

Governance and Vulnerability in Northern Mozambique

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Introduction

The manhunt for suspected Al Qaeda operatives in Somalia, punctuated by the Jan. 8, 2007, US air strikes in Mogadishu and the southern border town of Afmadow, underscores the risk of trans-national terrorism Western policymakers associate with so-called ‘ungoverned spaces’ in Africa. In its 2006 National Strategy for Countering Terrorism, the Bush administration vowed to ‘prevent terrorists from exploiting ungoverned or under-governed areas as safe havens – secure spaces that allow our enemies to plan, organize, train, and prepare for operations.’² The preponderance of weak governance in Africa makes this policy statement particularly relevant to the continent. As David Shinn notes, ‘Africa is replete with porous and poorly defined borders, ungoverned territories, refugee movements, internally displaced persons, and cross-border conflict.’³

The term ‘ungoverned spaces’ is problematic. Technically, other than Somalia, which has lacked a viable central government (outside the breakaway northern territory of Somaliland) for 16 years, Africa is carved up among more or less functional, internationally recognised sovereign states. Most African political and military leaders therefore regard as oxymoronic the notion there exist within their borders zones falling outside the jurisdiction or control of the state. Theresa Whelan attempts to resolve this problem by drawing a distinction between ‘physical’ and ‘non-physical’ ungoverned spaces. She defines the former as ‘ungoverned territories, or ‘rugged, remote, maritime, or littoral areas not effectively governed by a sovereign state.’⁴ The latter include areas within national boundaries characterised by ‘a sovereign state’s inability or unwillingness to exercise authority,’ or where ‘legal norms and processes can be exploited by actors who threaten domestic or international order.’ Non-physical ungoverned spaces also include cyber or financial systems not under the state’s regulation or control. The

¹ Kurt Shillinger is a research fellow specialising in African security and terrorism at the South African Institute of International Affairs. The author thanks Amancio Miguel Vilanculos for research assistance and translation.

² National Strategy for Countering Terrorism, September 2006, p. 16.

³ David Shinn, ‘Domestic or International Terrorism? A Dysfunctional Dialogue,’ a paper delivered at the symposium ‘Africa: Vital to US Security?’ at the National Defense University, Nov. 15-16, 2005, Washington

⁴ Theresa Whelan, ‘Africa’s Ungoverned Space – A New Threat Paradigm,’ notes from the conference ‘Rethinking the Future Nature of Competitions and Conflict,’ 19 December 2005, p. 2.

consequence of such environments, Whelan concludes, is that ‘terrorists can operate freely there.’⁵

But do they? Concerns about potential terror-related activity in Africa break down into three main regional categories. The first is Somalia and its consequences in its immediate region, the Horn. The prolonged absence of state control has created an open logistical base from which terrorist attacks can be launched against targets in neighbouring states – as was the case in 2002 attacks against Israeli interests in Mombassa. The second is West Africa, where non-state Islamist groups from North African states merge with Muslim communities from sub-Saharan states in Sahelian band (Chad, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania) – a vast and remote desert terrain criss-crossed by long-established smuggling routes and under little direct state control. Nigeria, with its large oil reserves and 12 states under Shariah law, juts upward into the centre of this vortex. Finally, there is southern Africa, where South Africa’s well-established physical, financial and tele-communications infrastructure anchors a region marked by porous borders, poorly patrolled waters, historical cultural and trade linkages with the Middle East and South Asia, and post-liberation governments that remain at least sympathetic to anti-Western movements. Across these three distinct African regions, four factors are relevant to a consideration of the risk relationship between poorly governed spaces and trans-national terrorism in Africa: state capacity, the existence of large and well-established local Muslim populations, vast national area, and proximity to both influential Islamic states and the West.

