



**THE QUESTION OF
MARGINALISATION AND
VULNERABILITY TO VIOLENT
EXTREMISM IN UGANDA**

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Introduction

This brief is the second of a series of discussion papers giving a flavour of the issues surrounding violent extremism across the Horn of Africa. This paper explores views on the question of Muslim marginalisation and vulnerability to radicalisation.

The set of papers reflect findings from research undertaken in 2018-2020 by LPI's Horn of Africa Regional programme (HARP) into the status of violent extremism, stakeholder perspectives and responses to it. It involved a consideration of the literature, key informant interviews and focus discussion groups with different stakeholders. Similar research has so far been conducted in Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and Somalia reflecting different views on, interpretations of, and responses to the phenomenon of violent extremism across the Horn of Africa. The overall purpose is to broaden and enrich our understanding of the issues, by considering and reflect on experiences and potential learning from across these different contexts.

Violent Extremism in Uganda and the Ideological Lens

As described in the first series of [papers](#), over the years, Uganda has experienced various manifestations of violent extremism which have informed conceptions of violent extremism among the various P/CVE actors. However, unlike others in the region, the Government of Uganda has ostensibly adopted the rhetoric of a broader framing in the language of violation of the national objectives. By broadening its definition, Uganda could possibly avoid the profiling practices of neighbouring countries, such as Kenya, which can undermine the human security of their Muslim populations. It could also potentially provide Ugandans with a political discourse enabling a new form of government accountability relating to human rights violations and discriminatory practices, although some worry that paradoxically the government might instead invoke Uganda's national principles to justify them.

The national framing of violent extremism has led to the government designating four groups as violent extremist organisations in Uganda (or 'terrorist' organisations – the preferred terminology): The Lord's Resistance

Army (LRA), the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Tablighi/jihadi-Salafists and al-Shabaab. Government responses to these organisations are fundamentally security-focused and largely situated within the government's broader strategic (arguably rent-seeking) behaviour as it relates to global assistance to counter-terrorism. In addition, reflecting a global pattern in Uganda, donors primarily adopt an ideological lens in their understanding of violent extremism. It is certainly the case that ideology has been and is an important aspect of both the LRA's and the ADF's militancy, representing, respectively, Christian and Islamic extremism. However, both organisations have also evolved in rapidly changing socio-political contexts, and recent academic studies now characterise them more as organisations fighting for survival more as 'borderland insurgencies' than as organisations driven by ideology. Recruitment to these violent organisations is also mediated by the discourse of marginalisation attached to them in northern Uganda and among the country's Muslim population as explored below.

Background to Islam and Christianity in Uganda and the colonial Legacy

Uganda is a very diverse country, not only in terms of ethnicity but also religion. There are three major religious communities: Protestants (45.1 per cent), followed by Catholics (39 per cent) and Muslims (13.7 per cent). The vast majority of Muslims are Sunni with small Shia and Ahmadi minorities also present. The Iganga District in the east of Uganda has the highest percentage of Muslims, and Muslims also live in central (Buganda) and northern districts (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Although Islam is currently a religious minority, it has a historical primacy over Christianity being first introduced to the Buganda kingdom in 1844, roughly three decades ahead of Christianity, and then at different periods in other parts of pre-colonial Uganda by a merchant class (Vilhanova, 2004). It reached its peak during the reign of Kabaka Mutesa I in pre-colonial Buganda. Indeed, the period between 1862 and 1875 has been called the golden age of Islam in Buganda (Soi, 2016). When Islam was used as an ideology of resistance by his subjects, Mutesa turned to Christianity, inviting Western Protestant and Catholic missionaries into the country. Muslims, Protestant and Catholic missionaries all competed for influence in the kingdom, which led to the infamous religious wars in the second half of the 19th century (MCJL, 2017).

British colonialism in Uganda gave further political leverage to Christianity, especially Protestants – a political situation that has continued to shape the differential access of religious

communities to the post-colonial Ugandan state. Muslim marginalisation can also thus be considered a part of the colonial legacy. The British promoted Protestants at the expense of members of other religions, considering Muslims as ‘proverbially difficult to manage’ and only tolerating them ‘because they were here before us’ (Vision Reporter, 2000). By 1900 there was a colonially sanctioned division of labour that basically assigned Muslims to the kitchen and tasks of slaughtering, being drivers, and other service oriented employment.¹ As noted by Musisi and Kiggundu (2019, p. 86): ‘The circumstances surrounding the current marginalisation of Muslims, particularly in formal or secular education in Uganda, are rooted in the country’s history of formal education. In the colonial period, being a Muslim organisation was often a prerequisite for establishing a Muslim school, just as being a Christian organisation was a prerequisite for establishing a Christian school.’ Furthermore, ‘while the spread of Christianity was a purposeful project, the spread of Islam was a by-product of trade. As a result, Christianity as an institution was more organised and enjoyed more financial support from its benefactors outside Africa than Islam did’ (ibid.). Muslims instead sent their children to madrasas or Qur’anic schools. As such, Muslims did not access secular education and so were unfavourably incorporated into the post-colonial Ugandan state.

