



# IDeIAS

Informação sobre *Desenvolvimento, Instituições e Análise Social*

## WHO IS “THE ENEMY” ATTACKING CABO DELGADO? SHORT PRESENTATION OF THE HYPOTHESES OF THE MOZAMBICAN GOVERNMENT<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

On 5 October 2017, the Mocimboa da Praia district capital, in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, was attacked by armed individuals. This attack, for which nobody claimed responsibility, was aimed essentially against State institutions, and particularly the local police. Since then there have been recurrent attacks. After Mocimboa da Praia, they spread across several districts of Cabo Delgado, particularly Palma, Nangade, Macomia, Muidumbe and Quissanga. On 23-24 March 2020, the most important attacks to date took place, with the temporary occupation of the Mocimboa da Praia and Quissanga district capitals, where, in accordance with several videos and images circulating on social media and in some of the local press, the attackers hoisted a flag similar to that of Islamic State. In the attacks against these two districts, in addition to State institutions, including the residences of the district administrators, and barracks of the government forces, private institutions such as banks were also targeted. However, about two and a half years after the attack of 5 October 2017, for the Mozambican authorities, the identity and motivations of this group remain shrouded in mystery. But it is known that the attackers, known locally as “Al Shabaab”, and as “insurgents” or “evildoers” by the government, have beheaded their victims, somewhat reminiscent of the behaviour of radical Islamist terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State. It is also known that “Al Shabaab” has publicly demanded the implementation of Islamic law in Mozambique. While the Mozambican government has stated that these are “faceless” individuals, and for this reason it has difficulties in finding an answer to the problem, at the same time it has put forward several hypotheses about who the attackers are and what they want.

This text intends to present the different hypotheses expressed by the Mozambican government about the identity and goals of “Al Shabaab”. Basically, the hypotheses of the Mozambican authorities about who the insurgents are and what they want can be summarised as four: (i) Individuals whose goal is to set up an Islamic state; (ii) Former illegal miners from the Montepuez ruby mines; (iii) A group of Mozambican business people resident in Beira and (iv) Outside forces.

### 1. Individuals whose goal is to set up an Islamic state

Immediately after the attack of 5 October 2017 against Mocimboa da Praia, the government stated that it was a group formed by individuals (foreigners and Mozambicans) whose goal is to set up an Islamic state in Mozambique. Rodrigo Parrique, the then administrator of Mocimboa da Praia, said this group consisted of Mozambicans who had studied fundamentalist religious doctrines in Tanzania, Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and that they worked with Tanzanian and Somali citizens who, to attain their objectives, glorified religious practices that are not common in Islam and disparaged the Mozambican government (Notícias, 2017). This thesis was also defended by the then Minister of the Interior, Basílio Monteiro, during the visit made by President Nyusi to Cabo Delgado, in April 2018 (Miramar TV, 2018a).

Because of this, immediately after the attacks, several moslem citizens in Cabo Delgado were arrested on the accusation that they were members of “Al-Shabaab”. Also some mosques across this province, particularly in Pemba city and in Montepuez district, were closed on suspicion of collaborating with “Al Shabaab”. This situation caused unease among the Mozambican moslem community which accused the government of arbitrary detentions.

However, and in what can be regarded as an attempt to avoid a collision course with the local moslem community, the Mozambican authorities changed their discourse, saying they were not sure that the attacks had anything to do with a group with religious motivations and that they still did not know their goals. In this change, the Mozambican authorities stated that Islam is a religion of peace; and that in Mozambique there is no history of a struggle between religions. They also reiterated that the insurgents who kill in Cabo Delgado are not even moslems, despite making their attacks in the name of this religion, as can be seen from the speech made by President Nyusi at the *Eid al-Fitr* ceremony, held in Beira in June 2019:

*“Our brothers in the north, in the districts of Cabo Delgado province, are today living through moments of horror and extreme violence. They are murdered, and their houses and possessions are*

