



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
with RELIGION and FAITH
in the 21ST CENTURY

The Importance of Peacebuilding for Cabo Delgado Province Against Terrorism – Mozambique

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INTRODUCTION

At a time when Mozambique was still in a long negotiation process to end the conflict arising from the election results of the 2014 general elections, the country was surprised, on October 5, 2017, with news of an armed attack on state institutions in the village of Mocímboa da Praia, Cabo Delgado province. Perpetrated by an unknown group with claims of practicing radical Islam, this armed attack was a new phenomenon in the Mozambican political process and brought about a series of questions not only from the perspective of the nature of the group and its motivations but also with regard to the political, social, and economic implications of the phenomenon itself for the country. However, later the actions of this group came to be described as an act of terrorism perpetrated by the Islamic State.

At the root of this incident, studies identified that the majority of the people who compose this group are young people of Mozambican origin. The motivation of the perpetrators behind the attack was threefold: a perception of injustice and humiliation by the State, need for a stable identity and opportunity to acquire a material reward.

The clear lack of a religious orientation that these young people have also contributes significantly to this phenomenon. In this paper, I intend to explain the importance of religion in solving the problem, and how it can intervene, depending on this social problem.

VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN CABO DELGADO¹

Since late 2017, after the attack, the province of Cabo Delgado has been living under the auspices of an armed conflict led by groups initially identified (named especially by the Government of Mozambique) as “insurgents.” They are now called terrorists by the Mozambican Defense and Security Forces. At the outbreak of the conflict, the national media considered, based on reports from local communities, that the attacks were perpetrated by a group, mostly young people, with claims of implementing a model of Islam regarded as radical - markedly different from that commonly practiced by the natives. Their overly antagonistic and militant approach towards both the Muslim community and adherents of other faith traditions closely matches that of a sect that is considered to be deviant in Islamic literature and known therein as the “Khawārij” (Kharijites). The Kharijite movement emerged in 7th century Arabia and managed to creep its way into the present day as a fringe group of professed adherents to the Islamic faith. Among the distinctive traits of this sect is the belief in the permissibility of opposing and overthrowing the ruler of the land, taking the lives and property of whomsoever opposes their ideals, and declaring fellow Muslims who contradict their stance as apostates or disbelievers and, therefore, placing them into the category of those whose lives and property are permissible to take from. The effects of these dissident beliefs tie in closely with the ruthlessness that has been seen from them in the past few years.

This group, initially of unknown origin, was nicknamed “Al Shabaab” (a name which, in Arabic and Swahili languages, means “the youth”) by the local community, although it was not possible to establish a concrete link with the Somali group “Al Shabaab,” due to the differences in the modus operandi and objectives of both groups.

Thus, in the early days of the conflict, a large segment of the national media as well as the intellectual wing of the country considered that the motive for the practice of violent acts was rooted in the intention of the aforementioned group to “purify” the state institutions and, in general, the social environment in which they were inserted, since, in their view, they were governed by norms and principles substantially contrary to those advocated by religion.

In this first phase, the modus operandi involved, besides the destruction of the above-mentioned infrastructures, the excessive use of brute force, especially against the natives, in public auctions, as a way to establish their domination and, on the other hand, to dissuade the population from collaborating with the Defence and Security Forces with regard to the identification and neutralization of the contact networks and the group’s elements.

Still in the referred phase - in which invasions to the residences of natives were frequent (often using disguise - military clothing from the Defense and Security Forces) with the purpose of obtaining information and food, as well as the invasion (by surprise) of police and military units (e.g., the movement spread to the surrounding districts, namely Quissanga, Macomia and Palma, which determined, besides the loss of numerous human lives, a forced exodus of a considerable part of the population to other parts of the country (e.g., Nampula and Niassa provinces). At this time, it is estimated that there are more than five hundred thousand (500,000) displaced persons, whose living conditions are even worse than those in the social context of origin of these displaced persons.

