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The Lived Contexts as a Precursor to Violent Extremism

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Abstract: Cases of radicalisation has been on the rise with many individuals joining. This article explores the life experiences of the individuals joining radicalization for terrorism in Kenya by looking at the influences of the lived contexts to their behaviour in joining radicalism. The study sought to understand their how the contextual factors influenced their decisions to join radicalisation and violent extremism. It analyses how different contextual factors influence individual to make decision to join radicalisation. Findings showed that the lived contexts influenced the individuals in joining radicalisation. The identified contexts included; family, religion, peer pressure, poverty and social injustice. Specifically, the study was guided by Interpretative phenomenological Approach and Social construction theories. Findings showed that most individuals joining radicalisation/ terrorism were influenced by different contextual factors where they lived. The study therefore recommended that unlike structural factors, the counter terrorism need to understand the contexts affecting those joining radicalisation and terrorism for effective interventions.

Key words: Terrorism, Radicalization, Lived experience, root causes and contextual factors.

I. Introduction

This article discusses contextual factors of the research participants. This discussion is borne from social construction theory, which argues that meanings emanate from contextual context (Blurr, 2003). These were identified from the narratives obtained from the participants as they described their lived experiences and their everyday meaning of life. In understanding the influences of the contextual factors, the grievances cited in the study were linked to the causal factors in different environments and

different lived experiences. In discussing the grievances to joining radicalization, the dominant grievances were analyzed to understand the specific influences to radicalization. In understanding the contextual factors affecting individual participant in this study, the theories in this study were used to guide the findings on their lived experiences and influences to their individual characteristics in their lived contexts. This was important because, it was only through interpreting their contextual factors and

their influences to the lives of the participants that one is able to identify the impact on their lives.

a) Family

According to Bandura (1969), individuals are socialized through modelling and social learning from the behaviour as practised by other members of the family or the surrounding environment. The first level of socialisation of an individual is the family where an individual embraces culture, language and religion, which then forms part of one's self-identity. The individual interpretation of one's life encounters were therefore based on reflections of childhood experience, which remains imbedded in an individual until death (Freud, 1923; as quoted by Borum, 2004:18). Of interest to this study was therefore to examine family experience as one of the contextual factors.

Findings of this study noted that majority of the respondents interviewed had experienced problems at family level. Among the problems experienced were broken families, orphaned at childhood, marital problems, issues revolving around polygamous families, family conflicts, inadequate subsistence and other negative influences emanating from the family. The current study observed that out of the 20 respondents interviewed, 10 respondents faced family problems. This is one of the most common contextual factors the radicalised individuals were found to have encountered, and this contributed to their learning through modelling (as explained by Bandura 1977).

Findings show that ten respondents were directly influenced by their respective families to join radicalization. This arises from the belief that being radicalised would improve their lives and that of their family. Others joined so as to gain power to revenge for some perceived injustices committed against their family by the authorities. In some instances, they lived in contexts that believed that they were disadvantaged in life as a family or community. This means the parents and other family members exposed the youth to the values and behaviours of their ethnic culture that tend to address their current grievances or perceived historical injustices through violent means. In all the cases of family influence, the behaviour of the radicalised individuals was found to have been influenced by the family ([Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009](#)). The current study therefore show that family modeling to a large extent does influence one's behavioural trends. One Key informant working for an NGO narrated that some returnees cited influence from families as the factor that influenced their decision to venture into extremism.

b) Peer influence

The study noted from the narratives that individuals joining radicalisation were mainly introduced into the in-group of the VEO through proxies using different approaches. One of the commonly used means of recruitment to radicalisation is using persons close to the targeted individual. Usually, recruitment is based on the grievances harboured by the targeted subject—it is this grievance that is then exploited. Once recruited, they are sustained in the VEO through peer pressure, group solidarity, and through the psychology of group dynamics (Post, 1986). The terrorists therefore tend to synergise their own identities into the group, resulting in a kind of "group mind" and group moral code that require undoubted obedience to the group (Crenshaw 1985). It was noted in the study that most respondents interviewed said that they joined radicalisation through friends or close relatives (Post, 1986). They were mostly lured by their peers to travel to Somalia for well-paying jobs and ended up being convinced or influenced into joining radicalization. Their peers therefore capitalised on the frustrations of their friends to persuade them to join or lure them into the group on promise of getting employment.

