Degrees of Political Extremism in West Africa

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Abstract

Political extremism and rebel movements are not events. They are, instead, the outcomes of long dynamic processes involving oppressive governance structures of symbolic and systemic violence against citizens and communities. These processes and structures are the political contexts from which jihadist groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and Jamā’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen emerge. Against this background, this article reviews four constitutive elements of political extremism: grievances, networks, legitimating ideologies, and local contexts. It argues that we can, and should, think of the potential for political extremism within African countries in terms of the degree to which these elements are available to serve as motivation, justification, opportunity, and capacity for political extremism. I argue that West African countries might be categorised as those experiencing political extremism and those that may do so in the future. The article draws on the literature on political violence, and cases and examples from Nigeria and Ghana.

Introduction

A United Nations Development Program ([UNDP] 2017, 15) report titled Journey to Extremism in Africa concludes that “violent extremism can be expected to increasingly act as a brake on Africa’s development aspirations unless steps are taken now to address its drivers and enablers.” Noting this point, this article contends that the issue must not stop there: steps should also be taken to address the problem in countries that are not yet experiencing violent extremism. There are two immediate reasons for this approach. First, while extremism is not yet present in some West African countries, the ingredients that contribute to extremism and violent rebellion are already present and starting to coalesce across communities.
Second, and perhaps more important, extremist movements are processes, rather than events. They are the outcomes of long-standing dynamics of oppressive governance structures which produce exclusion and underdevelopment, as well as systemic violence against citizens and communities.

Across Africa, these processes and structures are the political contexts from which jihadist groups such as Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, and Jamā’at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) emerge. By understanding the political context of these movements, it may be possible to delineate how existing socio-political structures—including in countries or communities currently not experiencing political extremism—are, or could be, a part of the dynamics that create rebel groups. Understanding the context will provide a better understanding of the kinds of conditions that might motivate and justify rebellion against the state, its agents, and institutions. It will also help identify the extent to which sentiments favouring rebellion are held by communities, and the opportunities that exist to actualise such an outcome.

Discussing statehood, Clapham (1998) argues that instead of distinguishing between entities that are states and those that are not, we should regard statehood as a continuum. Citing Harris, Schmid (2004, 110) contends that “the difference between fundamentalists and moderates—and certainly the difference between all ‘extremists’ and moderates—is the degree to which they see political and military action to be intrinsic to the practice of their faith.” Applying this principle, this article contends that rather than distinguishing between African countries that are, and are not, experiencing political extremism, it is imperative to view the manifestation of extremism as a continuum and as a matter of degree. I identify four elements or factors that contribute to political extremism: 1) grievances and aggrieved individuals; 2) a supportive group or network; 3) a legitimising ideology; and 4) a conducive local and global environment. These factors traverse and interact with economic, political, cultural, historical, and territorial dynamics to produce political extremism. Rebellion in the sub-region must, therefore, be understood as manifesting in different degrees, commensurate with how many of these factors are present. In other words, while rebellion, extremism and terrorism are not particular to any one community, some societies may have more of these factors, hence higher degrees of the potential for extremism, than others.

All African countries have varying degrees of socio-economic and political grievances that motivate rebellion. Jihadist rebellions in countries such as Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali, however, contain additional
elements that provide the justification, opportunity, and capacity to rebel, rather than some innate predisposition to violence. These additional factors and elements serve as force multipliers in the motivation to use violence as a tool for change, both on the personal and communal levels. Following this argument, a full-blown violent extremist movement is possible even in countries without ongoing open rebellion, if there are additional constitutive elements to multiply persistent and widespread socio-economic and political grievances.

These ideas draw from some of the arguments contained in Political Opportunity Theory (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2003; Meyer 2004; Tarrow 2011). Relevant to our argument, the theory holds that the actions of change activists are dependent on the availability or otherwise of a political opportunity, defined by Tarrow (2011, 32) as the “consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political struggle that encourage people to engage in contentious politics.” In terms of capacity, Buehler et al. (2009, 544) note that “geographic factors (such as location, terrain, and natural resources) interact with rebel fighting capacity and together play a crucial role in determining the duration of conflict.”

