

Mozambique's insurgency: a new Boko Haram or youth demanding an end to marginalisation?

Joseph Hanlon argues that Mozambique's new "Islamic" insurgency is about marginalised youth demanding to be heard, and therefore is similar to anti-establishment protest across the world.

Small groups have been raiding towns and villages in northeast coastal Mozambique in rapid hit-and-run attacks. Since October, [more than 50 people have been killed](#) – some decapitated with machetes. The army and riot police had moved in and hundreds have been arrested, but the attacks increase.

They say they defend an Islamist revival and the message is simplistic – people should not deal with the state, children should not attend state schools, and women must be more modest. One analyst called it "[Mozambique's own version of Boko Haram.](#)" But is it?

The Bishop of Pemba, Luiz Fernando Lisboa, [in a pastoral letter](#) on 10 June, pointed out that "the one thing we understand and which is very clear is the expression of their fury, their discontent, and their way of screaming to call attention." And he concurs with [research that shows these are local young men](#). As the Bishop says, they are children of local families and villages.

The attacks are disrupting the development of one of the biggest gas fields in Africa, and two weeks ago, the US company Anadarko flew out some on-shore workers. And the gas has been one trigger of the insurgency.

The militants appear to have started as groups of local young men with limited education (but more than their parents) who did not want to remain as peasant farmers and became street traders in Palma and Mocimboa da Praia on the coast of northern Cabo Delgado province. Already poor and marginalised, they saw the gas workers coming in from outside – what the Bishop described as "a real invasion of people from different provinces, companies and projects." There was little training and the jobs mostly went to outsiders, and there was little local purchasing, even of food which could be grown locally. On 23 and 24 May there was a [demonstration of hundreds of young people in Palma](#) demanding jobs, saying when they applied to the gas companies, their applications were just thrown in the rubbish.



Young people in Palma, Mozambique protest against the lack of jobs Image Credit: CivillInfo.org.mz

This came on top of three decades in Mozambique in which inequality has increased and poverty has worsened for most people. Young people see no future. It appears that at first these street traders came together in groups to complain, and then were offered work for big-time ivory, timber and ruby smugglers who have links to the ruling party, Frelimo.

[Traditional Islam in this area is Sufi-inspired](#), but the young men were attracted to radical preachers who said Islam could be used to challenge the state and the mining companies. Money from smuggling was used to send men north to Tanzania and perhaps Somalia for military and religious training. So far, however, there has been no real message, except to demonstrate the ability to attack, including attacking traditional mosques. The message is simply a demand to be heard and taken seriously.

These actions in a tiny corner of Mozambique are part of an international discontent. More than three decades of global neo-liberal economic policies have led to transfers of wealth from the poor to the richest 1 per cent and 0.1 per cent. Private sector led development with no role for the state was imposed on Africa – for example, the US and Europe could subsidise farmers, but not Mozambique. Malyn Newitt, the most eminent historian of Mozambique, in his new book [A short history of Mozambique](#), notes that “corruption, rife among the Frelimo elite for decades, had always in the end been condoned because of the outward compliance of the government with IMF prescriptions.”

So wealth goes to the top, to the Frelimo elite and foreign mining and gas companies. And it was not just in Mozambique but across Africa. Development stalled, and this led to a marginalised generation, as LSE's new Centennial Professor Alcinda Honwana showed in her 2012 book [The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa](#).

The squeeze on youth started in the global south, drawing a reaction to challenge the establishment, which is taking the money, denying jobs, and ruling in their own interests. The Arab Spring and the elections of Narendra Modi in India and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines were votes against the establishment. In the global south we called it the “informal sector” and in the north the same thing is called “the gig economy”, but the effect of falling real wages and transfer to wealth to older richer people has hit the global north. Brexit in the UK, and the elections of Donald Trump in the US and a right-wing government in Italy have all been driven by lack of jobs – and the belief that outsiders are taking the jobs. Last week, Assistant London Police Commissioner [Patrica Gallan pointed to social inequality](#) as a cause of rising crime because inequality leaves people feeling “they do not have a stake in society.”

The rallying point can be religion, as in India or Cabo Delgado, or it might be immigration, but it provides a banner under which to challenge the establishment. Mozambique's insurgency is part of a global pattern, but, as always, with local roots.

Cabo Delgado “has always been one of the poorest provinces in Mozambique,” commented Bishop Lisboa. Recently there was a discovery of many natural resources, including rubies and gas. “Our riches could have generated jobs, stability and hope for our youth, if they had been used for development,” he said. But they were not.

Young people demonstrated peacefully for jobs in Palma but that was only reported on a local website; a handful attacked villages with machetes, and the world heard. What lesson will the unemployed youth in Palma – and the government and the gas companies – take from that?

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