

# Youth Radicalization in Kenya or Unemployment Crisis? - Masheti Masinjila; Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development (CCGD)

## Executive Summary

Kenya appears ripe for consequences of a “youth bulge” (restive large unemployed youthful male population) as unemployment rate among 15-34 year olds averages 70 percent. The problem is already manifesting itself through high crime rates, inter communal conflicts over scarce resources, and radicalization among the country’s Muslim youth. The current situation may be in part because implementation of the 2008 National Accord (that ended the 2008 post -election violence) failed to consider challenges posed by “the informal manner” in which youth militia groups operate ending with no specific policy on disarmament and reintegration to preventing recurrence.

The last quarter of 2014 in particular saw increased security operations in the coastal port town of Mombasa targeting youth controlled mosques. The police raids led to confiscation of “extremist” Islamic literature advocating for *Jihad* (holy war), *Al shabab* flags and light weapons such as grenades and small arms similar to those that have been used in terrorist attacks at the coast and elsewhere in Kenya. The raids were preceded by extra judicial killings of Islamic preachers designated by the state as radical and subversive- followed by what was described by Muslim youth as retaliatory attacks on Muslim preachers thought to be sympathetic to the government and Christian clergy and places of worship.

It is believed that economic marginalization, youth unemployment, religious and ethnic marginalization are at the root of the radicalisation of coastal youth. However, this may not fully explain why the situation persists. It is noteworthy that despite a number of steps taken to facilitate youth engagement in income-generating activities by the current government, full implementation remains a challenge because of slow uptake, bureaucracy and corruption.

Furthermore, by appearing to condone and organize politics and economic benefits around ethnicity, the (Kenyan) state inadvertently promotes youth radicalization in a manner that may not be fully addressed by economic policies such as creating job opportunities for the youth at the coast. Kenya needs a comprehensive evidence-based policy framework for youth empowerment that should go beyond peripheral job creation and entrepreneurship promotion to address root causes of youth alienation and disenchantment with the state and society. The youth need to be

made to feel that they are useful and appreciated members of the Kenyan society if they are to be shielded from the temptations of radicalization.

## **1. Background**

Political violence (including armed insurgency) has been a key feature of Kenya's history since the struggle against colonial rule, roughly between 1896 and 1963 when Kenya got its independence. The violence was perpetrated along political and economic fault lines that still persist amid a range of emerging and evolving social, economic and political issues that define contemporary competition for political power and the control of the nation-state. Different manifestations of violent conflict persist because there have not been effective responses to address both political violence and socio-economic disparities: instead, compromises are commonly made to accommodate elite interests as was the case in the 2008 National Accord<sup>1</sup> that ended the post-election violence (PEV).

Kenya is still experiencing challenges associated with the 2007-2008 post-election violence that envisaged two mechanisms of transition from violent conflict: a Unity or Coalition (compromise) government that was to ensure political stability and the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that was presented as the mechanism to promote broader reconciliation and nation-building. Contestation over election results coupled with weak institutions and mass human rights violations principally by government security forces and informal youth formations (IYFs) supporting the pro-government parties and those supporting the opposition. "Youth" came into the limelight as groups whose potential for violence and intimidation of opponents amidst weak institutions would either win political power out rightly or through forcing a negotiated settlement such as was the case in the 2008 agreement. The compromises made in 2008 continue to face serious challenges in terms of providing assurances of sustainable democratic reform and addressing particularly violence perpetrated by informal youth formations.

## **2. Contextual Analysis**

### **2.1 The context of youth unemployment**

Since mid-1990 there is a credible body of research that appears to confirm the close statistical correlation between the likelihood of conflict and in particular civil strife, and the size of what Howe and Jackson described as a society's "youth bulge" (a combination of a sizeable male youth population with a lack of

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<sup>1</sup> Signed on 28th February 2008 and under the auspices of the African Union the parties agreed to enact the National Accord and Reconciliation Act 2008 to end the political crisis. The National Accord laid the foundation for power sharing and for moving the country out of the post-election violence crisis.

regular employment opportunities).<sup>2</sup> Kenya appears ripe for consequences of the youth bulge as unemployment rate among 15-34 year olds averages 70%<sup>3</sup> yet the population is dominated by young people and this trend is set to continue in coming decades. According to an increasing number of analysts the problem is already manifesting itself through high crime rates, inter communal conflicts over scarce resources, and radicalization among the country's Muslim youth population.<sup>4</sup>

