



EXTREMISM IN GHANA

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Extremist tendencies, and their violent outcomes are not comparable to the magnitude of what is occurring in some West African countries such as Ghana, which is one of the most important countries. However, multiple vulnerabilities such as youth bulge, youth unemployment, poverty, limited education and skills, unregulated cyber space, weak and politicized police institution exist in the country, predisposing the youth to radicalization and violent extremism, depriving the country of the bedrock of renaissance, progress and stability, unless otherwise these problems are well addressed.

The Root Causes

Like other countries in West Africa, Ghana has been plagued by extremism and violent extremism, and the root causes of violent extremism are primarily attributed to youth bulge and youth unemployment. As theorized by Moller, a bulge in the population of young adults can potentially destabilize countries. As of July, 2020, Ghana's population is estimated at 31 million, with the youth category of below 25 accounting for about 57%.

The World Bank (2018) Report on jobs in Ghana indicated that about 48% of the youth in the country, who are between 15-24 years do not have jobs. Absence of jobs for this cohort of young people constitutes a potential trigger for violent extremism. The job deficit also suggests that there is little or no income for the youth, with implications on the level of poverty in the country.

Although the levels of poverty across the country has decreased over the last two decades (from 56.5% in 1992 to 24.2% in 2013), it is still disproportionately high among the youth and in the Northern half of the country compared to the Southern half. The 2015 Ghana Poverty Mapping Report provides help for the northern districts through providing support

and analysis of basic needs; For example, the level of poverty in East Gonja was (84.2%), Bole (74.4%), Kpandai (76.9%), Bawku West (68.1%), and Wa West (92.4%), highlighting the relative vulnerabilities of the Northern half to potential acts of conflicts and violent extremism.

Linked to the above is the exploitation of cyber space by the youth. While the cyber space offers varied business opportunities, it has exposed the youth to online radicalization and recruitment into extremist organization outside the country. In 2015, for example, three individuals, namely; Nazir Alema Nortey (graduate from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology), Rafiq and Shakira Mohammed were reported to have joined ISIS. An interview indicated that the departure of these individuals to join ISIS was influenced by Badhan Diallo, a radical Guinean student of the University of Ghana, who had earlier left for ISIS in 2015. The recruited individuals were brainwashed and radicalized through social media platforms. These incidents show the level of vulnerability of the cyber space and the extent to which tertiary institutions are increasingly becoming fertile grounds for proselytization and recruitment of innocent young persons into extremist and terrorist networks outside the country.

Violent Manifestations of Extremism

Ghana is a multi-ethnic society with an estimated population of 31 million—Christian (71.2%), Muslim (17.6%), traditional (5.2%), other (0.8%), and none (5.2%). Generally, there is peaceful co-existence among Muslims, Christians and traditionalists, except occasional reciprocal accusations and attacks relating to forcing non-Muslims to wear hijab in Islamic established schools, forcing Muslims to attend church services in Christian missionary schools, and complaints of noise-making by the two religious groups. Of major concern in recent times is the issue of hijab in second cycle institutions. Complaints of harassment by Muslim girls led to massive protests simultaneously taking place in the three biggest cities in Ghana—Accra, Kumasi and Tamale on 12th October, 2019. Such protestations and mutual accusations have not degenerated into violence.

However, what has been of security concern in the past is the holding of radical views and the violent attacks occurring between two Muslim groups: Sufi Al-Tijaniyya and Sunnah, arising from interpretational and doctrinal differences of Allah's scriptures.

Other non-classical Sunnis such as the Ahmadiyya Movement and the Shitte group also exist in the country, however, with limited history of violent extremism. The violent expressions between the Al-Tijaniyya and Sunnah groups started from the late 1960s to 1990s. While the advocacy for returning to the true Islam was important, it nevertheless challenged the existing status quo of Sufi Al-Tijaniyya group, but also recognizing tradition as part of Islamic practice. The radical preaching methodology by Ahlusunna wal Jamaa'a movement faced resistance and generated series of violent mutual attacks in many cities and towns across the country including Kumasi, Tamale, Techiman, Atebubu, Asokore, Ajura. In Tamale, for instance, a series of confrontations between Ahlusunna wal Jamaa'a movement and the Al-Tijaniyya group were recorded in 1969, 1976, 1977, 1997 and 1998. Although such violent confrontations have reduced dramatically over the last two decades due to institutional structures such as the establishment of Coalition of Muslim Organization (COMOG) and changes in the preaching approach, occasional violent incidents keep recurring in the North, particularly in Tamale.

Politics and Electoral Extremism

Contestations for political power in Ghana is a 'do and die affair', which is a political ambivalence, largely because the youth are unemployed, with limited education; they are recruited and misused as thugs, personal security guards for politicians during registration exercises, electoral campaigns and on voting days. Such youth groups (Aljazeera, NATO Forces, Al-Qaeda, Kandahar Boys and Delta Forces) have come to be characterized as vigilante groups, unleashing fear and terror on political opponents across the country.

In February, 2019, vigilante young men associated with the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) engaged in violent attacks during the Ayawaso West Wuogon bye election. Similarly, vigilante groups associated with the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) had perpetrated violence in Chereponi (2009), Atiwa (2010), Akwatia (2012) and Talensi (2016) (by-elections). In most of these cases, the police have not demonstrated capacity and professionalism to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators, ostensibly because they belong to the two political parties in power. To curb the menace, Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, (Act 999) has been operational since 2019. However, an on-going voter registration exercise

slated between 2 July to 6 August, 2020, has so far, been characterized by extreme violence by both NPP and NDC party foot soldiers, resulting in maiming, destruction of properties, shooting incidents and the killing of an innocent civilian in Banda in the Bono East Region.

Responses

Anti-Terrorism Act of 2008 has been crafted to combat terrorism, suppress and detect acts of terrorism in Ghana. However, it did not envisage how to deal with extremism. Thus, recognizing the danger extremism and its violent expressions poses to the security of the country, the Ministry of National Security has approved a document — National Framework for the Prevention of Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Ghana (NAFPCVET) to reflect the nature and dynamics of the threat in the country. It consists of four pillars— Prevent, Pre-empt, Protect and Respond.

The Prevent Pillar aims at addressing the root causes of radicalization leading to violent extremism by minimizing vulnerabilities and building resilience.

It also stresses on education and awareness creation across the categories of society. The Pre-empt Pillar seeks to establish national early warning systems and terror risk assessment center to detect and prevent extremist threats in the country. NAFPCVET outlines the need for involving local CSOs, the media, religious as well as traditional leaders in this effort.

Institutionally, the police collaborate with other security agencies—the Ghana Armed Forces (GAF); the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS); Customs Division of Ghana Revenue Authority; Bureau of National Investigation (BNI); Criminal Investigation Department (CID), Financial Intelligence Center, and Financial Intelligence Unit (EOCO) to establish preventive and response mechanisms. The collaborations are, however, hampered by lack of legislative harmony, lack of joint training and exercises, personal egos and sense of institutional superiority, pursuit of personal interest as opposed to national interest. In view of these challenges, National Peace Council and Civil Society Organizations such as West Africa Network for Peacebuilding engage in mediation, conflict monitoring and prevention towards addressing potential sources of extremism in the country.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that extremism and its violent manifestations remain a concern in the country given the level of vulnerabilities. Although legislative and institutional mechanism are in place to prevent and counter the threat, efforts need to be placed on the root causes; in other words, addressing youth unemployment, poverty, inequality. This will however be effective when the political establishment dissociates itself from professional police operations in the country.