Some of the foreign respondents interviewed also echoed similar influences in their way towards finding themselves in radicalized groups. For instance, a respondent aged 34 years who lived in an Arabic city in Israel described the influences of the Arabic thinking against the Jews in the context of the protracted Israel and Palestine conflict, which he said influenced him to join violent extremism. The youth mostly, in an attempt to make meaning in life, they easily get swayed by their peers—in this case, they were easily influenced by their peers to join radical groups (Olsson, 1988). As advanced by Wallerstein (1995) and Gabbard (2000), peer influence can exert a significant degree of influence that can charge the trajectory of one's life. This appears to be the case in this study.

c) Religion

Religious terrorism has been defined as political violence that is motivated by an absolute belief that another-worldly power has sanctioned, or sometimes commanded, terrorist violence for the greater glory of the faith (Martin, 2010). Religious perpetrated terrorism is the most dominant type of terrorism in the world as compared to secular terrorism (Rapoport 2004). Terrorism attacks in Kenya have been committed by a Muslim violent extremism organisation, the Al Shabaab. Therefore, some radical elements in the Islamic religion recruit, radicalise and preach extremism to their followers. People who

participate in religious terrorism believe that any act they commit will be forgiven and perhaps rewarded in the afterlife (Martin 2010).

In the current study, respondents interviewed indicated that at the time they were associated with radicalisation, they were practising Muslims (or converted after recruitment into radicalisation). They narrated that Islam had a strong influence on how they viewed the world. According to one respondent, by the time of joining radicalization, he was naïve about the Quran and Islam, and as such, the radicalisers took advantage of his naivety to recruit him. He added that it was while in prison that he realised that he had been misled and the Koran misinterpreted to lure him into radicalization. While another respondent narrated that aftershifting house from where they had lived for a long time interrupted his social network. He resorted to reading Islamic literature that he found in his father's house. This, he says, influenced him to join radicalisation. His way of interpreting the Koran changed and eventually he became a radical.

Findings from respondents show that the recruiters to radicalisation used the Koran to radicalise and harden them into radicals. Some of the respondents attended further Islamic studies in the country and the Middle East after which they indulged in preaching Islam. The study therefore confirmed that one of the major contextual factors associated with terrorism was religion. Findings show that all the 20 terrorism inmates interviewed were currently practising Muslims. Among them, only one converted on recruitment to Al Shabaab. The respondents said that most of them believed that Jihad was the main driver to violent extremism. This would most likely have a bearing on how they viewed themselves as opposed to the edicts of terrorism.

As mentioned earlier, there are many different forms of religious terrorism, but the most common is Islamic extremism (Martin 2010). However, in Islam, killing a human being is considered as an act that is equal in gravity to "unbelief" (Gulen, 2004:1). Considering the Islamic values, which define a way of worship and a way of a life, deviation from the teaching is the main concern in Islamisation of terrorism (Rahman, 1996).

A Key Informant (Muslim cleric) criticised some radical Muslim clerics for using Islam for radicalization. The key informant having been involved with preaching to prison convicts identified cases of misunderstanding of the Quran among the terrorism convicts which according to his

understanding, was deliberate misinterpretation to lure them into violent extremism. This sentiments were echoed by one key informant (Counter terrorism researcher) who said that most the recruits were exposed to misinterpretation of the Quran to persuade them participate in what they believed was fight for Jihad.

All the participants interviewed had converted to Islam with only one converting shortly after joining radicalisation. Their false understanding of the Koran was found to be premised on two things: one, fight for Jihad and second, restoration of the Islamic dignity in the world by reclaiming the Islamic caliphate, which would be distinct from western influences. Majority of the respondents made discoveries about realities of the Quran while in prison because their independence of which had previously been arrested, was now exposed to the right teaching.

d) Poverty

When social inequality emerges in society, many of those affected become dissatisfied and angry because they are unable to achieve what others are easily able to achieve. The Human Development Index includes per capita income, life expectancy, and education into account in regards to terrorism, and found that there is a correlation between terrorism and human development (Schmid, 2005).

Several researchers have also claimed a sociological connection between poverty and terrorism (see Schmid 1983; Harmon 2000; Hasisi and Pedahzur 2000; Krueger and Maleckova 2002). This is due to the perception that the government's priority is usually different from that of its citizen, which often brings about feelings of marginalization. The people therefore seek alternative means of survival, which at times includes joining terrorism. These variables can combine to produce a situation that is ideal for terrorist organizations to recruit.