This paper considers these factors in the context of northern Mozambique, where three predominately Muslim provinces combine to create a large geographical area far removed from the national capital, with long borders, large unpatrolled coastal waters and centuries-old cultural connections with various points to the north and east in the Muslim world. This vast area has been and remains an important historical and modern cross-roads for traffic coming from within Africa and across the Indian Ocean. It includes characteristics meeting Whelan’s definitions for both physical and non-physical ungoverned spaces. What are the levels of governance? What is the ratio and balance between government and international transactions?⁶ Do social and religious structures attempt to compensate for the state’s shortcomings, and how so? Do the region’s cultural and trade linkages facilitate negative pressures on the rule of law? Finally, does the region constitute a risk, and what forms of engagement might render this space a greater or lesser vulnerability in the context of trans-national terrorism?

Cloth, Gold and the Koran

When Vasco de Gama plied his caravel into the alluring waters of Mozambique Island in 1498, Islam had already arrived, carried in probably several centuries earlier through Arab trade routes dating back nearly a millennium. The early Portuguese encountered pockets of Arabic-speaking Africans up and down the coast of what is now Mozambique and stretching inland along the gold route toward the Zimbabwean plateau. Early Portuguese documentation estimates that there were already 10,000 people living in Sofala, well to the south, by the early 16th century. The port was under the rule of a Muslim sheikh with Somali patrilineage who lorded over and was himself the principle trader in vibrant

⁵ *Op cit.*

⁶ The author thanks Dr. Jeffrey Herbst, Miami University Provost, for suggesting this line of inquiry.

internal and trans-oceanic commerce.⁷ The Muslim influence therefore stretched both inland and seaward. As Malyn Newitt explains,

“To be a member of a sharifian lineage was an essential part of the prestige on which success in Indian Ocean trade depended. Kinship ties with African chiefly lineages were of equal importance for the conduct of trade in the interior and for the day-to-day affairs of the town. Through polygynous marriages the sheikh himself, and the other traders in Sofala, were linked with the chiefly families of the immediate hinterland. Some, though by no means all, of these chiefs themselves adopted Islam – located up the rivers that flowed into the bay of Sofala were two or three *reis mouros* (moorish kings), as the Portuguese described them, as well as others who were merely *reis cafres* (kaffir kings).”⁸

Portuguese letters and journals map the existence of towns and villages stretching southward along the coast as far as bay where the Sabi River meets the sea. Commodities along the trade routes included gold, ivory, cotton, slaves, tortoise shells and foodstuffs.

Although the coastal communities remained distinctly Muslims, Islam did not fare well against the advance of Roman Catholicism. To the north, the Portuguese tore down mosques and imposed various restrictions on Muslim commerce and religious observance, including, a prohibition on Muslim slave ownership ‘because Muslim owners indoctrinated the slaves with “their damned Mohammedan faith.”’⁹ There is some evidence there as well of commercial and matrilineal collaboration during this period between coastal Muslims and inland Africa tribes like the Makua, but it wasn’t until the 19th century, with the advent of Busaidi sultanate in Zanzibar, that Islam experienced a resurgence. By the end of that century, Islam had spread convincingly inland across northern Mozambique, Malawi and parts of Zimbabwe, sparking a fierce competition with the Portuguese and British for not only territorial control but influence over the African tribes as well. The Omanis built schools to teach Arabic and medicine. Indian Muslim traders began arriving along the coast.

An important consequence of the confrontation between Portuguese colonialists and Muslims in northern Mozambique from the late 19th century into the latter half of the 20th century was a strengthening of ties between local Muslims and their co-religionists farther afield in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. Unlike the British in Malawi, Edward Alpers indicates, the Portuguese took a hostile stance toward Islam, attempting to eradicate Islamic education through the coastal communities of Cabo Delgado, the northernmost seaward province of Mozambique, starting in the late 1930s, but failing to provide an alternative system of Western education. This ultimately hastened Muslim linkages abroad. As Alpers notes, a confidential colonial investigation in 1960 found that Muslims were travelling to Tanzania, Egypt, Iraq, Oman and India for Islamic education, literature and music. This trend coincided with rising African nationalism. Secretive Islamic associations were formed. The colonial report ‘warned of a looming “phase of open war” with Islam growing out of the enduring Portuguese “spirit of anti-Islamic

⁷ ‘Letter from Diogo de Alvaçova to the king’ (Cochin 20 Nov. 1506), *Documents on the Portuguese in Mozambique and Central Africa*, Vol. 1, pp. 388-401, cited in Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique*, London: Hurst & Co., 1995, p. 4

⁸ Malyn Newitt, *A History of Mozambique*, London: Hurst & Co., 1995, p. 4.

