

Struggle against Secular Power: The Prospects of Islamism in Kenya as Epitomized by Sheikh Aboud Rogo's Sermons

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Abstract

Kenya is witnessing a pronounced Muslim activism presence in the country's public sphere. The Muslims activism prominence in the public space could be attributed to numerous factors, but significantly to political liberalization of the early 1990s. Due to the democratic freedom, it encouraged the emergence of a section of Muslim clerics advocating for Islam as an alternative political ideology relevant to both the minority Muslims and the general Kenya's population. This group of Muslim clerics espouses Islamist view of the world, and like other Islamists in the world, their key call is the insistence of the establishment of an Islamic state governed by sharia, which they regard to be the solution to all problems facing the humanity. The article seeks to contribute to the larger debate on Islamism within the Kenyan context. Though some commentators are pessimistic of the presence of Islamism in Kenya, I endeavor to demonstrate its existence in the country. In this article, I conceptualize Islamism in Kenya in the form of individual Muslim clerics who reject secularism, democracy and the nation-state. In this respect, I employ Sheikh Aboud Rogo's sermons, comments and statements as a representation of Islamism in Kenya. Through his hateful and inciting orations that included issuing *fatwas* (legal opinions) against the government, praising attacks on churches as appropriate and acceptable in Islam, and completely disregarding mutual religious co-existence, indicated the existence of an extreme form of Islamism among sections of Muslims in Kenya. Therefore, the article will focus to analyze Rogo's proclamations and relate them to the global Islamism identity. This would be concluded by exploring the wider role of Islamism and its impact on integration in the Kenyan society in relation to the chaos that followed the assassination of Rogo.

Introduction

The introduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s that ushered freedom of expression has contributed to the emergence of Islam as political ideology in Kenya. The repealing of section 2 (a) of the Independence Constitution in 1992 became a landmark in Muslims activism presence in the country's public. The Muslims activism ultimate prominence in the Kenya's public space could be attributed to several factors, but importantly to political liberalization. The liberalized atmosphere reorganized the settings for partaking in public debate, which impacted all interest groups, including Muslims. Constitutional and institutional reform expedited the emergence of numerous Muslim organizations, some with clear political stance,

and also Islamic FM radio stations in Nairobi, Garissa and Mombasa to articulate issues affecting the Muslim community. At this crucial moment of democratic freedom, it inspired the appearance of a group of Muslim clerics advocating for Islam as an alternative political ideology relevant to both the minority Muslims and the general population in the country. Apart from the democratization process influencing the political realm, it also ‘democratized’ the religious decree-issuing practice, providing Muslims the prospect of soliciting guidance from any cleric they please. This development undermined the integrity of government sponsored institutional interpretation of Islamic doctrine through the *Kadhi* office. Among the Muslim clerics engaged in independent interpretation of religious texts, there are also those who espouse Islamist view of the world.

This article seeks to contribute to the larger debate on Islamism within the Kenyan context. At this juncture an important question could be asked; what is Islamism? Various definitions of Islamism have been advanced by various scholars over time, but the one by Mehdi Mozaffari is elaborate in content.¹ In clear terms Mozaffari writes; “‘Islamism’ is a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means.”² The author elaborates that this definition consists of four unified features, which include a religious ideology, a holistic interpretation of Islam, conquest of the world and the usage of all mean to attain the third component.³

As an ideology, Islamism embodies “a coherent, specific and identifiable construction”, Mozaffari observes.⁴ He argues Islamism is more than simply a ‘religion’, because it offers guidance in all spheres of life. And since it relies on Islam, the proponents of Islamism always fall back to the faith to selectively identify essentials that are significant to their cause, turning them into ideological precepts that are sacredly supported. Due to this nature of Islamism,

¹See Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. London: Hurst & Company, 2002; William E. Shepard, “Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology”, *International Journal of Middle East* (August 1987), pp307-35; Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed) *Islamic Activism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004.

²Mehdi Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 8, No 1, 17-33, March 2007, p21

³Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p21

⁴Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p22

“actions undertaken by Islamists are” considered by their supporters “as religious duties.”⁵ More so, to the Islamists, the holistic interpretation of Islam “is based on the absolute indivisibility of the *Din* (Religion), *Dunya* (way of life), and *Dawla* (Government).”⁶ It is, therefore, imperative to all Islamists wherever they are in the world to fulfill this trinity. To them, the fulfillment of the triad can be attained by conquering the prevailing world, which they regard to be both wrong and repressive. The existing world is considered wrong because it “does not correspond to Islamic principles”, and “repressive because non-Muslims occupy what the Islamists consider to be Muslim territory or because Muslim live under severe repression from their own (anti-Islamic) governments.”⁷ The outlined remedy to these circumstances is to go back to the ‘true’ Islam as exemplified by Prophet Muhammad and the period of the Caliphate.⁸

And finally, the Islamists’ range of means to achieve the objective of ruling the entire world varies “from propagation, peaceful indoctrination and political struggle to violate methods such as assassination, hostage taking, terrorists and suicide actions, and even massacre of civil populations.”⁹ Though, there are some Islamists groups that do not employ violence, it is important to understand that the usage of “violence is integral to their strategy for achieving their ends.”¹⁰ It is this Islamists’ support of the usage of violence, together with intolerant and exclusivist messages made by certain clerics that leads me to refer to them as extreme Islamists. Therefore, this article conceptualizes extreme Islamism in Kenya, which could possibly differ in other countries, in the form of violent groups, and individual Muslim clerics who reject secularism, democracy and the nation-state. As demonstrated in this article, Rogo’s form of Islamism discourages participating in democratic elections, calls for the adoption of sharia, condemns the principle of secularism by attacking other faiths and advocating for the elimination of key government officials.

