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THE FIRST FACES OF “AL SHABAAB” IN CABO DELGADO: THE CASE OF ANDRÉ IDRISSE IN COGOLO¹

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Introduction

The village of Cogolo, in Pangane locality, in the Mucojo administrative post, in the coastal district of Macomia, was one of the first regions in Cabo Delgado province where individuals known as defenders of a radical vision of Islam – known locally as “Al Shabaab” – set themselves up, long before the first military attack by this group in the province, on 5 October 2017. Hence Cogolo village is one of the places where some of the first traces can be found of the Islamic radicalism enshrined by the “insurgents”, who are attacking Cabo Delgado today. To have an idea of who were the followers of this radical version of Islam, this article presents the profile of a young man from Cogolo, named André Idrissa, who is regarded locally as one of the prototypes of the first faces of the “insurgency”. It sets out from the argument that speaking of André Idrissa could help give an idea not only of the sociological characteristics of the followers of “Al Shabaab”, at least in the early days of the formation of this group, but also of their motivations and ideals. The work results from an exchange of correspondence with people who used to live with André Idrissa in Macomia and from semi-structured interviews held in Cabo Delgado, between June and December 2019². The article is divided into two parts: first, it gives a brief presentation of the profile of André Idrissa and then shows the first moments of his radicalization.

André Idrissa and the beginning of Islamic radicalisation in Macomia

According to local sources, André Idrissa (also known locally as Amir or “leader”) was born in 1986, in Cogolo village, where his parents were also born. The son of a local Sheik, who is now deceased, André Idrissa attended the Mucojo-sede complete primary school, up to 7th grade. In addition to his mother tongue, Emakhuwa, André Idrissa spoke Kimwani, Kiswahili and Portuguese. He married at least three women, with whom he fathered four children. In Cogolo, people knew André

Idrissa as a businessman. He was initially notable for selling basic goods, and later spare parts for motorcycles which he brought from Tanzania. Apart from these activities, André Idrissa also showed, on his television, football games from various European championships, such as the Premier League, La Liga and Series “A”, among others. This made André Idrissa a famous and respected man, and a model to be followed locally, particularly among young people. Not only was he a successful businessman, but André Idrissa also enjoyed enormous social prestige. He was seen as an easy-going person, who dealt with everybody, regardless of their social status.

During the early years of his life, André Idrissa followed the religious position of his father, who was a muslim of the “African traditionalist” sufi currents. However, with the passage of time, André Idrissa came to clash with his father, whom he regarded as an ignorant and outdated Kaffir (unbeliever). He came to follow the principles of Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah (“adepts of the prophetic tradition and of the congregation”). This follows a Wahhabi line, and most of its followers are regarded as “reformers”, who speak Arabic and were educated in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Tanzania. However, under the influence of Tanzanian sheiks, whom he came to know during his visits to Tanzania³, where, as mentioned above, he went to fetch his merchandise, André Idrissa embraced radical islamist principles. So he also rejected Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah, and joined the group of insurgents, known locally as “Al-Shabaab”⁴. It should also be mentioned that, historically, the Tanzanian sheiks are very popular in Cabo Delgado, and are seen as models by the local youths. These sheiks have a passionate and forceful discourse against the State and against the former local religious leaders, whom they regard as unbelievers⁵.

André Idrissa was involved in the attack of 5 October 2017 against Mocimboa da Praia, and then fled into

Nampula province. Here he was detained and, under circumstances yet to be ascertained, was sent to the Mizeze prison, which is the Cabo Delgado provincial penitentiary. André Idrissa left Macomia in the company of some young men from that district who were part of his circle, and joined with others, from other places, to stage the attack of 5 October 2017. But, before they left Mocimboa da Praia, André Idrissa’s group sold their property at low prices because, in accordance with their religious principles, they could not leave them to their relatives, whom they regarded as unbelievers. This is one of the reasons mentioned locally to explain the fact that, when they were captured or killed, members of “Al Shabaab” were found with large sums of money on their persons (at least in the initial phase of this war).

The latest news on André Idrissa, indicates that he was killed somewhere in Niassa province, where he had supposedly been captured by the Mozambican authorities. It is believed that, at the time, André Idrissa was in the company of one of his son, whose whereabouts is so far unknown.

Idrissa’s profile is similar to that of the young men described in the study on islamic radicalisation in northern Moçambique, specifically in Mocimboa da Praia district, which states that the first youths to join the islamist group were mostly informal sellers. These sellers on the informal market form “an important part of the social base of support for the Al-Shabaab group” (Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira, 2019: 23). To some extent, the profile of André Idrissa recalls that of Ansumane Vipodozi, a youth from Mocimboa da Praia, who made his name as a seller of cosmetics which he went to fetch in Tanzania. In that country, he was probably influenced by radical Islam. He not only rejected his parents and other relatives, whom he regarded as “unbelievers”, but also embraced the principles of “Al Shabaab”, and was part of the first attack against Mocimboa da Praia on 5 October 2017. Vipodozi became locally famous because he appeared on one of the first

¹ This is the first of two texts about some figures who were part of “Al Shabaab” before this group launched its military attack against Mocimboa da Praia district on 5 October 2017.

² To preserve the identity of the interviewees, they spoke on condition of anonymity.

³ In Cabo Delgado, some members of Ahl al-Sunna (or Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah) were also members of the Islamic Council of Mozambique (CISLAMO), a Wahhabi organization set up in 1981. Ahl al-Sunna was created in 1998 (and was never legalised by the State) by young men who had studied Islam abroad and who had clashed with the CISLAMO leadership which they accused, among other things, of mismanagement and of being close to the Frelimo Party. In addition to this, the members of Ahl al-Sunna, were frustrated at the lack of economic and job opportunities in the country (Bonate, 2020).