*destroyed by men who do not want to show their faces, and who are trying to some extent, and through their statements, to make an effort so that we confuse them with men who defend Islam. We Mozambicans have no history of conflicts of a religious nature. We don't accept that they tell us they are moslems who are doing that... they continued to kill people in the middle of Ramadan, which is unacceptable since Islam, as we know it, means peace ... in its words and in its acts (STV, 2019a)*

This change is understandable in a context in which relations between Frelimo and religion, particularly with Islam, were very difficult during the period of “Marxism-Leninism”, but improved with the introduction of pluralism in 1990. It should also be stressed that the Mozambican moslem community always distanced itself from the Cabo Delgado attacks, saying that these are the work of individuals who favour radical Islamic practices (such as denying the secular state, for example), and the community thus called for firm action from the State.

### 2. Former “garimpeiros” (illegal miners) from the Montepuez ruby mines

In May 2019, the general commander of the police, at a rally in Montepuez, in Cabo Delgado, claimed that former “garimpeiros” (illegal miners) from the ruby mines of Nhamanhumbir not only finance “Al Shabaab” but are also among the organisation's ringleaders (RFI, 2019). According to the Mozambican authorities, the local “garimpeiros” were being manipulated by “foreigners” from Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), who had been expelled from the ruby mines where they had been mining clandestinely. They were provoking chaos so that they could continue to exploit illegally natural resources in Cabo Delgado. Also, according to the government, these “foreigners” also took advantage of the fact that the majority of the population in this province are moslems to set this religion against the State (Notícias, 2019).

It should be mentioned that the arrival of Montepuez Ruby Mining (MRM) in Montepuez, in early 2017, to operate the ruby mines, was preceded by the violent expulsion of “illegal” garimpeiros by the police, with some of them buried alive, others shot dead in cold blood, women raped, houses and property destroyed,

<sup>1</sup>The extracts of speeches given here have been reproduced literally, without modification.

among other humiliations. Accused of violating human rights, MRM was sentenced by a London court to pay compensation of 6.7 million euros in 2019 (Silva, 2019).

It is important to note that the situation remains tense in Montepuez, with several incidents reported, the latest being an attack on the MRM installations in February 2020. This attack was blamed on the former garimpeiros. Three MRM security guards were injured and a vehicle belonging to the company was set on fire (Notícias, 2020).

### 3. Group of Mozambican business people living in Beira

The Mozambican government also says that some Mozambican business people resident in the city of Beira, in the centre of the country, unhappy at the combat waged by the State against illegal trafficking in timber, were financing the “insurgents”. Without giving any further details, this suspicion was launched publicly by President Nyusi in August 2019:

*“There are signs that some are Mozambicans who are living here, who live well in Beira, but who are not satisfied because perhaps they used to have some opportunities and no longer have them, because things are now done with some transparency, When people say the timber trade now has to be done this way, they get angry and go and stay in the bush. They used to get things without tenders, now people say you’ve got to compete, and they get angry, and they send other people’s sons to go and die...”* (Miramar TV, 2019)

It should be stressed that, a month before the statement made in Beira, President Nyusi mentioned, during a visit to the Socone administrative post, in Zambézia province, that some Mozambican “false business people” had been detained, who were recruiting young men from this province into the ranks of the insurgents in exchange for fake job proposals in Mocimboa da Praia and Palma (O País, 2019).

In December 2019, two months after the general elections of 15 October, at a rally in Mueda. Cabo Delgado, President Nyusi again raised the hypothesis of a possible internal conspiracy intended to ruin his governance. He declared “... we are looking to see if here inside the country there is somebody interested in disturbing my governance by supporting these scoundrels.” (STV, 2019b).

However, to date, there have been no further developments around this hypothesis, and it is not known what conclusion the authorities reached about the “false business people” or the business people of Beira.

### 4. Outside forces

The other hypothesis raised by the Mozambican government is that this is a war waged by “outside” forces, in complicity with some Mozambicans.