⁵Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p22

⁶Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p23

⁷Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p23

⁸Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p23

⁹Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p24

¹⁰Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p24

This scenario presents a clear demonstration of tension between the realities of secular principles and the idealism of religious authority.¹¹ John Hunwick distinguishes between secular power and religious authority, arguing that a secular power is that “one not dictated by a religious or other ideology”, though willing to “accept and operate within the general culture of a religion.”¹² To add to Hunwick’s explanation, it is expected in a society governed by secular power to be tolerant and accommodating to people of different religious pursuant and ideologies. On the other hand he posits religious authority as one, which dictates people’s “lives in accordance with an interpretation of what the holders of such authority claim to be divine authority, which overrides authority established by ‘secular, powers.’”¹³ This description of religious authority by Hunwick fits Rogo’s Islamist’s view and sole endeavor of fighting against the secular power.¹⁴

In August 2003, Feisal Ali Nassor arrested in Mombasa on suspicion of associating with terrorist suspects detonated a grenade, killing himself and the police officer who had arrested him. The eventual ‘martyr’ was initially sent to Europe to advance his studies, before opting to drop out and join one of the alleged terrorist cells in the country that culminated to his premature death. Nassor represent a section of young Muslims who have fallen prey to the jihadist message of the extreme Islamist preachers in Kenya. One such manifestation of extreme Islamists cleric is Sheikh Aboud Rogo. What gave strength to Rogo’s ideas to encourage young Muslims to turn against their ‘secular success’, and seek the depressing path of martyr is still puzzling analysts in the country. Through his sermons he was able to inspire and persuade a section of disenfranchised Muslim youth seeking to live up to a meaningful ‘cause’ during their life on earth, that there is no noble cause than that of dying for your religion. This is the theme that

¹¹John Hunwick, ‘Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society: The Case of Songhay’, in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1996), p176.

¹²Hunwick, ‘Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society: The Case of Songhay.’

¹³Hunwick, ‘Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society: The Case of Songhay.’

¹⁴In determining the tension between secular powers and religious authorities, John Hunwick thoughtfully unpacked variant ways evident in Muslim societies. For more on how the tension between secular power and religious authority has been resolved in Muslim societies, see Hunwick, ‘Secular Power and Religious Authority in Muslim Society: The Case of Songhay’, pp175-194.

resonated and emphasized in his mosque sermons, also relayed through the media tools of DVDs.

Gradually, Rogo turned to be an important link in conveying the message of martyrdom to young Muslims in Kenya. Perhaps, by design his preaching became useful to the al-Shabaab in Somalia in quest of reinforcing its ranks with supporters, sympathizers, and fighters from Kenya's Muslim community. The toxic messages of these Islamist preachers that included issuing *fatwas* (legal opinions) against legitimate authority, praising attacks on churches as an appropriate response to alleged oppression of Muslims, and open defiance of the accepted norms of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence, signaled a deepening presence of Islamism in the Kenyan society. Therefore, using Mozaffari's definition of Islamism, this article seeks to show that there is a prospect of Islamism within the Kenyan context as epitomized by Sheikh Rogo. Sermons, comments and statements attributed to Rogo would be analyzed and related to the global Islamism identity. Further, the wider role of Islamism and its impact on integration in Kenya is discussed in the light of the events that followed the assassination of Rogo.

The 'Mysterious' Sheikh who lived in the Radar of Terrorist Watch List

Just who is Sheikh Rogo? Rogo was described by many as a mysterious individual who led a simple and reserved life. It is reported that the cleric was born around mid 1960s in the remote village of Siyu in the expansive Pate Island where he spent his early childhood.¹⁵ As a child Rogo attended Siyu Primary School, but later opted to drop out before completion of his elementary level studies. Upon leaving secular education, he decided to pursue Islamic religious education at a local madrasah school in his birth village. Later, Rogo left his home village and proceeded to Mombasa where he apparently enrolled at the Kisauni College of Islamic Studies to pursue a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies, which he was unable to complete due financial constraints.¹⁶ Consequently, Rogo decided to involve himself in various business activities like fishing, poultry keeping and running kiosks as a way of meeting his financial needs, while at the same time serving as an imam of a local mosque. In 1991 Rogo joined the defunct Islamic Party

¹⁵Awadh Babo, "This Man Sheikh Aboud Rogo", *Standard on Sunday*, September 2, 2012, p3.

¹⁶Babo, "This Man Sheikh Aboud Rogo", p3; David Ochami, "Of a Task Force that Hit Brick Wall and How it all Began", *Standard on Saturday*, January 5, 2013, p12

of Kenya (IPK), served as its youth activist and failed in his effort to become one of the town's councilors under the banner of the party, which had entered into partnership with the FORD-Kenya.¹⁷ In line with the programs of other political parties that were formed after the ushering of multiparty politics in early 1990s, the IPK was primarily seeking reform and improvement of the public institution in order to facilitate justice and fair play. The concern and struggle of the party was to make the system more open, fair and honest rather than demolishing it.¹⁸ Clearly, the IPK members, including Rogo at that moment, were willing to work within the existing political system.

Upon failing to secure the political position in his first attempt in competitive politics, Rogo decided to concentrate in his duties as the imam of Masjid Musa, Mombasa, where he regularly preached. As a fulltime imam, there are conflicting reports that portrays his nature and how he related with the general public. Outside his mosque, Rogo was described by many as someone who was careful in his talks, whenever outside the precincts of mosque, he would be reluctant to criticize the government or condemn US policies or comment on the supposed "injustices being done to Muslims" in the country or "even engage in politics during a casual conversation."¹⁹ This attitude is contrasted with his fiery posture as a vocal preacher who espoused views that would not be accepted by many while in the mosque. Despite opting to discontinue with secular education, Rogo easily moved his listeners as an informative person as he tackled both local and international issues facing Muslims with ease. Ironically, he criticized the international media and local FM stations, which he evidently relied in acquainting himself with global news.

