The Prospects of Islamism in Kenya as Epitomized by Shaykh Aboud Rogo’s Sermons

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Introduction

This article seeks to explore the prospects of Islamism within the Kenyan context. Using Shaykh Aboud Rogo’s sermons, the paper will show that there is a strong wave of Islamism gradually sweeping over the country. At this juncture an important question could be asked: what is Islamism? Various definitions of Islamism have been advanced by various scholars, but a few will suffice for illustration. Robert Woltering considers Islamism a “political ideology” integral to Islam, essentially conceived for “political motives.” He argues that it is the desire of all Islamist groups to “Islamize society” by capturing the political instruments “of the country in question” and substitute them with preferably “an Islamic state”, even though the “desired result is rarely satisfactorily defined.” Mehdi Mozaffari presents and defines ‘Islamism’ as “a religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam whose final aim is the conquest of the world by all means.” Mozaffari elaborates by identifying four unified features: a religious ideology, a holistic interpretation of Islam, conquest of the world and the usage of all means, including violence, to attain that conquest. Although there are some Islamist groups that do not employ violence, it is important to understand that the usage of violence is “integral to their strategy for achieving their end.” It is the Islamists’ support of the usage of violence, together with intolerant and exclusivist messages made by certain clerics that leads this writer to refer to them as ‘extreme Islamists,’ if ‘moderate Islamists’ exist at all. The discussion about whether there are ‘moderate Islamists’ or ‘extreme/radical Islamists’ is a problematic one as there is no clear distinction between these two categorizations. However, given the distinction in academic circles, this article conceptualizes ‘extreme Islamism’ in Kenya (which possibly differs from other countries) in the form of violent groups with jihadist tendencies, and individual Muslim clerics who reject the notions of secularism, democracy and the nation-state. As demonstrated in this article, Rogo (as a mouthpiece of Islamism in Kenya) discouraged participating in national elections, called for adoption of sharia, condemned the principle of religious toleration by attacking other faiths and advocated for the elimination of key government officials. Using Mozaffari’s
definition of Islamism, the article shows that there is a prospect of Islamism in the Kenyan context as epitomized by Shaykh Rogo. Sermons, comments and statements attributed to Rogo would be analyzed and related to the global identity espoused by Islamism. Further, the wider role of Islamism and its impact on integration in Kenya is discussed in the light of the events that followed the assassination of Rogo on August 28, 2012.

Aspects of ‘Extreme Islamism’ in Shaykh Rogo’s Mosque Sermons

At the time of his death, Rogo was facing a series of terror related charges.7 As the circumstances of his killing remained unclear, conspiracy theories erupted with mourners accusing the police of executing the cleric.8 Nevertheless, until his brutal death, Rogo lost no opportunity to express abhorrence for his critics or those he considered infidels. His provocative sermons were directed against the government, police and a section of Muslims whom he regarded apostates for allegedly supporting the ‘war on terror.’ Among Rogo’s provocative sermons was the one he delivered in July 2012 at Masjid Saada, declaring support for the terrorist church attack in Garissa. The attack was among a series of violent attacks launched by the Al-Shabaab movement in Kenya in retaliation for the country’s military mission against the group in Somalia in October 2011. The Kenya military incursion into Somalia in pursuit of the Al-Shabaab provided an opportunity for the group to create an excuse for initiating attacks against churches in Kenya.

Without hesitation Rogo depicted the attack on the church as a justified retribution by the supposedly marginalized Kenyan Muslims. While quoting a verse in Surat al-Tauba (“go forth, whether equipped lightly or heavily, and strive, and struggle, with your goods, and your persons, in the cause of Allah. That is best for you, if ye but knew”), Rogo praised the killing of the seventeen Christian worshippers. He added that the homicide was significant to control the alleged forced conversion of Muslims to Christianity, and continued desecration of ‘Muslim land.’ For Rogo, the presence of churches in ‘Muslim territory’ represented a despicable sign of Islam gradually disappearing and it is such developments that makes it an obligation for ‘pious’ Muslims to confront and challenge. Consequently, Rogo instructed his audience not to sympathize with the killed ones, describing the massacre as a glorious event and a demonstration of a continuation of jihad against ‘infidels.’10

Though jihad as a concept has been interpreted differently by various Muslim scholars,11 Rogo insisted that it is obligatory upon Muslims. With emphasis on the earlier verse, Rogo urged his audience to join other Muslims in Somalia and strive to die as martyrs. Rogo’s specific call for support of Al-Shabaab demonstrates the existence of a global Islamism, whose objective is to champion for the restoration of an Islamic dominion; in other words, it is a struggle to liberate Muslim territories from oppression by non-Muslim occupiers.12 Arguably, he was expecting that through successful efforts that placed Somalia under the control of Islamists with support from Kenyan jihadists, a similar project of ‘liberation’ could be replicated in the areas of Kenya where Muslims dominate demographically. While expounding upon this concept of jihad and justifying acts of terrorism against people he considered infidels, Rogo declared that “Islam shall stand by the sword [to be read as: force/power]”, without which the religion would not be able to prevail. To him the phrase “Islam is a religion of peace” has a deeper meaning, for it implies that it is only by the use of ‘the sword’ that Islam would be able to reign and create peace.

