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AI SHABAAB IN CABO DELGADO: DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM IN CONFLICT?

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Introduction

The armed conflict that has been raging in northern Mozambique, especially Cabo Delgado province, since 5 October 2017, started out as an ideological confrontation between, on the one hand, followers of the group known locally as “Al Shabaab”, who defended an extremist version of Islam and, on the other hand, local Muslims and the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO) in particular¹.

Essentially, the confrontation pitted groups that considered themselves “true Muslims” or “true sons of Muhammad” against those they regarded as “ignorant”. The “ideological” struggle included spreading written or taped messages where each party defended its vision of Islam and considered the practices of the other as contrary to the Islam. In the case of CISLAMO, confrontation also took the form of reporting people to the authorities, lectures and advising local communities not to take up what was viewed as or considered the bad practices of “Al Shabaab” in Cabo Delgado.

Based on interviews in Pemba, reports, newspaper articles and audiovisual material, this article aims to show how the conflict unfolded and its repercussions before and after the 5 October, 2017 attack. The new “society” defended by Al Shabaab and CISLAMO’s reaction to its propaganda are presented briefly, followed by Al Shabaab’s response to CISLAMO².

The new society defended by “Al Shabaab” and the reaction of CISLAMO

Although it is difficult to date precisely the appearance of Al Shabaab in Cabo Delgado, according to local reports its effects started to be felt in the early 2010s. The year 2015 is indicated for some districts, such as Macomia, one of the districts most affected by the war³.

At that time, local Muslims noticed the presence of a religion that, despite claiming to be Islamic, defended principles that they considered strange and contrary to this faith. Basically, the group advocated the radical insertion of Islamic law in Mozambique and fighting anyone who opposed it. For example, the different ideas defended by this group included rejecting the Mozambican state and its symbols, as well as social interaction with atheists or other

religious faiths.

The group’s presence in Cabo Delgado was also known to the government and the Frelimo party at that time but it was not considered a threat to the country, with differences between local Muslims regarded as mere ideological differences. For example, in his regular column in the weekly “Domingo” in 2013 in a brief analysis of potential regional dangers that could affect Mozambique’s political stability Sérgio Vieira, a historic Frelimo figure, wrote:

“Nothing threatens us from the Tanzanian side... except for fundamentalist outbreaks that kill innocent people and that, sooner or later, can reach our land, given the little control we have over these countless immigrants and missionaries... who come to teach us to pray and hate our neighbour”. (Vieira, 2013)."

The group’s existence since the beginning of the 2010s was also confirmed by President Nyusi in December 2020, in his so-called “Address on the State of the Nation”. In this speech, Nyusi stated that the government had had information about the existence of Al Shabaab since 2012. According to Nyusi, this radical Islamic group was led by foreign nationals, particularly Tanzanians, and their actions were characterized by inciting people to disobey the Constitution, preventing children from attending public schools in favor of madrasas, as well as defending admission to mosques with shoes, shorts and blunt objects (VOA Portuguese, 2020).

The initial reactions of Muslims in Cabo Delgado included rejecting the ideas of Al Shabaab and expelling its followers from their mosques. This was followed by reports to the authorities and the promotion on awareness-raising campaigns where communities were advised to reject these ideas.

For example, reacting to the Al Shabaab belief that a Muslim should not be a civil servant in a state run by disbelievers, because it was Haram (a sin), in 2015 a CISLAMO leader in Pemba, Abdulcarimo Fadile, published a text entitled “The problem of the Muslim as a civil servant” in which he condemned the existence of a group of individuals who, in the name of Islam, promoted an “ideology” that was contrary to Islamic principles, that disrupted social interaction among Muslims in the province. Fadile advised Muslims to warn the authorities and others about the exis-

tence of these people who were “ignorant” and “retrograde” and jeopardized the integrity of Islam and peaceful coexistence between religions in Mozambique (Fadile, 2015).

In a conference that brought together Muslims from various parts of the country, held in Nampula in November 2016, the leader of CISLAMO, Sheik Aminuddin Mohamad stated that the radical sects spreading across the country, took advantage of the ignorance and poverty of “naive” Muslims to mislead them and were “part of the global war against Islam [aimed at] the destruction of Muslims...” (Mohamad, 2016:11).

Addressing the conference on behalf of the Cabo Delgado CISLAMO, Háfiz Bin Nuro said that there were many sects preaching a radical Islam in the province, the most important being Al Shabaab, whose influence was strongest in Palma, Nangade, Mocimboa da Praia and Montepuez districts. According to Bin Nuro, Al Shabaab incited discontent and violence against Muslim leaders, and promised to attack all those who did not observe the Muslim traditions and practices followed by Al Shabaab (Bin Nuro, 2016:13).

Al Shabaab’s propaganda was also rebutted during the celebration of religious festivals. At the 2016 Eid Ul Fitre party in Pemba, local Muslims denounced what they considered to be anti-Islam attitudes promoted by “conservatives” in some regions of Cabo Delgado. According to local leaders, among other things, these individuals forced women to wear a burka covering the entire face and considered anyone who did not do so as a prostitute (Wazir, 2016).

Rejected by local Muslims and reported to the authorities, Al Shabaab followers built their own mosques, many of them with poor materials. Some of these mosques were destroyed by local people, as happened in October 2016 in Cogolo village, Pangane, on the grounds that their members were against the Muslim religion.

It should be noted that, immediately after 5 October 2017, Mozambican Muslims who studied in Tanzania, Sudan and Saudi Arabia (many of the people who studied in these countries are from CISLAMO) were accused of being behind the attacks. The accusations came from both the

¹ CISLAMO is a Wahabbi organization created in 1981 and legalized in 1983.