In early 2001 Rogo allegedly introduced Fazul Mohamed, a Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) wanted terrorist mastermind, to Siyu village while in a group of Muslim preachers. During his stay at Siyu, Fazul married a local girl from a family related to the cleric. It was during the search for Fazul by the FBI agents and the Kenya Anti-Terror Police that the intelligence network begun focusing on Rogo. Consequently, after the 2001 bombing of the Paradise Hotel at

¹⁷Ochami, "A Man with a Fiery Tongue", *Standard on Sunday*, September 2, 2012, p3.

¹⁸For more on the Islamic Party of Kenya, See Hassan Ndlovu, "Religion and Politics: A Critical Study of the Politicization of Islam in Kenya", PhD Thesis, University of Kwazulu Natal, 2009.

¹⁹Babo, "This Man Sheikh Aboud Rogo", p3

the coastal town of Kenya, the intelligence intensified their close watch on Rogo.²⁰ Following the Paradise Hotel attack and attempted shooting down of an Israel plane with around 260 Israeli passengers on board, Rogo together with others were arrested as Fazul's accomplices who had fled to Somalia. However, Rogo and the co-accused were eventually acquitted after being held for several months in custody on allegation that "key witnesses were too scared to testify", the country's Attorney General observed.²¹ But to Rogo and the other suspects, it was clear that the war on terror was a global war on Islam and Muslims, which through the grace of God they have been vindicated.

However, his release coincided with the government crackdown on Islamists in the country where some were deported while others went underground. The crackdown created a leadership vacuum among the Islamists in the country, and coincidentally, during that period, Islamists "groups in Somalia began gaining momentum with the Union of Islamic Courts controlling major parts of southern Somalia" being "in dire need of recruits to boost its fighting capacity."²² Rogo seized the opportunity and established contacts with some of the Islamists groups in Somalia. As a result, in 2009, he supposedly visited Somalia and received military training from foreign jihadist with affiliation to al-Qaeda thereby intensifying his radicalization. Accordingly, the cleric established the Sirajul Munir Madrassa, which he allegedly used as a centre for recruiting Muslim youths from Likoni, Majengo and Kisauni to the al-Shabaab cause.²³

In February 2012, at his farm in Kanamai, Rogo was arrested allegedly with an AK 47 rifle, two hand grenades, two pistols, 102 detonators and 113 bullets, which the police contended he was intending to use them in an orgy of violence that involved blowing up churches in Mombasa, the Nyali Bridge and the Likoni ferry.²⁴ At the time of his death in August 27, 2012, he was out on bond facing a series of terror related charges. According to reports, Rogo was

²⁰Babo, "This Man Sheikh Aboud Rogo", p3.

²¹Murithi Mutiga, "Mystery of Wanted Terror Suspect Who Hid in Plain Sight", *Sunday Nation*, September 2, 2012, p4.

²²"Intelligence Report that Indicted Rogo", *Standard on Saturday*, January 5, 2013, p11.

²³"Intelligence Report that Indicted Rogo", p11

²⁴Willis Oketch, "Fiery Preacher was on US Watch List, Arrested with Weapons Cache", *The Standard*, August 28, 2012, p5.

killed by a “killer squad” who shoot his van with several bullets on a traffic high way.²⁵ As the circumstances of his killing remained unclear, conspiracy theories erupted with mourners accusing the police of executing the cleric who earlier claimed in court during the mention of his case that unknown people had been following him.²⁶ Though Rogo’s secular education and working experience is not clear, there is no doubt that he was a known wandering Islamist preacher, especially in Mombasa area, where he expressed extreme views that were unacceptable by the mainstream *ulama*. Until his brutal death, Rogo lost no opportunity to express abhorrence for his critics or those he considered infidels. His provocative sermons were directed against the government, police and a section of Muslims he regarded apostate for allegedly supporting the war on terrorism.²⁷ He was prominent in preaching against Western influence and exhorting youth to fight jihad. His sermons focused on defining and justifying jihad together with terrorist acts in ‘Muslim’ areas he considered ‘occupied’ by non-Muslims.²⁸

Aspects of Radical Islamism in Sheikh Rogo’s Public Preaching and Mosque Sermons

Among Rogo’s provocative sermons was the one he delivered in July 2012 at Masjid Saada, Changanwe, declaring support and validation for the terrorist attacks in Garissa. Without hesitation he depicted the attacks as justified retribution by the supposedly marginalized Kenyan Muslims. In this sermon one could discern intolerance and exclusivist message that he conveyed to his followers. Rogo praised the killing of the seventeen Christian worshippers, adding that the homicide was significant to control the alleged forced conversion of Muslims to Christianity, and continued desecration of ‘Muslim land.’ In the sermon the cleric declared that the Christian churches have a hidden agenda to undermine Muslims, and their existence amongst them is a great threat that the community should address. For Rogo, the presence of churches in ‘Muslim territory’ portrayed a despicable form of Islam disappearance, which was an obligation of ‘pious’ Muslims to confront. Consequently, he instructed his audience not to sympathize with the Garissa church killings, which he described as a glorious event and a demonstration of a

²⁵Philip Mwakio, “Cleric’s Murder: Youth Attack Churches as Mombasa Erupts”, *The Standard*, August 28, 2012, p4.

²⁶Mwakio, “Cleric’s Murder: Youth Attack Churches as Mombasa Erupts”, p4.

