Senegalese academic says prevention is vital as West African countries battle the rise of radical Islam

Our series examining the Origins of Africa's War of Terror continues with Senegalese academic Dr Bakary Sambe who says that a deep reform of education systems in the Sahelian countries is key to preventing the rapid rise of Islamic militancy in the region.

Islam in West Africa has historically had a unifying effect within the sub-region inspired by the Sufi brotherhood which represents a peaceful way of practising Islam. Yet, as radical Islam grows, the African continent and the Sahel region in particular are now being labelled as the new Afghanistan in the political discourse.

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While the majority of analysts point to poverty, youth employment and local political crises as major factors in violent extremism, there are other reasons that explain the rapid growth of this phenomenon at national and regional level. These include under-resourced state institutions mostly in the educational and social sectors, the absence of rule of law and impunity which contribute to the erosion of citizen confidence in the state and democratic institutions.

In the meantime, the current dual nature of the education system in the majority of Sahelian countries (Western and Arabic) could in the next few decades, if not already, cause a deep social divide, one that could be exploited by Islamic movements.

In Senegal, Mali, Niger and Chad, there is an urgent need to reassert the state's control over sensitive issues such as knowledge transmission and socialisation. The Boko Haram phenomenon should make West African states more alert to the dangerous juxtaposition of differing education systems when what is really at stake is building an inclusive society.

Even the United Nations has called for a "comprehensive approach" to extremism given the failure of military solutions in recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In light of these considerations, it would be relevant to have an overview of the political and religious dimension of the extremism which will give a better understanding of the problem. Over the last few months, the focus has been on religious extremism while ethno-national and political aspects have been ignored. In analysing the recent Mali crisis, one has to take into account not just the religious perspective, but also the ethnic issue which is the Tuareg struggle for self-determination. The overlapping nature of the religious and ethno-national dimensions of this

conflict make it susceptible to abuse by groups such as Al Qaeda in the Magreb (AQIM) and Movement for the Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Al-Qaeda is now more interested in parasitising local conflicts than promoting global causes. Religious extremism feeds more easily into terrorism and organised crime and poses a threat to public peace and to sovereign integrity of countries. The case of Mali remains relevant. However, violent ethno-political and religious extremism are not new phenomena in the region given recent crises in Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria (the Biafran War and more recently with Boko Haram) and Mali.

The French intervention in Mali triggered a virulent debate between scholars and activists. While jihadism was for the most part universally rejected, opinions about France's political motives were divided. Of course, terrorism cannot be solved by military means alone. However Mali was not the only country under threat from armed jihadists, in fact, the security of West Africa was at risk. This is why I was among the group of African intellectuals who supported the intervention.

There is still a great deal of debate about France's role during the Mali crisis. I certainly do not support any neo-colonial interests that France might possibly associate with its course of action. Politically speaking, my generation grew up with a critical view of European colonialism and imperialism. Now there exists Arab imperialism and my position is that we have to fight that too. For some time now, the proponents of international Wahhabism have been working on a plan to establish a Wahhabi zone of influence that extends right across the entire Sahel region from Eritrea, Somalia, Chad, Northern Nigeria, Niger and Mali through to Senegal. This represents a huge threat to our brand of Islam which has always lived in harmony with the local culture of a country.

Organisations financed by Arab nations such as Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia are attempting what could be described as the "Islamisation" of the Sahel region. Their goal is to bring their idea of "true Islam" to sub-Saharan Africa. This ideology is motivated by a kind of Arab paternalism that most West Africans vehemently oppose. The attempt to "Arabise" these Muslim communities is based on a total denial of the local cultures of African Muslims. The destruction of the mausoleums in Timbuktu was an extreme example of this. Poverty is certainly a factor. The African state is weak and does not operate any kind of social policy. But above all, the state has withdrawn too much from the education system, leaving the field to non-state organisations which are financed out of Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

This is especially true of Mali, where the state education system is impoverished and religious players have been given too much room to manoeuvre. This gives rise to a parallel education system with an ideology that comes from abroad and over which the state has absolutely no control. To a German journalist interviewing me after a rancorous debate with the Swiss academic, Tariq Ramadan, I said, "In the Arab world, Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa are viewed as second-class Muslims, as sub-Muslims. In the fifteenth century, Timbuktu was an important city of scholars, and now, in the twenty-first century, Arab organisations exploit our young people and tell them that it is their job to Islamise their societies! My response is this: Africa must stop importing ideologies from abroad and regarding itself as an inferior Zone B".

The nature of the threat posed by transnational groups, together with the new concept of territorial spaces, demands multidisciplinary expertise that is not only related to security. This expertise will have to take into account not only the geopolitical aspects but also the ideological and sociological dimensions of a multifaceted phenomenon that often accompanies indicators such as rampant poverty, youth unemployment and blatant inequalities. The multidimensional character of the threat, and, therefore, of the response, apparently has not yet been fully appreciated, especially by the relevant Senegalese security services.

The problem is so complex and multifaceted that experts and African scholars recommend establishing a multidisciplinary platform for the strategic monitoring of religious radicalism, providing regular updates on developments and preparing a forward-looking plan in close collaboration with the relevant authorities and development partners.

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