



# IDeIAS

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## AFTER ALL, IT IS NOT JUST CABO DELGADO! INSURGENCY DYNAMICS IN NAMPULA AND NIASA

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### Introduction

Over the past three and a half years, Mozambique has faced armed violence launched by a jihadi group. With its origins in the northern part of Cabo Delgado and known locally as *Al-Shabaab*, it began as a religious sect (Morier-Genoud, 2020). It then established itself as a militarized unit and turned to armed violence on October 5, 2017.

Based on fieldwork in Cabo Delgado, Nampula and Niassa provinces<sup>1</sup>, this paper analyses the insurgency based on its dynamics in some districts in Nampula and Niassa. Focusing on the factors behind the progress of the insurgency on the ground, the paper argues that an understanding of the development of the insurgency in Cabo Delgado involves, *inter alia*, an analysis of the social, economic and religious dynamics in its neighbouring provinces - Nampula and Niassa - that have become fertile recruiting grounds, particularly since 2018. The argument proceeds with two moments. In the first moment, the paper identifies and analyses the main factors in the spread of the insurgency to more districts in Cabo Delgado and the attempt to establish cells with a radical tendency in some districts in Nampula and Niassa. In the second moment, we focus on internal recruitment dynamics, especially in certain districts in the coastal zone of Nampula and on the border between Niassa province and Tanzania.

### Why was the insurgency not confined to Mocimboa da Praia?

When local religious leaders initially complained to government authorities about the existence of a group of young people who were creating disturbances in mosques and preaching a different Islam (Savana, 2020), it is highly likely that few people could imagine that these "young agitators" were beginning a new cycle of complex armed violence in Mozambique, attacking not only state institutions but also local populations, causing a major humanitarian crisis. Perhaps that is why, when the attacks began in 2017, the Mozambican authorities regarded the phenomenon as common banditry, comparable to a simple phenomenon of public order disturbance.

However, over time, the phenomenon became much more complex! Indeed, the religious sect that emerged in the years 2010, focusing on Cabo Delgado districts, with ramifications in Nampula and Niassa, turned into a military movement with jihadist characteristics. What factors could have caused the phenomenon to evolve? Why was it not confined to Mocimboa da Praia or to villages and small settle-

ments? Field research suggests various explanatory factors. Although intrinsically linked, for the purposes of this analysis, we have grouped these factors into two categories: contextual and institutional.

#### • Contextual factors

The literature on extremist, jihadist movements pays particular attention to contextual factors and, to a large extent, associates them with crises in relations between the state and citizens, crystallized in weak policies in various sectors of economic and social life (Hansen, 2018; Oriola & Knight, 2019; Nkomo & Buchanan-Clarke, 2020). In the specific case of northern Mozambique, contextual factors refer to the social, economic and political conditions favourable to the emergence and expansion of the insurgency, namely, the feeling of ethnic, social, economic and political exclusion. Exploited and mobilized by the insurgents, these conditions permitted the construction of an anti-state narrative, which acted as a catalyst for the adherence of young people to the group, through a complex recruitment mechanism that extended beyond the borders of Mocimboa da Praia and Cabo Delgado. Linked to this, there are other contextual factors associated with regional dynamics in northern Mozambique, that contributed to the advance of the insurgency on the ground, namely:

- The existence of an organized crime network with cross-border ramifications operating an illicit economy, through a variety of trafficking operations: drugs, timber, ivory, rubies, gold, weapons, etc. (Haysom, 2018; Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019);
- Porous borders, particularly with Tanzania, facilitated a strong migratory movement associated with illegal mining and poaching (in Cabo Delgado and Niassa) and fishing (in Cabo Delgado and Nampula);
- The existence of electronic and informal money transfer mechanisms that permit fast and efficient payments, such as M-pesa, E-mola, M-kesh or even the Hawala system. These payment mechanisms made it possible to boost the recruitment process;
- When Islamic State entered the scene, particularly from mid-2019, it brought better trained and more experienced foreign fighters, sophisticated weaponry and comprehensive propaganda mechanisms, thereby increasing the international visibility of the insurgency in northern Mozambique.