²⁷“Hate Speech Dominated Sheikh Rogo’s Sermons”, *The Standard*, August 28, 2012, p5.

²⁸“Hate Speech Dominated Sheikh Rogo’s Sermons”, p5

continuation of jihad against ‘infidels.’²⁹ Instead, he reiterated that any Muslim accused of killing infidels, it is the responsibility of the community to defend the perpetrators from being arrested by the *kafir* (read government).³⁰ Such sentiments demonstrates why Rogo condemned any efforts by Muslim and Christian leaders to come together in show of solidarity after the Garissa church killings.

To illustrate that Jihad is obligatory to Muslims, Rogo quoted *suratul* At-Tauba that reads “go ye forth, (whether equipped) lightly or heavily, and strive, and struggle, with your goods, and your persons, in the cause of Allah. That is best for you, if ye (but knew).” The verse formed the basis for him to urge his audience to join other Muslims in the frontline, including Somalia, for assurance of blessings that emanates from participating in jihad. Rogo’s call for support of the al-shabaab movement in Somalia was calculated as it is part of the global Islamism whose objective is to champion for the restoration of a powerful Islamic dominion, which would only be attained by liberating all Muslim territories from the oppression of non-Muslim occupiers.³¹ Arguably, it was expected that by successful putting Somalia under the control of Islamists with support from Kenyan Muslim jihadists, similar project could be replicated in Kenya in the areas predominantly inhabited by Muslims. He lamented that the Kenyan Muslims, especially the youth, lacked role model and leadership to guide them into jihad. Despite the acknowledgement of leadership absence, Rogo encouraged Muslims youths to strive to die in battle fronts as martyrs because it guaranteed one access to *jannah fil-daus* (paradise). It is against this position that he glorified the killing of Fazul Mohamed and Osama bin Laden as a blessing since these personalities died as martyrs. Nevertheless, there is an opposing voice of Muslim clerics in Kenya like that of Sheikh Badru Khamis and Sheikh Hassan Omar who denounces the on-going war in Somalia as jihad, and more so deems any war waged by Muslims, if necessary, as a lesser form of jihad, a view utterly discarded by Rogo as misrepresenting of facts about jihad.³²

While Islam promises non-Muslims treatment as People of the Book, in Rogo’s sermons the place of the other religion elicited lack of commitment to rights and personal freedoms. Though Muslims can be delighted with the historical toleration of Jews and Christians under

²⁹“Hate Speech Dominated Sheikh Rogo’s Sermons”, p5.

³⁰See Sheikh Aboud Rogo’s audio visual sermon at Masjid Musa on 23/11/10.

³¹Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p28.

³²See Sheikh Aboud Rogo’s audio visual sermon at Masjid Musa on 23/11/10.

Islamic authority, Rogo agitated for their physical extermination. In one of his recorded audio visual sermons, his lecture is juxtapose with a sermon delivered by Mustafa Muslim, a professor of Al-Sharriqa University, declaring that the creation of the state of Israel provides an easy target of eliminating the Jews. In the video the professor is shown on June 2005 inciting his audience against the Jews by positing:

The Israelites have spread all over the world. Now Allah gathers them in this land (state of Israel). He brings them in groups from all countries of the world in order to fulfill Allah's universal law. Judgment day will come when the Muslims fight the Jews...and the stone and the tree will say: Oh Muslim, Oh servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him. If the Jews were scattered throughout the world how could we [Muslims] find them in order to fight them?³³

These sentiments were echoed by Rogo, bragging that very soon the Jews will be eliminated. Despite the fact that the persecution of Jews and Christians in Islamic history is scarce, prejudice and denigration was common. It is these incidents of discrimination and vilification in the past that some contemporary Islamists have referred in calling for jihad against non-Muslims. While expounding the concept of jihad and justifying acts of terrorism to people he considered as infidels, Rogo declared that "Islam shall stand by the sword", without which the religion would not prevail. To him the meaning of the phrase "Islam is a religion of peace" is deeper, where he expounds it by giving the parallel of Kenya Defense Forces on peacekeeping missions, arguing that during peace assignments the army usually go to these places "with guns, tanks, and planes" to establish peace.³⁴ In his view, this implied that it is only through the sword that Islam would be able to reign and create peace.

Though earlier in 1991, Rogo had offered himself for an elective position through the IPK indicating his willingness to participate in competitive politics, later in life he lost interest in Kenya's political system. He easily encouraged Muslims to aspire for the creation of a global Muslim state than participating in the country's politics. In one of his sermons in early 2012, he made a proclamation that Muslims should avoid indulging in the country's politics, alleging that it constrained their agitation for a global caliphate, which he held would one day prevail.³⁵ All Islamists are nostalgia for the disappeared normative past, making Islamism a regressive

³³See Abou Rogo audio visual sermon on "Jihad na Izza."

³⁴Ochami, "A Man with a Fiery Tongue", p3.

