



RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN AFRICA

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN

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OBSERVATOIRE GÉOPOLITIQUE DU RELIGIEUX



NICOLAS KAZARIAN: In your opinion, what is the cause of religious extremism in Africa today?

NURUDEEN LEMU*: Let me begin by attempting a working definition of ‘religious extremism’. I define it as the expression of extreme and unjust positions or actions taken by some adherents of a religion, based on their understanding of a religious teaching or scripture. Yet, the majority of adherents regard such positions as fanatical, unacceptable and unrepresentative of their faith. The adjective “extreme” here is negative and relative to the “moderate” or “centrist” position of the majority or mainstream. I will also assume that in this discussion, ‘religious extremism’ refers to the kind of extremism which is expressed through violence.

REHMAH KASULE: When people talk about religious extremism, you realize that many still second-guess what religious extremism is. The media has come out with all kinds of popular jargon and brands, such as the depiction of all Muslims as “Terrorists.” We have also witnessed what is going on in the USA, with President Trump’s conviction that Muslims are dangerous and should therefore be banned from entering the country. Religious extremism has become amplified such a way as to distort the public’s perception of the religion. Innocent Muslims become angered because the perception of their faith is being negatively distorted.

NURUDEEN LEMU: It is difficult to discuss the causes of religious extremism in broad terms. Many generalizations are not very useful because each incidence has its own peculiar combination of conspiring factors. Discussing the causes of what appears to be religious extremism in a particular context allows for more thorough diagnosis of that particular expression of “religious extremism”. Indeed, it enables us to know whether it is actually about religion or not; and if it is about religion, how much of it is really “religious”. Or whether describing it as “religious” (or based on religious teachings) is due to prejudice against a particular religion (or religion as a whole), or whether it is just the extremists’ way of mimicking mainstream religion and trying to gain or borrow credibility from it.

REHMAH KASULE: In my opinion, social isolation, social disconnectedness and economic discrimination of young people are key root-causes of violent extremism in Africa. However, this is still interpreted differently depending on one’s race, religion or country. Globally for example, if a white Christian male shoots people, it is termed as “a tragedy done by a disturbed person”. If it is a black Christian man, it may be branded as “an act of racism”. And if it is done by a white or black Muslim man, it will be called “an act of terrorism.” What people do not realize, is that all those young men may have been angered by their marginalized status. In Uganda, a number of Muslim youth are coming of age in societies that lack stable social settings, economic opportunities and positive role models for inspiration. Adding to these factors, high youth unemployment also predisposes young people toward religious extremism and violence in Africa.

* The entire text of the interview is available at: <https://nicolaskazarian.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/nurudeen-interview-on-religious-extremism-in-africa-march-20171.pdf>

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: For many, Religion is often considered synonymous with violence. For example, Al-Shabaab in East Africa, Boko Haram in Nigeria and LRA in Uganda justify their brutality with religion. But what is the truth of the religious landscape in Africa and can you explain the use of religion in various conflicts throughout the continent?

NURUDDEEN LEMU: In most of Africa, religion permeates every facet of community life – births, funerals, marriages, business, ethics and morals, dressing, grooming, food, ceremonies and celebrations, rites of passage, titles, names of people, days of the week and months, language, national anthems, pledges and oaths, law and politics, conflict and peace-making... – everything! Thus, when conflict arises, it can easily take on a religious tinge. As Karen Armstrong says in her extraordinary *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence*, “Religion, like the weather, ‘does lots of different things’... Identical religious beliefs and practices have inspired diametrically opposed courses of action.”

REHMAH KASULE: Alice Lakwena, a woman who used religion to immerse so much support from religious-loving Christians, did not kill people based on religion, but on tribal conflict by lunatics who wanted political leadership. It is true that religion is used as a tool to fuel conflict because whenever people are poor, unhappy, suffering and are in state of despair, the only light and hope comes from religion. Furthermore, religion is a tool for mobilizing communities regardless of people’s tribes and language. Therefore, people that use religion in various conflicts know that masses will come to “praise the Lord”; and in the process, they gradually indoctrinate them with their messages.