In drawing on the wider political economy of West African societies, and the regional and global dynamics that affect their functioning, it is possible to illuminate how jihadist or other rebel movements have utilised certain opportunities. In countries without current violent rebellion, it is possible to analyse how extremist movements might occur given the right set of circumstances, or opportunities. Applying these ideas to communities within the sub-region and to problems in their formative stages, it becomes possible to suggest how they might, in the future, experience violent rebellion and threats to various levels of security.

This article follows Mildersky (2011) in defining political extremism as

the will to power by a social movement in the service of a political program typically at variance with that supported by existing state authorities, and for which individual liberties are to be curtailed in the name of collective goals, including the mass murder of those who would actually or potentially disagree with that program. (Cited in Schmid 2014, 12)

This definition is adopted to encapsulate concepts such as political radicalism that may result in an insurgency, and the use of tactics such as terrorism, suicide bombings, kidnapping, and assassinations.
In the next section, I engage the literature on political violence, especially the pieces that offer processual nuances and disaggregate the constitutive elements of radicalisation, extremism, and political rebellion. Following this, I use the case study of Boko Haram in Nigeria to bring some empirical evidence to the above elements, and to illustrate the motivation behind and justification for Boko Haram, as well as the opportunity and capability deployed by the Nigerian insurgency. A final section offers general perspectives on political extremism in countries not experiencing open rebellion, such as Ghana.

**Constitutive Elements of Political Extremism**

From Ted Gurr (1970) in *Why Men Rebel*, to theories of greed or grievances in civil war (Collier and Hoeffler 2004) and new wars (Kaldor 2013), scholars have attempted to explain the motivation behind violent rebellion and conflicts. While one cannot do justice this exhaustive literature here, I identify four interrelated elements of political extremism relevant to our argument: the presence of grievances, a supportive group or network that socialises this grievance, a legitimising ideology, and a conducive local or global environment. Throughout much of the literature, these four elements reoccur in varying forms. My goal in this section is to outline these elements and then to use them to support examples in Nigeria and Ghana.

Louise Richardson (2007) argues that terrorism requires three conditions to occur: a disenfranchised and aggrieved set of individuals, a supportive group, and a legitimising ideology. Arie Kruglanski et al. (2014) identify three ingredients of individual radicalisation that roughly parallel Richardson’s: a motivational element involving the quest for personal significance and defining the goal of one’s activity; an ideology, which is a belief system identifying the means to that goal or the way of gaining that significance; and the social process (networking, group dynamics) which serves “as the vehicle whereby the individual comes in contact with the ideology.” Elsewhere, Webber and Kruglanski (2018) simplify this in a “3N” approach, involving needs (individual motivation), narratives (the ideological justification of violence), and network (group processes).

The “phased explanation” of terrorism advanced by Doosje et al. (2016, 79) also refers to these elements. Phase one of their model “is characterized by a sensitivity to a radical ideology”, phase two is where “an individual becomes a member of a radical group”, and phase three is when a person may be “ready to act on behalf of the group’s ideology”. For their part, Silber and Bhatt (2007) explain homegrown jihadist
radicalisation as evolving through four stages, the pre-radicalisation phase, the self-identification phase, the indoctrination phase, and finally, the jihadiisation phase. If the above constitutive aspects of extremism are on a horizontal plane, other studies, such as the “staircase to terrorism” model (Moghaddam 2005) and the pyramid model (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008), attempt to place them on a vertical gradient.

The “staircase to terrorism” model treats the process of radicalisation as a six-floor building, where the ground floor is the largest with the remaining floors becoming smaller at each climb until the fifth floor. Importantly, it notes that many “people, even when feeling deprived and unfairly treated, remain on the ground floor, [while] some individuals climb up and are eventually recruited into terrorist organisations” (Moghaddam 2005, 161). In this regard, McCauley and Moskalenko opine that “one way of thinking about radicalisation is that it is the gradient that distinguishes terrorists from their base of sympathizers” (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008, 417). Their pyramid model maintains that the overwhelming majority of people who could be radicalised remain at the wider base, while a few progress upwards to the ever-narrowing tip of the pyramid (McCauley and Moskalenko 2008).

