Do Religious Communities Hold the Key to Counter-Radicalization in Kenya?

by John MwangiGithigaroOctober 12, 2016

In the post-9/11 environment, religious communities have been considered vital partners in efforts to counter radicalization widely believed to be a factor that drives acts of violent extremism. Violent extremism is considered a transition phase in the radicalization process and is marked by the mobilization of violence. One notion of community defines it as individuals bound into a group by a common interest, such as religion, with a physical presence and a level of legitimacy from which it can operate.[1] Bringing religious communities into counter-radicalization efforts is considered complementary to the hard-power approaches, such as the use of force and legal responses that have been applied by state actors.

Non-state actors such as religious communities are well networked within local and global environments. They can bring on board religious insights and perspectives to counter narratives of political violence, and they can be used to challenge stereotypes around such violence-for instance, jihad discourses and, thus, to counter radicalization narratives. They often rely on interfaith platforms, their respective audiences and the media to build on social capital to prevent or challenge the rise of political violence. In contrast, hard-power approaches, while necessary from a state-centric perspective, have at times created alienation from communities, and they cannot by themselves fully address the threats of such violence.

Thus, religious communities can be useful in building community resilience against radicalization and contribute to preventive approaches to violence.[2] Those in Kenya are already engaging in counter-radicalization initiatives.

Radicalization in Kenya

Radicalization and violent extremism have been on the rise in Kenya especially since the country's military intervention in Somalia in 2011. The phenomenon of radicalization is a process by which individuals imbibe extreme political, social, and religious aspirations, which also drives the belief that the achievement of particular goals justifies the application of indiscriminate violence. It is an emotional and mental process that motivates an individual to engage in violent behavior. Not limited to Kenya and other parts of Africa, radicalization is now widely entrenched in parts of Asia, the Middle East, North America, and Western Europe.[3] The advancement of radicalization, at least in Kenya, has been blamed on several pathways. These pathways to radicalization have been a combination of religious ideology (misrepresentations), socioeconomic marginalization, and among others, the rise of new media.[4] The process is open to following multiple pathways, not least shaped by context and the mobilizing narratives used.

Radicalization does not always lead to the mobilization of political violence; this is illustrated by the case of the Adam brothers in the United Kingdom. The three brothers were equally exposed

to radicalizing videos, yet only one contemplated committing a terrorist act in 2004, for which he would be convicted in 2007.[5] Studies conducted in Kenya argue that radicalization to commit violent extremism is occurring there, in places that have included Nairobi, Mombasa, and Isiolo Counties, although other parts of the country are also susceptible. It has mostly targeted youth at the margins of society and has proceeded along mixed pathways, influenced by socioeconomic marginalization, extreme religious ideologies, peer networks, and, increasingly now, the shift to online platforms.[6]

Rethinking Religion in Counter Radicalization

In Kenya, counter-radicalization efforts have mainly been government-centered and have included militaristic, legalistic, and preventive interventions, among others. While these approaches are practical and are required of government to safeguard peace and security in the country, the need remains for reflection on what roles religious communities can play. Religious communities can, for instance, play essential roles in the conversation about what needs to be done. Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and other faith traditions have the moral authority to deal with social issues in society and additionally can provide cultural and religious insights to government agencies. Cases are documented in which religious communities have been able to mobilize their respective audiences, convening dialogues and educational activities to counter negative stereotypes and attitudes.

Furthermore, religion-based communities bound by local interests can be useful in changing the narratives of violence within their operational areas. In Kenya, a variety of religious communities often take an interfaith perspective. The Coast Inter-faith Council of Clerics (CICC) in the former Coast Province, for example, draws representatives of Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and African traditional faiths. Some of these communities are combining their energies to counter radicalization by presenting counter narratives through online platforms and dialogue sessions and by building the capacity for advocacy against violent extremism. These interventions are laudable and can often complement the activities of government, and lessons taken from them could be useful in other counter-radicalization initiatives globally.

[1] S. H. Lesbirel, “Project Siting and the Concept of Community,” *Environmental Politics* 20, no. 6 (2011): 826–84.

[2] A. Halafoff and D. Neville, “A Missing Peace? The Role of Religious Actors in Countering Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 11 (2009): 921–32.

[3] A. S. Wilner and C. J. Dubouloz, “Home-Grown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization,” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 22, no. 1 (2010): 33–51.

[4] J. C. Amble and A. Meleagrou-Hitchens, “Jihadist Radicalization in East Africa: Two Case Studies,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 6 (2014): 523–40.

[5] J. Githens-Mazers and R. Lambert, “Why Conventional Wisdom on Radicalization Fails: The Persistence of a Failed Discourse,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2010): 889–901.

[6] A. Botha, “Political Socialization and Terrorist Radicalization among Individuals Who Joined al-Shabaab in Kenya,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 11 (2014): 895–919; D. M. Anderson and J. McKnight, “Kenya at War: Al-Shabaab and Its Enemies in Eastern Africa,” *African Affairs* 111, no. 454 (2014): 1–27.