Assessment of awareness of religious youth leaders on violent extremism in Mtwara, Tanzania

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Abstract

Religion has become increasingly important in conflict resolution worldwide. Religious leaders may play a key role in mobilising believers as they can call for peace or instigate violence. But what makes religious leaders support peace or promote violence? Several studies have linked religious leaders to violent extremism (VE) due to a lack of awareness and training on how best practices for ending VE can be incorporated into their daily teachings. Incorporation of tolerance-based teachings towards other faiths and secularism can reduce pro-violent attitudes. This is a qualitative study that collected qualitative data through one-on-one interviews with 20 clerics in Mtwara, Tanzania. The data was thematically presented and analysed. The findings indicated that although they incorporated some preventing violent extremism (PVE) teachings into their daily services, they did not adequately do so as the country does not openly address the issue but rather regards VE cases as conflicts or normal crimes. The Government did not openly acknowledge the existence of VE for a long time. As a result, the level of VE awareness of religious leaders was minimal. It should also be noted that clerics perceived the concept of VE differently, as there was no single clear definition of the subject matter. Due to limited information, awareness and knowledge of how they could best incorporate the subject matter into their daily holy teachings, they ended up stimulating rather than preventing the problem. The study recommends intensive VE training for religious (youth) leaders so they understand what it is, its challenges and how best to prevent it. These methods include incorporating some VE teachings on prevention in their sermons. The study believes, in the long run, the country will have a community that is knowledgeable on VE and how to resist the temptations of joining such groups that deny human rights and freedom.

Keywords: Assessment, Violent extremism, Religious youth leaders, Tanzania.

1. Introduction

Religious leaders have played a part in VE for centuries, as demonstrated by the bloody crusades and many other faith-driven violent incidents even today, with religious leaders playing a crucial role in many conflicts. Alongside religious structures, ideas and institutions, religious leaders play a key role in mobilising religious groups due to their legitimacy, credibility and influence in the eyes of many followers. They command huge resources for mobilisation and may be the crucial difference that tips the balance in the ambivalence of the sacred. Therefore, when empowered with positive PVE training, they can change ideas and incorporate this training into their teachings to have a positive effect on ending VE in society.

Tanzania is peaceful and politically stable, so issues relating to VE are not usually addressed, despite the Mtwara region, which borders Mozambique, facing continual VE challenges. Religious divisions in the region leave the area vulnerable to VE since religious leaders have the power to morally influence the citizens and, as such, affect their attitude.

The existence of VE in the Mtwara region has been linked to corruption and poverty. Poverty and injustice caused by corruption weaken any sense of mutual tolerance, social solidarity or coexistence while reawakening social hatred, radicalism and violence.

Okpanachi (2010) links VE to identity. According to Anderson (2010), identity is an individual's sense of belonging to a group if it influences his political behaviour. Identity influences an individual's ability to be emotionally tied to a group, their love for and belief in a group and their pledge to a cause and their commitments and duties to a group with which they identify (Smyth and Robinson, 2001: 7-11; Okpanachi, 2010). Recent studies have discussed the role of religion in influencing identity among religious believers (Alger 2002:101; Okpanachi 2010).

The existence of different religious denominations and different teachings has resulted in the existence and aggravation of an us-versus-them syndrome, where different denominations see themselves as different people with different ideologies and beliefs (Adefemi 2003:14; Okpanachi 2010). Religious differences have become a prominent factor in instituting and executing socioeconomic strategies and applications. These differences have resulted in socioeconomic disequilibrium among different regions (Fearon and Laitin 2003:82; Okpanachi 2010).

This is why this paper aimed to assess the awareness of religious youth leaders of VE in Tanzania.

1.2 Problem statement

Most studies have concentrated on the influence of religious leaders on ending VE. Religious leaders do have power and influence over their followers, but the question is to what extent they are aware and knowledgeable about the subject matter. A study needed to be conducted on assessing the awareness of religious leaders of VE and empowering them with necessary VE training so they may shift this knowledge positively and effectively to their followers. Despite the global call for religious leaders to spread positive religious tolerance, religious leaders have continuously been part of VE.

1.3 Main objective

To assess the awareness of religious youth leaders of VE in Mtwara, Tanzania.