In the broader field of violent conflict and civil war literature, other scholars identify a variety of factors. The Social Cubism framework (Byrne and Carter 1996) refers to six causal factors contributing to conflict: the socio-economic, the political, the geographical and/or environmental, the historical, the religious and/or ideological, and the psycho-cultural. Randy Borum notes that “violence is ‘caused’ by a complex interaction of biological, social/contextual, cognitive, and emotional factors that occur over time. Some causes will be more prominent than others for certain individuals and certain types of violence and aggression” (Borum 2004, 10). To Michael Brown (1996), there are four categories of the permissive and proximate causes of conflict (structural, political, socio-economic, and cultural). Acknowledging the interplay of the above factors, Zartman concludes that conflicts traverse multiple motivational levels of need, creed and greed. To him, the interesting questions “are how these factors relate to each other in causing and sustaining conflict, and how, not whether, conflict is related to these three factors” (Zartman 2019, 95).

These frameworks are applied mainly to extremism in Western societies. Despite potential ideological and normative premises inherent in these models, they nevertheless present conduits through which the arguments about degrees of political extremism in West Africa can be made. These factors and elements may also seem to create a “Kitchen
Sink” problem in trying to causally analyse the problem of political extremism. No single social phenomenon, least of all political violence, however, could be analysed through a monocular lens (Higazi et al. 2018).

From these four constitutive elements, we can draw several key dynamics—socio-economic, political, psycho-cultural, historical, ideological, and geographical/territorial—in violent conflicts in Africa. While these variables are generic and overlap substantially, they are based on causal factors reflected in the literature above. I argue that political extremism should be understood as a continuum depending on the extent to which the above constitutive elements, along with these key dynamics, are present in any given country.

**Boko Haram: A Case Study**

Boko Haram is a Nigerian jihadist movement that started in the country’s north east around 2009. Translated as ‘education is forbidden’, it has engaged in a violent campaign in the name of establishing a form of political Islam. The group was born in the early 2000s, in the context of Nigeria’s post-1999 politics following decades of military rule. To Walker (2012), it was the August 2011 suicide attack on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja that brought the violent and ideological fortitude of the group to world news. Yet, in many respects, it was Boko Haram’s abduction of 276 schoolgirls in the northeastern town of Chibok in April 2014 that catapulted the group into global prominence, with “global leaders and celebrities leading … a campaign for [their] immediate release” (Mickler et al. 2019, 273).

In recent times, this insurgency has come under some control, although it continues to pose significant threats to all levels of security. From its initial violent engagement with Nigeria’s security forces in 2009, the group has morphed into three factions:

1) The original group, usually referred to as Boko Haram, *Jama’atu Ahl al-Sunna lid Da’wati wa al-Jihad* ( Followers of Prophetic Traditions on Preaching and Struggle or ASJ);

2) *Ansaru al-Musulmeen fî Bilad al-Sudan* (Helpers of the Muslims in the Land of the Black People or Ansaru); and

3) *Wilāyat Gharb Ifriqiyyah* (Islamic State’s West Africa Province or ISWAP).

The last two groups came from splits in 2012 and 2016 respectively. Although they differ in terms of ideology and tactic—Ansaru, for
instance, broke away due to Shekau’s indiscriminate killing of civilians, while ISWAP is beholden to ISIS’ ideology as opposed to ASJ which follows al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, they are all situated within the political economy of (mis)governance within Nigeria and, by extension, Western Africa.