Several respondents in this study said that at the time they got involved with radicalisation, they faced challenges with poverty. One respondent, aged 24 years, born outside the country revealed that he lived a life of abject poverty and tried to sustain a living through engagement in various businesses at times illegal activities that involved travelling in and outside the Kenya. Another respondent, after the loss of his mother, says he led a life of isolation where his close relatives disowned him. He reached out for moral support and association, which ended up with him landing into the hands of the radicalizers.

Several respondents in this study said that they came from families with poor backgrounds. They narrated how they struggled in life to make a living and engaged in numerous mundane activities to eke out a living. In trying to earn a living, some of them said that they travelled to places away from their homes in search of income for survival. This finding therefore shows that poverty is one of the main influences to radicalisation. To mitigate the problem of poverty, most people (mainly the youth) tend to travel from their home residences to foreign lands where they hope to get favourable opportunities of earning a living, only to be recruited into radicalism. Cases in issue from this study are two respondents lured to Somalia in search of employment only to end up in radicalism. Poverty is therefore discussed together with the context of occupation as they are mutually dependant on each other. However, there is a dilemma as to why some people ravaged with poverty do not join terrorism and some do not. Probably, the adage that proclaims that "terrorists are made not born" (see Silke, 1998:51-59) may be true. Several sociological explanations have been given about the reasons some individuals decide to join radicalisation or desist.

e) Discrimination and social injustice

Human rights violations, including dispossession and humiliation, often result in those affected harbouring severe grievances against the governments (Newman, 2006). In addition, when a government is unable to provide basic standard of living to its citizen, citizens become displeased and it is at this point that terrorist organizations take advantage and come in to recruit them.

Findings from the present study show that some of the respondents cited discrimination and social injustice as having influenced their decision to join radicalization and their eventual participation in violent extremism. They cited discrimination on religious grounds where Muslims feel dominated by the majority Christians. They also cited marginalization by dominant communities over minority communities especially in the distribution of resources, mainly at the coast, as another reason for their decision. One respondent, aged 37 years, who came from the minority Nubian community in Kenya, said that he was influenced to radicalisation over acts of discrimination exhibited by the authorities and by other major/dominant ethnic communities.

One respondent explained that witnessing the police raid a mosque devastated his life to the extent that he readily accepted and internalised the preaching of radical preachers, agreeing with them that there was

indeed the need to defend Islam, justifiable through violent means. This feeling drove him into radicalism. This study reveals that the respondents cited discrimination as one of the factors that changed their perception of life and persuaded them to join terrorism organisations. Influenced by discrimination in their lives they sought mitigations through joining violent extremism to address their grievances. Cases of discrimination in this study included discrimination along; racial, ethnicity, religion, nationality and social class. The oppression theory explains that oppression provokes political violence (see Fanon 1965; Whitaker 1972; Schmid, 1983), which is a key component of terrorism.

To back up the theory (the oppression theory), one key informant working for an NGO stated that most youth joining radicalisation from the Kenyan coast cite social injustice and discrimination by the majority 'wabara' (upcountry) people¹. Issues of discrimination and social injustice form a key component of the grievances of the individuals joining radicalisation. Kenya's sessional paper No. 10 of 1965 categorising the country into high and low potential areas, thus discriminating areas into potentials and non-potential areas. Most of the areas under low potentials are found at the Coast, Northern and North Eastern part of the country. Apparently, the bulk of the areas are Muslim dominated. This raises concerns of religious discrimination.

f) Residences of respondents

One's area of residence does influence one's behaviour of individuals (Shaw, 1986:365). Family units in a locality influence the general society behaviour. People living in some localities tend to be influenced by the contexts in that area which make them benefit or feel marginalised or disadvantaged in some way. Psychologist Eric D. Shaw (1986:365) provides a strong case for what he calls "The Personal Pathway Model," by which terrorists enter their new profession. The components of this pathway include early socialization processes; narcissistic injuries; escalatory events, particularly confrontation with police; and personal connections to terrorist group members, as follows: The pathway model domiciled in a locality where favourable conditions for recruitment to terrorism occur. This study therefore sought to assess the respondent's area

¹Wabara is a term used by Kenyans living at the Coast of Indian Ocean to refer to Kenyans from the upcountry. The term is used to demean the non-coastal by implying that they are primitive as considered to the coastal.

of residence and to examine how this could have influenced their path to radicalisation.