For Bernardino Rafael, the General Commander of the police, for example, the leaders of the “insurgents” would be Congolese, who recruited and trained Mozambicans in the DRC to wage war in Mozambique:

*“The leaders came out of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where they were in some mosques; in Kisan-gani, in North Kivu, in Goma, in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Where they fed themselves on diamonds. Because this group always consisted of those who lived off minerals, they tried to penetrate our*

*country, recruiting our brothers, training them in the Democratic Republic of Congo”* (Miguel, 2019).

In this undertaking, the Congolese would be acting in collaboration with Tanzanians. To sustain this thesis, the police presented in Mocimboa da Praia, a group of three Mozambicans supposedly trained in the DRC and who had been captured by the Congolese authorities and handed over to the Mozambican police. One of them said he had been enticed by a Tanzanian to go to the DRC to receive military training in order to wage Jihad:

*“A Tanzanian called Kiyenda took me to Tanzania ... to go on to Congo, because there are some Tanzanians who fled from Tanzania and are in Congo... to train to wage Jihad...”* (TVM, 2018a)

In addition to Tanzanian and Congolese citizens, the police also cited Somalis and Malians. There were also “foreigners” of Asian origin. For example, in May 2018, in Mocimboa da Praia the police presented the body of one individual supposedly of Asian origin who had been shot dead in combat. The police also said that another two Asians were on the run (TVM, 2018b). In June 2018, the authorities of Moma district, in Nampula province, presented a group of 38 Mozambicans who had supposedly been enticed by a group of Pakistanis to join the “insurgents” in Mocimboa de Praia (Miramar TV, 2018b).

With the situation almost slipping out of the government’s control, President Nyusi was much more forceful when he said, on 25 September 2019, the date on which Mozambique was celebrating another anniversary of the start of the armed struggle against Portuguese colonial rule, that “it was clearer than ever that the country was a victim of a camouflaged invasion by enemies of our development” (STV, 2019c). At the time, President Nyusi did not provide details, but he did so at the meeting of the Council of Ministers, especially held in Pemba, in February 2020. On that occasion, Nyusi said that “the foreigners” who were waging the war against Mozambique were people “with money”, which they used to entice Mozambicans:

*“This is a war waged by people from outside and people who have money. We don’t know where they obtained this money to kill Mozambicans. Perhaps it is even money from Mozambicans themselves that kills Mozambicans, but we have been advised and recommended to be more attentive so that we can catch these people ...”* (STV, 2020).

According to President Nyusi, apart from setting Mozambicans against the government and other State institutions such as the army, the aim of these “foreigners” was to use tribalism to divide Mozambicans. President Nyusi said he is willing to enter into a dialogue with these “foreigners”, if they identify themselves (STV, 2020).

Even without indicating the nationalities of these “foreigners” it seems that President Nyusi was echoing the statements of the police.

### Conclusion

What reading can be made of these different versions? Is it the case that after various detentions and demands, the Mozambican authorities do not know who is “the enemy” that is attacking in Cabo Delgado and what it wants?

Evidence on the ground clearly shows that the country is facing the presence of a radical Islamic group, which wants to impose Sharia law. As shown in the text, this is a thesis initially put forward by the government, and which, for reasons that are not very clear, was abandoned. However, the recent attacks against Mocimboa da Praia and Quissanga on 23 and 24 March 2020, where the demand of radical Islam is very clear, leave little room for doubt about the connection between “Al Shabaab” and the Islamic State, which destroys the thesis that the attackers are faceless or have no message. Likewise, with regard to the complexity and evolution of “Al Shabaab”, there are signs that this group benefitted from the violent expulsion of the “garimpeiros” from Montepuez, who joined it. However, more research is needed to understand the various mutations through which the group has passed over the last two and a half years and the reasons why it opted for military means to achieve its goals, after initially prioritizing non-violent actions.

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