The advance of the insurgency beyond Mocimboa da Praia was also associated with a second category, institutional

factors, crystallized in the fragility of the state: a combination of exposure to risk and insufficient state capacity to deal with it (OECD, 2019). We address this set of factors below.

#### • Institutional factors

Starting with the analysis of institutional theory (March & Olsen, 1989; Peters, 1996) we look at institutional factors as being associated with the way institutions work and that, in the case of the armed violence in northern Mozambique, shape the outcome of the state's efforts to contain the insurgency. In this respect, we highlight the following factors:

- The state's inappropriate response, at least at the beginning of the insurgency, with mass arrests, the closure of mosques and human rights violations (DW, 2017, 2019). In this context, the state's action helped to reinforce the schism in its relations with local populations and to feed the anti-state narrative built and disseminated by Al-Shabab not just in Mocimboa da Praia, but also in other districts in Cabo Delgado, Nampula and Niassa;
- Internal divisions at the highest level of the ruling party (Frelimo) prevented, at least in the beginning, the creation of a clear and shared common view on the armed conflict and strategies for action on the ground (MozNews, 2020). For example, issues such as, on the one hand, the use of mercenaries and, on the other hand, the feasibility of external support in the framework of military cooperation with countries in the region and others, are not at all consensual within the party;
- Little insertion of elements of the Defence and Security Forces (*Forças de Defesa e Segurança* - FDS) in the field. According to our interviews, some FDS barely know the usages and customs of the places where they operate. As a result, the local people consider them to be foreigners, which sometimes ends up creating a sense of resistance to cooperation on the part of local populations;
- Difficulty on the part of FDS elements in the field in understanding clearly, at least in the first years, the operations command centre (Ministry of the Home Affairs? Ministry of Defence?). According to our interviews, following the intensification of the fighting, especially since the entry of the Islamic State in mid-2019, among some FDS elements there was a certain lack of motivation and the feeling of being involved in a war with unknown objectives... a feeling well

<sup>1</sup> Field work took place between July and December 2020.

captured by the exclamation by one of the soldiers interviewed on the ground: "this is not our war..."

Although Cabo Delgado is the epicentre of the insurgency, interviews in the field show that its dynamics also extend to Nampula and Niassa. In what way? Through attempts to install religious cells with a radical tendency and the recruitment of young people to fight in areas directly affected by armed violence in Cabo Delgado. We discuss this next.

### Cells with a radical tendency and recruitment in Nampula and Niassa: A little discussed subject

Before the first attack on Mocimboa da Praia in October 2017, there was already evidence that there were radical religious cells in some districts in Nampula and Niassa. With the outbreak of armed violence, these cells became important for recruitment to the ranks of the insurgents in Cabo Delgado. It is interesting to note how the establishment of these cells is very similar to the stages in the Cabo Delgado districts: first, religious cells are established and then later, military cells. Our interviews show that the religious cells were established by Tanzanians or Mozambicans who attended salafist mosques in Tanzania.

When these people arrived in Nampula and Niassa, they first sought to penetrate the local mosques. Examples of this are the Mutope zone, outside Nampula town, in 2017, or even Memba (Nampula province), in 2016; Mecula in 2017 and Lichinga in 2014/15 (Niassa province). In all these cases, just as in Cabo Delgado, they encountered resistance from local Muslim religious leaders, both the Islamic Council of Mozambique (cases of Lichinga and Mutope), and the Islamic Congress (case of Mecula). As a result, they decided to build their own places of worship (mosques). Resistance on the part of religious leaders was accompanied by denunciations to local authorities, as happened in the Cabo Delgado districts in the early stages of the phenomenon. However, it is important to note that, unlike Cabo Delgado, the Nampula and Niassa cells were unable to militarize and unleash large-scale armed actions against state institutions and civilian populations. This difference may be related to at least two factors: a) better coordinated action in Nampula and Niassa between government authorities and local Muslim religious leaders in denouncing elements of the group and, in some cases, neutralizing them; b) the group had difficulty establishing logistics capable of launching and fuelling armed attacks in Nampula and Niassa. Nevertheless, in areas where the group was able to establish religious cells with a radical tendency, they began to function as important centres for recruiting young people into the ranks of *Al-Shabaab* in districts in Cabo Delgado. How did this recruitment take place?