Much has been written on what led to, and sustained, what we now call Boko Haram. This literature includes many simplistic treatments of the Nigerian insurgency. Zenn (2017), for example, has been criticised by many scholars in that respect (Higazi et al. 2018). Some scholars of Boko Haram, and jihadist movements in Africa in general, use ideologically compromised and morally subjective language such as “Butchers of Nigeria” (Soyinka 2012) and “today we shall drink blood” (Cline 2011). Others conclude, in a thesis resembling Kaplan (1994), that “West Africa is becoming the home of a 21st century Islamist dystopia” and “Islamist activities in West Africa have prompted the possible emergence of a new ‘Middle East’ in that part of the world” (Sulemana and Azeez 2015, 52). Methodologically, others write on causes of Boko Haram consulting suspect data and/or by relying on data in locations far removed from the local context of rebellion: Pérouse de Montclos (2020), for example, criticises Comolli (2015) for writing a whole book based on interviewing people in Abuja, and not in Borno State.

A common denominator of these treatments of Boko Haram is that they tilt towards the tendency to outsource the cause of the African insurgency to the Middle East. They reify the global ideological, rather than the local material socio-economic and political, aspects of Boko Haram. The reality, however, is that Boko Haram was born and bred under oppressive political-economic structures in Nigeria. The insurgency is predominantly grievance-based, and international or global factors or connections became accessories to rebellion in relation to the justification and legitimising of rebellion (Dan Suleiman 2017a).

Boko Haram resulted from a long chronology of events across many decades (see Reinert and Garçon 2014 for example) which implicates pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial politics. Abdul Raufu Mustafa (2014) listed poverty and inequality, post-1999 politics, youth agency, religious ideology, and geography as the key elements in the emergence of Boko Haram. Accordingly, William Hansen (2017, 551) concludes that Boko Haram is “a reaction to more than a half century of corruption, venality, poverty, and abuse by the state predator class.” Other scholars have pointed to Boko Haram’s proximity to porous border regions of Borno State in Nigeria with Cameroon and Chad (geography), the local community grassroots support (hence social networks), and decades of
state failure to address endemic poverty, inequality, and the grievances of radicalised youth (Zenn, Barkindo and Heras 2013). Grievances, supportive networks, legitimising ideology, and favourable environment therefore render Boko Haram an attractive alternative. Thurston (2016) highlights this complexity:

it is misleading to treat Boko Haram as a socio-economic protest with an Islamic veneer, an ethnic revolt, a puppet of foreign jihadists, or a resurgence of an earlier religious movement. Rather, analysis should examine the interaction between structural factors, politics, and ideas in Northeastern Nigeria, and how this locality both redirected and diverged from broader global trends in militancy. (8)

We can safely assert, from the foregoing discussion, that Boko Haram (including all its factions), emerged from an interplay of socio-economic, political, psycho-cultural, historical, geographical, and ideological factors, with socio-economic factors appearing to play the major part. To support this argument, a veteran technocrat in the Nigerian security forces maintained that if someone (such as an jihadist intellectual entrepreneur) visits a place like a bank and asks people to burn their certificates and join ‘a jihad’, he or she may get one person out of a thousand to oblige. In a car park full of people with little or no source of income, however, he or she may get three hundred.1 The point is that there would be more grievances and aggrieved individuals in the latter place, than in the former.

Socio-economic grievances become political, in a context of horizontal inequality, which Stewarts (2011, 3) describes as inequality “in economic, social or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups” located in the same country. He adds that where adverse socio-economic conditions coincide and cross-fertilise with real or perceived marginalisation of cultural and identity groups the potential for rebellion increases. The northeast of Nigeria is the poorest in the country, and northern Nigeria has a predominantly homogenous Muslim population. This is why Boko Haram is political: these factors enable it to challenge “Western values, challenge the secularity of the Nigerian state, and reveal the corruption of a ‘democracy’ that relies on a

1 Interview with a serving military officer with operational experience in countering Boko Haram, 27 March 2018, Kaduna, Nigeria.
predatory ruling elite, the so-called ‘godfathers’” (Pérouse de Montclos 2014, 155).