1.4 Research questions

1. How knowledgeable are the religious leaders about VE?

2. How do religious leaders receive information on VE?

2. Literature Review

The state of violent extremism in Tanzania

Several VE issues in Tanzania are linked to religious leaders. However, due to a fear to disclose and address VE publicly, there has been limited information on awareness and even a lack of deeper understanding of the subject matter itself. As a result, religious youth leaders have limited knowledge of and information on VE, so their awareness of VE is questionable. A lack of shared understanding between the community, religious leaders and police as to what constitutes VE, along with a lack of trust in working together on a response, means that police efforts to prevent or counter VE could aggravate rather than mitigate the problem (Dang, 2019).

Tanzanians are reported to have been among the foreigners fighting for al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia. For example, in 2015, a Tanzanian was charged with involvement in the al-Shabaab attack on Garissa University College in Kenya, killing nearly 150 people, mostly students (International Crisis Group, 2018)

According to the Global Terrorism Database, there were 43 terrorism incidents in Tanzania between 2008 and 2017 (Berkebile, 2017). According to the Tanzania Terrorism Index, Tanzania had more than 15 incidences of VE in 2022 (Sambaiga, 2022). In October 2020, Islamic State fighters in Mozambique staged their first claimed attack on southern Tanzania, killing at least 20 people in Kitaya, Mtwara Province. There was a spike in terrorism events in Tanzania in 2014 and 2015 in which unidentified armed groups attacked the Government, police and religious officials and institutions. In 2016, in Mwanza Region, 15 assailants used improvised explosive devices, machetes and axes to attack a mosque, killing three people (United States Department of State, 2017). The assailants made comments criticising police treatment of Muslims. In another incident, armed assailants attacked a police station in Dar es Salaam and stole weapons (United States Department of State, 2017). The following year, a series of suspected terrorist attacks took place in the coastal region of Pwani, killing more than 30 police and low-level ruling party officials (United States Department of State, 2018). Since terrorism-related incidents have been underreported or characterised as criminal in nature by the Tanzanian Government and security services, the actual number of terrorist attacks could be higher than what is publicly disclosed.

In Zanzibar, a number of leaders of Uamsho (The Awakening), a separatist movement that came to prominence in the early 2010s advocating for Zanzibar's independence and voicing the grievances of young Zanzibaris, are under ongoing detention. Uamsho has been linked to attacks against religious leaders and churches. The detained leaders, known as the Uamsho sheiks, are held on terrorism-related charges by the Tanzanian Government (Bergmann, 2013). According to community stakeholders, extremist religious and political ideologies are present in Zanzibar and occasionally fuel violent attacks. However, religious and political messaging has the potential to be a driver of VE.

Messaging from religious leaders has driven interreligious tensions and is believed by local stakeholders to have helped inspire at least eight recorded attacks from 2012 to 2014 on

Muslim and Christian leaders and churches and mosques in Zanzibar. These incidents include the murder of a Catholic priest and the torching of a church in February 2013; an acid assault on two British tourists in Stone Town in August 2013; and an explosion at a mosque in June 2014 (LeSage, 2014).

Since 2016, the Office of the Mufti in Zanzibar has been particularly concerned with the arrival of Salafist preachers on the islands and the propagation of what is viewed as an extremist – and potentially competitive – interpretation of Islam. According to an interview in 2017, the Office of the Mufti is regulating madrassa teachers and curricula to prevent the spread of extremist religious teaching.

VE has also been experienced in Tanga with a series of events in 2015 and 2016. A shadowy armed group attacked and killed one soldier and injured five others, including one police officer, in and near Tanga's Amboni caves. A year later, eight residents of Kibatini, a hamlet near the Amboni caves, were murdered in a single night. The group inhabiting the caves was providing "militia" training to children. The members of Kibatini hamlet were most likely killed for having alerted police to the group's presence. Boys and young men were suspected of receiving military-style training inside some mosques and madrassas of the Ansār Sunna in the rural western districts of Tanga (Gilsaa, 2015).

Other community stakeholders voiced an alternative view that there is an Islamist VE organisation distinct from – but operating under cover of – the Ansār Sunna community. These stakeholders referred to this amorphous group as Hizbu, a pejorative term used to describe individuals of Arab descent. According to stakeholders, members of the group subscribe to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and disagree with the practice of other Muslim sects. The group does not appear to be a unified organisation but rather a number of individual cliques located in different areas across Tanga (ibid).

The events at the Amboni caves induced community stakeholders and police representatives in Tanga to discuss VE risks more openly than workshop participants in the other two regions. Yet, despite being ready to discuss VE within the workshop, community stakeholders saw several reasons for limiting public discussion on the topic. One was to avoid publicising the presence of VE. Community stakeholders stated that they wanted to deal with VE issues discreetly to avoid attracting more attention and possible recruits to their community (ibid).