Rogo appeared to have lost interest in Kenya’s
political system thereby encouraging Kenyan Muslims to aspire for the creation of a global Muslim state rather than participating in the country’s politics, which constrained their agitation for a global caliphate.13 In his sermons Rogo persistently reminded his audience not to accept living in a country governed by laws other than sharia. In the event of failure to attain this aspiration, he recommended two options for Kenya’s Muslim minority: “to fight and topple the state or like the Prophet Muhammad, they should emigrate elsewhere.”14 Arguably, Rogo believed that the reluctance of Kenyan Muslims to be administered by sharia plunged them into dar al-kufr (an abode of unbelief); a struggle that he considered to be obligatory in Islam. Consequently, his extreme dislike for secular politics saw him calling Muslims to boycott elections and to ensure that key government officials were executed.15

Clearly, Rogo’s ideas do not comply with the current developments witnessed among Islamists in various parts of the Muslim world. Muslims of all political ideologies, Islamists included, “took to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere” not campaigning for ‘an Islamic state,’ or demonstrating ‘against religion,’ but to call fervently “for freedom, justice and dignity.”16 During the respective election campaigns of their countries, the political language of these Islamists groups “is overshadowing their religious rhetoric,” by discarding “religious and dogmatic propaganda.”17 As they strived to participate actively in the politics of their countries, the Islamists “did not promise paradise as a reward for those who would vote for them but rather pledged to improve the economy, fight corruption and attract foreign direct investment (FDI).”18 Whether this pragmatic outlook of the Islamists is merely a strategy to attain power and then later resort to their Islamist agenda, is nevertheless a relevant question.

In between his sermons, Rogo also persuaded Muslims, similarly to what preached by the Nigerian movement known as Boko Haram, not to seek employment in government, and those who refused to heed his ‘guidance’ were branded as apostates. In this respect, he regarded all Muslim government officials as having denounced Islam, urging them to pronounce the kalimat (Muslim profession of faith) again in order to re-convert to Islam.19 This method of declaring the infidelity of opponents was perfected by the Azariqah Kharijite sect, in early Islamic history. Today, some contemporary Islamist groups and preachers such as Rogo similarly hold that those Muslims who do not share their position are infidels. As an instrument of intimidation ‘against other Muslims in matters of jurisprudence,’ apostasy was denounced by some of the earliest and contemporary ulama.20 Progressively, Rogo’s sermons became not only separatist, encouraging conflict with Christians (and Muslims), but they also denounced Western-model education as corrupting the Muslim mind.21 It is common for Islamist groups to advocate for ‘authentic’ behavior in all spheres by contrasting them with elements considered to have had ‘foreign’ origin.22 Rogo wondered that if Muslim children are enrolled for Western styled education, then how they would find sufficient time to “memorize the Quran;” he accordingly considered this form of schooling as forbidden in Islam and seemed to share similar views with Boko Haram in Nigeria. Without any textual evidence Rogo openly held that it is wrong for Muslim parents to register their children for Western modeled education on the basis that the environment under which it is provided is polluting and morally corrupting for
the kind of piety he advocated. To demonstrate his dissatisfaction, Rogo established the Sirajul Munir Madrassa, whose atmosphere he declared to be ideal for imparting the Islamic way of life. But to the Kenyan security agents, Rogo’s madrassa did not inculcate good virtues of peaceful co-existence to the youth: rather, it served as a recruiting and propaganda channel center for violent jihadists.

Rogo’s Radicalism: A Threat to Kenyan Society

The killing of the controversial preacher sparked tension and violence in the town of Mombasa where he commanded respect from his followers. Youthful supporters of the shaykh directed their rage towards any symbol of government and towards anything they regarded as ‘un-Islamic.’ At the beginning the violence appeared spontaneous, but after a while it became evident that some clerics were instigating it. Immediately after the assassination of Rogo, his accomplice and co-accused on terror charges, Shaykh Said Shariff Abubakar allegedly called for burning and destruction of churches and murder of police officers together with “certain Muslim leaders.” The stern statement directed at the police and certain Muslim clerics was based on the conspiracy theories tying competing Muslim clerics and government agents to the tribulations of Rogo since the terror attack of 2001. According to his supporters the state had harassed the shaykh for more than a decade on charges of terrorism without evidence, while his rival clerics allegedly spied on him and reported to the government authorities.