⁹ Edward Alpers, ‘East Central Africa,’ in *The History of Islam in Africa*, Nehemia Levtzion and Randall Pouwels, eds, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000. P. 305

crusade.”¹⁰The liberation struggles in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Mozambique forced a turn in colonial strategy. Faced with a violence African resistance, the Portuguese made an about-face turn, seeing Muslims as potential allies. They translated key Islamic texts into Portuguese and made the available among Muslims.

Independence in 1975 brought further twists and turns in the Muslim experience in Mozambique. Islam, like other religions, found little favour among the new Marxist-Leninist Frelimo government, and some Muslims groups were banned. Over the next decade, Alpers notes, Muslim activism tilted toward Renamo, the northern-based guerrilla movement fighting a civil war against the government, and this drew in Saudi and Omani support for the rebellion. But by the early 1980s, President Samora Michel, needing to weaken his enemy, turned again, embracing the Islamic community and recognising the newly formed Council of Muslims of Mozambique. Today, many key Muslim business and community leaders are closely associated with the ruling Frelimo, which, as will be seen, has important governance implications in the predominately Muslim north. Importantly, commerce still faces eastward, reflecting the trade and familial linkages developed over centuries.

Cabo Delgado: State Delivery and Social Welfare

The three northernmost provinces of Mozambique, Cabo Delgado, Niassa, and Nampula, are predominately Muslim, with strong and historically established linkages to Muslim communities and/or states to the west, north, and east. Land corridors from Malawi and Tanzania carry flows of people from Sudan, Somalia, Senegal, Mali, Nigeria and Kenya, while sea corridors across the Indian Ocean nurture family connections and commerce with Dubai, Karachi and Bombay. Demographic estimates vary widely, ranging from 50 % to 78 % Muslim – depending on the source – and likely even higher in the coastal communities. This paper focuses on Cabo Delgado. It assesses, to the extent possible, the balance between governance and social welfare and government and international transactions in an attempt to understand how and whether these factors create vulnerabilities in the context of international terrorism.

Before looking in detail at the province, however, some national context is required. Mozambique emerged from 16 years of civil war in 1991 a shattered and deeply impoverished nation. In the nearly as many years since the end of the war, the country has made admirable strides in reconciliation. Once bitter enemies, Frelimo and Renamo have contested three peaceful national elections, and while Frelimo has maintained its control of the government since 1975, the two parties have successfully transferred their contests from the battlefield to parliament. The country has sustained 8% growth since the mid-1990s, but this is achievable only through huge inflows – 60 % of gross national income, according to the UNDP – of foreign aid for social and economic infrastructure. The government allocates 4% of GDP to health care, well above countries with similar economic profiles like Mali and Burkino Faso. Agriculture contributes more each year to national economic growth through foreign investment in sugar and tobacco.

Even so, Mozambique remains one of the least developed countries in the world, as well as one of the most trade disadvantaged. During the war, nearly half of all primary schools were closed or destroyed. A similar percentage of health clinics were looted, destroyed or surrounded with landmines. Today, the country ranks 96 on the UNDP's Human

¹⁰ *Op cit*, p. 315

Poverty Index. GNP per capital in 2004 was \$270. Some 79.4% of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. Barely half the population has access to clean water. Adult literacy remains under 50%, and a child entering primary school can, on average, anticipate only four years of formal education. Life expectancy is 42 years. On the gender-related development index, the country ranks 133 of 140.

