The April 2015 Attack in Garissa by al Shabaab

A Basic Human Needs and Structural-Cultural-Direct Violence Analysis

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Abstract

The article analyses the recent attack conducted by al Shabaab in Garissa, Kenya, by tying the current conflict back to the emergence of violence in Kenya's Northern Province under colonial rule. The author argues that the long-standing violation of the Somali community's basic needs has developed into a cycle of violence eventually leading to the current situation.

Introduction

The recent attack at Garissa University College, conducted by al Shabaab on April 2, 2015, resulted in the death of 147 people, and many more injured. Most newspapers highlighted al Shabaab's fundamentalist Muslim ideology, stressing the religious antagonism with Christians, who were singled out and killed in the attack. There is however a very long history of grievances between Kenya and

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Foreign Policy Journal, June 12, 2015

Somalia, and Kenya's Northern province, where Garissa is located, stands as a symbol of the long-standing conflict. Violence in Kenya's Northern province dates back to colonization, when the Northern District, being then a part of Italian Somaliland, was handed by Britain to Kenya when the latest obtained independence. Since then, violence has erupted on a regular basis, and the relationship between the two countries has consequently deteriorated. All parties have violated their opponents' basic needs and rights, leading to a cycle of violence.

The present essay focuses on the repetition and evolution of the cycle of violence in Kenya's Northern Frontier District. I argue that the repetition of human needs and rights' violations led to the development of violence within the very structure and culture of the different communities at stake—be they Kenyans, Somalis, Somali refugees or Kenyan Somalis.[1]

Firstly, I will focus on the history of the relationships between Kenya and Somalia, and the conflict over the Northern province. Secondly I will study the feelings of victimization, which may have developed amongst the Somali community, as a result of the long-standing violence. In my analysis, I will use the Basic Human Needs and Structural and Cultural Violence theories. I will lastly explain how such feelings translated into direct violence on the part of al Shabaab.

The evolution of violence around Kenya's Northern Province

While the Northern Frontier District was part of Italian Somaliland, Britain extended its control over the region at the turn of the century. According to Ogenga Otunnu, Professor at DePaul University College of LAS, it did so in order to "provide a buffer between Italian Somaliland and Ethiopia on the one side, and the East African railway and the white settlers in the highlands on the other".[2] Britain was also motivated by a desire to stop the Southward Somali expansion. Since the territory was constituted as a buffer zone, no serious attempt was made to foster political, social, and economic development. When Kenya gained its independence in 1963, Britain granted the administration of the Northern Frontier District to Kenyan nationalists, despite the fact that it was an

almost all-Somali area. Several opposition parties emerged, and armed struggle progressively intensified. The Kenyan government declared a state of emergency. No efforts were made to integrate the Northern Frontier District's inhabitants, and in the 1970s, Kenya started to expel dissidents back to Somalia. Otunnu writes that "anyone partaking in any form of dissent in the region would be seen as an 'enemy' of the state. This reinforced the image of the inhabitants of the area as 'aliens', whose loyalty to Kenya was always questionable".[3]

Since then, there has been a repetition of violent events at the border. Such incidents provoked severe military retribution on the part of Kenya. Otunnu stresses the fact that, to incidents carried out by Somalis nationalists, "Kenya's security forces reacted … by using force totally out of proportion".[4] Attacks in the North Eastern Province were carried out on a regular basis, starting with the Garissa massacre perpetrated by Kenyan military against local hoodlums, which resulted in the death of approximately 3,000 ethnic Somali residents of Kenya.[5]

Violence in Kenya's Northern province happens while the situation in Somalia remains very unstable. According to Otunnu, "by 1989 the political situation in Somalia was leading to civil war, social disintegration and the collapse of the state", as most Somalis were very unhappy at the highly corrupted government in the 1980s.[6] The government collapsed in 1992, leading to a process of decentralization where power was assumed by local authorities. Although there have been transitional governments, the country has not recovered its stability nor unity until now.

In such a context, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen emerged as a hard line faction of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) that took power over large parts of Somalia in 2006. When the ICU collapsed, al Shabaab remained and fought against the Ethiopian army at war in Somalia from 2006 to 2009. Valter Vilkko, from Uppsala University, writes that the group "was widely seen as a defender of Somali interests against the Ethiopian invaders. The ICU had been able to bring order and security, which led many to hope that al Shabaab, regardless of means and ideology, could do the same".[7] At this time, most Somalis considered members of al Shabaab as freedom fighters rather than terrorists. The group however lost most of its support when it decided to continue fighting

once the war was over. Since then, many moderate supporters have been scared by the group's methods of fighting and its affiliation with al-Qaeda. Currently, al Shabaab justifies its fighting by the war declared on Somalia by the Kenyan government in 2011, since, as explained by Daniel Branch from the University of Warwick, "Nairobi invaded its neighbor to secure its eastern border and to create a buffer zone inside Somalia".[8] This echoed the reasoning Britain provided a century earlier to justify its invasion of the Northern Province. By extension, it brought back to life the trauma of colonial rule—and oppression—over Somali territory and unity.