1. In-depth discussion with Ahmed Hadji, Head of UMYDF, Kampala, 25 August 2019.

Post-Colonial Attitudes

An inadequate response to this situation by post-colonial governments also explains the continued marginalisation of the Muslim minority. The socio-political situation of Muslims greatly improved when Amin became President in 1971 as the country's first Muslim President. For the first time since Mutesa I's reign, Islam appeared at the centre of Ugandan politics. As Amin came from an ethnic minority, too small to guarantee a strong political base, he turned to the Muslim community for support (Hanlon, 1974), declaring Uganda a Muslim country in 1974 at the Islamic Summit Conference in Pakistan and promoting its membership of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), even though only a small minority of Ugandans were Muslims. Amin is also credited with increasing their self-confidence: *"In Kampala, all religious communities except Muslims had their own hill where they built their respective houses of worship. Having a hill is prestigious and a statement of power. Muslims did not have a hill until Amin gave us one on a very strategic hill where [colonial administrator Baron Frederick] Lugard had established his*

*headquarters. We established a small house as a commemoration for Lugard near the mosque."*²

The city of Kampala is spread across seven prominent hills close to Lake Victoria. The hill referred to above is Old Kampala Hill, where the Ugandan colonial administrative headquarters remained until 1905 when it was moved to Entebbe. On this hill, Muslims built, with financial support from Libya's Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, one of the largest mosques in Africa, now known as the Uganda National Mosque.

Muslims were, however, blamed for Amin's brutality, and their socio-political standing deteriorated during President Obote's rule 1980-85. In 1989, President Museveni reached out to them to contribute to national reconstruction, condemning discriminatory practices by the state and the dominant Christian population. Muslims have acknowledged his policy shifts and concessions, but they reproach his administration for not having instituted 'robust affirmative action' to redress the historical marginalisation of the community in public life.

The structural drivers shaping the vulnerability of Muslims in Uganda to violent extremist messaging

Despite its earlier introduction than Christianity, Islam has remained a minority religion in Uganda, and Uganda's contemporary Muslims employ the discourse of marginalisation to describe their current situation. *Education and Participation in Government:* Muslims refer to

inequality of access to education, and the allocation of government jobs as the latter is shaped by the faith-based inequality in education. As Musisi and Kiggundu state (2018, p. 86), 'It is an open secret that the literacy and education levels of Muslims in Uganda are far below those of their Christian

2. Interview with Media Development Foundation, Kampala, 17 August 2019

counterparts.' The UMSC has accused the government of discriminatory hiring practices, stating that Muslims do not receive fair consideration for senior government positions and fill only a small number of low-level positions. It has also reported that Muslims comprise less than 10 per cent of the total staff in most government agencies, which is considerably less than Muslims' percentage of the population (US Department of State, 2017).

As a non-Muslim CSO noted; This unequal access to secular education, is because education was spread and delivered by Christian missionaries and was focused on Christians. Muslims went to the less-resourced madrasas sometimes considering secular and Christian schools as a tool of conversion. Thus, less value was given to secular education by Muslims and they felt their religious identity threatened if they sent their children to Christian schools.

Muslims also feel excluded from power and national politics. According to the Muslim Centre for Justice and Law (MCJL, 2017, p. 7), 'Muslims are found at the periphery of power centres. They are a truly subordinate group whose members have significantly less control or power over their lives than members of other faiths in Uganda, be it in the Legislature, Judiciary or the Executive.' Unquestioningly, the relationship between educational marginalisation and access to jobs is mutually reinforcing with lack of access to government jobs simultaneously both a consequence and cause of educational inequality.

The Justice System: Marginality in the justice system is also linked to

perceived discrimination which Muslims say is reflected in extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, denial of bail rights and, above all, profiling by security personnel based on religious identity – as the following extract from an interview indicates: *"Muslims are not well integrated into Ugandan society, and many have been imprisoned because they spoke up against government human rights violations. Christian leaders have also spoken up strongly but are not labelled as terrorists. It is still a mystery who murdered Muslim clerics. The majority killed are members of the Tablighi community, regarded by the government as extremists. Because of this perceived connection to radicalism, Tablighis say they face regular harassment from Ugandan security forces, including surveillance, arbitrary detention and torture ... Many Muslims are accused of terrorism, which is why they feel Islam is under attack. There is a strong sentiment that the judiciary discriminates against Muslims. For example, two [Christian] MPs were charged with treason, but they got bail, but Muslims were charged for 12 years without bail."*³

The murders referred to here are the mysterious 2014–15 killings of 12 Muslim clerics. Following which, at least 14 Muslims, including former Tablighi leader Sheikh Yunus Kamoga, were arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2017 on terrorism charges (Kasule & Nsambu, 2019). Enraged Tablighi leaders have demanded the government explain the wave of arrests and detentions, asserting that they are based on nothing more than rumours and speculation.