Regarding the activities in Quissanga - and in this aspect a change in the modus operandi and the evolution of the phenomenon is evident - it is important to mention that the group organized rallies, where they openly exposed their ideology, this time capitalizing on the feeling of dissatisfaction (with

the socio-economic situation) of the population, who attended the events in allusion en masse. These events saw the hoisting of the group's flag and the perjury of the national flag, which, unexpectedly, was accepted by a significant part of the participants in the rallies. Thus, in a second phase, research reports were produced and published in Cabo Delgado by academic institutions, national and international nongovernmental organizations, and researchers of various origins, which suggested that, among the most diverse, the factors that determined individuals, especially youth, to engage in acts of terrorism could be summarized as follows:

- Perception of injustice and humiliation;
- Need for stable identity or desire for status quo;
- Opportunity for material reward.

Therefore, in the example in question, the propensity for radicalization on the part of young people did not only originate from strictly religious/ideological or cultural issues; furthermore, young people dissatisfied with their position in their social structure - to which can be added the lack of economic integration, low levels of schooling, and hostile relations with certain ethnic groups considered dominant - found in radical movements a vehicle for the expression of feelings of exclusion.

At the core of the question would be, therefore, among other aspects, the promise of payment of monetary values, of integration in the job market, of scholarships, of the establishment of a new social order, issues that seem especially relevant in view of the conditions of vulnerability referred to.

Now, almost four (4) years after the beginning of the armed attacks, new elements have been brought to light that contribute to a new characterization of the phenomenon.

First of all, it is possible that external groups or entities with interests in the resources (especially the natural resources) and the potential offered by the province of Cabo Delgado are taking advantage of the aforementioned feeling of dissatisfaction to attract, especially the youth, to commit acts that lead to social instability and ultimately to the ungovernability of that region of the country, as a way to enable the fulfilment of their agendas.²

IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS INTERVENTION

Firstly, the first way in which religious life influences well being is through the attendance of religious services. Attendance to religious services provides religious individuals with an important source of social support. The community that arises around religious organizations provides individuals with a sense of communion and belonging that is particularly helpful when going through unwanted situations. This source of support may also be valuable for elderly people and widows that have lost other traditional sources of support, like family and friends.

Secondly, religion provides an all-inclusive set of meanings and values "for the ordering and interpretation of human events."⁴ This framework gives individuals, with strong religious beliefs, the ability to extract meaning and significance from seemingly routine and everyday situations.⁵ This ability to reinterpret life through the lens of religion is especially useful when individuals are confronted with traumatic events. Religion gives individuals who have fully internalized their beliefs, an increased ability to cope with stressful situations.

Lastly, the third point explains that religious communities have established norms that provide its adhering members with an above average state of health.

Religion has also been observed to have macro effects on the well-being of groups of people. Communities arise around religious organizations. As these communities grow, the religious organizations influence the values of the society.

How and Why?

Religion is understood to influence subjective well-being through various ways: the religious community gives people a sense of belonging and provides an important source of social support; religion gives people's lives meaning and purpose; and finally, religion encourages people to lead healthier lifestyles.

Religion needs to strengthen its presence and strategically in Cabo Delgado specifically by reaching out more to the youth and making known the real benefits of joining the religious community, and in this way, it can also significantly reduce the impact of terrorism. However, these religious actions should be combined with a series of other social actions, such as: cultural intervention, training opportunities and employability for youth.

Challenge

Due to this structural matter that led the youth to massively join the terrorist group and the fact that they in reality lost even more of the religious values and principles, the biggest challenge is to convince young people to join the religious community and abandoning the terrorists, this, due to the fact that the young people inserted their material gains with the promise of an even better life.

Opportunities

Taking in to consideration that these challenges also brings us opportunities, This is the opportunity that the religious community has to intervene for the youth of Cabo Delgado, creating lines of development

and growth for this youth, bringing back religious values and moral principles and combined with other actions, which will allow the youth to abandon terrorism.

Religious intervention, combined with other social actions, are the only mechanism to have a definitive solution to the problem of terrorism that exist in Cabo Delgado.

Recommendations

The issue in Cabo Delgado lies strongly in the youth; therefore, I would highly recommend the implementation of:

- Awareness campaigns;
- Mediation and dialogue;
- Community dialogue forums
- Promotion of discussion on the contribution to the creation of conditions for technical-professional training that allow these young people to be absorbed by the labour market
- Enhanced resilience, especially of the youth, in adhering to extremist and violent ideologies;
- Sustainable (local) interfaith cooperation;
- Increased capacity of religious leaders with regard to conflict resolution, mediation and dialogue;
- Strengthening local peace structures;
- Improving understanding of religious teachings and values related to justice and peace.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recognizing that youths in Cabo Delgado are in the most at risk of radicalization, medium and long term solutions should be initiated in order to obtain behavioural *improvement of youth*. This is because short-term solutions for solving youth problems are non-existent.