The very existence of socio-economic and political grievances justifies a desire for alternative politics. Although post-colonial African countries, including Nigeria, have widespread socio-economic and political grievances, not all of them have experienced violent extremism within their borders. Apart from factors that spur rebellion on the material level, there should also be justification on the ideological and discursive level. It is on the ideological level that psycho-historical factors come in. According to Stewart (2009):

while all conflicts have several motives with political and or economic ones generally central, mobilisation frequently occurs on the basis of particular identities, and conflicts can then be classified as ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’, or class or ideological, on the basis of how people are mobilised rather than with respect to the political or economic motives for such mobilisation. (5)

Boko Haram’s success as an insurgency is attributable to the availability of pre-existing emirates and caliphates in northern Nigeria. For instance, at the intersection of psycho-historical and geographical dynamics, the territories once controlled or traversed by the insurgency in the present-day Lake Chad Basin (LCB) area would fit almost perfectly with the map of the Kanem-Bornu Empire, which existed at varying degrees of strength from the ninth to the nineteenth centuries. Indeed, most Boko Haram leaders are of the Kanuri ethnic group, descendants of the Empire.

The pre-colonial Sahel region had also been home to Muslim imperial contestations, including the jihads of Usman dan Fodio in present-day Northern Nigeria (Kane 2008, 164). This history allows the “creation of a potent sense of victimhood based on re-invented or re-interpreted historical grievances” (Jackson and Dexter 2014, 17). The anger and rage given to the immediacy of these grievances can then become the basis for and justification of violence directed towards self-defence or righteous revenge. In short, across the Sahel, this religio-political history allows for easy justification of political extremism in ways that other regions or countries in Western Africa lack.

State repression is yet another political factor that led to the justification of violent extremism and facilitated Boko Haram. In 2019, Stig Hansen (2009) claimed the extrajudicial killing of Yusuf was not
crucial in the making of Boko Haram. Yet, “Boko Haram under Muhammad Yusuf was not violent prior to 2009” before the “unprovoked killing of its leader and continuous jailing of its members caused violent retaliation” (Hansen and Musa 2013, 286). Thurston lists “the brutality of the Nigerian government’s response” as one of the triggers of Boko Haram. A specialist in security strategy emphasised the role of the killing of Yusuf. To him, that allowed the remaining members to filter out into neighbouring countries and the notorious Sambisa Forest to rebuild themselves and come out with the clear strategy of violence against the Nigerian state.

Many scholars highlight the role of geography in explaining Boko Haram (Mustafa 2014; Zenn et al. 2013). The reference to Sambisa Forest shows that the location of Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria played a key role. Socio-economic and political grievances, active political history, and state repression could not, in and of themselves, have led to the Boko Haram we know today. The location of Borno State—hence of Boko Haram—provided a conducive local environment, and the presence of porous borders in the Lake Chad Basin countries of Chad, Cameroon, and Niger is yet another favourable geography. To two peace-building researchers, women were paid one hundred dollars to carry “stuff”—possibly weapons, cash or even drugs—across the Niger-Nigeria border, at the height of the Boko Haram insurgency. In this sense, geography offered both the opportunity and capability to rebel or expand the rebellion. The active political history discussed above provided a favourable local discursive and global environment.

Ideology serves as a force multiplier for all the above factors. There are local and global dimensions to the role of religious ideology. Locally, Nyang (1984, 21) pointed out that the jihad wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western Africa were declared on the invading European armies. Islamic resistance to colonialism insisted not just on the end of foreign rule but also the grant of cultural, socio-economic, and religious autonomy to the African (Muslim). Since de-colonisation failed to deliver this autonomy (wa Mutua 1995, 1116), there remains a deep-seated disavowal of Western systems of rule in predominantly Muslim societies. Boko Haram’s legitimising ideology, Salafi-Jihadism, draws on

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2 Interview with a retired Army General with leadership experience in UN and African Union peacekeeping, and a defence and security governance expert, 29 March 2018, Abuja, Nigeria.

this deep-seated wish for an Islamic form of politics. This jihadist ideology helps in explaining, justifying and supporting alternative political governance structures and forms of insurgent action.