Other stakeholder views on Muslim

3. Senior Muslim leader, Kampala, 26 September 2018

marginalisation: The interpretation of Muslim marginalisation as a structural driver of violent extremism in Uganda is also shared by Non-Muslim CSOs, as indicated in a focus group discussion with members of a CSOs working on PCVE-related projects: ‘Some groups have better access to power through the government patronage system. It started as a colonial project [and] resulted in regional inequality. Muslim majority areas such as eastern Uganda are the poorest. Radicalisation in Muslim areas is not about religion but a religious framing of socio-economic marginalisation.’⁴

Not everyone agrees with this discourse of marginalisation though, as reflected in Brian Kisomose’s article, in which he wrote: ‘Allegations have been put forward by [Muslims] that the President has from time to time appointed Ugandans to various government offices ... at the exclusion of Muslims. We all know that Uganda is a secular state in the sense that every Ugandan is free to practice and profess any religion. No law or policy in Uganda provides for the appointment of any person basing on religious background in the public sector... I personally have never witnessed any public service job advertisement that excludes Muslims as eligible applicants ... There is nothing like discrimination of the Muslims, and they are not a Marginalised group because they have always enjoyed all rights entitled to them as they are human beings.’⁵

This perspective does not recognise the systemic nature of bias and discrimination in practice, which Muslims consider needs affirmative action to address: “The Constitution of the Republic of Uganda is very clear on the principle that government should reflect national character. It is in this spirit that affirmative

action for women and persons with disabilities and youth were allocated a quota in the National Assembly. It should therefore be the policy of government to address any imbalances if observed.... It is neither an attempt to make religion a basis of employment or government appointment but a cry for an equitable allocation of the national cake. It is the same cry by other minorities, especially cultural minorities – it is not unique to Muslims.” (MCJL, 2017, p. 13)

This view is not held by Muslims alone. Investigative journalist Ivan Okuda, who investigated the mystery of the murders of Muslim clerics, noted that: ‘From my involvement to search for answers to the question, ‘Who is killing Uganda’s Muslim clerics?’ many Muslims we spoke to in and outside of Uganda, while acknowledging internal weaknesses and intrigue, don’t have the nicest outlook on how the government of Uganda treats them. They feel victimised. Some young Muslims claimed they were tortured to confess membership to terror groups like the ADF in exchange for freedom. ...When you follow arrests made after high-profile assassinations, without singling out any, it is of mainly Muslims. This doesn’t appear a coincidence in the minds of Muslims as some feel this is part of an unwritten program of demonising a community ..., there is a steadily growing feeling of ‘being othered’ and targeted and abused and unwanted and profiled and judged with prejudice.’ (Ivan Okuda, quoted in MCJL, 2017, p. 14)

Muslim CSOs active in Uganda’s PCVE space are concerned that VEOs can easily exploit this Muslim sense of marginalisation: “Uganda has grappled with the problem of violent extremist groups ... since 1986. Notable among them have been Lord’s Resistance Army,

4. Kampala, 26 September 2018

5. Kisomose, Brian. (2014). ‘Muslims are not marginalised’. Daily Monitor, 11 February. Retrieved from <https://www.monitor.co.ug/OpEd/Letters/Muslims-are-not-marginalised/806314-2200718-kklmpz/index.html>

LRA, Uganda National Rescue Front, UNRF ... West Nile Bank Front, WNBF, and Allied Democratic Forces, ADF. With the exception of the LRA and ADF, the above groups have disbanded after signing amnesty/peace agreements with the government of Uganda,

under the Amnesty Act. Except for the LRA, the above groups have been dominated by Muslims. Muslim rebel groups use marginalisation as a tool for recruitment.” (MCJL, 2017, p. 7)