Instigated by sentiments expressed by Abubakar and his clerical cohort, Rogo’s assassination caused irate Muslim youth to go on a rampage, and vowed to avenge the death of their ‘martyr.’ In the resulting chaos, about five security agents were killed, their vehicle destroyed, and several others injured in different grenade explosions blamed on Rogo’s ‘radicalized’ followers. As the violence perpetrated by his supporters ensued, it acquired a sectarian dimension that witnessed the burning and destruction of several Evangelical churches. Although these churches belonged to the Evangelical stream, which had a long-standing critical stance on issues concerning Islam and Muslims (such as the Kadhi courts), the destruction was accidental rather than premeditated. Clearly, the churches’ destruction had a calculated agenda; the first was to provoke Christians against Muslims, and the second was to inspire religious antagonism with the intention of destabilizing the country.

Knowing the negative repercussions that such attacks would have in the name of Islam and on the Muslims, an official of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), Mombasa, unequivocally criticized the violence perpetrated against the churches. The Muslim leaders were aware that the rioting Muslim youths were stoking religious unrest and subsequently insisted on their arrest. Such responses signified that within the Kenyan context, the Islamist agenda lacks support from a large section of the Muslim community. These and other incidents of attacks against churches provoked a domestic backlash against certain members of the Muslim population whom the general non-Muslim public perceived as ‘terrorists’. Clearly, there are Kenyan Muslims who vehemently deplore ‘extreme’ acts of violence. However, this does not imply a complete absence of support for these Islamist clerics and their terrorist activities. The catalysts of Islamist support in Kenya include deteriorating living standards, socioeconomic inequity and increasing Western dominance. In the emerging conditions, “Islamism is only one of many revolutionary currents which tap into the feelings of discontent and deprivation among the young.”

Despite the emerging threat of Islamist groups
in the country, these still lack overwhelming support among Kenyan Muslims. Moreover, the issue of ethnicity among the various groups of the Muslim population, such as the long established division between Arab and African Muslims, creates a stumbling block that the Islamists will find difficult to overcome. However, the Islamists’ drive for renewal and social justice appeals to the youth, especially when Islamism is regarded as “the ideology of the dispossessed.”

Conclusion

This article has shown that the Islamist world view is popular among certain sections of the Kenyan Muslim population, as it is evident from Rogo’s sermons. Although there are no established Islamist political parties such as the An Nahda movement (Tunisia), nor Islamist grass-root organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt), nor Islamist clandestine cartels such as Boko Haram (Nigeria), Islamist actors in Kenya are a diverse group that deserves a detailed study to explore their ideological basis and manner of operating. Rogo, a charismatic Muslim cleric, strived to unite the country’s Islamists into a unified political force, strongly expressing anti-Western, anti-Christian and anti-government political slogans. Some of the views that he expressed demonstrated regional and transnational Islamist influence and features, underpinning global Islamism identity. His legal opinion that Islam outlaws individuals who seek to attain Western styled education, and prohibits Muslims from working for a non-Muslim government, is a view that resonates with Islamist groups such as Boko Haram. Increasing communication with the rest of the Muslim world implies that the waves of ‘reform’ championed by Islamist groups will continue to be evident in Kenya, and will affect its Muslim population. The ‘Arab spring’ political upheavals that brought Islamist leadership to power in North Africa, the struggle of Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists in Mali, will encourage such groups in Kenya to advocate for the application of sharia, and even work towards secession with the sole objective of establishing an Islamic state. Within the Muslim community, the Islamists’ main opponents will continue to be the ‘moderate’ Muslim clerics, particularly the ones who work with the government authorities. In the foreseeable future they will, however, be constantly confronted and challenged by the Kenyan government, which is not ready to accept any form of political opposition represented by religious groups that invariably instigate Christian-Muslim rivalries in and beyond Kenya.

Notes

5. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. “Hate Speech dominated Sheikh Rogo’s Sermons,” The Standard, 28 August 2012, p. 5; see also “Jihad na Izza,” Aboud Rogo’s sermon addressing the issue of jihad.
10. Ibid.
14. Murithi Mutiga, “Rogo is Dead but His Ideas are the Real Threat to Stability in East Africa,” Sunday Nation, 2 September 2012, p. 12.
18. Ibid.
21 See ‘Ulazima wa Kupigana na Mayahudi na Wakristo,’ Aboud Rogo’s video sermon on why it is necessary to wage war against non-Muslims.
23 Kwendo Opanga, “State Must get to the Bottom of Rogo’s killing,” *Sunday Nation*, 2 September 2012, p. 18.
28 Ibid.