The "youth bulge" threat informs some of the four main agenda items of the 2008 national accord namely: to stop violence and restore fundamental rights and liberties; to address the humanitarian crisis that involved resettlement of internally displaced persons (IDPs); to resolve the political crisis; and to examine and address constitutional, legal and institutional reforms, poverty and inequality, youth unemployment and land reforms- were intended to address the crisis, reconcile communities and mitigate against future conflicts. It is however notable that youth were only addressed directly in agenda four and only the dimension of their unemployment seemed worth attending to by the drafters. The fact that the youth had been at the centre of the violence did not warrant them attention in agenda one that had to do with stopping the violence- instead political power sharing among leaders of combatant political parties (agenda 3) became the avenue through which violence could be stopped. A monitoring report<sup>5</sup> on the implementation of the accord notes that the approach to the youth dominated "illegal armed groups" appears to have been unsystematic as it failed to consider challenges posed by "the informal manner" in which these groups operate for their demobilisation and disarmament. The report pinpoints the lack of a specific policy on disarmament and the fact that these groups could re-emerge as an issue of concern.

The national accord mediation process settled on initiatives aimed at creating employment for the youth that included: generation of an average of 740,000 new jobs each year from 2008 to 2012; revitalization and expansion of Youth Polytechnics in all districts to facilitate the training of young people in technical, vocational and entrepreneurial skills to enable them participate fully in productive activities; rehabilitation of youth empowerment centres and establish three new ones; development and enactment of the National Youth Council Bill; establishment of the youth enterprise and employment programmes to promote small and medium-size enterprises as well as self-employment among the youth; increasing the youth enterprise and development fund and putting in place mechanisms for easier access to credit and collateral. Notably, the Government prioritized youth unemployment in its long term plan – Vision 2030. A number of steps have been taken to facilitate the youth to engage in income-generating activities by the current government (elected in 2013) that include: allocation of 30 percent tenders to women and youth; creation of "Uwezo

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<sup>2</sup>Neil Howe, and Richard Jackson, "Battle of the (Youth) Bulge," *The National Interest*, July/August 2008, 33.

<sup>3</sup> Kenya National Bureau of statistics and World Bank estimates- 2013

<sup>4</sup>*Protest: East Africa Tries to Tame an Arm of Angry Young Men PP 32-33* "East African December 20-26 2014

<sup>5</sup> THE KENYA NATIONAL DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION (KNDR) MONITORING PROJECT: Findings February 2009

Fund” that disburses small loans through the youth enterprise fund to young people to start businesses; re-vamping of National Youth Service (NYS) to recruit 21,000 youth per year (up from 2000) and equip them with para-military training- ultimately to train 200,000 to be deployed among other places in counties to help with administration and inculcate patriotism through working on public programmes such as slum improvement, construction of dams and social amenities. Implementation, however, remains a challenge because of slow uptake and bureaucracy.

## **2.2 The context of youth radicalisation and involvement in rising insecurity**

The *International Crisis Group* warned in 2012 that Somalia’s growing Islamist radicalism was spilling over into Kenya and that “the militant *Al-Shabaab* movement has built a cross-border presence and a clandestine support network among Muslim populations in the north east and Nairobi and on the coast, and is trying to radicalise and recruit youth from these communities, often capitalising on long-standing grievances against the central state”.<sup>6</sup> The situation is increasingly becoming a source for concern with the rise of terrorist attacks and violent crime since the 2013 General Election (and the political transition from one government/president to another). Violence ascribed to terrorism is becoming more generalised as non-state actors such as criminal gangs and informal youth formations seem to gain the upper hand in perpetrating violence against a broader cross-section of the population without an effective state response. The line between political and criminal actions is increasingly becoming blurred as violent acts are given political justification. This is laying credence to research findings that that criminal associations and networks spawned before and during the 2008 PEV conflict continue to mutate and evolve in response to new opportunities for political influence and criminal enterprise.<sup>7</sup> It is also apparent that political parties are strengthening ethnic-based mobilisation and encouraging exclusive identities that target “outsiders” as direct threats to party (ethnic) groups’ livelihood or access to state power.

