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Mozambique blames Islamists for war: Should the West accept that narrative?

By Cyril Zenda

Religion Unplugged (25.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3fy11QL> - On July 18, 2019, the bishop of the Roman Catholic Church's diocese of Pemba in Mozambique, Luiz Fernando Lisboa, issued an [open letter](#) "to the people of Cabo Delgado" in which he pointed out: "As long as the people are exploited by hidden powers, there will be no peace, no reconciliation, let alone hope."

This was nearly two years after [an insurgency](#) had started in this northern-most province of Mozambique where the [world's biggest gas find](#) in decades is turning out to be more of [a curse](#) than a blessing to this vast resource-rich-but-[poor](#) southern African nation.

As the bishop of the diocese of Pemba, under which the Cabo Delgado province falls, Lisboa is one of those voices that disagreed with the "simplified" official narrative that religious fundamentalism is the primary cause of this fast-escalating conflict that has killed [over 2,500 people and displaced another 700,000](#).

An Islamist State-linked armed group calling itself [Ansar al-Sunna](#) (supporters of the tradition) is believed to be behind this insurgency that is threatening to blow up the [multi-billion dollar](#) gas exploitation project.

"Economic motivations are at the forefront of the origin of conflicts, because if religious extremism constitutes an important element, it is not the main one, since wars break out where there are many natural resources," Lisboa [later wrote](#) in his appeal to the European Union in December 2020. In this appeal, the priest also blamed the crisis on a form of "new colonialism" by some western nations when it comes to dealing with weak but resource-rich nations.

"Portugal (Mozambique's former colonial master) would do well to launch a debate within the European Union concerning the use of resources in the world: how are we currently dealing with the situation? What kind of new colonialism are we practicing in relation to the resources that exist in Africa and other poorer places in the world?" Lisboa asked.

Such a stance put the Brazilian-born priest in direct confrontation with authorities in Maputo who, since the outbreak of the armed conflict in October 2017, have portrayed the insurgency as purely the work of Islamist jihadists seeking to destabilize the Lusophone nation.

But Lisboa is not alone in holding such divergent views. When in February the Vatican [transferred](#) Lisboa from Mozambique, reportedly under severe pressure from Maputo, President Filipe Nyusi's government was [deporting](#) a British journalist, Tom Bowker, the editor of a popular online publication, *Zitamar*, his partner and journalist Leigh Elston and their two children. Bowker insisted that his expulsion, officially for violating immigration laws, was a result of his publication's offering an alternative narrative on [brutalities](#) in Cabo Delgado.

The expulsions came a few months after the August 2020 [firebombing of Canal de Mocambique](#), a local newspaper that has also been highlighting corruption and [government brutality](#) in the area.

No Consensus on Causes of Insurgency

While there is no consensus on the exact cause of this insurrection, some believe that religion alone cannot explain it because Islam is found in many parts of Mozambique ([19%](#) of Mozambique's 30 million citizens are Muslims) and Africa, yet there is no trace of the radicalized version similar to that which is now causing problems in Cabo Delgado. It is this school of thought that insists on the importance of seeing the causes of this radicalization as the real cause of the rebellion, not just Islam as a religion.

Cabo Delgado province, which is on Mozambique's northern border with Tanzania, is home to some 2.3 million people, about 60% of them Muslims. Its neglect by the Maputo administration – which is nearly 2,000 kilometers away – has caused locals to call it the “*Cabo Esquecido*” or “Forgotten Cape”.

Just like Lisboa, some analysts believe that religion could have served to bring together a people already dissatisfied with conditions of widespread social-economic and political inequalities such as those that have continued to exist in Mozambique even after the country won its independence from Portugal in 1975. These conditions of abject poverty are believed to be some of the push factors that make joining radical movements such as Ansar al-Sunna – which promises to replace the current “[corrupt, elitist rule](#)” in Maputo – appear an attractive alternative for increasingly hopeless youths.

“They feel they have been marginalized for decades by migration into their area, a lack of economic development, and their neighbors’ political clout,” wrote [Dr Eric Morier-Genoud](#), a Mozambican-born political scientist at Queen’s University in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

“The movement emerged within a particular religious, social and ethnic group known as the [Mwani](#),” Morier-Genoud added.

However, Lorenzo Macagno, an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Paraná, Brazil, who has conducted extensive fieldwork on Islam in Mozambique's Nampula province (next to Cabo Delgado), [argued that](#) the armed groups in Cabo Delgado are an expression of “jihadist” tensions that have been marking Islam in Mozambique for several decades.

“I found Islam in the province of Nampula to be hospitable and peaceful, but I know that it has also been marked by internal tensions and that now they are experiencing a ‘jihadist’ extrapolation in Cabo Delgado,” said Macagno.

For Macagno, poverty, state repression and the presence of foreign capital in natural gas projects in Cabo Delgado cannot adequately explain the armed uprising in the area, because these factors are prevalent in other parts of Africa and the world, yet there are no “jihadist” ventures.

“[The armed groups] present themselves as messianic and with an agenda for the salvation of an Islam which combats Muslims deemed apostates, who collaborate with the secular state,” he explained.

Borges Nhamire, a researcher at the Centre For Public Integrity who has worked in Cabo Delgado, concurred with Macagno that aside from a radicalized religion, there is nothing

peculiar about the material conditions obtaining in the area to explain the insurgency away.

