

Will hardline approach against extremism backfire in coastal Kenya?

by [Ariel Zirulnick](#)

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The 26-year-old's tone was calm as he recounted showing up at a local mosque here last month with dozens of other young men, armed with knives and ready to drive out the imam and other leaders for their flawed teachings of Islam.

In his dim, sweltering bedroom in a shack behind a welding workshop on the outskirts of this coastal city, he spoke of martyrdom and his path from drug addiction to jihad. He converted to Islam five years ago, finding sobriety via CDs and the preaching of a radical imam and recruiter for al-Shabaab, a militant group based in neighboring Somalia.

"Burning churches, killing police—it's not a sin to us; they are the biggest enemies of the movement," said the young man, referring to the police and non-Muslims.

Should the government move against them, he said, "there is a Muslim somewhere, in Somalia or Kenya, whether al-Shabaab or someone else, who will definitely revenge us."

For a couple of weeks, this young man and his allies took over the Musa mosque in the Majengo neighborhood and preached a return to sharia law. Then police raided and shut it down along with three other mosques the young men had taken over; some were arrested, while others fled. The police said they found weapons stored in the mosques.

A heavy security presence has enforced an uneasy calm in this city, which has emerged as a testing ground for Kenya's hardline approach to confronting extremism after a spate of attacks by al-Shabaab, including the recent killing of 64 people in two incidents in northeast Kenya that singled out non-Muslims.

Tensions have built since Kenya's military joined African Union forces fighting in Somalia in 2011. President Uhuru Kenyatta has called on Kenyans to help combat

terrorism by informing authorities about potential militant activity in their community.

But in a city like Mombasa, where the population is 41 percent Muslim, the government's tactics are beginning to be seen as a campaign against all who practice Islam. Police raids on neighborhoods and mosques have been followed by attacks on police and churches, and local willingness to cooperate with authorities is fading. Many worry that providing information is self-incriminating.

The current dynamic “drives the Muslim community against the government in a way that is very dangerous,” said Khalef Khalifa, chairman of Muslims for Human Rights, a Kenyan advocacy group. “For the first time, Muslims on the coast feel they are under siege.”

The growing resentment and fear could become a liability for Kenya in its fight against al-Shabaab. And while the radicalized youth appear too disorganized to pose a threat beyond the coast, the chaos they have created provides cover for militants.

“The actual harm that they can do as a group—it’s not substantial,” said Niklas Rogers, director of Kenya Risk, an East Africa security consultancy firm based in Kenya. “It’s more likely al-Shabaab would take advantage of a situation to escalate it.

“There is no coordinated link between the two. [But] there is a massive level of sympathy and money,” Rogers said.

'Ripe' for al-Shabaab

On November 27, authorities reopened the Musa mosque. But frequent riots have prompted many local businesses to close, and residents say anyone who can afford to move away is doing so.

Parents and elders here watch their sons with trepidation. To the police, Mombasa’s young men “are all drug addicts or terrorists,” said Farooq Saad, head of Citizens Against Child and Drug Abuse, based in Mombasa. “Opportunities for the coastal youth are very inferior” to other parts of the country. He estimates there are 35,000 addicts in Mombasa County today. In a 2013 poll of the Kenyan coast by Ipsos, 51 percent of county residents cited “jobless youth” as the main threat to security.

Young Muslim men say they are caught in the middle between authorities and radical youth. “We want jobs! We want a wife! We want a car! We want a house! We don’t have anything!” cries one as he left the first prayers at Musa mosque since its reopening. Others refused to talk, afraid of incriminating themselves.

The day after Musa’s reopening, Farida Rashid Safe presided over Mombasa’s first deradicalization workshop. As chairwoman of the Kenyan Muslim Woman’s Alliance, she worries about the twin temptations of drugs and jihad for young Muslim men.

About 200 people, mostly parents, sisters, and community elders, gathered to hear from local experts and government officials. The draw for the few dozen young men was likely the few dollars and three free meals offered for attendance. But as the day wore on, some started to speak up.

At a question and answer session with local politician Abdul Samad, attendees pleaded for him to reason with the police. Speaking after the forum, Samad said that police tactics were creating a “very ripe environment” for al-Shabaab recruiters.

“Take a balloon—it doesn’t burst on first breath, it bursts when it can’t take anymore,” he said.

Government officials “don’t want to see our faces,” complains 17-year-old Ali Farouq, unemployed and no longer in school. “They promise us many things but they don’t fulfill them.”

Last Friday, three police cars came to Farouq’s neighborhood and took away young men they accused of terrorism, he said. It happens often. He just tries to stay out of sight.

“After 6 p.m., I’m home, cooped up like a chicken,” Farouq said.

A moment for change?

Most Mombasa residents admit that radicals, even al-Shabaab, are among them, and that the police probably did find weapons in the four mosques they raided last month.

But the police campaign is backfiring, locals say, because of moves like bursting into mosques during prayer without removing their boots, a major affront to the religion.

“There are many ways to kill a rat,” said Ruby Tamina, a local radio journalist dressed in an abaya. “Kenya’s police don’t use their head. It’s just boom-boom, force. Every action has a reaction.”

Now may be the moment for change. The spate of shocking attacks in the northeast—one a bus attack that al-Shabaab claimed was in retaliation for the mosque closures in Mombasa—prompted a public outcry so fierce that two top national security officials were removed from office December 2. New leadership may provide an opening for a review of security tactics.

“The government obviously needs to rethink its strategies so that they could benefit from intelligence from these same communities,” Rogers, the risk consultant, said. “It involves a very big change in policy.”

Muslims in Mombasa are also angry at religious leaders and elders from umbrella organizations like the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims. Locals accuse these groups of staying mum not only on police abuses, but extremism. None condemned the radical youth’s takeover of the mosques, for example, nor the mass arrests and raids that followed.

But Muslim elders are also feeling the heat. In June, Sheikh Idriss Mohamed, the leader of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya, was gunned down in what was widely believed to be by local radicals. Khalifa of Muslims for Human Rights said he’s never feared for his life as much as he has the past two years.

That sympathy for radical teachings exists here is a departure from past practices. In the 1990s, Israeli academic Arye Oded, a researcher on radicalization in Africa, wrote that in Kenya’s coastal Muslim community, “Islamic extremism does not pose a security threat.”

However, he cautioned that, “frustrations and dissatisfaction could be exploited” by militant groups “if the regime does not give this important minority more attention.”

Decades of political and economic marginalization and discrimination against coastal Kenya is blamed for its current lack of underdevelopment. In 2013, Mombasa’s unemployment rate was 27 percent.

Some thought November’s battle over the mosques and the subsequent riots and crackdown might finally push Mombasa over the brink. The city pulled back, but

mediators—including local politicians like Samad and organizations like CIPK—say they are running out of ways to placate people.

Elders, who have seen waves of violence before, insist moderation will prevail.

“Youths by themselves can’t run the show,” said Mohamed Jahazi, an elderly former member of parliament, speaking from his plastic chair at the Musa mosque on the day of its reopening.

Referring to the radical youth that previously seized the mosque, he added, “That path they are taking—they’re learning a lesson. It is dangerous and costly. . . . They cannot win.”

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