and intercommunal dynamics occurring on higher education campuses and implications of these interactions on student life.

Increasing understanding of the nature of these topics throughout the Nigerian university system requires greater investment in local research, analysis, and resources. This research is a starting point for future study, both in Nigeria and beyond. Further study and attention to developing dynamics in Nigerian higher education and social structures are needed in crafting policies and practices capable of effectively addressing the social, religious, and resource-based schisms that threaten broader social cohesion and resilience.

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