³⁵Ochami, "A Man with a Fiery Tongue", p3.

ideology that is concerned with returning to the past (*salaf*). This could be confirmed when Sayyid Qutb posited that ‘If Islam is again to play the role of the leader of the mankind, then it is necessary that the Muslim community be restored to its original form.’³⁶ Here, the reference points of the Islamists are the Prophet Muhammad’s Medina model and the Caliphate of the four ‘rightly guided’ caliphs. Clearly, the restoration of the Caliphate today represents the beginning of the process oriented toward the realization of the project of Global Islamization. This is because according to the Islamists, Islam is a religion for the entire humanity and effort should be asserted to restore its ancient political power. Although the main goal of Islamists is the establishment of Islamic states within the boundaries of existing nations, there is also a vision of a global religious and political unity that would congregate all Muslims into a single global entity. For such individuals the creation of the *dar-es-Islam*, the realm of Islam is an important religious obligation. Arguably, Rogo believed that the reluctance of Kenyan Muslims to be administered by Sharia plunged them into *dar al-kufr* (an abode of unbelief), a struggle he considered to be obligatory in Islam. Consequently, his extreme dislike for secular politics saw him calling Muslims to boycott elections and urging them to ensure the assassination of key government officials is executed.³⁷

For many years, Islamists’ language has been preoccupied by Islamizing the state, society and everyday life, Khalil Al- Anani observed. While jihadi Islamists took up violence as a political approach to attain these aspirations, moderate Islamists adopted peaceful means. Though the adoption of Sharia is an essential source of legitimacy to both the jihadi and moderate Islamists, the appearance of the Arab Spring has considerably altered the agenda of the Islamists.³⁸ Clearly, Rogo’s ideas are not in sync with the current development witnessed among Islamists in various parts of the Muslim world. There is a gradual change of Islamist politics manifested on their discourse, ideology and tactics. Since the emergence of the Arab Spring, ‘new’ Islamists have appeared while old ones altered “their tactics and ideological views.”³⁹ Muslims of all political ideologies, Islamists included “took to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt,

³⁶As quoted by Mozaffari “What is Islamism? History and Definition of a Concept”, p23.

³⁷Mutiga, “Mystery of Wanted Terror Suspect Who Hid in Plain Sight”, p4.

³⁸Khalil Al-Anani, “Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring”, *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3, November 2012, p469.

³⁹Al-Anani, “Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring”, p467

Libya, Yemen and elsewhere” not campaigning for “an Islamic state”, or demonstrating “against religion”, but to fervently call “for freedom, justice and dignity.”⁴⁰ Following the events of the Arab Spring, Islamists involvement in politics is evident, restraining themselves in engaging in “‘absolutism’, *halal* and *haram* dichotomy, and adopt ‘relativism’ and pragmatism.”⁴¹ During the respective election campaigns of their countries, the political language of these Islamists groups “is overshadowing their religious rhetoric”, by discarding “religious and dogmatic propaganda.”⁴² As they strived to actively participate in the politics of their countries, the Islamists “did not promise paradise as a reward for those who would vote for them but rather pledged to improve the economy, fight corruption and attract foreign direct investment (FDI).”⁴³ Whether this quietist attitude of the Islamists is a strategy to attain power, and thereafter resort to their Islamist agenda, it is nevertheless a development evident among them.

Apart from encouraging Muslims from disengaging in Kenya’s politics, Rogo also daunted them from seeking employment in government as either state administrators or security officers, and those who refused to heed his “guidance” were branded as apostates. According to him it is *haram* to work for a government that is not Islamic. In this respect, he regarded all Muslim government officials to have denounced Islam, demanding them to pronounce the “*kalimat*” or “*shahada*” again in order to re-convert to Islam.⁴⁴ The *shahada* declaration that “there is no other god other than Allah and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah” is important to Muslims as it confirms ones commitment to the religion of Islam. This method of declaring infidelity of opponents was popular and perfected by Azariqah, a Kharijite sect, in early Islamic history. The Azariqah branded other Muslims who did not subscribe to their worldview as unbelievers whose execution was not viewed as an act of sin. Today, some contemporary Islamist groups and preachers like Rogo similarly hold those Muslims who do not share their position as infidels. Those Muslims who support secular democracy and willing to work within the system are classified as apostates by Islamists, who recommend the classical Islamic punishment of death against them. As an instrument of intimidation “against other Muslims in

⁴⁰ Al-Anani, “Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring”, p467

⁴¹ Al-Anani, “Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring”, p468

⁴² Al-Anani, “Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring”, p468

⁴³ Al-Anani, “Islamist Parties Post-Arab Spring”, p468

⁴⁴ Babo, “This Man Sheikh Aboud Rogo”, p3.

matters of jurisprudence”, apostasy was denounced by some of the earliest and contemporary *ulama* like Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyyah and Rashid al-Ghannushi of Tunisia.⁴⁵

Progressively, Rogo’s sermons turned out not only to be separatist, encouraging conflict with Jews and Christians, but also denounce secular education as corrupting. He wondered that “if a child goes for secular education” he will not find “time to memorize the Quran” and accordingly considered this form of education as forbidden in Islam.⁴⁶ He openly hold that it is wrong for Muslim parents to enroll their children for secular education on the basis that the environment under which this form of education is provided is polluting and morally corrupting for the kind of piety he advocated. To demonstrate his dissatisfaction to secular education, Rogo ensured that all his children were enrolled at his Sirajul Munir Madrassa he had founded, declaring that the atmosphere was ideal for imparting the Islamic way of life.⁴⁷ But to the Kenyan security agents, Rogo’s madrassa in Mtwapa did not inculcate good virtues of peaceful co-existence to the youth, rather it served as a recruiting and propaganda channel centre for violent jihadists. According to police information the Sheikh was considered to be a key “recruiting agent for al-Shabaab in the country”, attracting several Muslim youth “to the path of jihad,” Where he enjoined them to wage war as they champion for the imposition of sharia in Kenya.⁴⁸ This view is also corroborated by the UN Security Council who identified Rogo as the “main ideological leader” of Kenya’s al-Hijra group (Muslim Youth Centre), which was viewed as a partner of al-Shabaab.⁴⁹

His association and alleged fundraising for the al-Shabaab could be interpreted as part of the global Islamism, and also a campaign to promote violence in Kenya and Somalia. As the supposed leader of al-Hijra, Rogo used the extremist group as a conduit for radicalization and recruitment of Muslim youth in the country for carrying out militant activity in Somalia. In a

⁴⁵ AbuKhalil As’ad, “The Incoherence of Islamic Fundamentalism: Arab Islamic Thought at the End of the 20th Century”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 4, Autumn 1994, pp678-679.