Youth drawn from informal youth formations remain the foot soldiers of both the political party leaders in Kenya and terrorist insurgency groups such as *Al shabaab* of Somalia. Narrow socio-political identities still shape informal youth formations’ sense of place in society and images of masculinity. The situation is made worse by the increasing economic hardship that is partly a result of terrorist attacks (associated with the *Al shabaab*) in traditionally volatile areas such as the Kenyan coast - a situation that carries with it the potential for more violence. There is evidence of increasing radicalisation of youths in particular at the Coast of Kenya and North Eastern Kenya counties that border Somalia and are largely inhabited by members of Somali ethnic group.<sup>8</sup> The last quarter of 2014 saw increased security

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<sup>6</sup>International Crisis Group Report 2012

<sup>7</sup> **Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Armed Youth Formations in Kenyan Transitions:**

Nairobi Peace Initiative- Africa (NPI-Africa) May 2011 – August 2012

<sup>8</sup> Stories on terrorist attacks and state response have dominated media reports in 2013 and in particular the last quarter of 2014

operations in the coastal port town of Mombasa targeting mosques. The police raids led to confiscation of “extremist” Islamic literature advocating for *Jihad* (holy war), *Al shabab* flags and light weapons such as grenades and small arms similar to those that have been used in terrorist attacks at the coast and elsewhere in Kenya. The raids were preceded by taking over of mosques by young men and extra judicial killings of Islamic preachers designated by the state as radical and subversive—followed by what was described by Muslim youth as retaliatory attacks on Muslim preachers thought to be sympathetic to the government and Christian clergy and places of worship. So far there is limited research conducted on radicalisation among youth groups in Kenya in particular and East Africa in general, but most media reports identify Somali youth, mostly those along the coast of Kenya, as being targets and “victims” of extremist Islamic radicalisation.

Radicalisation is at times contested terminology but Onuoha draws from several scholars to define it as a process that involves an individual or group transitioning from passive reception of revolutionary, militant, or extremist views, ideas, and beliefs to active pursuit of these ideals, especially through supporting, promoting, or adopting violence to realize such intentions.<sup>9</sup> The process is associated with changes in self-identification that are informed by unaddressed grievances driven by personal or group concerns regarding local issues as well as international events. Such grievances create the sense of alienation or disenchantment that provides a cognitive opening for radicalisation. This definition fits well with what is so far known about radicalisation at the coastal region of Kenya. The violence and transition project 3 study revealed that the most prominent informal youth formation at the Kenyan coast, the Mombasa Republican Council, draws from the Kenyan history of marginalisation (while glossing over historical inter and intra ethnic issues among the Coastal people) to identify the biggest issue as one of betrayal by Kenya of rightful expectations of the “Coast protectorate.”<sup>10</sup> The overall impression from MRC interviewees is of a conspiracy by government to impoverish the Coast region while government officials pick the spoils and entrench themselves as the kingpins of the (coast) economy, including in illegal drugs trade transacted through the Mombasa port<sup>11</sup>.

Economic marginalization, youth unemployment and widespread poverty as well as religious and ethnic marginalization are some of the factors which may contribute to youth radicalisation though they may not fully explain why such movements persist. Raftopoulos et al state that violence in Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa, whether perpetrated by the military, paramilitary or informal youth formations is closely associated with dynamics of anti-colonial nationalism and state formation making questions of sovereignty, nation building and legitimacy lie at the heart of

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<sup>9</sup>Freedom C. Onuoha, *Special Report on Boko Haram*, United States Institute of Peace [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)  
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<sup>10</sup>Violence and Transition Project Phase 3 (VTP 3): The Transformation of Violence through an African Comparative Lens: Lessons for Violence Prevention Draft Consolidated Report, NPI Africa 2012. PP 9-10

<sup>11</sup>Ibid Page 10

making sense of the forms and character of violence.<sup>12</sup> They cite the role played by the state in determining the weight of ethnic identification as a factor of violence where ethnicity is a key marker of boundaries of political community in this way, giving credence to ethnic identity and mobilization. By appearing to condone and organize politics and economic benefits around ethnicity, the (Kenyan) state inadvertently promotes youth radicalization in a manner that may not be fully addressed by economic provision such as providing employment opportunities to the youth at the coast.

Still on the contested role of the state in violence, RasnaWarahdescribes the Kenyan state as “a fragile entity with unresolved group grievances and which those in power can conjure up at will, and make disappear just as quickly” making Kenya “a shadow, a whiff, an odour in the air but no real form or substance” for those outside elite circles.<sup>13</sup> The state is seen as a possession of the ruling elite while at the same time alienating those who do not belong to the ruling political parties and affiliated ethnicities.

