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## **LESSONS FROM KENYA IN PREVENTING VIOLENT EXTREMISM: A WHOLE-OF-SOCIETY APPROACH**

By Amanda Lucey

In Kenya, the prosecution of Pastor Paul Mackenzie, who urged more than 400 followers to fast to death in the Shakahola forest to “meet Jesus”, is underway. MacKenzie faces possible terrorism charges, among others. The trial illustrates the potential for extremism to take root across all sides of the ideological and religious spectrums, with implications for programming.

Kenya has come leaps and bounds in its approach, adopting a National Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism in 2016, and then moving to develop more localised county action plans that involve a wide variety of stakeholders, and that are more relevant to the unique context. However, the Kenyan government’s predominant focus is on Al-Shabaab, who continues to be responsible for attacks, particularly in Lamu county by the Somali border, with growing concerns that attacks may increase as the African Union Transitional Mission in Somalia draws to a close in December 2024. It can be argued that many of the methodologies employed by MacKenzie’s church are similar to those of Al-Shabaab, in that they employ rigid belief systems and manipulate religious texts, and thus the trial is a reminder that extremism can take many forms. As such, is a need to deepen consultation and participation on Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) across different communities

In August 2023, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation undertook research in the Nairobi, Mombasa and Lamu counties of Kenya, in partnership with Kenyan researchers Faith Ondeng and Wilfred Muliro. This forms part of a project entitled ‘Shifting Narratives on Violent Extremism in Africa’, undertaken in partnership with the Open Society Africa. Its main objective is to produce alternative narratives about and approaches to PVE in Africa, thereby contributing towards sustainable peacebuilding that includes gender-sensitive and survivor-centered transitional justice and reconciliation processes.

Kenya has been subject to instability from Al-Shabaab for several decades, which increased substantially after the Kenyan Defence Force sent troops into Somalia in 2011. Al-Shabaab was born following the ousting of the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia in 2006 by an Ethiopian-led military, supported by the United States, who were concerned over the possibility of an Islamist foothold in the Horn of Africa. Thus, Kenya's support to the transitional government in Somalia was used as a narrative to generate support for Al-Shabaab in Kenya, with the government of Kenya portrayed as an enemy of Islam. Kenya became a key partner for the war on terror, with strong connections to the United States and United Kingdom, as well as other Western partners.

After the devastating 2013 attack on Westgate Shopping Mall, as well as subsequent attacks including Mpeketoni attacks of 2014, the multiple Mandera attacks of 2014 and the Garissa University College attacks of 2015, Kenya adopted strong counter-terrorism measures including new laws and strong counter-terrorism operations. Yet the approach was criticised as being discriminatory against Muslims and led to mass defiance, including through online media, where the hashtag #KenyaIAmNotATerrorist became a powerful slogan.

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As a result, Kenya moved towards a more comprehensive approach to countering and then preventing violent extremism through the development of its national and county action plans. The national action plan has nine pillars: media and online; psychosocial; education; legal and policy; arts and culture; training and capacity building; political; faith based and ideological; and security and county action plans can adapt these pillars as they choose.

The plans have been widely embraced and held up as examples to others who may want to follow in their footsteps, since they provide clear platforms for knowledge sharing, assign responsibilities for action, promote collaboration, and avoid a duplication<sup>5</sup> of responsibility. They have also developed trust between communities and government stakeholders, such as through community policing efforts, engagement with religious leaders, and the development of educational and vocational training schemes to address issues of unemployment.

And yet, more can be done to ensure that these plans are adaptive and flexible to an ever-changing context. For example, youths can be better included and involved in these action plans to keep abreast of the types of recruitment narratives being used, and the specific grievances that young people have.

Counter-narrative messaging can be strengthened by involving youths on the use of the latest social media platforms. There is also a need to strengthen understandings of the gendered dimensions of extremism, as well as to involve mothers of those recruited to understand youth vulnerabilities.

Moreover, there have been criticisms that, because the national and county plans on extremism are predominantly externally funded, they tend to use the term synonymously with Salafi-Wahhabi oriented Islamist extremist trends, with erroneous profiling of any Salafi-Wahhabi group as suspicious. A better approach therefore is for communities themselves to define exactly what extremism is for their own context.

There are also some issues in Kenya which remain unaddressed – in the wake of Kenya's strong counter-terrorism response, a number of forced disappearances took place. The families of the dead and disappeared are not entitled to any form of recognition, and struggle to access legal documents such as birth certificates and bank accounts. If not properly managed, these grievances have the potential to deepen. There is also no clear process or framework to deal with the issue of defectors, known locally as returnees.

This is problematic as there are differential layers of responsibility for those associated with violent extremist groups, from sympathisers to those forcibly recruited, to those that have never committed a serious crime but are disillusioned. UNDP's report, *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement*, has shown that most people voluntarily disengage as a result of government incentives and amnesties. Currently, it appears that defectors return in a very haphazard manner, causing the potential for conflict.

In moving forward, the Kenyan government needs to ensure that it applies the values upheld in its Constitution to all. This will ensure that it is perceived as treating all ethnic groups as fairly. Its national and county action plans have illustrated the benefits of involving multiple stakeholders in the prevention and countering of extremism, but this should be strengthened and widened to keep abreast of changing narratives and approaches.