Critically, several factors are preventing economic self-sufficiency and a decrease in aid dependency. Despite important reforms in the customs sector, the country's overall ability to mobilise taxes remains weak: revenues account for 17.3 % of the budget, according to the World Bank World Development Indicators. Business growth, according to the OECD, is hampered by the high cost and lack of access to finance; poor infrastructure; and endemic corruption and cumbersome regulatory barriers. Dumping of highly subsidised foreign sugar has severely undermined local primary and potential secondary production.

Cabo Delgado, the most geographically removed from the capital Maputo, is a poor province in a poor country. Life expectancy is four years lower than the national average. Age-height stunting is 56%, 15 points higher than the national average. Overall illiteracy is 77%, while female illiteracy is 92 %, according to statistics compiled by the Aga Khan Foundation.¹¹ The province is rich in cashews, timber, gemstone deposits and other mineral reserves, but there is only one factory in the province – a modest furniture mill owned by South Africans – and one shrimp farm. The potential exists for commercial-scale cultivation of cassava, cotton and rice, but agriculture is limited to subsistence farming, which has a disruptive effect on schooling as families tend to send their children into the fields rather than the classrooms during planting seasons. Food insecurity is perennial. The six coastal districts, where people tend to have little arable land and are traditionally more oriented toward fishing, are particularly vulnerable to crop cycles. Currently, no plans exist for large-scale industrial investment in the province, at least in the near term. As one Muslim informant in Pemba, the provincial capital, said, 'The province is rich, but we need ideas. We are poor in our minds.'

As for religious demographics, the province is roughly 80 % Muslim, according to local leaders, and perhaps as much as 90 % in the coastal districts. There are 13 mosques in Pemba, a town with two main commercial strips – each stretching no farther than one city block – and small enough to walk across in half an hour. Within the local Muslim population, huge disparities exist. The vast majority are black and poor, while the wealthy and politically connected few, who dominate the business community, are of Indian descent.

Levels of governance are difficult to assess with precision since official statistics are scarce, and where these do exist they usually differ sharply with evidence obtained through interviews. Officials, furthermore, are often curiously reluctant to speak quantitatively even about mundane factors such as police staffing levels, which may reflect a holdover of proclivities shaped during the liberation struggle and civil war periods.

With that caveat in mind, however, it was still possible through even limited field research to develop an instructive picture of state capacity and responses to it.

¹¹ Figures are for 2005, the latest available at the time of writing.

While the provincial police commander was unwilling to reveal how many officers were at work throughout the district, knowledgeable informants from the foreign NGO sector involved in helping to equip the police estimated the figure to be roughly 1,500. As for resources, according to these same sources, the police force has only two vehicles for the entire province, one of which is dedicated fulltime to escorting the provincial governor. Customs is similarly thin. Pemba is the sole commercial port in the province and the northernmost in Mozambique. According to figures from the Bulletin of the Republic No. 51 of 27 Dec. 2005 – the last published – Cabo Delgado has two customs managers, four team leaders, and 50 staff. Most of those would naturally be deployed at border posts, Pemba airport, or the main sea port. The province's northern border, however, is defined by the Ravuma River, which divides Mozambique from Tanzania. There is only one ferry crossing, which is located inland from the mouth of the river and regulated by the tides. No bridges span the river. According to Joao Miguel, the Operational Manager of Pemba customs, of the 56 provincial customs leaders and staff, there are three managers and six operational staff at Pemba port. The six staff, however, have multiple assignments. When a ship comes in these six man the docks; when the ships roll out, the same six make up the sole customs mobile unit, which bears responsibility for monitoring traffic on the four main road corridors running the length and width of the province. Shipping traffic is not high. In October 2006, for example, six ships carrying 73 containers reached Pemba, but only 21 of those were direct imports (the rest had been cleared previously through Maputo). With no electronic scanning equipment, containers are inspected randomly and by hand.