⁴⁶Ochami, “A Man with a Fiery Tongue”, p3.

⁴⁷Ochami, “Rogo Widow says Danger Stalks her Children”, *Standard on Saturday*, January 5, 2013, p11

⁴⁸“Mystery of Wanted Terror Suspect Who Hid in Plain Sight”, *Sunday Nation*, September 2, 2012, p4.

⁴⁹Wycliffe Muga, “The Mysterious Life and Death of Sheikh Aboud Rogo”, *Weekend Star*, September ½, 2012, p. iv.

series of inspirational sermons, he constantly called for the denunciation of the Somalia peace efforts, thereby condemning the African Mission and the Kenya Defense forces in Somalia by urging his audiences to join al-Shabaab's in fighting the alleged invasion.⁵⁰ Arguably, Rogo supported terrorist groups in the country and the region both directly and indirectly, for logistical support and actual execution of the terrorist operations.

Apart from incensing the government authority with his controversial sermons, Rogo also enraged mainstream Muslim clerics and *Kadhi*,⁵¹ reproaching them of "cowardice, apostasy and corruption for appeasing non-Muslim political leaders."⁵² One of the jurisdictions of the *Kadhi* (judges in the Islamic courts) in their courts is to preside Muslim marriages in accordance to Islamic traditions, but in agreement with the Kenyan constitution that disallow marrying of persons below the age of eighteen. In Rogo's view, refusing to marry a girl below the age of eighteen is to repudiate Muhammad's marriage to the six year old Aisha, a gesture that can only be done with someone who is not a Muslim. This brings into fore his position on the rights of women in society. While contributing on the debate of whether the *Kadhi* courts should be reformed to allow Muslim women *Kadhi* in the courts, Rogo strongly condemned such proposals arguing it is not acceptable for women to hold leadership position within Islamic tradition, a view rejected by other *ulamas* in the country.⁵³ It is clear that Rogo's views demonstrate extreme Islamists stance on women rights. However, Muslims' standpoint on the issue of women rights is divergent. Progressive Muslims in the country have shown signs to be leaning toward revering individual's freedoms and rights thereby incorporating them within their program and structure. A section of Muslim clerics have constantly indicated their admiration to women's right, and sustaining any changes that may improve their personal status. Their efforts are reinforced by the Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), which affirms their support and commitment for gender equality between sexes in education and holding public offices.

⁵⁰Mutiga, "Mystery of Wanted Terror Suspect who Hid in Plain Sight", p4.

⁵¹*Kadhis* are Muslim judges in the *Kadhi* courts, which are part of the Kenya's judicial system.

⁵²Ochami, "A Man with a Fiery Tongue", p3.

⁵³See About Rogo's audio visual sermons

Due to differences in interpreting doctrinal issues, Rogo repeatedly disparaged other sheikhs and *ulamas* for not being ‘good’ Muslims.⁵⁴ As a result he was a lone ranger who did not relate with other credible and knowledgeable Muslim clerics in the country who on their part held mosque lectures, and press release to correct his distortions and misinterpretations. Rogo’s Muslim opponents were infuriated by his offensive remarks about their ‘hypocrisy’, which according to Rogo was demonstrated in their opportunistic relations with political leadership of the country, and their critical stance on jihad. Accordingly, the other clerics censured his sermons as inciting, distinctively intended to create animosity among Muslims and the general Kenya’s public community. Rogo responded by intensifying the production of his audio-video recorded sermons that captured his views on various issues raised by the opposing *ulamas*. He effectively used the media products to spread his critical lecture sermons to a wide Muslim audience.

The Threat of Rogo’s Radicalism to the Kenyan Society

The killing of the controversial preacher sparked tension and violence in the town of Mombasa where he commanded respect from his followers. Youthful supporters of the sheikh directed their rage on any symbol of government and what they regarded as ‘un-Islamic.’ At the beginning the violence appeared spontaneous, but after a while it became evident that some clerics were instigating the disobedience. The protesters armed with petrol bombs and grenades targeted police officers and churches, which the cleric had strongly criticized in his sermons.⁵⁵ Immediately after the assassination of Rogo, his long time accomplice and co-accused on terror charges, Sheikh Said Shariff Abubakar allegedly called for burning and destruction of “churches and murder of police officers” together with “certain Muslim leaders.”⁵⁶

Police sources confirmed that leaflets were circulated in specific mosques in Mombasa urging Muslims to mobilize and embark on a jihad.⁵⁷ On the day of Rogo’s killing, at Masjid Musa, Abubakar is accused to have incited their supporters to violence by ordering the killing of

⁵⁴“Intelligence Report that Indicted Rogo”, p11.

⁵⁵Kwendo Oponga, “State must Get to the Bottom of Rogo’s Killing”, *Sunday Nation*, September 2, 2012, p18.

⁵⁶Oketch, “Cleric Remanded in Prison to Await Ruling on Bail”, *The Standard*, September 6, 2012, p10.

⁵⁷David Ochami and Ngumbao Kithi, “Militant Killed After Grenade Attack”, *The Standard*, August 30, 2012, p6.

all those imams collaborating with the government together with any police officer; he is purported to have instructed “imam wote wanaoungana na serikali wachinje na pia polisi yeyote akionekana auwawe.”⁵⁸ The stern statement directed at the police and other Muslim clerics was based on the conspiracy theories tying competing Muslim priests and government agents to the tribulations of Rogo since the terror attack of 2001. According to his supporters the state had harassed the sheikh for decades on charges of terrorism without evidence, while his rival clerics allegedly spied on him and reported to the government authorities.⁵⁹ On the same day Abubakar allegedly threatened the life of security agents uttering “nyinyi polisi na haswa wale mko na uniform tutaonana na nyinyi makafiri” (we will deal with you infidel police officer).⁶⁰ More so, he is also charged to have ordered “makanisa yote Mombasa ya chomwe” (all churches in Mombasa should be burned down).⁶¹ These statements point to a deliberate incitement and exhortation to commit murder to a group of people and destruction of property of a specific community.