⁴ Initially, and like André Idrissa, some of those who joined “Al-Shabaab” in Cabo Delgado were also members of Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah, but they abandoned this current or group, because they thought it was not following the sayings of the prophet Muhammad, that is that their followers were not pure muslims and did not tell the truth..

⁵ For more details on this matter, see Habibe, Forquilha & Pereira (2019).

videos of “Al Shabaab”, claiming the attack on Mocimboa de Praia⁶.

André Idrissa and the first “Al Shabaab” mosque in Cogolo

It was in Cogolo village that individuals who favoured a radical version of Islam, whose main face was that of André Idrissa, set up the first mosque of the “Al Shabaab” group in Macomia district. Building the mosque had been authorised by the administration of the Mucojo Post, but without the consent of the Cogolo village structures, who did not identify with the ideas defended by Idrissa’s group. Indeed they argued that the group’s religious principles were opposed to the Islamic religion. Indeed the population of Cogolo had been denouncing Idrissa’s group to the local authorities since the earliest days of its formation. However, the local administrative authorities, evoking the principle of freedom of religion, enshrined in the Mozambican constitution, believed they could not interfere in a conflict within a religion, which, in their opinion, did not call the State into question, and the solution to which depended only on the members. For that reason they authorised the construction of the mosque.

At the time, around 2015, the initial group that followed André Idrissa consisted of around 15 young men. The group argued, among other things, that it was allowed to pray while wearing shoes, and to enter mosques carrying bladed weapons, that women should not wear short skirts, that the Koranic schools (madrassas) were more important than formal schools, and that all those who did not follow the version of Islam favoured by the group were unbelievers (or “Kaffirs”). Idrissa’s mosque began to win many supporters and to attract youths from other places in Pangane locality, namely Ingoane, Rueia, Nacala and Medina, which are all neighbourhoods close to Cogolo.

However, due to the tension created by Idrissa’s group within the local community, in October 2016, André Idrissa’s mosque was destroyed by members of the public, on the pretext that its members “do not follow the roots of the old Islamic religion” (Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia, 2016). However, the destruction of the mosque did not mean the end of the tension, because André Idrissa and his group had managed to make an impression on many followers. This situation led the then head of the Pangane locality, Abubacar Artur, to urge the population of Ingoane, Nagulue and Cogolo, in June 2017, not to let themselves be influenced by the ideas of “Al Shabaab”. He cited examples of the negative impact of the group’s ideas on school attendance and on an increase in religious conflicts (Nacedje Community Radio and Television of Macomia, 2017).

It should be recalled that Pangane locality, where Cogolo village is located, had already experienced turbu-

lent moments in 2015, when local Muslim religious leaders banned the sale and consumption of alcoholic drinks, on the pretext that this was against Islam. This matter ended with police intervention and the arrest of the ringleaders of the ban⁷.

The expulsion and rejection of André Idrissa’s group by the population may perhaps be one of the main reasons that explains why this is one of the villages most attacked by “Al Shabaab” in that part of Macomia district. Just between December 2018 and July 2019, according to the press, Cogolo was attacked three times (Carta de Moçambique, 2018a, 2018b, 2019b; CIP, 2019).

The population of Cogolo has memories, not only of attacks by the “insurgents”, but also of abuses by the Defence and Security Forces (FDS), which include, among others, cases of rape of women. One of the significant moments in the atrocities committed by the FDS concerns the public execution of eight youths in late 2019, accused of being part of the group of “insurgents” who attacked Ingoane village, even under protest from the local community authorities and members of the public, who considered them innocent.

Cogolo was also known for hosting one of the largest military bases of the FDS, which included a military health centre, which for some time benefitted not only the local population, but also the population of the surrounding areas, which had nowhere to seek treatment because, due to attacks by “Al Shabaab”, the Quiterajo-sede, Mucojo-sede and Pequeue health centres had been closed. However, in September 2019, at a time when the campaign was under way for the elections of October of that year, the FDS base was attacked by “Al Shabaab”, and this group seized various military equipment, as well as causing the death of several soldiers of the government army. On the same day, Mitacata village in the Quiterajo administrative post, was attacked. The Quiterajo-sede Complete Primary school was vandalised and the local hospital was burnt down (Carta de Moçambique, 2019b; CIP, 2019). These attacks were claimed by the Islamic State (EI) (Diário de Notícias, 2019). “Al Shabaab” also had a base in the Cogolo bush, between the Messalo river and the Chai administrative post. This base was dismantled by the FDS with the support of the local community⁸.

Conclusion

Through the figure of André Idrissa, this text shows, not only the beginnings of the Islamic radicalisation in Cabo Delgado province, but also the profile of the first members of the Islamist group “Al Shabaab”. Basically, it can be said that, at the beginning the people who joined this group were mostly young. They were former followers of Ahl al-Sunna or Ahlu Sunnah wal Jamaah, and informal sellers or traders influenced by radical foreign

sheiks, particularly Tanzanians, who enjoy enormous prestige in that region. Also, throughout the text one notes that the start of Islamic radicalization, not only disturbed formal education, but created serious divisions inside the local Islamic community and inside families. It left the local state authorities in an embarrassing situation. They were afraid to interfere, because they believed it was a simple religious dispute, which should be solved by the members.

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⁶ For more information on Vipodozi, see Carta de Moçambique (2019a).

⁷ For more details, see Chichava (2020).

⁸ Interview with A. O., Pemba, 7 October 2019.