An interplay of socio-economic and political grievances, favourable local history, and geography and conducive global ideological environment, as a matter of course, create supportive groups and networks that socialises the motivation and justification for rebellion. Still, the connection to other groups came due to the endogenous ontology of northern Nigerian society. Here, one can hardly disagree with Thurston (2018, 3) that “Boko Haram represents the outcome of dynamic, locally grounded interactions between religion and politics.” Without endemic and persistent socio-economic and political grievances, and aggrieved individuals and communities, Nigeria and the LCB area would have experienced the violence and threat that Boko Haram has come to embody.

The Potential for Political Extremism: A Ghanaian Illustration

A body of literature challenges the causal relationship, or the nature of the relationship, between poverty and violent conflict, with some scholars pointing to an inverse relationship between economic health and ethnic rebellion (see Braithwaite et al. 2016; Olzak 2006, 145). Very few scholars, however, discuss rebellion or political extremism in Africa without underscoring socio-economic and political grievances. As an international relations and governance professor in Abuja explained, the deplorable socio-economic conditions help extremist ideologues to couch their ideology in the context of the hereafter: “you better fight now. If you succeed in taking over the State, fine. [But] if you do not succeed in taking over the State, there is a reward in the afterlife”.

Unsurprisingly, an Afrobarometer survey found that, in the Lake Chad Basin countries, the desire for personal enrichment or power was a far more common motivation to join extremist groups than religious ideology (Buchanan-Clarke and Lekalake 2016, 3). We know from this evidence and from the short case study of Boko Haram that socio-economic and political grievances remain at the core of the problem of political extremism. For security and governance scholars and practitioners in African countries such as Ghana, where there is no full-fledged political extremist insurgency on the scale of Boko Haram, there are some key questions:

1) To what degree do conditions that motivate and justify rebellion against the state, its agents, and institutions exist among citizens and communities?

2) To what extent could groups and communities attain the opportunity and capability to actualise the motivation to rebel?

3) Why do some Western African communities experience jihadist violence while others do not, even though grievances are widespread and persistent?

Communities in Ghana—a country which is a beacon of peace and democracy in Africa—may lack the level of homogeneity that allows for the socialisation of the motivation, and justification for collective violence. Its communities may also lack favourable ideological and geographical opportunity and capacity. Yet, Ghana, like all African countries, has endemic socio-economic grievances and aggrieved individuals, most of whom are youth. Given this fact, there is potential for political extremism to grow.

A peace and security professor, Kwesi Aning, shared an interesting perspective. He echoed this article’s argument in stating that extremism manifests in different shades and that even disobeying sanitation laws and vandalising (or stealing) public streetlights could all be extremist acts by citizens against the state for failures to provide the socio-economic needs of citizens. He emphasised the need to look at rebellion at the lower levels of society, noting that it would be important to know what ordinary citizens were willing to do to survive the harsh socio-economic conditions that confront them daily.5 The suggestion is that these lower-level, or ‘soft’, manifestations of rebellion could, if not checked, explode into full-blown, large scale violence.

Reinforcing this point, Ghana is dealing with a proliferation of militia groups with names such as ‘Azorka Boys’, ‘Delta Force’, ‘Invincible Forces’, ‘Kandahar’, and ‘Bamba Boys’ (Gyampo et al. 2017). These creations are used by political patrons affiliated with Ghana’s two main political parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC), for political advantage, and to disrupt law and order. In one instance, the Delta Force vigilante group “stormed the Kumasi Circuit Court and freed 13 members of their group who were facing charges for causing disturbances at the Ashanti Regional

5 Conversation with Professor Kwesi Aning, 17 February 2020, KAIPTC, Accra.
Coordinating Council. They vandalised some court properties and almost assaulted the Judge” (Gyampo et al. 2007, 124).