Two other sectors, health and education, are also revealing. In 2003, Cabo Delgado had just six high schools, enrolling 1,785 students from a total population of 1.5 million (total provincial population in 2007 is projected to be 1.68 million). The Ministry of Women and Social Action, which focuses on health and education, provides \$20,000 per district per year to help seed small-scale agriculture projects to promote self-sufficiency particularly among women. 'It is never enough,' admits Fernando Neves, executive secretary of the provincial commission for social action in the Ministry of Women and Social Action, 'so we stick to a philosophy of communities taking the lead and encourage NGOs.'¹²

Responses and Vulnerabilities

The meagre capacity of the state combined with the overwhelming socio-economic needs of the population have two primary consequences: First, on the security side, the province is wide open, unprotected and unmonitored; second, on the social welfare side, the state is highly dependent on foreign NGOs and community structures to compensate.

The vulnerabilities are more readily apparent in incidents of drug trafficking, smuggling customs abuse, corruption and poorly monitored immigration. Customs officials described incidents in which Chinese tourists set up camps in the inland forests and engaged in illegal forest cutting and timber smuggling. Some within the growing Somali communities in the province, meanwhile, are allegedly engaged in illegal gemstone extraction. Corruption is high. Even prominent and long-established local businessmen admit to manipulating trade invoices. Understanding the extent of these practices is hard,

¹² Interviewed in Pemba, Jan. 8, 2007

however, because, as Tony Vaux et al indicate, a culture of impunity and the ready flow of aid encourage corruption and clientelism.¹³

Police and customs officials meanwhile contend that drug trafficking through the province, which was robust during the 1990s, has tailed off. They provide no verifiable data or explanations for this reverse trend, however, and many informants contradicted this impression. As one government official in Pemba said,

‘There are so many people coming here from outside – from Somalia, Tanzania, Sudan and elsewhere. They say they are refugees or here for business. I don’t think they are here only for business. Customs are not effective. There are lots of unprotected places where people can get in. Where does their money come from? Its drugs. Dagga, hashish.’¹⁴

There is little reason to believe that the conclusion reached in 2004 by Peter Gastrow and Marcelo Mosse, that levels of organised crime, corruption and smuggling in Mozambique have not yet been adequately addressed and will have far-reaching repercussions on ‘economic stability, democratic governance, and the investment environment.’¹⁵

Although the province is peaceful, many locals see reason for future concern in the swelling ranks of foreigners. As one foreign relief official based in Pemba said, ‘The local economy is growing fast, but with a high population influx services are not keeping pace. Fast economic change brings fast social change – with new pressures, for instance, on the family and the health sector. There is potential for conflict.’¹⁶ Businessmen and bankers in Pemba privately worry about the conduct and rising competition resulting from the growing numbers of Somali traders in Pemba – some of whom make large weekly cash deposits in the local banks but appear to run mere sidewalk shops. One prominent businessman related the following anecdote: ‘I needed \$130,000 in US dollars cash. I tried all my usual contacts. I said I was willing to pay 26.2 MZN. One said he couldn’t help because he just gave \$140,000 to a Somali at 27.’

Limitations in the state’s capacity to delivery on the social needs of the population, meanwhile, a range of community and external responses. Prominent Muslim businessmen describe establishing bursary systems to enable promising Muslims to attend schools elsewhere in Mozambique. As one Indian trader explained:

‘In a place like Pemba, you can make a lot of money, but my idea is that you have to have social responsibility. We have built three or four mosques, madrassahs, and clinics. We provide scholarships and make donations to the municipality.’¹⁷

The lack of state services has also drawn in external actors, resulting in a gross imbalance in the ratio of state and international transactions. Cabo Delgado, like all of northern Mozambique, is overrun with foreign NGOs running projects in everything from health

¹³ Tony Vaux et al, ‘Strategic Conflict Assessment: Mozambique’, April 2006

¹⁴ Interview, Pemba, Jan. 4, 2007

¹⁵ Peter Gastrow and Marcelo Mosse, ‘Mozambique,’ in *Penetrating State and Business: Organised Crime in Southern Africa*, Pretoria: ISS, p. 69

¹⁶ Interview, Pemba, Jan. 8, 2007

¹⁷ Interview, Pemba, Jan. 3, 2007

to agriculture to tourism promotion. One of these, which derives its prominence not by the logo-bearing trucks in the street but the sky-blue minaret of its mosque, is the Africa Muslim Agency, a Kuwaiti-based organisation that builds mosques and runs humanitarian programmes in impoverished locations across in Africa and elsewhere. The mosque, the most central in town, attracts mostly African immigrants. Its imam, whose office is stuffed with boxes marked ‘Sultanate of Oman Charitable Organisation Donation’, is Moroccan. The Agency runs an orphanage and school tending to the needs of 107 boys and 26 girls and their families.

