



# IDeIAS

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## MAULANA ALI CASSIMO: INSURGENCE IN THE NORTH OF MOZAMBIQUE AS SEEN FROM NIASSA

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### Introduction

In late November 2021, Mecula district in Niassa province, was the target of attacks on civilians that resulted in several deaths and destruction. The press and government authorities attributed the attacks to the Al Shabaab group, which had been attacking northern Mozambique since 5 October 2017, with a particular focus on Cabo Delgado province. According to the police, one outcome of these attacks was the death of a citizen named Maulana Ali Cassimo, considered one of the leaders of the insurgency (Borges, 2021). If the link between the attacks and Al Shabaab were to be confirmed, this would mean the expansion of the war to a province that had shown signs of the group's presence ever since the conflict began, particularly the recruitment of young people.

In July 2018, President Filipe Nyusi stated that young people who were part of Al Shabaab and came from Lago and Mecula districts in Niassa, (Government of Niassa Province, 2018) had been detained. In June 2019, the general commander of the Mozambican police, Bernardino Rafael, stated that the authorities were looking for a Tanzanian citizen suspected of recruiting young people from Mecula district to join Al Shabaab by promising scholarships in countries such as Tanzania and Saudi Arabia. In 2020, the press started reporting attacks attributed to Al Shabaab, but they were always denied by the authorities. The first was precisely in Mecula, in February 2020, where a group of "unknown" armed men attacked a village, setting fire to several houses and fighting the Defense and Security Forces (FDS), resulting in the death of eight and the capture of 15 attackers (*Carta de Moçambique*, 2020a). On 2 October 2020, another attack was reported in Mavago district, with a group of armed men attacking a bus, fatally shooting the driver and seizing some cash (RM 2020). According to the police, neither attack was connected to the war in Cabo Delgado. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the February 2020 attack in Mecula district was carried out by the group that had been attacking Cabo Delgado, as one member of the group, wounded in combat, sought

treatment in a local hospital, and was identified by witnesses as being part of Al Shabaab and a native of Macomia district in Cabo Delgado (*Carta de Moçambique*, 2020b).

In March 2021, an IESE study also showed that Niassa, particularly the districts of Lago, Sanga and Mecula, were areas for the recruitment of young people for Cabo Delgado (Forquilha & Pereira, 2021)<sup>1</sup>. It so happens that these districts share a border with Tanzania, a country identified in various studies and also by the authorities as being the origin of radical sheiks who are well known for speaking out against the State and against local Islamic leaders whom they consider outdated, enticing young people to their cause. Moreover, in September 2021, shortly before the November 2021 attack on Mecula, Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda, a country that has been providing military assistance to Mozambique in the fight against insurgency in Cabo Delgado, said that Al Shabaab was expanding to Niassa (Zitamar News, 2021).

Based on semi-structured interviews with religious leaders and citizens in Lichinga, Niassa province between May and August 2021 and in January 2022, the objective of this article is twofold: (i) to describe the first moments of the insurgency in that province and (ii) to show the diverse profiles and motivations of the young people who join the insurgency. The analysis and description are based on the figure of Maulana Ali Cassimo, considered by the authorities to be one of the main figures of the insurgency in Niassa<sup>2</sup>. It is argued that, as in Cabo Delgado, from the very beginning Muslim religious leaders warned the Mozambican authorities about the presence of groups of national and foreign citizens (particularly Tanzanians) who not only preached a radical view of Islam and did not recognize the Mozambican State, but were also recruiting local youth to adhere to their principles. However, the denunciations were always downplayed by the State, that regarded them as merely a different interpretation of the Koran, to be resolved among Muslims themselves. This is explained, in part, not only by the immobility and negligence of the State but also because, ever since the late 1980s, there have

been conflicts within Islam in Mozambique arising from differences in the interpretation of the Koran<sup>3</sup>.