In early 2019, masked men said to be National Security operatives used live bullets at a polling station during a by-election, leading to many casualties, including an assault on a sitting MP. Some commentaries have since connected the masked men to one of the above militia groups associated with Ghana’s ruling government (GhanaWeb 2019). Attuquayefio and Darkwa (2017, 90) maintain that most of these extra-legal uses of force and violence by sub-state but politically affiliated groups have gone unpunished due to culture impunity which has resulted from “a systemic decapitation of the Police by the political elite.” Testifying before a Commission of Enquiry into the above election violence, Professor Aning submitted that violence in Ghana is “perceived to be extremely useful; it is beneficial; it transforms lives; it creates new identities and it gives access to power” (The Independent Ghana 2019). The Commission also heard that there is a growing “everydayness of political violence” and “extremist tendencies are beginning to grow in Ghanaian society.”

The thought of comparing political violence in Ghana and Boko Haram in Nigeria may sound alarmist. Indeed, Ghana is not Nigeria, and the two countries have different socio-economic dynamics and geopolitical configurations. What we now call Boko Haram, however, morphed from a civil society group called ECOMOG, a group that was used by politicians to gain power. Modu Sheriff, the Governor of Borno State from 2003, used ECOMOG to wrestle power away from Mala Kachalla, the Governor from 1999 to 2003. As one respondent explained, when Modu Sheriff became Governor the organisation “metamorphosed from the ECOMOG to Boko Haram between 2003 to 2007”. Additionally, even the name of Boko Haram evolved, and “the word ‘jihad’ was not in its name until after the repression of July 2009” (Higazi 2013; Chouin, Reinert and Aparo 2014, 217). Organised and collective violent rebellion is gradual and processual. In this vein, a governance and democratisation specialist narrated how he witnessed, first-hand, how Siaka Stevens of Sierra Leone ran a corrupt government which protected

7 Interview with a professor of security and political science, 19 March 2018, Abuja, Nigeria.
8 Ibid.
political elites at the expense of citizens, and how in the 1980s, the politics of social neglect slowly introduced violence as a political alternative.9

In another respect, violent extremist tendencies—to quote an elite Ghanaian diplomat and academic—has “come too close for comfort” (Dan Suleiman 2017b, 320). Here, it pays to remember Mohammed Alema, a Ghanaian graduate from a prestigious Ghanaian university who joined ISIS in mid-2015, before his alleged death in Libya in 2016 (Dan Suleiman 2017b, 319). While the idea of “global jihad” was a motivating factor, local grievances could not be dismissed in the decision of Alema. Relatedly, according to a security specialist,10 20 Ghanaians in Ghana’s conflict-prone northern region have been prevented from travelling to join ISIS. This specialist added that, in most cases, the ideological aspects of jihadist movements come later, after years of perpetual oppression and inequality.

In a sub-regional context, Ghana’s national security is under threat of a possible spiralling of jihadist violence into the country from Burkina Faso. The latter in recent years has come under threat from jihadist groups operating in the broader Sahel-Sahara. The 2019 West Africa Mining Security (WAMS) Conference in Accra heard that there are some 189 border crossings between Ghana and her neighbours, but only eight have approved border posts. Moreover, there is a recent resuscitation of separatist sentiments in the western border of Ghana with Togo where a movement, Members of the Homeland Study Group Foundation, is campaigning for the liberation of “Western Togoland”. In the context of these dynamics, the United Nations and the Small Arms Commission of Ghana disclosed that about 2.3 million unregistered arms are in circulation in the country (Dan Suleiman 2017b, 19). West Africa is a region riddled with geopolitical vulnerabilities, and Aning re-stated at the WAMS Conference (2019) that there were 2.1 million unregistered guns in Ghana.