With this in mind, the key recommendations for solving the behavioural problem of youth are:

Creation of a Youth Empowerment Program

The youth empowerment program should have two components, namely *Life Skills* and *Entrepreneurship*, in the sense that there is a need to work on the behavioural attitudes of the youth, create a *spirit of leadership*, create the *capacity to be proactive*, *communication skills*, the *capacity to work in groups*. These aspects should all be linked to entrepreneurship, due to the fact that Cabo Delgado, has a high level of poverty.

It is also important that *entrepreneurship training* is done, and later the financing of companies or businesses of the youth themselves.

Communication between the Government and the Target Group

Given that youth are considered the majority in our country, these same youth in Cabo Delgado perceive that their dreams and goals are frustrated when there are no opportunities for employability or training and professional development for them. This is also due to the fact that there has not been an investment on the part of the Government in having professional training institutions in Cabo Delgado, causing individuals from other parts of the country or world to occupy jobs in Cabo Delgado. With this said, there is a need to *build infrastructure*, *improve communication*,

create educational institutions and professional training and give opportunity to have scholarships.

Work to Benefit the Displaced

Humanitarian work with the displaced becomes ever more urgent and glaringly obvious. These displaced persons, who have left their areas of origin, are in accommodation centers. For the displaced youth, there is a very high probability of joining the terrorists because they have lost everything. So it means that if they are lured by the terrorists, young people will easily join them. There is a need to have a *project of information and training of young people* for the job market, and this, associated with *partnerships with some companies* that can later employ these young people, or give them the necessary tools to have their own enterprises.³

CONCLUSION

The objectives to be pursued with this paper arise from the recognition of the need to disseminate a counter-narrative, above all, a religious one, in relation to which the influence of religious leaders is inexorable.

The objective is to attempt to approach the phenomenon with the aim of understanding the complexity of the dynamics not only at the origin of the terrorist group as well as in the structure of the conflict and violence in Cabo Delgado, and mostly, the importance of having a strong religious interventions for a permanent Peacebuilding not only in Mozambique, but in the region in a perspective of working on the improvement of the behavioural issue of youth, and through this, bring possible solutions to the problems that young people face.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The term Al-Shabaab is used in Mocímboa da Praia by analogy to the Al-Shabaab group operating in Somalia and Kenya, constituted in the 1990s as a militarized wing of the Union of Islamic Courts (ICU). In the case of Somalia, at that time, the group was a force made up of few elements, but effective in the realization of its missions, with leaders dedicated to jihad. Some of these leaders had experience working in Afghanistan. your ward militarized was initially constituted by former members of the AIAI (Al Itihaad al Islamiya), an Islamic organization Somali formed in the 1980s by a group of Middle East-educated Wahhabi Somalis who fought against the government of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre. For a more detailed analysis of the origin of the Al-Shabaab group in Somalia, see: Menkhaus (2007a; 2007b); Menkhaus (2008).
- 2 Many young people who have joined the Al-Shabaab group in Mocímboa da Praia are in a phase of critical personal development, mostly aged between 18 and 25 years. It is the phase where there is a greater cut emotional relationship with the family of origin and where the big issues of independence arise: what life project ramp up? What values to follow?
- 3 According to what Morin (2002) postulates, religion can be considered a system of ideas, for bringing with it an association of linked diverse concepts logically and that they have truth value for the religious. From this system, the religious manages to establish a relationship with the world, which in general, makes life more comfortable and less painful. It is a closed system of ideas as a doctrine, where its maintenance and survival it withdraws to protect itself and to defend itself from possible external attacks.
- 4 Zouain, Oliveira and Barone (2007) highlight that entrepreneurship, especially with a focus in young people, it emerges as a crucial issue on the current development agenda. Socioeconomic status, as it directly affects the process of inclusion of young people in the job market. However, Schoof (2006) points out that the representatives of the population have made little effort to face entrepreneurship from a youth perspective.

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