



EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM BEHIND BARS IN WEST AFRICA SUCCESS OR TICKING TIME BOMB?

Dr. ANTONIN TISSERON

Researcher & Consultant; former UN consultant, France

Since the 9/11 attacks of 2001 in the USA, extremism leading to violence has received great attention by the media, public policies, and researchers, who have commented on the types and patterns of violent action instead of further investigation into the causes leading to terrorist action.

Important questions rose to prominence in the discussions related to developing public policies to address this phenomenon and enhance the resilience of societies, the ideological and practical development of extremism, the causes leading to violence, and the motivation behind adoption. There is a stable unanimity on the dynamic nature of this phenomenon. Whatever the standard by which it is investigated, such as determinants or mechanisms, or the individual and interactions with others, or the political, social, and economic space, the consensus labels the phenomenon as a gradual stage. The individual may gradually adopt beliefs that promote extremism and violence, relying on political, social, or cultural references, without prior involvement in extremist actions.

Prison Environment

Extremism leading to violence is a global social phenomenon not limited to areas without others; it grows exponentially in some environments, regions, or institutions, the most important of which are prisons. Prison is a fragile institution in which several individuals sentenced or awaiting trial cohabit forcibly; they often have troubled relations with society, and experience social frustration, economic exclusion, or cultural categorization. Many cases of extremism arise there, under the direct influence of convicted individuals, or by personal acquisition from one's own experiences, or because of the conditions of detention and imprisonment.

Although research studies on extremism leading to violence have been conducted in Europe, North America and the Middle East, West Africa is not immune from extremism

leading to violence; this is because of the increasing growing attacks by armed extremist groups in recent years and arrests of terrorists and suspects.

The emergence of armed extremist groups in West Africa and the spread of their attacks and operations led to an increase in the arrest and imprisonment of anyone suspected of or proven to be involved in joining extremist groups and involvement in affiliated activities. In 2016, more than a thousand people accused of belonging to Boko Haram, or of supporting the Boko Haram operations, were imprisoned in Niamey Prison.

Many Sahel countries also hold convicted or suspected terrorists. In Côte d'Ivoire, an investigation was conducted into the attack on the Grand Bassam Resort, in March 2016; a trial was held in Senegal in 2018 to prosecute the Senegalese individuals who were arrested on their way back from Nigeria after joining Boko Haram.

The presence of those accused or convicted of involvement in terrorist attacks, advocacy of terrorism, joining armed groups, or attempting to join a terrorist group is only the most visible part of radicalization in prisons. The issue may have three other aspects:

- The case of detainees who were known to be involved in violent extremism before entering prison, but who were imprisoned for other non-terrorist related acts.
- The case of detainees arrested for crimes that are not serious, and detainees who do not belong to extremist sects, but agree to belong to a guide or one's group to gain protection, and to get rid of the pressure of leaders or other individuals who seek to take advantage of their weakness.
- The case of frustrated prisoners easily discouraged from accepting violent speeches.

Formidable Challenges

Prison administrations face formidable challenges, including but not limited to the following:

1. The necessity of enhancing security in prisons, as many detainees arrested on charges of terrorism have escaped in recent years. In Mauritania, for instance, Sheikh Ould Salek, who was sentenced to death in 2011 on charges of committing a terrorist act, escaped in December 2015 from Dar Al-Naim Prison in Nouakchott, before being arrested a few weeks later in Guinea-Bissau.

Prison escapes are not new. The detention of fighters and sympathizers with armed groups in prisons in the Sahel and Lake Chad has made them docile targets in various incidents, including the incidents in Kotokali prison in Niger in October 2016 and in Nyono prison in Mali. In Nigeria, Boko Haram has attacked several prisons since violence spread in the country in 2009 to free its members, and to recruit other prisoners who cannot return home after escaping.

2. The activity of prisoners who adopt extremism, who see prison as a stage on the road, look forward to their release to complete their combat journey, and strive to deliver extremist speeches to prisoners of public rights to influence and attract them. What is the method to identify those who embrace extremism and those who have been imprisoned for non-terrorist acts? How can the risk that may arise from their detention in prison be estimated? What is their real impact on other prisoners? How is this effect measured?

3. The release of prisoners; programs have been launched to push prisoners accused of extremism, belonging to

terrorist groups, or those convicted of terrorism to sever their association with organizations that call for violence. Some of these programs in Mauritania, Nigeria, and Senegal, aided by teams in different specializations, have yielded good results, but they remain experiences with limited impact, confined to their regions, and the results are not definite.

4. The density of prisoners; it increases the risk of overcrowding in prisons, and the density of the prison population has reached 200% due to the scarcity of resources allocated to prisons, the slow pace of legal procedures, and the lack of alternatives to prison. For instance, by the end of 2019, Senegal had 11,547 prisoners in 37 prisons, with a total capacity of 4,224 prisoners in detention. Conakry maximum security prison accommodated more than 1,500 prisoners in 30 units and the number of non-convicted prisoners is often more than half of the total number of prisoners, with arrests exceeding preventive measures. In Burkina Faso, the number of detainees in prisons in 2020 was estimated to be about 900 people; none of them was tried or issued any rulings against them.

5. The decrease in the number of guards, the loss of real human resource policies for the staff of prison administrations and warders, and the inability to provide specialized and trained bodies to monitor prisons in many countries. When the prison intelligence

system is put into official capacity, it does not eliminate the challenges associated with extremism that require the adoption of appropriate standards for assessment and classification, alongside the training of all staff according to those standards.

For these and other challenges, West African prisons are very fragile. In a report published in 2020, a Nigerian non-governmental organization indicated that prison does not serve its intended purpose; it is about to turn into an incubator for extremism.

Conclusion

The fragility of prison systems is not limited to West Africa. Overcrowding, radicalization by prisoners of terrorism, and the inability of prison administrations to ensure the care of extremist prisoners are prevalent in other parts of the world. It is important to beware of hasty generalizations about linking the conditions of detention to the prisoners' adoption of extremism and violence.

The situation in African prisons requires two procedures. First, adapting prison spaces and administrations to tackle and grapple with extremist prisoners; second, reducing the period of pre-trial detention to legal date, providing more alternative sentences, and releasing detainees without maturity, which are among the core activity tasks in combating extremism leading to violence in prisons. Prison is a link in the punitive chain; the correctional approach should not be limited to rehabilitating prisoners only, building new prisons, or improving the care of notorious prisoners. More importantly, there must be a firm belief that it is impossible to separate combating extremism in prison from strengthening the rule of law.