These Ghanaian dynamics are not the same as Nigeria’s. Yet, it is essential to think about the possibility of a Ghanaian locality becoming redirected by regional or global trends in militancy. As noted above, Ghana (like other African countries) has endemic socio-economic and political grievances, although it does not have a full-blown political

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9 Interview with governance and democratisation professor, 12 February 2018, Accra, Ghana.
10 Interview with the Executive Director of a security think tank in Ghana, 14 February 2018, Accra, Ghana.
extremist rebel movement—yet. This is because socio-economic and political grievances lack enough of the other ingredients (supportive groups or network, legitimising ideology, and conducive local and global environment) and factors (psycho-cultural-historical, ideological, and geographical). Under increasing globalisation, no one can tell how regional or global trends could influence the Ghanaian specificity. Whereas geography is rather a static concept, other elements and factors of rebellion could evolve in the future and, in the presence of persistent and widespread socio-economic and political grievances, complete the causal and factorial ingredient for political extremism in Ghana. The case of Burkina Faso and Ghana’s porous borders with her neighbours highlights this possibility.

It is the possibility of resorting to violence under certain circumstances that brings Schmid (2014) to problematise a discourse that considers so-called quietist and reformist Salafists as non-violent, preferring, instead, the description “not (yet) violent”. Schmid concludes that depending on circumstances, violent extremism and non-violent extremism could be two sides of the same coin. The above suggests that in countries such as Ghana, under the right (or wrong) circumstances, organised violence could be justified and actualised. Silber and Bhatt’s (2007) conception of cognitive opening is important here. Defined as the consequence of a trauma that makes the individual start questioning the values they previously believed in, four types of triggers may lead to cognitive opening: economic, such as job loss or blocked mobility; political, such as the international conflicts involving Muslims; social, including alienation, discrimination or racism, both real or perceived; and personal, for instance, the loss of a loved one (Silber and Bhatt 2007).

Returning to the primacy of socio-economic and political grievances, no one can predict when deprivation may push radicalisation of ideas (cognitive radicalisation) over the line to become radicalisation of behaviour (violent radicalisation) (McCauley and Moskalenko 2011), leading thereby to a full-blown rebellion in African countries, including those not currently experiencing political extremism. From the above discussion, there are numerous “cognitive openings” that could push individuals or collectives over the line, to violent radicalisation or political extremism.

Might we then consider West African societies in terms of those that are experiencing political extremism and those that are not yet so situated? In any case, it is important to remember that every individual or group of individuals is capable of violence “if sufficiently provoked … Assault lies dormant within us all. It requires only circumstance to set it
in violent motion” (Smith 2004, 367). Under the wrong circumstance, ordinary people, too, can commit genocide and mass killing (Waller 2002).

**Conclusion**

I have argued that we can, and should, think of the potential to experience political extremism in African communities in terms of the degree to which causal factors and constitutive elements are present in any given country. These factors (socio-economic, political, psycho-cultural, historical, ideological, and geographical) and elements (aggrieved individuals and grievances, supportive group or network, legitimising ideology, and conducive local and global environment) determine the possibility or potential for a country to experience political extremism since they determine the degree to which there are the motivations, justifications, opportunity and capability to rebel.

There still exists persistent and widespread socio-political and economic grievances, and aggrieved individuals, in almost all African countries due to endemic governance challenges. Some countries, however, experience violent extremist movements while others do not because African communities are at varying stages regarding the existence of constitutive elements. Current socio-political structures and processes, even in countries currently not experiencing extremist groups, are therefore a part of the processes that could produce extremist groups in the future.

These arguments are exploratory in many respects. For a country already experiencing political extremism, knowing the emergent elements of an insurgency helps in countering it. For a country without political extremism, the article’s arguments are pre-emptive: they ask both scholars and practitioners to consider the making of political extremism before it is visible enough to threaten human, national, regional, and global security. The argument allows us to transcend the problem of simplistic presentations of jihadist extremism and to focus on what could be manifested in the future if preventive measures are not taken now. By showing the primacy of socio-economic and political factors in the emergence of political extremism, the article points to progressive de-radicalisation and counter-extremism dividends for relevant security actors in Africa where, due to endemic governance problems, many of the factors and elements of violent extremism and rebellion are present.
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