NURUDDEEN LEMU: I do believe that the arrogance of some people - and especially of religious extremists who regard themselves as pious messiahs and good saviors of others - can easily cause them to overestimate their personal invulnerability to evil, as well as the power and influence of negative situational forces (or “temptations”) that surround them. They are therefore more often vulnerable to slipping into inhumanity and incarnating an evil even greater than what they claimed to be fighting against in the first place. While religious extremists cite religion as the justification for their brutality, it often has little to do with religious teachings, but more to do with human nature and social psychology. To escape the guilt of their atrocities, extremists try to infuse meaning into their madness by seeking creative ways to justify their actions and if possible, to even put a halo on it. For such people, quoting religious texts and authorities becomes a convenient instrument for justification and an anesthesia to their evil.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: Could you give an example of one specific project you implemented in your respective countries to oppose religious extremism and radicalization?

REHMAH KASULE: As a result of the terrorist bombings in 2010 and in 2012, I organized - with a grant from the United States Mission Kampala - a Youth Engaged Program Muslim Centre to cater for the growing number of unemployed youth in the

predominately Muslim communities of Kawempe - the largest slum in Uganda. The Centre has provided young people with a sense of community and purpose, by providing economic incentives that are a strong de-motivator for participation in violence and extremist activities. The program promotes positive communication to counteract the negative narratives from radicalizing groups; it strengthens resiliencies, engages youth and communicates messages among high-risk groups. The program also works with community leaders to prevent *violence* without suppressing *peaceful expression* of ideas. The Program also promotes self-sustaining businesses and community dialogue. It has equipped 1,447 Muslim youth (boys and girls) aged 18-30 years with vocational, financial literacy, leadership, cognitive, critical-thinking, innovation and cooperative skills. 75% of the youth have started their own businesses and 15% have gone back to school. As Abdu-Basset Mulinde, a project beneficiary once told me: "With the money I earn from my business, no one can convince me to join extreme groups. Every day when I wake up, I know that I am not a victim but a winner, a role model and a star who is destined for greatness."

NURUDEEN LEMU: The pathways and drivers to "religious extremism" are numerous and varied. Thus there is a need for holistic and concerted efforts of many stakeholders, both in the formal and informal sector. I have been very fortunate to work with the Islamic Education Trust (IET) as Director for Research and Training of our Da'wah Institute of Nigeria (DIN). I was tremendously blessed with a wonderful team of colleagues and volunteers, with whom I continue to learn a lot about religious extremism. The institute's main objective in this area is the capacity-building of Islamic organizations, religious leaders and activists; it provides better concepts and approaches for responding to religious extremism, building community resilience to it, and training others in more effective peace-building. Over the last decade or more, we have directed a fair amount of time and resources into understanding various expressions of religious extremism (especially among Muslims) and finding ways of countering these.

We have developed training programs for imams, religious and youth leaders (including women) that are aimed at empowering them with a unique set of concepts and skills, in order to think more critically and systematically about extremism and (mis)interpretations of religious texts. The training also focuses on responding to and deconstructing extremist narratives; building their personal development and community leadership capabilities; improving their skills in managing human resources and conflict; encouraging them to proactively build interfaith networks for better peace and community development. Through increasing community participation, more effective and structured strategies for non-violent social reform - combined with support of greater gender equity -, the training is offering a more ethical and value-oriented paradigm of Islam.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: What further steps should be taken for religion to promote social inclusion, economic growth, women's rights, health care and education?

NURUDEEN LEMU: Ownership of the reform and implementation process by people of faith. This is where steps taken to promote economic growth, women's rights and so on are initiated, supported and/or driven by religious authorities. This "in-house", "home-grown" and intra-faith strategy is also a template which ensures that any major opposition to proposals put forward by religious institutions would have to also challenge the credibility of religious authorities and their institutions, instead of directing the challenge to less trusted politicians or "the West".