### Maulana Ali Cassimo: From Extensionist to Al Shabaab

Born between 1990 and 1991 in the town of Lichinga, capital of Niassa, Maulana Ali was from the Ajaua ethnic group, a Muslim family and one of seven siblings. His father, a famous carpenter, owned a well-known carpentry shop in the Sanjala Expansion neighborhood, on the outskirts of Lichinga. His mother was a civil servant working for the Lichinga Municipal Council. His parents divorced early on and he went to live with one of his older brothers, who also became a respected entrepreneur in the furniture business in the same town. In addition to learning carpentry from his father (like his brothers), Maulana Ali also studied agriculture in Lichinga where he completed secondary school at the Lichinga Agricultural Institute (*Instituto Agrário de Lichinga* - IAL) in 2014, the year he also got married. The marriage resulted in two children (a girl and a boy). After completing his studies, Maulana Ali worked briefly for the Vale mining company in Tete and the Mozambique Leaf Tobacco (MLT) company in Cuamba district (Niassa)<sup>4</sup>. After leaving the MLT, he joined the civil service, more specifically, the Niassa Provincial Directorate of Agriculture, and was assigned to the District Service of Economic Activities (SDAE) in Mecula district.

In addition to considering himself a good extension worker, Maulana Ali also saw himself as a good carpenter (Cassimo, 2015a, 2015b)<sup>5</sup>. Before joining the insurgency, as well as attending the mosque, in his spare time he loved sport and liked to watch European League football matches, considering himself a fan of Manchester United, Real Madrid and Futebol Clube do Porto. He was also part of a group of Niassa citizens who created the Niassa Provincial Football Association in 2012 (Mfaume, 2012)<sup>6</sup>.

Maulana Ali was also active on social media (Facebook), participating in various debates. For example, in addition to the group "Técnicos Agro-pecuários do IAL"<sup>7</sup> (IAL Agricultu-

<sup>1</sup> Some districts in Nampula (Angoche, Mossuril, Nacala-a-Porto, Nacala-a-Velha e Memba) were also identified as Al Shabaab recruitment centres.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the data on Maulana Ali were taken from his Facebook page that, although still active, appears to have been "cleaned". See <https://www.facebook.com/Mali.cassimo>.

<sup>3</sup> See Morier-Genoud (2007); Bonate (2009).

<sup>4</sup> According to Feijó (2021) in Tete, Maulana Ali had worked in MLT.

<sup>5</sup> So, in 2012, Maulana Ali registered in a site linked to various kinds of advertising called "*Boladas Lichinga*" (Lichinga Jackpot) where he offered his services as a carpenter. see Cassimo (2012).

<sup>6</sup> In 2014, he wrote to Floorball - Recife - Brasil (@FloorballRecifeBrasil-Community) requesting help with ideas and material resources for the development of Floorball no Niassa. See Cassimo (2014).

<sup>7</sup> See, *Técnicos Agro-pecuários do IAL* em: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/308169549351680>.

ral Technicians) as he studied there and where he commented quite regularly, he also contributed his opinions on various subjects in a Facebook discussion group called “Opinião Académica do Niassa” (Niassa Academic Opinion)<sup>8</sup>.

According to several interviewees, Mecula was considered the epicenter for the Al Shabaab recruitment and training of young people in Niassa, particularly as it is close to Tanzania. While there, Maulana Ali became an exemplary civil servant, and on one occasion was even considered the best extension officer in Niassa and awarded a motorbike as a prize. Mecula was also the place where Maulana Ali's life would change radically after he got to know Tanzanian sheiks who followed a radical version of Islam that did not recognize the Mozambican State. His adherence to this version of Islam set him on a collision course with his family, who made every effort to warn him of the potential danger, but he regarded them as unbelievers. In July 2017, he reportedly left Mecula for Mocimboa da Praia (Cabo Delgado) accompanied by his wife, daughter and sister, both minors. While in Mocimboa da Praia, he kept in touch with his family, who still tried to make him come to his senses. When this was clearly no longer possible, his family contacted the local authorities, the Niassa Provincial Prosecutor's Office and the provincial government, asking them to rescue their brother from Al Shabaab's clutches, but without success. The family even tried to warn the local authorities through the Islamic Council (CISLAMO) in Lichinga. On September 18, 2017 (a few days before the October 5, 2017 attack on Mocimboa da Praia), CISLAMO sent a letter to other local state institutions, the Niassa Provincial Directorate of Justice, Constitutional and Religious Affairs, the Niassa Governor's Office, the Niassa Provincial Police Command, the State Information and Security Services (SISE) and to the first police station in Lichinga. Among other aspects, the letter mentioned a worrying phenomenon in Mecula district, led by Tanzanian citizens who, in the name of Islam, were inciting young people to leave public service, to ignore the country's laws, and not to send their children to public and private schools, but only to madrassas<sup>9</sup>.