The theme of alienation of a broad section of the Kenyan citizenry by the ruling elites is further elaborated by KarutiKanyinga who posits that the government (after 2013 general elections) has abandoned the “reform agenda” that held the hopes of most Kenyans who feel left out despite raising serious concerns around management of politics and several issues around governance.<sup>14</sup> Kanyinga accuses leaders at National and County governments of bringing leadership into disrepute by undermining the values and spirit of the constitution. Leaders undermine the fight against corruption, sabotage institutional reforms and undermine accountability and the rule of law.<sup>15</sup> He says the space for CSO engagement is becoming increasingly constrained and national development (mega infrastructure projects agenda such as the Lamu port, South Sudan and Ethiopia Transport (Lapsset corridor; the standard gauge railway) is poorly linked to local needs making it difficult for counties to embrace it as a solution to their problems.<sup>16</sup>

### **2.3 Conclusion**

It is clear that chronic poverty among significant sections of the population, serious youth unemployment amid increasing high population growth, rising insecurity, poor

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<sup>12</sup>Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa: Violence and Transition in Post Settler-Colonial States — by Brian Raftopoulos, Solomon Mungure, Nicky Rousseau and Masheti Masinjila [Solidarity Peace Trust blog](http://www.solidaritypeacetrust.org/1294/violence-and-transition-in-post-settler-colonial-states/). Citation: Raftopoulos, B., Mungure, S., Rousseau, N., and Masinjila, M. (2013) *Violence and Transition in Post Settler-Colonial states*. 19 July, <http://www.solidaritypeacetrust.org/1294/violence-and-transition-in-post-settler-colonial-states/>

<sup>13</sup>RasnaWarah *New Anti- terrorism law will reinforce feeling of alienation among Kenyans*; *Daily Nation* 29.12.2014 page 12.

<sup>14</sup>KarutiKanyinga Page 9 *Why Jubilee government must embrace rule of law and employ government* *Daily Nation* 29.12.14

<sup>15</sup>Ibid pg 9

<sup>16</sup>Ibid pg 9

infrastructure and lack of basic services for the poor have intensified the “youth bulge” threat. Despite this threat, the government has lacked an effective engagement strategy with the general public and the youth in particular to facilitate reintegration of informal youth formations and militarized youths, thus compounding the problem by feeding into stereotypes and furthering social marginalisation. Kenya needs a comprehensive policy framework for youth empowerment that should go beyond peripheral job creation and entrepreneurship promotion to address root causes of youth alienation and disenchantment with the state and society. The youth need to be made to feel as useful and appreciated members of the Kenyan state if they are to be shielded from the ramifications of radicalization.

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### **3. Policy recommendations**

#### **3.1 Data**

Noting that data relied on by government for youth programmes is largely narrowly statistical in nature, we recommend that Kenya Bureau of statistics (among others) also conducts comprehensive participatory action research to elaborate youth issues, concerns, perceptions and ideas (that do not come out in the statistical data they currently collect) to form the basis for an inclusive youth strategy development (with their active participation) to inform alleviation and human capital development programmes for youth.

#### **3.2 Radicalization**

Taking cognizance of the understanding that youth radicalization is a complex phenomenon that goes beyond religious fundamentalism to include systemic participation in criminal activities and political violence, we recommend that:

- State counter terrorism measures rise above stereotype-based ethnic and religious profiling and monitor indiscriminately all faith-based teachings and outreaches for intelligence gathering to better understand the problem
- The government coordinates the creation of inter-faith and specific religious advisory councils consisting of representatives and respected leaders but open to those designated as hardliners and responsive to community concerns and with the ability to communicate such concerns to the state and work with it to formulate reform and other measures for community and national welfare. Use the forums to promote the emergence of unifying figures despite the sectarian and regional tensions and to promote peace education.
- Government works with the above-mentioned forum to design and implement short and longer term counter de-radicalisation strategies to reduce the

appeal of radicalism in particular to the youth and to persuade those already in radical organisations to leave.

- Noting that the most socially and economically vulnerable youth are the main targets of terror organizations, government should lead in designing robust programmes for destitute children and fast-track them for implementation.

### ***3.3 Promotion of National values and ethics/Enforce the rule of law***

Noting that a significant number of youth feel alienated from government and show growing animosity towards it, largely because government elites undermine the rule of law, making youth more vulnerable to recruitment, we recommend that:

- Key government institutions discontinue the erosion of fundamental freedoms and rights and that fundamental rights be respected and fostered.
- Government enforce anti-corruption laws and punish leaders who contravene the constitution and other national laws
- Government abandon the “militarization of security” and involve more ordinary citizens in security endeavours rather than looking at them only as suspects or informants.
- Government fully implement recommendations of the (Kenya) Truth, Justice and Reconciliation report