And indeed violence erupted. Probably instigated by sentiments expressed by clerics like Abubakar, Rogo’s assassination saw irate Muslim youth go on rampage, and vowed to avenge the death of their ‘martyr.’ To demonstrate that in death Rogo attained martyrdom while fighting jihad in defense of Islam, his enraged supporters hurriedly buried his body without washing it in accordance to Islamic burial tradition. This action was censured by other Muslim clerics who considered it a gross misunderstanding of the concept of jihad martyrdom in Islam. Nevertheless, in the engulfing chaos, around five security agents were killed, their vehicle destroyed, and several others injured in different grenade explosions blamed on Rogo’s radicalized followers.⁶² During the three day violence, intelligence officials maintained that recently trained militants, allegedly recruited by the sheikh to fight jihad for al-Shabaab in Somalia, had joined the rioters and were liable for the increasing turmoil and successive grenade explosions.⁶³ As violence perpetrated by his supporters ensued, it acquired a sectarian dimension that witnessed the

⁵⁸Oketch, “Cleric Remanded in Prison to Await Ruling on Bail”, p10.

⁵⁹Ochami, “Rogo Widow says Danger Stalks her Children”, p11, 12

⁶⁰Oketch, “Cleric Remanded in Prison to Await Ruling on Bail”, p10.

⁶¹Oketch, “Cleric Remanded in Prison to Await Ruling on Bail”, p10.

⁶²Oketch, “Cleric Remanded in Prison to Await Ruling on Bail”, p10; “Mombasa Rioters Kill Cop as Leaders Plead for Calm”, *The Standard*, August 29, 2012, pp1-6.

⁶³Ochami, “Rogo Widow says Danger Stalks her Children”, p10

burning and destruction of a Salvation Army, the Jesus Celebration, Pentecostal Assemblies of God and Neno Evangelism churches in Mombasa.⁶⁴ Though all the affected churches were the evangelical ones, who have had a clear and critical stance on issues concerning Muslims i.e. the *Kadhi* courts, their destruction can be interpreted as accidental than predetermined. The destruction of churches had a calculated agenda; to provoke Christians against Muslims. Evidently, the strategy was to inspire religious antagonism and animosity thereby destabilizing the country. Apart from attacking any symbol of government and Christianity, liquor stores were also targeted during the protests indicating the perpetrators were extremists who did not tolerate anything they considered 'un-Islamic.'⁶⁵

Meanwhile, both Muslim and Christian leaders condemned the violence as they sought to reconcile their groups following attacks on churches. Commenting on the church attacks, a Reverend of Mombasa Churches Forum lamented that "most Christians are shocked by the aftermath of the killing of Sheikh Rogo" and "we do not know" how his assassination is connected with Christians and the church in general.⁶⁶ Knowing the negative repercussion such attacks would have on the name of Islam, an official of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslim (SUPKEM), Mombasa, unequivocally criticized the violence asserting that "the burning of churches and causing conflict is against the faith [Islam], those responsible must be arrested."⁶⁷ The Muslim leaders were aware that the rioting Muslim youths were stoking religious unrest and subsequently insisted their arrest. Such comments from Muslim leaders depicted divergent view-point on the issue of extremism and acts of violence, particularly on places of worship.

In fact other Muslim leaders went further and questioned the credibility of Rogo as a Muslim theologian and authority on matters concerning Islam.⁶⁸ This criticism demonstrates the continued debate as to who has the authority to speak for Islam in Kenya; a contest between Muslims perceived as moderate and radical. It is an indication that there is a section of Kenyan

⁶⁴Mwakio, "Cleric's Murder: Youth Attack Churches as Mombasa Erupts", p4; Oponga, "State must Get to the Bottom of Rogo's Killing", p18.

⁶⁵Mwakio, "Cleric's Murder: Youth Attack Churches as Mombasa Erupts", p4.

⁶⁶"Mombasa Rioters Kill Cop as Leaders Plead for Calm", *The Standard*, August 29, 2012, p6.

⁶⁷"Mombasa Rioters Kill Cop as Leaders Plead for Calm", *The Standard*, August 29, 2012, p6.

⁶⁸"Mombasa Rioters Kill Cop as Leaders Plead for Calm", pp1-6.

Muslims who vehemently deplores extreme form of Islam mainly because it espouses violence in addition to its adherents considering other Muslims as unbelievers. Such division is as a result of doctrinal variations “between those who follow Sufi practices and those who have been variously called ‘reformist’, ‘Wahabbi’ or ‘Salafist.’”⁶⁹ Although the ‘moderate’ Muslim leaders did well to restate that the attacks should not be misconceived as religious war between Christians and Muslims, the fact that most of the victims of the violence were non-Muslims, while Rogo and those speaking on his behalf are Muslims, threatened to produce a Christian-Muslim faction in the country.