“Those people are not saying they are fighting for employment for their youths, for development, or fighting against a corrupt government,” Nhamire said in an interview. “They say they don’t recognize the state of Mozambique which is not ruled under Sharia law so we cannot pretend to say this has nothing to do with religion. It has to do... not with Islam, but has to do with Islamists, which is a radical form of Islam.”

He said the build-up to the October 5, 2017 start of armed attacks was characterized with actions typical of all fundamentalist movements: banning children from attending government schools, stopping people from paying taxes to the government and barring people from going to the (secular) law courts among other things.

Is Mozambique’s Government Shifting Blame For Its Failures?

However, a local university lecturer said before blaming the insurgents, the government should first take the blame for causing the radicalization, blamed for the insurgency, to develop in the first place.

“I find those who say conditions of poverty exist everywhere and therefore cannot be the cause of the insurgency to be dishonest,” he said in an interview, insisting on anonymity.

“From 1964 and 1974, FRELIMO (the ruling Front for the Liberation of Mozambique party) and other nationalist groups waged an [armed liberation struggle](#) against Portuguese colonial rule because of the grievously inhuman conditions that existed in the country, without religious radicalization ever being a factor.

The conditions that FRELIMO succeeded in removing in the southern half of the country have continued existing in other parts of the country, making the people in those provinces feel the same way FRELIMO cadres felt against the Portuguese colonialists... these are the ‘[root causes](#)’ that brave people like the bishop (Lisboa) refer to and get them threatened.”

His request for anonymity is not unfounded. Threats, similar to those that Lisboa – who was accused of “[colluding with terrorists](#)” – faced, are not to be taken lightly in Mozambique. [According to Amnesty International](#), there has been a growing pattern that shows researchers, journalists, aid workers and other individuals who hold critical views about the Mozambican government are [subjected to harassment](#), [abduction](#), intimidation and torture.

According to this report, on June 25, 2020, *Carta de Mocambique* journalist Omardine Omar was arrested and detained by police while investigating allegations that police officers were demanding bribes from citizens accused of violating COVID-19 restrictions. On April 7, 2020, Ibraimo Mbaruco, a community radio journalist and newscaster in Cabo Delgado’s Palma district, was forcibly disappeared, allegedly by the army.

On January 5, 2019, the police abducted two community radio journalists in Cabo Delgado’s Macomia district, Amade Abubacar and Germano Adriano, as they interviewed Internally Displaced Persons in the troubled area.

On March 27, 2018, “unknown” gunmen abducted Ericino de Salema, a lawyer and journalist, and severely tortured him – breaking his arms and legs – after expressing critical views about the government on television.

On May 23, 2016, Jaime Macuane, a professor of political science and public administration at Eduardo Mondlane University, was abducted and taken to a secluded place on the outskirts of the capital, Maputo, where he was severely beaten and also had his arms and legs broken, after being critical of the authorities on television.

On March 2, 2015, Gilles Cistac, a constitutional lawyer and professor at Eduardo Mondlane University, was shot dead in Maputo, shortly after publicly airing his views on the country's constitution.

Asked if the threats he had received could have come from the state, [Lisboa said](#): "It's hard to say. Wherever the Church stands up for the truth and defends humanity, that bothers people and invites problems, because those who live in lies do not appreciate the truth and the corrupt don't like to be called out. They feel upset, whether they are Government or hold other responsibilities. This happens everywhere, and Mozambique is no exception."

Why Stifle Alternative Voices?

Nhamire said attempts to keep a lid on goings-on in Cabo Delgado could be informed by Maputo's fears that such negative reports would scare away investment into the gas project, on which the country pins its economic hopes.

"... FRELIMO needs to convince the international community that it must be supported because this is a terrorist war from outside, by Islamic State. And it needs the U.S. and key European countries on board..."

However, negative reports are still leaking out of the area. A damning [Amnesty International report](#) released in early March highlighted gross human rights violations in Cabo Delgado blamed on all sides in the conflict... the government, its mercenary partners and the insurgents.

"We are entering into a very difficult period in which the greed and corruption of Frelimo is the root of the civil war in Cabo Delgado," [said](#) Joseph Hanlon, the editor of *Mozambique News Reports and Clippings*, an online publication. "... FRELIMO needs to convince the international community that it must be supported because this is a terrorist war from outside, by Islamic State. And it needs the U.S. and key European countries on board because they are profiting from the gas. It cannot accept anyone saying the emperor has no clothes - that the war has local roots. So the press, civil society, and academic researchers must be silenced."

It, however, appears like Maputo's narrative could be yielding the desired results. On March 10 the U.S. government [designated](#) the Mozambican group a terrorist organization because of their alleged links with the Islamic State and went on to deploy its [Green Berets](#) to train members of the Mozambican defense forces in counter-terrorism.

"They (Mozambican government) need to constructively engage with issues of land ownership, begin to address sectarian tensions, and avoid vexing Muslims in their security operations if they want to prevent the Islamist guerrillas from tapping into local grievances and gaining more ground," Dr. Morier-Genoud warned previously.

His warning could have been informed by lessons from examples of other jihadist insurgents like [Boko Haram](#) in West Africa and [al Shabaab](#) in East Africa.