For instance, the current Emir of Kano in Northern Nigeria, HRH Muhammadu Sanusi II, organized a multi-disciplinary team of well-respected traditional and contemporary local religious scholars and experts from various other fields, in order to collectively draft a proposal which has been submitted to a council of Islamic scholars for "validation". Then, it will be presented to the Kano State legislature to be passed into law for the Shari'ah (Islamic) courts. This proposed bill deals with a number of reforms to family law and the rights of women, including some important legal restrictions on polygamy; improved marriage rights; right to education; fair application of inheritance laws; a ban on forced marriages and on domestic violence; giving women the option to seek compensation for any bodily harm; and the complete right to divorce in cases of domestic abuse. This is very important as the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Kano and elsewhere would rather go to the Islamic courts with their complaints whenever these are available.

REHMAH KASULE: As the narrative to global development challenges changes, so do development solutions. A great philosopher, Aristotle, put it very well: *"No one can straighten an iron with the same energy that bent it."* Therefore, as we work towards sustainable development goals, we must be cognizant of the fact that education for youth is smart economics to empower more than 78% of Africa's population. It is evidenced that education breaks inter-generational poverty, reframes mindsets, and changes perceptions. Hate speech and negative perceptions about other people's values and beliefs are cultivated at a young age at homes and schools. Programs should work with education systems to integrate social empowerment, interreligious dialogues and community initiatives in schools, in order to build social cohesion from a young age.

To economically empower young people and women in order to create a sense of community with action builds platforms for self-expression, increases access to information, creates supportive network and builds their capacity and skills. Since the media has played a big role in distorting peace and accelerating hatred globally, there is therefore a need to amplify peace messages at all forums, including social media where young people get information. This will gradually change the narrative about peace, security, and violent extremism. Community leaders that have close proximity to challenges should be empowered by building their capacities and be equipped with the right information, in order to prevent and deal with cases of violent extremism tendencies. There is a need to map out resources and identify peace champions to

consolidate efforts, to avoid duplication of resources, and to amplify voices as well as multiply face of peace agents at various levels. Diversity and inclusion promote the concept of “leaving no one behind.” Youth and women should be meaningfully empowered as active players in peace and security initiatives. The tipping point will come from involving youth that make up more than 80% of the population as agents of change, not as tools of destruction.

There is a need to identify peace efforts that have worked at community level, to provide adequate funding and to replicate them in other parts of the world. Civil society plays a great role in implementing such projects in communities and it must be supported.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: What is your hope for Africa’s future?

NURUDDEEN LEMU: Few countries have suffered more starvation, civil strife and cross-border wars than Ethiopia, or more tragic genocide than Rwanda. My hope is that others will be able to learn from and be inspired by these countries and peoples; and even try to catch up with these countries in their resolve on peace-building and strategies for building their economies. They remind me of a verse in the Qur’an that says, *“God will not change the condition of a people, until they are ready to change what is within themselves.”*

These countries, I believe, prove to the rest of Africa and beyond that no situation is beyond repair; that there will always be good and caring people within the international community and in Africa willing to assist through their governments and NGOs. They show there is always hope if a people and its leadership are determined to care from each other. Dare I also add that they also show that a better future in Africa (as I think of Botswana too, but also South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia) is not necessarily undermined by dictatorships, especially and if very lucky to have a benevolent dictator!

REHMAH KASULE: A great leader, Eleanor Roosevelt, said that “The future belongs to those that believe in the power of their dreams.” So for Africa, there is great hope for total transformation if we focus on developing value-based leadership, transforming the education system and fully integrating peace education into the latter, so that young people are immunized with positive messages right from childhood, to become part of their DNA.

Lastly, leaders in Africa should also promote the *7Ps of Peace*: inclusive participation of all People; Practice shared values and principles; strengthened community level Programs; implement strong Policies; multiply faces and amplify voices of Peace-builders for community Policing; create strong Partnerships to expertise and resources to avoid duplication of efforts; Promote shared vision for great good. ■

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