Since the 1930s, the development of Islam in Kenya could be described as one that is “traditional,” particularistic and local form of Islam as represented by the Sufi.⁷⁰ It is this category of conservatives-traditionalists, who follow the prescription of a religious establishment passed from their forefather, which comprises the largest group of Kenyan Muslim. For several years this type of Islam that is regarded as peaceful and moderate has been observed in Kenya.⁷¹ Arguably, this demonstrates why many Muslims in Kenya did not approve the September 11 terrorist bombings on the twin tower and the numerous terrorist activities in the country, considering the incidents as acts of extremists whom they denounced. However, this does not imply complete absence of supporters of Islamists and terrorist activities on presumed enemies. The so called local form of Islam is gradually “faced with the challenges posed by “modern,” universalist, reformist Islam brought in from outside.”⁷²

Clearly, this point to the Salafiyya brand of Islam, which as represented by Rogo, it espouses extreme Islamists ideology that encourages outright intolerance and violence against non-Muslims through its rallying call for jihad. This rigid form of Islamism has succeeded to find readily available supporters in the “growing unemployment among young people and poor

⁶⁹Hassan Mwakimako, Hassan Ndzovu and Justin Willis, (2009), “Trends in Kenyan Islam” A Research Report, p10.

⁷⁰Rudiger Seesemann (2007), “African Islam or Islam in African? Evidence from Kenya”, in Roman Loimeier and Rudiger Seesemann (eds), *The Global Worlds of the Swahili: Interfaces of Islam, Identity and Space in 19th and 20th Century East Africa*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, p234.

⁷¹Mutiga, “Rogo is Dead but his Ideas are the Real Threat to Stability in East Africa”, *Sunday Nation*, September 2, 2012, p12.

⁷²Seesemann (2007), “African Islam or Islam in African? Evidence from Kenya”, p234.

economic conditions.”⁷³ It is among the desperate section of the society that Islamists are able to contract individuals willing to participate in the acts of terrorism and disruption. In his sermons Rogo persistently reminded Muslims that they are not “good Muslims” if they continue living “in a state where sharia is not the law of the land.” To devout Muslims, Sharia is the acceptable standard by which a society is measured and judged to be Islamic. Failure to attain this aspiration, the sheikh recommended to the Muslim minorities in Kenya two options: “to fight and topple the state (hence Rogo’s calls in his mosque sermons for the assassination of the President and the Prime Minister together with other Muslims working for the government) or like the Prophet Muhammad, they should emigrate elsewhere.”⁷⁴ An intelligence report released a few months before Rogo’s murder profiled the Muslim cleric as dangerous man preaching against the President and the Prime Minister for being non-Muslims. Clearly, such sentiments represent an extremist form of Islam, which does not accommodate tolerance and mutual co-existence.

A study report on the emergence of Islamists groups in East Africa, and Kenya in particular, attributes it to clerics from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries in early 1970. These clerics were able to channel million of dollars to their counterparts in the region through Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) purporting to be promoting social causes.⁷⁵ Instead, such funds are used to propagate Islamists ideology in the guise of initiating reforms in Islam. Since the time of al-Amin al-Mazrui, the agenda for reform in the country was focused on unacceptable and acceptable practices in Islam, a struggle that has for centuries “characterized Islamic reform throughout the world.”⁷⁶ A number of reformist organizations in Kenya modeled on the Wahabi movement ideology, which originated in Arabia in the eighteenth century, has been influential in encouraging attacks on saint worship and other Sufi ‘innovations.’ Despite the emerging threat of Islamists groups in the country, they are still a minority among Kenyan Muslims. More so, the issue of ethnicity among the various groups of the Muslim population, such as the long

⁷³Charlotte A. Quinn and Frederick Quinn (2003), *Pride, Faith, and Fear: Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p5.

⁷⁴Mutiga, “Rogo is Dead but his Ideas are the Real Threat to Stability in East Africa”, p12.

⁷⁵Mutiga, “Rogo is Dead but his Ideas are the Real Threat to Stability in East Africa”, p12

⁷⁶Quinn and Quinn (2003), *Pride, Faith, and Fear: Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p5.

established division between Arab and African Muslims, creates a stumbling block that the Islamists will find it intricate to overcome. However, the Islamists drive for renewal and social justice is prone to gradually appeal to the youth, especially when Islamism is regarded as “the ideology of the dispossessed.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

In Kenya, Rogo, a charismatic Muslim leader strived to unite the country’s Islamist into a unified political force, strongly expressing anti West, church and government political position. His initiative came at a time the country is experiencing religious radicalization, ethnic polarization and call for secession by the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC) with poor human rights records, weak political institutions and economic marginalization escalating. Increasing communications with the rest of the Muslim world implies the waves of ‘reform’ championed by Islamist groups will continue to be evident in Kenya, and to some extent affect the country’s Muslims. The Arab spring political upheavals that bring Islamist leadership to power in North Africa, the struggle of Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists in Mali, will encourage such groups in the country to advocate for social equality, justice, application of sharia, and even ambitiously, to secede and establish an Islamic form of government. Muslim youths in Kenya, lacking access to educational opportunities and facing unemployment are likely to challenge the political leadership for a share of social equity and economic benefits. If this situation is not addressed, the Islamists could capitalize on the dissatisfaction and use the desperate youth for their intolerant and exclusivist agenda. Clearly, the turmoil that engulfed the coastal city after the killing of the controversial cleric was exploited by Islamists who attempted to implant religious violence hence the attack on churches. The Islamists’ main opponents will continue to be the state, members of other religions and moderate Muslim clerics who accept to work with the government authorities. However, despite of this possibility, Islamist elements among the Muslim population will be confronted by the government that does not tolerate political opposition presented by religious activism, which could eventually instigate Christian-Muslim rivalries.

⁷⁷Quinn and Quinn (2003), *Pride, Faith, and Fear: Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p26

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Audio Visual (DVD)

Aboud Rogo's audio visual sermon at Masjid Musa on 23/11/10.

Abou Rogo audio visual sermon on "Jihad na Izza."