The study findings show that majority of the respondents were citizens of Kenya (75%) with only 25% being foreigners. Findings show that, majority (30%) of the respondents interviewed lived at the Kenyan coast, 25% from North Eastern region, and 15% from other parts of Kenya. The Kenya Government through the Sessional paper No. 10 (1965) categorised the country into high potential and low potential areas according to productivity. Most of the high potential areas are in the upcountry but low potential areas were listed as coast, North Eastern and parts of Northern Kenya. From the study findings, out of the 15 Kenyan convicts interviewed, 11 were from the Coast and North Eastern, translating to 73.3% of the Kenyan respondents coming from the so-called low potential areas. In effect, these are considered as marginalised areas. It can therefore be said that most of the radicalisation is concentrated at the Coastal and North Eastern Regions respectively. Apparently, the areas under reference are also dominated by Islamic religion, which is used by recruiters to radicalise the youth (Religion above).

On whether their areas of residence had an influence on their lives, this is how some respondents put it. One respondent aged 37 years, who had lived most of his life in Kibera among his Nubian² ethnic members, viewed life as marginalised due to the living conditions found in the slum. The respondent reference to “cross-border feuds” is in reference to the perennial inter-ethnic clashes between the Somali clans across the Kenya-Somalia border over water and pasture. Due to the arid nature of the land in this environment, the communities living in this place are exposed to hardship prompting inter-ethnic clashes. Compared to other Kenyans living in high potential areas, they see themselves as marginalised as they are deprived of basic needs, essential services and infrastructure.

One respondent born in the area with existing hostilities between the Arabs and the Jews got involved in these hostilities, due to community influence. His perception of the Jews was exacerbated by an incident he witnessed in which a Jew police was mercilessly battering an Arab—an act that annoyed him to the extent that he decided

² Nubians are an immigrant community living in Nairobi’s expansive slum, Kibera. They migrated to Kenya from Southern Sudan during the first world war (1914-1918).

that he will from that day going forth he will fight the Jews anywhere and everywhere that the opportunity presents itself. This feeling prompted him into joining radicalisation. His action to join radicalisation therefore was not caused by the attack of the police on the Arab per se, but was a precipitation of lived experiences of repeatedly being told that the Jews were enemies of his community. The police beating of the Arab was only a trigger to his joining radicalisation—he had for long harboured the feeling of revenge against the Arabs. Others felt disadvantaged by living in unstable residences like conflict prone areas, unstable countries and environs where communal influences to participate in deviant behaviours were over-bearing.

According to one respondent, as if his desolate life was not enough, he encountered further life challenges while living in the slums of Kibera and Biafra estates of Nairobi. While searching for a purpose in life, he interacted with friends in these two slum areas who eventually introduced him to radicalisation. He admired the life that his friends led and he wanted to also enjoy this life. The study therefore show that People tend to learn from parents and from other people that they interact with and later practise what they have learnt later on in life. The behaviour influencing the youth are contextualised in the residences where they live and grew up. The current scope of terrorism and especially after the September, 11, 2001 terrorist attacks changed the perception of terrorism, with national politicians and United Nations officials identifying poverty, global income inequality, unemployment, and low levels of education as key causes of terrorism (Gottlieb 38 as quoted by Reyes N., 2016:119).

One Key Informant stated that most radicalisers view Kenya as predominantly a Christian state, therefore its deployment of a peace-keeping force in Somalia is viewed as an invasion by Christians on an Islamic state. This understanding of the perceived action of Christians against Muslims is used as a reason to recruit Muslim followers to wage a Jihad war to protect Islam. Further, Kenya is viewed as a protector of Western interests and this is why it has deployed its military in Somalia to fight against the violent extremists. This is often used by extremists to recruit members into Al Shabaab (Wafula, 2014). Further, the attackers in the country are increasingly becoming localised, as witnessed by the suicide bomber who participated in Riverside attack in Nairobi on 15.01.2019. The recruiters use religious radicalisation to recruit and radicalise the youth, and it now seems that this recruitment is extending to

non-Muslims who have grievances against the government of one nature or another. This is a new trend and a far cry from the usual recruitment of Muslims (Njogu, 2015). Njogu adds that this phenomena can also be attributed to acts of kidnapping of non-Muslim persons from refugee camps and colleges and transported to Somalia to be radicalised. The targeting of non-Muslims also covers higher institutions of learning (i.e., Universities) where recruitment based on peer influence is used to radicalise students to participate in terrorism.

ii. Conclusion

The living contexts in this study forms the basis of individual construction and the way they define themselves. The respondents tend to behave according to the community practices which the respondent live. This means, the cultural, religious and socio-economic values of the lived community influence the behaviour of the individual living in such contexts. Therefore, this contextual understanding of the radicalized individual may assist in analyzing the behaviour of the those individuals joining radicalism and administer appropriate interventions.

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