Officials and local Muslim leaders both say the government actively embraces such projects. As Nassurulhae Intizane Dula, provincial representative of the Mozambique Muslim Congress, said: ‘The government engages with Muslims community structures on social problems. The government recognises the role of religious institutions in social development.’¹⁸ But the resulting influx of foreign funding also appears to be perpetuating state weakness. As one NGO official noted, ‘Foreign money undermines governance through corruption.’¹⁹

Conclusion

Northern Mozambique combines all the characteristics under Whelan’s various definitions of ‘ungoverned’ spaces – except one. Governance is weak and prone to influence. The territory is porous. The population faces mounting and shifting social pressures. Social norms are under strain. There is obvious state and non-state criminality. The influx of foreign African and Middle Eastern Muslims is introducing – or re-introducing – competing religious practices. The Africa Muslim Agency, for instance, is Wahhabist, reflecting a strong financial and ideological influence from Saudi Arabia, whereas traditional Islamic practice in Mozambique is Sunni.

But does all this combine to present an international threat?

It is far easier to assess levels of governance and their impact on criminal behaviour and community-oriented social welfare responses than to gauge how weak governance relates to potential terror-related activity. The holes through which the latter can slip are readily apparent in Cabo Delgado, but although the dynamics described there occur in an additional context of gradual social and political ferment among Muslims countrywide, there is no evidence of radicalisation. Alpers observes that ‘Islam is poised to assert itself as a major force in the religious, social, and political life’ of Mozambique.²⁰ But that is not necessarily in and of itself a cause for concern. The trend has been growing in that direction for years. In 1980, for instance, there were only 2 Islamic NGOs in Mozambique. Two decades later, that number had increased to 19.²¹ It is undoubtedly higher still today, but it more accurately reflects the Islamic principle of *zakat* than serves as a conduit for radicalisation. International trade in the province tilts eastward, but it has

¹⁸ Interview, Pemba, Jan. 4, 2007

¹⁹ Interview, Pemba, Jan. 8, 2007

²⁰ *Op cit* p. 319

²¹ NGOs and Voluntary Organisations Registry

for centuries. Islam itself has survived in Mozambique longer than any one political era – whether Omani, Portuguese, or self-rule.

Observing another so-called ungoverned space in Africa, one with obvious and rising Islamist activity, the International Crisis Group noted of the Sahel:

The prospects for growth in Islamist activity in the region – up to and including terrorism – are delicately balanced. Muslim populations in West Africa, as elsewhere, express increasing opposition to Western, especially U.S., policy in the Middle East, and there has been a parallel increase in fundamentalist proselytisation. However, these developments should not be overestimated.²²

Strengthening the reach and character of the Mozambican government is essential to curbing potentially destabilising criminality in the country and region. But in the age of the internet and 24-hour real-time media, Western counter-terrorism practices are feeding Muslim perceptions that their brethren and faith are under attack from the West. Any engagement in Mozambique under the open label of countering terrorism almost certainly risks incitement where there currently is no open hostility. The need, as David Shinn notes, is ‘that the US develop much better expertise on the causes of extremism and terrorism in Africa and improved understanding of the role and importance of Islam on the continent.’²³ Recognising northern Mozambique as an ungoverned space can lead to creative forms of engagement to boost governance, democratisation and development. Treating the region as a terrorist threat might just make it one.

²² International Crisis Group, ‘Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction?’, Africa Report No. 92, 31 March 2005

²³ *Op cit*