As stated by Idil Lambo in his work for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "there were approximately 520,000 Somali refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya by the end of November 2011" as a result of the civil war.[9] However, the Somali community has been very present in Kenya for a long time, with Nairobi becoming the hub of Somali economic activity. Such economic activity is mainly in the hands of Kenyan Somalis whose families have been living in Kenya for generations. Yet, and this has been the case already for several decades according to Otunnu, "the authorities have increased security sweeps and identity checks of Kenyans of Somali origin and Somalis living in Kenya. The arrival of the refugees is being used as an opportunity to impose compulsory screening on all Kenyan-Somalis, in order to identify 'illegal aliens'".[10]

Building up feelings of victimization

Cultural and structural violence tie back to colonization, when Somalis did not have a voice in the decision-making process affecting their territory, communities and clans. Structural violence refers to the social structure and institutions that prevent people from fulfilling their basic human needs. Since it affects people differently depending on their social group, it is very closely connected to social injustice.[11] Cultural violence refers to the aspects of a culture used to justify discrimination and structural violence. It makes the two other forms of violence, namely direct and structural violence, look "right".

By handing the Northern province to Kenyan nationalists, colonial

powers handed the role of the oppressor to Kenya, who then clearly reinforced this oppressive role by using a level of violence that was not proportional, in an attempt to control the threat. The fight for self-determination became the fight against the Kenyan government. The constant opposition between the Somali community living at the border and the Kenyan government established a clear distinction between Kenyans and Kenyan Somalis,[12] leading to the establishment of cultural violence.

This last one was translated into structural violence, whereby the institutions in place discriminated against the Somali community by treating them with suspicion and violence, therefore drawing a clear line between the respect of Somalis' and Kenyans' human rights. As structural and cultural violence developed in the very core of society, direct violence emerged on a repetitive basis, raising suspicion and prejudices between the two communities. Johan Galtung, from John Perkins University, writes that "generally, a causal flow from cultural via structural to direct violence can be identified. The culture preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on, and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them … at all. Then come the eruptions, the efforts to use direct violence to get out of the structural iron cage, and counter-violence to keep the cage intact".[13] The three types of violence mutually reinforce each other.

In this long history of grievances, Garissa stands as a symbol because of its geographic location and history. While it was part of the territory that belonged to Italian Somaliland and handed to Kenya when this last one became independent, it more recently was the place where the massacre of about 3,000 Kenyans of Somali origin happened. It symbolizes the violence of colonial powers, and then of the Kenyan government, over an idealized Somali unity. This made it easier for al Shabaab to spread its ideology, and Garissa county became a strategic base for the group's recruitment and military operation. As stated by Paul Hidalgo, analyst of politics in the Horn of Africa, "al Shabaab…controls two thirds of Garissa Country, which the group's top operatives have declared as their preferred base of operations. This has proved to be a strategic location; it has allowed al Shabaab to target the half million Somali refugees sandwiched between Garissa and the Somalia border as potential recruits".[14]

The violation of Basic Human Needs (BHN) is a constant in the

relationship between the Kenyan and Somali communities. Galtung defines BHN as "irreducible and nonnegotiable essentials in human life".[15] Abraham H. Maslow, from Columbia University, draws a hierarchy amongst the different types of BHN. Physiological needs, such as access to food and water, come first. The war and the situations in overcrowded refugee camps have prevented many Somali from access to such basic goods, depriving them from what they need to survive as human beings.

The need for safety comes second. The war in Somalia as well as the repeated attacks on the Somali community have clearly violated those needs. In Somalia, the Kenyan military appears as a constant threat since, according to Human Rights Watch, "foreign forces have committed grave abuses in South-central Somalia, including indiscriminately bombed and shelled populated areas".[16]

The third category consists in the need for respect. As stated by Abraham H. Maslow, "all people in our society … have a need or desire for a stable and firmly based, usually high evaluation of themselves, … and for the esteem of others".[17] There is however a strong belief among the Somali community that the local population perceives them as 'the other', 'the Somali'. According to Idil Lambo, "this perception has aided in the construction of a socially distinct and separate group or community".[18] Hence Somali refugees in Kenya will seek support within their own community, perceived as the only one able to bring them the respect and means to self-esteem needed.

Self-actualization needs come last. Their non-respect develops into feelings of frustration. Abraham H. Maslow defines them as "the tendency for [a person] to become actualized in what he is potentially".[19] Many refugees talked of a "life in limbo". And indeed, to Idil Lambo, "as a result of the lack of education and employment opportunities for Somali refugees in Eastleigh and Kenya in general, many lives have … been put on hold since arriving in the country".[20]

Such violation in turn entails an emergency response on the part of the community whose needs are violated. As pointed out by Daniel Branch, "since independence, a lack of public investment in health and education and inequalities in access to land have left many Muslims along the coast feeling alienated".[21] The Kenyan government's discrimi-

nation against Kenya's Muslim population, which makes up around 10 percent of Kenya's population, has clearly supported al Shabaab recruitment efforts. Dehumanization of the other has therefore taken place on both sides of the line, helping al Shabaab in its attempts to appear as a unifying group for the Muslim community, over tribal rivalries.