With a mixed Christian and Muslim population, there is no overarching religious institution that is regulating the entrance and activities of religious-based organisations. The religious demographic of Tanzania is not officially recorded because the national census does not capture information about citizens' religion. However, a 2010 survey by the Pew Research Center estimated that 61% of the population is Christian, 35% is Muslim, and 4 % belong to other religious groups (Wormald, 2015). On the Tanzanian mainland, Muslim communities are concentrated in coastal areas, but Muslim minorities are also found in the inland areas. Although interfaith dialogues have helped ease interreligious tensions that have flared between Muslim and Christian communities in Tanga in recent years, mainstream Christian and Muslim leaders have limited influence among fundamentalist religious groups, some of

whom have been associated with violence. Given these factors, Tanga is a region more vulnerable to Islamist VE organisations than the neighbouring islands of Zanzibar(Dang, 2019).

In Morogoro, religious leaders also discussed potential recruitment by unknown VE organisations inside some mosques of the Ansār Sunna. One Muslim community leader stated that a group he referred to pejoratively as "al-Shabaab" supports violent jihad and recruits from Ansār Sunna mosques. However, according to another Muslim leader, when discussing the group in the same interview, "They have select mosques that they go to. It depends on the leaders of the mosque" (Dang, 2019).

A police representative confirmed these views, stating that terrorism suspects have been detected in Morogoro, although such information is not disclosed to the public. The police representative believes Morogoro is an ideal hiding spot for shadowy actors or groups because of its vast forested areas as well as being a crossroads for transit around Tanzania. A recent report by the International Crisis Group (2018) identified Morogoro, Kigoma, Kondoa and Tanga as regions where militants have reportedly planted sleeper cells.

3. Methodology

This study collected qualitative data through one-to-one interviews based on a guide. The aim was to collect in-depth findings. This method was convenient due to the nature of the study, which is complex and requires careful data collection from the participants. Qualitative data was perfect and helpful in avoiding chaos and participant bias. Qualitative research is deemed convenient as it deepens the appreciation of human experience (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The qualitative data analysis method helped the author to understand more about the specific situation, issues and circumstances surrounding the religious youth leaders. This study adopted a cross-sectional design. This design was considered the best for this study because it secured evidence concerning all prevailing situations and offered a way forward on how to take the next step, having determined the current situation and what is anticipated (Saunders *et al.*, 2015).

This form of data collection was suitable when it came to collecting qualitative information. The information was derived from purposively sampled participants selected based on the information they had and how long they had spent in religious leadership. Using interviews to generate qualitative data helped to collect detailed information about the subject matter since the participants were knowledgeable about VE. In order to reduce information saturation, it was better to use qualitative means via interviews with 20 youth clerics. To reduce participants' negative perceptions and misinterpretations of the major aim of this study, one-to-one interviews were the best way of collecting data.

Since the data was qualitative, a thematic analysis method was used to analyse the data. This involved analysing and categorising themes with the same meaning.

The data was collected through one-to-one interviews with 20 participants who were religious youth leaders from different denominations. From the five districts selected from Mtwara region, four participants were chosen from each district, and each district had two female and two male participants. As the region is mainly dominated by two main religions, Christianity and Islam, two male and two female participants were obtained from each religion in each district so as to maintain gender balance and eliminate information bias. The participants were mainly adult youth clerics between 24 and 36 years old who were at least three years into serving as religious leaders. This was due to the need to interview participants who had obtained a minimum number of years of experience in religious leadership and, therefore, could participate effectively in the study. A purposive sampling procedure was used to identify them. All respondents had followers or attended to a congregation of at least 15 people. On average, participants conducted services or preached/taught at least twice a week.

Fifteen respondents had served as religious leaders for 2-10 years, while five respondents had served for more than 10 years. Therefore, they were experienced religious leaders and could effectively participate in the study.

4. Findings

During the interviews, the respondents stated that the main conditions that led them to become religious leaders included attending training on a given religion, a special call from God, education and family background.

When participants were asked how they understood the term VE, most understood it as a strong belief in their religion. However, although six participants were aware of the subject matter, they had no common definition of VE. As a result each participant perceived the term according to their own understanding. The other 14 participants did not commonly hear the term and did not have a deep understanding of the subject. Most cases attended to were linked to moral decay and indiscipline. Some responded with stereotypes relating VE to problems from different religions.