Internal divisions in Uganda’s Muslim Community

Uganda’s Muslim community is riven by factionalism which has undermined the emergence of a united, coherent Muslim voice in national politics that might assist address inequity. Divisions have been evident from the start as Islam was introduced to Uganda by two sources with different ideological orientations. Coastal traders brought a liberal version to Buganda (Vision Reporter, 2000), and a less liberal form of Islamic observance was introduced in the 1870s by Sudanese teachers from Khartoum (Soi, 2016). The new arrivals criticised aspects of the form being practised, such as mosques built facing westwards. This was compounded in the 1980s by the blending of the more conservative, Saudi-based transnational Islamic movement known as Salafiya with Tablighi. This gives a distinct flavour to the Islamic reform movement

in the Ugandan context, as the Tablighi are often considered ‘moderate’ and ‘apolitical’ elsewhere in the world. Many Ugandan Muslim youth sent to the Middle East for religious studies, particularly during Amin’s rule, sought on their return to take over the country’s Islamic leadership and institutions through violence. As noted by the head of the UMYDF, this complicated Muslims’ conversation with the Ugandan state and society: *“The Tablighi–Salafiya militancy was inspired by the Turabi revolution in Sudan and returnees from Islamic countries such as Pakistan. It is unfortunate that unscrupulous Tablighi youth framed genuine Muslim issues as if they were part of the project of political Islam. It is in this political context that the ADF has emerged.”*⁶

The influence of Global and Regional Geopolitics

The attacks of 11 September 2001 by al-Qaeda (hereafter 9/11) and the US-led Global War on Terror (GWOT) are also intimately connected to the issue of Muslim marginalisation in Uganda, as elsewhere. A senior Muslim leader notes how terrorism is equated with violent extremism: *“...the threat*

*is identified with Islam. No wonder that nearly 70 per cent of prisoners in Uganda are Muslims. Uganda’s counter-terrorism infrastructure and trainings are designed in Washington, DC, and have contributed to their criminalisation. If you are a Muslim, you are either a terrorist or a potential terrorist.”*⁷

6. Interview with senior Muslim leader, Kampala, 16 August 2019

7. Interview, Kampala, 17 August 2019

Uganda is one of the most enthusiastic regional 'partners' in the US-conceived GWOT, which has translated into close military and intelligence cooperation, particularly in the fight against al-Shabaab. Since February 2007 over 5000 Ugandan soldiers have been sent to Somalia as part of AMISOM, and Uganda remains both the largest contributor of troops and the major African coordinator of the operation. The government has explained the Ugandan intervention in terms of regional responsibility, African solidarity and domestic interests (Romaniuk & Durner, 2018). Some commentators, however, interpret Uganda's presence in Somalia as having more to do with Uganda-donor relations than with maintaining regional stability. For instance, Jonathan Fisher notes (2012, p. 404): 'Museveni's decision to intervene in Somalia is the most recent example of his regime's multi-pronged 'image management' strategy in which the President has involved Uganda in numerous foreign and domestic activities to ensure that donors perceive his government in a particular way vis-à-vis their interests: as an economic success story, a guarantor of regional stability, or, in relation to Somalia, an ally in the global war on terror. In so doing, Museveni's strategy ... has been able largely to avoid censure in areas of traditional donor concern such as governance, thereby achieving a considerable degree of agency in a seemingly asymmetric relationship.' Whatever the motive might be, Uganda's military intervention in Somalia was cited as a major reason by al-Shabab for its twin attacks in Kampala in 2010.⁸

8. Al Jazeera. (2010). 'Al-Shabab claims Uganda bombings'. Aljazeera.com, 13 July. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2010/07/2010711212520826984.html>.

Conclusion

The conceptualisation of violent extremism as a contravention of the national objectives, in theory allows for a different approach to violent extremism in Uganda, but in practice, there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of the interpretation. The possibility for greater accountability of government and a less securitised approach that places less emphasis on ideology, particularly Islamic ideology, and more on addressing the structural drivers of violent extremism is still to emerge. From available knowledge generated by a variety of academic studies and as explained by research participants, marginality is an everyday reality for Muslims reflected in their lack of access to secular education, and therefore later government employment opportunities, as well as perceived discrimination and targeting within the justice system. This situation has been engendered by various long-term systemic factors: historically entrenched internal divisions and the lack of a united Muslim voice; the colonial legacy of bias towards Christians; inadequate government responses to the situation from post-colonial governments; the more recent effects of the so-called 'Global War on Terror'; and the current government's apparent strategic rent-seeking behaviour as it relates to global assistance to counter-terrorism. These different factors shaping the socio-political landscape and result in a self-fulfilling cycle that Muslims feel can only be addressed through affirmative actions designed to better include them in the national polity and enable them to participate in the governance of the nation as equal citizens. Civil society actors believe that responses to violent extremism that emphasise addressing structural drivers could be more effective P/CVE strategies than the current preoccupation with ideology. In addition, where and when ideological interventions may be necessary, they believe that it is more appropriate to empower and support Muslim CSOs already on the ground with projects such as reforming and standardising traditional Islamic education (reforming the madrasa curriculum) and establishing national institutions of Islamic learning. Such projects are considered very effective in combating external extremist influences, particularly from the Gulf countries and are not likely to confirm or fuel perceptions of discrimination against Muslims.