With their basic human needs unmet, many Somali and Kenyan Muslims have been forced into their position as underdogs, developing feelings of helplessness as to moving up in the interaction system, defined by Galtung as "a multidimensional system of stratification, where those who have and those who have not, those who have more and those who have less, find, are given, or are forced into their positions".[22] The lack of opportunities and respect leads to the frustration directed at the topdogs or power players, perceived to be Kenyans, and especially Christian Kenyans.

From feelings of victimization to aggression

During the war with Ethiopia in the 2000s, al Shabaab emerged as a leader for many members of the Somali community. By discriminating against its Somali and by extension Muslim population, the Kenyan government put many Muslim Somalis in the underdog position on several fronts (economically, socially, culturally). This created an opportunity for al Shabaab to build itself as a leader figure for many Somali refugees, Somalis, Kenyan Somalis and more generally Muslims who felt trapped in the underdog positions. Indeed, Paul Hidalgo writes that al Shabaab "has been able to depict the government as eager to inflict more suffering on the already disadvantaged".[23]

Al Shabaab has therefore developed an ideology gravitating around the trauma and discrimination inflicted by the Kenyan government on its Somali population. The April attack in Garissa could therefore appear as a way for the group to call for indiscriminate retaliation from the Kenyan government and military against Somali community, leading to the violence of more basic human needs and rights. This in turn could reactivate many members of the Somali community's memories, and rally some of them to al Shabaab's ideology. Conducting the attack in the symbolical place of Garissa makes the link to the traumatic memory

of the 1980s even more obvious.

As Galtung explains, aggression happens when the underdog (U) access a topdog (T) position. Indeed, "an element in a TU position will be constantly reminded of his objective state of disequilibrium by the differential treatment he is exposed to". The gap between the underdog and the topdog positions lead to the development of an "unstable self-image",[24] which then transforms into a desire to acquire a stable self-image by acquiring topdog positions on the other levels. To Galtung, "a complete underdog, UU, may not even dare to think in terms of TT as a reference group; the complete topdog will be beyond his imagination. The absolute deprivation of the UU may be higher, but the TU has relative deprivation built into his position. The destabilizing effect of this discrepancy will provide a mobility pressure, and the thesis is then that if there are no open channels of mobility, rectification of the disequilibrium will be carried out by other means".[25]

In Nairobi's Eastleigh area, many Somali Kenyans have become very successful businessmen. Yet, while these members of the Somali community acquired a topdog position regarding wealth, discrimination maintains them in underdog positions in other domains such as political and cultural power. Many of them have fueled al Shabaab with their wealth during the war against Ethiopia, in a desire to help the group fight for Somalis' interests and re-equilibrate their underdog positions towards topdog ones. And indeed, according to Mitchell Sipus, specialist in conflict and postwar reconstruction, "it is well known throughout Eastleigh that al Shabaab utilize[d] incoming remittance flows to fund its operations in Somalia and has direct involvement with many of the businesses in Eastleigh".[26] In recent years, the support for the group from the diaspora has decreased dramatically due mainly to the group affiliation with al-Qaeda. Nevertheless, this happens at the time when the group is already financially autonomous.

Disequilibrium then easily spreads from a few individuals or a group into a wider population. Following Galtung: "disequilibrium at one level can lead to disequilibrium at another level: a highly disequilibrated individual may become the leader of a completely underdog group and led into disequilibrium by giving it power, property or education".[27] Due to its wealth, al Shabaab is able to provide opportunities to young members

of the Somali community who are unemployed and don't see any pacific way of ending oppression by the ones they perceive as the topdogs. As stated by Mitchell Sipus, "the success of al Shabaab has become understood as the opportunity for any man to rise above the traditional restraints of tribalism and a means to take up new opportunities for a population tired of the violence of war and the frustrations of displacement".[28]

Conclusion

With an ideology and a leader capable of disseminating the ideology into the wider population, the power of the group is able to increase, providing it with the means to carry out attacks like the one in Garissa on April 2, 2015. The cycle of violence is now escalating. Retaliatory violence in turns lead to more violence by the opposing side, while both feel victimized by the other one.

The situation stresses the necessity for change at a multidimensional level: more economic, political, social, and cultural inclusion is necessary for the conflict to be progressively defused. However, because of the trauma and prejudices both parties have against the other, retaliatory violence is almost always implemented as an answer to any attack. This, in turn, reinforces the conflict, adding to the long list of grievances felt by the communities involved.

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