² The audiovisual material mentioned in this paper was offered to the author in Pemba in 2020. For reasons of confidentiality, the authors, places and year of broadcast are not mentioned.

³ In the case of Macomia, see for example (STV, 2018).

government, as well as other religious groups, including other Muslims.

For example, Rodrigo Paruque, then the administrator of Mocimboa da Praia, said that the Al Shabaab leaders who had led the attack on the district had studied in these countries (Diário de Notícias, 2017). Abdul Rashid Ismail, president of the Islamic Community of Mozambique (CIMO), a Muslim organization based in Beira town, and which defines itself as following the philosophy "Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah" (followers of the Sunah tradition) said:

"We (CIMO) have complete control over the madrasa teachers. Our teachers are not trained abroad, they are all trained in Mozambique. If there are people who have these types of behavior, they are not connected to us in any way... the people who have radical, extremist and fundamentalist ideals are people who studied mostly in Saudi Arabia and learned fanaticism, Wahhabism (Diário de Notícias, 2018)."

To some extent, this suspicion initially affected the image of CISLAMO in that region and was justified, among other reasons, by the fact that some of its members were supporters of Al Shabaab, like Mahamudo Sahah, one of the leaders of the group (at least in the early stage) in Macomia⁴.

The "Al Shabaab" response to CISLAMO

Unable to convince CISLAMO to join its cause and with the authorities already on its heels, Al Shabaab reacted aggressively. One way they reacted was to spread recorded messages refuting the idea that they were not true Muslims, arguing that those who should be fought were Muslims who did not follow its principles. Al Shabaab said that the recordings should target CISLAMO leaders, the focus of their attacks and who they sometimes called "Africa Muslim Sheiks", referring to the connections that some of them have with the Africa Muslim Agency (AMA)⁵. As Bonate (2009) says, the relationship between CISLAMO and AMA is (or was) so strong that, in Pemba, the two institutions are (were) seen or considered to be a single entity. No wonder, then, that the top CISLAMO leaders in Pemba, including its current president, studied in countries like Sudan and Saudi Arabia on AMA scholarships.

In one of the recording, Al Shabaab condemned the fact that CISLAMO leaders cooperated or coexisted with the government, with other religious faiths or with atheists, as this was against the precepts of Islam:

"Our Sheiks studied and are knowledgeable, but they are an aberration; they do not want to separate themselves from Jews, Catholics, atheists, idolaters. The government we have today practices these religions. The Sheiks unite and live with these people, with these religions... When someone [us] speaks the truth, the Sheiks don't like it... These Sheiks are from Africa Muslim..."

Al Shabaab followers were also furious with CISLAMO leaders for reporting them to the authorities. They said they

did not understand how a Muslim could do evil against another Muslim, that is, they did not understand why the CISLAMO leaders were fighting their Muslim brothers in collusion with the government. They gave the example of a situation in Ancuabe (Intutupué) and Chiúre districts where, according to them, following CISLAMO's denunciations, some of their supporters or followers had been fatally shot or wounded and others arrested by the authorities. In addition, some of their mosques had been destroyed and their members expelled:

"We have heard that the African Muslim Sheiks of Intutupué and Chiúre say that a new group called Al Shabaab has entered and they have requested government support to help fight these people, because they are not Muslims, and they insult Prophet Muhammad. That's why they had our colleagues shot, destroyed our mosques, Africa Muslims..., saying that we are unbelievers..."

It can also be inferred from these statements that Al Shabaab supporters, in addition to the interior of Cabo Delgado, were present in several mosques in the provincial capital, Pemba, as their various messages appealed to young people in the town's neighbourhoods, namely Chuiba, Ingonane, Expansão and Mahate, not only to get their message across to the leaders of CISLAMO, but also to fight them.

Al Shabaab's threats to local religious leaders are also confirmed by them. For example, Sheik Selah Haif claims that he denounced the group's presence in Macomia and received death threats (STV, 2018).

It was not possible to determine whether there were cases of murder of religious leaders before the 5 October, 2017 attack on Mocimboa da Praia. However, after this attack some cases were reported, such as the murder of Sheik Tuaha Hassane from Mocimboa da Praia, who fought the group from the very beginning, protesting against the religion they were trying to implement and reporting them to local authorities. Tuaha Assane was one of the religious leaders who agreed to speak to the press shortly after the 5 October attack. It is believed that, in addition to having always publicly disagreed with its ideas and refusing to join the group, his press interviews were the reason for his murder by decapitation in June 2020, in one of several attacks on Mocimboa da Praia⁶.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to show that the principles defended by Al Shabaab - a group that emerged in Cabo Delgado in the early 2010s, defending a radical version of Islam - created friction within the local Muslim community. Although differences over interpretation of the Koran were initially peaceful, they soon degenerated into violence, with Al Shabaab followers not only expelled or banned from local mosques, but also witnessing the destruction of their alternative mosques. Al Shabaab supporters were also reported to the authorities, with some of them arrested or killed. This led them to view local Muslim leaders, especially those linked

to CISLAMO, as a target to be brought down. Nevertheless, the armed subversion on 5 October, 2017 resulted in a certain distrust of CISLAMO not only on the part of government authorities, but also by other religious entities, as some members of the organization had adhered to Al Shabaab.

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⁴ On Sahah, see (STV, 2018).

⁵ According to Bonate (2009), the AMA was founded in 1981 in Malawi by a Kuwaiti doctor named Abd ar-Rahman Hamoud al-Sumait as an organization for local Muslims. This institution, with funding from Kuwait and the Gulf countries, has grown and expanded throughout the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa.

⁶ On Tuaha Assane see (DW, 2018). In May 2022 another religious leader was killed by Al Shabaab in Macomia. See (VOA Português, 2022).