One of the civil servants enticed and mentioned in the letter was Maulana Ali. It was said that he had fled to Mocimboa da Praia together with his family. According to his family and people close to them, he was allegedly duped by Tanzanian citizens with the promise of a scholarship in Saudi Arabia<sup>10</sup>.

CISLAMO, which distanced itself from this group, believed that it had many adherents in Cabo Delgado and that young people recruited in Niassa were being sent there. Nevertheless, the authorities only began to show any concern after the October 5, 2017 attack on Mocimboa da Praia, contacting the family to obtain information on the whereabouts of Maulana Ali. By this time, the family had already lost contact with him.

After the attack on Mocimboa da Praia, Maulana Ali's wife reportedly fled to Nampula with her daughter and sister-in-law, and from there she went to Lichinga. She was pregnant at the time, and later gave birth to a boy (Maulana Ali's second child). Sometime later, she tried to rejoin him in Cabo Delgado, but was unsuccessful as her relatives reported her to the authorities, who immediately intervened and she was imprisoned for about a year.

After a long time without news, in August 2021 information circulated that Maulana was one of the faces of the insurgency in Mozambique. According to these accounts, he had joined the insurgency, because he was angry about the violent expulsion of artisanal miners from the Rubi de Montepuez mines (Feijó, 2021). The last information about him was in December 2021, from Bernardino Rafael, who said that he had been shot by the SDF when Al Shabaab attacked Mecula district.

Even though Mecula has had signs of an Al Shabaab presence or focus for a long time, recruitment and indoctrination activities take place all over the Niassa Province. In Lichinga, for example, there are reported cases of young people who disappeared before and after the start of the conflict and who are thought to have been recruited into Al Shabaab. Some of these young people, who had been lured with offers of jobs in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), ended up running away and returning home when they realized these promises were false.

### Conclusion

The aim of this study is to show that the first moments of the insurgency in Niassa do not differ substantially from those in Cabo Delgado. In Niassa, too, when radical groups emerged, rejecting the State under the cover of Islam, there were disagreements with local Islamic leaders, followed by complaints to the authorities. As in the case of Cabo Delgado, these complaints were ignored. The study also shows that in Niassa, Tanzanian religious leaders influenced the indoctrination and the recruitment of young Mozambicans into Al Shabaab's ranks.

The study shows that it is difficult to portray one single profile of Al Shabaab youth. The figure of Maulana Ali shows that there are many different sociological profiles of the young people in Al Shabaab. Typically, most of its young members are described as being small, informal traders, miners, fishermen with no education (Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019). However, while not earning a large salary, Maulana Ali was an average civil servant, and not without opportunities or prospects. More than the economic necessity of a lost youth, the case of Maulana Ali reveals a situation of radicalization and ideologization.

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<sup>8</sup> See, *Opinião Académica do Niassa*: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/896551497070420>.

<sup>9</sup> Copies in possession of the author.

<sup>10</sup> According to Feijó (2021), he was lured by the prospect of a monthly salary of 60 thousand meticals. Witnesses close to the family speak of a salary ranging between 60 and 70 thousand meticals.