### Dynamics of recruitment in Nampula and Niassa

Evidence on the ground suggests that members of the *Al-Shabaab* group do not come solely from Cabo Delgado. Indeed, the dynamics associated with the evolution of violence has enabled *Al-Shabaab* to install a vast and complex recruitment network that has made it possible to incorporate combatants not only from abroad, but

also from different places in the interior of Mozambique, Nampula and Niassa in particular. To a large extent this fact undermines an eventual thesis of an "ethnic war."

The growing literature on extremist movements of a jihadist nature (Neumann, 2013; Zenn, 2014; Schuurman, 2019) agrees in considering that the recruitment process is not uniform, as there are differences in the way different jihadist groups recruit. For example, in their comparative work on *Boko Haram* and *Al-Shabaab* from Somalia, Omenma, Hendricks & Ajaebili (2020) stress that the two groups favour different recruitment strategies, reflecting the political configuration of the countries where they operate.

In the case of Nampula and Niassa, our interviews suggest that *Al-Shabaab* exploits local social, economic, political and religious dynamics for recruitment purposes, focusing on various aspects: local religious divisions within Islam; ethnic divisions; instrumentalization of the anti-state/Frelimo narrative; microcredit schemes to boost small businesses for future recruits; promises of employment in the Cabo Delgado fishing sector (for young people from coastal districts in Nampula) and in mining and other activities (for young people from Niassa districts).

In many cases, the incentives for recruits are based essentially on two aspects: high wages, which are believed to exist in Cabo Delgado, and the possibility of better living conditions (e.g. the construction of improved houses for the recruits' relatives in the urban centres of Nampula and Niassa, with money from the alleged jobs in Cabo Delgado). As regards the target group, the recruitment process focuses mainly on young people, especially those living in very vulnerable conditions, with no jobs or prospects, particularly in the coastal districts of Nampula (Angoche, Mossuril, Nacala-a-Porto, Nacala-a-Velha and Memba) and the Niassa districts neighbouring Tanzania (Lago, Sanga and Mecula) and Cabo Delgado (Marrupa). In these circumstances, the *Al-Shabaab* structure their recruiting discourse by manipulating not only religious factors but also opposition to the state. Our interviews show that the *Al-Shabaab* recruitment strategies in Nampula and Niassa are essentially based on the dynamics of the local context, making recruitment a contextually determined phenomenon. Therefore, knowing the dynamics of the local context is a fundamental condition for combating the insurgency. In this sense, counterinsurgency actions in the context of the so-called "counter violent extremism" programmes cannot be designed and implemented in northern Mozambique, based on models coming from other contexts. This runs the risk of reproducing and reinforcing the local tensions that are exploited and mobilized by insurgents for recruitment purposes.

### Conclusion

Although Cabo Delgado remains the epicentre of armed violence in northern Mozambique, evidence on the ground shows that the insurgency has complex geographical ramifications through the installation of radical religious cells and recruitment mechanisms outside Cabo Delgado, particularly in Nampula and Niassa. In

this context, armed violence in northern Mozambique requires an approach that stops regarding Cabo Delgado as an "island" but studies the dynamics that exist in the other two provinces, as mentioned throughout this paper, because, after all, it is not just Cabo Delgado!

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