Islamic Radicalisation Threat to Kenyan Children

Author: Wanja Gathu

Schools and mosques become the focus as Islamic militants seek to exploit local grievances.

Eight-year-old Moses arrived home from school one Friday evening excited by what he had learnt that day.

Moses (not his real name), who attends a private school outside Nairobi, told his mother that his science teacher had taught the class how to dismantle and reassemble a gun. In the same lesson, he also learned how to shoot at targets and practiced firing at the blackboard with a toy pistol.

According to Moses, the teacher told the class he was preparing them to defend themselves against terrorists.

“I was shocked,” Moses’s mother told IWPR. “I asked my son to tell me exactly when and by whom the lesson was given. He identified a teacher. I took a decision to go to school and talk to the administrators.”

Kenyan media have reported that a teacher at another school, in Nairobi’s Somali-majority suburb of Eastleigh, praised recent attacks carried out by the Islamist group al-Shabab. He told a class of 11-year-olds that it was honourable for them to die fighting.

The Kenyan authorities and security experts believe incidents like this are not isolated, but part of an increasing trend of Islamic radicalisation which is targeting children and young people in schools and places of worship.

While the authorities are aware of the threat, experts say official responses has failed to address the underlying causes of radicalisation and the attraction it holds for young Kenyans. They want to see the government take a more comprehensive approach to addressing the problem.

GROWING THREAT OF EXTREMISM

Over the last two years, Kenya has suffered numerous attacks by al-Shabab militants. The most brutal came in September 2013 when four gunmen took control of a Nairobi shopping centre for four days, killing some 70 people and injuring more than 200 others.

Al-Shabab says the attacks are retaliation for the Kenyan military’s ongoing intervention in southern Somalia, where its troops have been fighting the militants since 2011.

In May this year the group, announced that it was taking the fight inside Kenya and called on all Muslims to sign up. In June, an attack on the town of Mpeketoni and nearby Mporomooko on the eastern coast killed 60 people. Smaller attacks have taken place in Nairobi, around the border with Somalia, and in the northeastern city of Garissa.

In February this year, dozens of young people and children as young as 12 were arrested in a police raid on the Musa mosque in Mombasa. The mosque is under investigation for hosting radical preachers.

Police spokesperson Zipporah Mboroki told IWPR that radicalisation of schoolchildren at mosques and in schools appeared to be on the rise.

“We have identified several schools in Nairobi, Mombasa and Garissa where radicalisation activities have been reported and investigations are ongoing,” she told IWPR. “An increasing number of school heads have been coming to us asking us to investigate suspicious activities in their schools.”

Educationalists say the targeting of children by extremist groups poses a huge threat.

Warucu Ngethe, a clinical psychologist and education specialist told IWPR, “If they are fed with extremist ideas and are desensitised to violence and murder, they become the worst kind of killers.”

Kenya has just over four million Muslims, approximately 11 per cent of its overall population. Many community, particularly those living on the coast and in Kenya’s northeast, hold long term grievances against the Nairobi authorities. They have been economically and socially marginalised under successive governments. Muslims remain under-represented in national politics.

Experts say that al-Shabab is able to exploit these grievances to launch attacks like the one in Mpeketoni, and also to recruit young people.

Simiyu Werunga is a former major in the Kenyan military who now heads the African Centre for Security
“Al-Shabab picked [up] on the issue of joblessness, on the issue of marginalisation,” Werunga told IWPR, noting that this made young people a target “for anybody who comes around and tells them you can earn money by working for al-Shabab, or we can train you so you can come back and fight for your rights,” he continued.

Experts believe the problem goes beyond religious schools, which are already viewed with suspicion by the authorities, and is now spilling over to secular schools, state-run and private.

The problem is most prevalent on the coast and in parts of Nairobi, but Werunga said it had now spread “all over the country”. He said that in some cases parents “quietly endorsed” the recruitment of their children.

Werunga said that besides targeting schools, al-Shabab was also trying to recruit university students.

“A few accept this is a good idea, then [al-Shabab] start using them to spread the ideology,” he said. “That is how it is spreading.”

“There are serious campaigns taking place in some of these colleges and schools to spread the ideology,” he added.

**ANTI-RADICALISATION MEASURES**

The government has taken some measures to combat the problem, particularly in the schools.

In April, the education ministry warned school authorities to look out for attempts to radicalise pupils. Under new guidelines, guest speakers are vetted and their presentations sent to the ministry for advance approval. Students transferring from one school to another now undergo background checks.

The education ministry also directed schools to carry out internal investigations to establish whether radicalisation was taking place on their premises, and also to intensify the guidance and counselling they offered pupils.

A senior staff member at a private school in Kajiado, where one suspected case of radicalisation was reported earlier this year, told IWPR that the school was now working closely with local security agencies to tackle the problem.

Mboroki told IWPR that increased vigilance had resulted in some success. However, some teachers and security experts believe the new measures are only partly effective.

Mary Atieno, a state school teacher in Eldoret in the Rift Valley, told IWPR that her students have been receiving regular talks about safety and security, but “beyond that, there has been no visible security presence in the school”.

Bashir Abdullah, a retired major who now works as a security consultant in Nairobi, welcomed the new measures and security alerts. But he wants to see the ministry take a more hands-on approach by working in close consultation with the police and conducting “thorough background checks” on teachers.

“The ministry cannot expect a compromised school or teacher to report themselves,” he said.

Abdullah also called on Kenya’s counter-terrorism police to work closely with the public.

“It is unfortunate that the anti-terror unit which should be contributing to public security does not seem to understand their role in protecting schoolchildren from radical extremists,” he said. “The anti-terror unit should reach out to the public, [inform] them [about] the serious threat posed by extremists to the country, and educate the public so the public can be able to reach out to come to the police with vital information.”

Other experts are more sceptical about the value of vetting teachers and other such reactive measures. Werunga pointed out that it was very difficult to get information that would incriminate staff members or raise questions about their motives.

Instead, Werunga believes there is a need to focus on the underlying problems that al-Shabab exploits in its recruitment drive. Unless entrenched poverty and the marginalisation of and discrimination against the Muslim community, and residents of coastal areas generally, are tackled, the problem will persist, he said.

Other security groups have come to a similar conclusion. A report by the International Crisis Group think-tank published in September argued that the Kenyan government should implement the recommendations of a 2008 presidential committee in order to address longstanding discrimination against Muslims and their lack of representation in official roles.

“We have no national programme to deal with those underlying problems,” Werunga said. “We want to
know the underlying factors, we want to know the growth of this issue, we want to understand how it has gotten to this point and how we can reverse this trend.”

**Wanja Gathu** is a freelance reporter in Nairobi.

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