Participants agreed that they had training before they became religious leaders, but most of it was mainly spiritual based and related to moral behaviour and discipline. Matters concerning VE were not taught to them before they became religious leaders. While serving as religious leaders, they have experienced several organisations, together with the Government, developing training and awareness activities related to VE. However, the participants claim the subject matter did not adequately address them.

The training they received was mainly provided by the police, other government peace-related agencies and peace-related non-governmental organisations. Participants stated that most of the training conducted focused mainly on strategies incorporating moral behaviour teachings. Participants stated that the training received primarily focused on how to impact the congregation but not their knowledge as clerics.

Of the 20 participants, 12 stated that although they had received some training or were aware of the term VE, it was difficult to integrate the term into their spiritual teachings as it could contradict their spiritual and divine teaching and divert their minds into something mainly world based. Most participants revealed that they received PVE training between zero and two times per year.

Of the 20 religious leaders who participated in interviews, 17 stated that VE cases had been happening in Mtwara region but were perceived as conflicts by the actors and community at large and were linked to the moral decay of local youth. Their responsibility as clerics was to preach practising good morals and that was God's will.

5. Conclusion

From the findings presented, it is clear that religious youth leaders are not very aware of the term VE as only six were aware of the term. Those who were unaware of the term had different personal understandings of VE. There was no common definition of the term among those participants that were aware of the term. Therefore the study compared responses with similar themes to clarify the responses that used a definition that was similar and close in meaning to VE. It was also ascertained that those religious leaders who were aware of the subject found it difficult to incorporate VE lessons into their religious teachings as it could contradict their responsibility as divine leaders whose main objective is to preach about God. The majority (14) of the religious leaders were not aware of the subject matter and had just heard about it from the outside world, so they had no clear information about the term. However, they also stated that the region experienced several conflicts and killings seen as resulting from misconduct and moral deficiency rather than VE.

6. Recommendations

From the above, it can be concluded that a lot needs to be done to raise religious leaders' awareness about VE and give them a common understanding of the term. There is a need to provide the clerics with in-depth awareness training on VE, focused on how they can best acquire knowledge, positively tackle the problem, overcome the temptation of becoming part of VE and help their congregation, especially youths, to take part in productive activities that are legally accepted by the country. Training should also focus on the best strategies to align their teachings to incorporate VE issues. PVE training before and after becoming clerics needs to be improved and solidified to provide knowledge on handling issues related to the subject matter. In-service training will help clerics cement their acquired knowledge and enable them to effectively deliver teachings that do not just condemn VE but involve their believers in productive activities that help them to be future responsible citizens of the country, bearing in mind national policies on VE. The organisation dealing with PVE underground should channel their approach to influence critical thinking about the subject in order to have a broader understanding. The study highlighted the lack of knowledge of the relationship between VE and terrorism, as respondents could not understand what VE is when

the researcher told them how it relates to terrorism. This is also a linguistic challenge as the terms have to be translated into Kiswahili, the commonly spoken language in the region.

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8. Interview guide for religious leaders

- What is your position as a religious leader in your denomination?
- How long have you served as a religious leader?
- What is the average number of people/followers/ believers you attend to?
- How often do you conduct services?
- What made you become a religious leader?
- Were you given prior training for your services at your religious institution?
- Are you aware of the concept of violent extremism?
- How did you learn about it?
- Have you ever received any training on it?
- How often did/do you receive violent extremism training?
- Are you allowed to incorporate the concept in your teachings?
- How often do you incorporate the concept in your teachings?
- What strategies do you use to share messages on violent extremism with believers?
- What are the challenges encountered when addressing the concept?

About the Author

Dismas is a peace promoting consultant with over a decade of experience in working on community projects, in senior management and advisory roles, with a focus on community development, program and project designing, project management, peace and conflict resolution, including prevention and countering radicalization and violent extremism. His work has been performed Off-Broadway, with Africa Center for peace and Conflict Research in Tanzania and East and Southern Africa in cross border PVE interventions projects and research. He has a strong track record in working in partnership with governments, youth-led organizations, civil society at various levels and diverse organizational stakeholders, developing and implementing appropriate and targeted learning and capacity sharing activities.

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About the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

The JLI is a learning network of researchers and practitioners, building fair and equitable spaces to create and share evidence on religions in development and community work. The JLI aims to strengthen partner-ships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally.

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