



**THE DISCOURSE OF VIOLENT
EXTREMISM AND RESPONSES TO IT
IN THE UGANDAN CONTEXT**

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Introduction

This is part of a series of short discussion papers on violent extremism (VE) across the Horn of Africa. They reflect findings from research undertaken in 2018-2020 by LPI's Horn of Africa Regional programme (HARP) into the status of violent extremism, stakeholder perspectives and responses to it. The research involved a consideration of the literature, key informant interviews and focus discussion groups with different stakeholders. It has been conducted in Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and Somalia. The purpose of these briefs is to broaden and enrich our understanding of the issues surrounding violent extremism, by considering and reflecting on experiences and potential learning across these different contexts. This brief explores views on the discourse to VE in Uganda from government, academia and civil society.

The Threat and Experience of Violent Extremism in Uganda

The Government of Uganda (GoU) considers VE a major peace and security issue (GoU, 2019) while UNDP rates the threat as moderate, recognising Uganda as an 'at-risk country'.¹ Academic studies also suggest Uganda is moderately vulnerable compared to others in the region (Romaniuk & Durner, 2018, p. 159).

Uganda has experienced various forms of VE (or terrorism - the term used more generally), including the LRA civilian attacks, kidnappings, torture and killings in northern Uganda (1980s–2006) with some 66,000 children abducted in this period, according to a World Bank report (Fares et al., 2006, p. 182). There has also been sectarian violence in the Muslim community (1990s), the ADF insurgency in the Rwenzori region in western Uganda (1997–2000), and the al-Shabaab bombing in Kampala (2010) - the single, biggest incident in Uganda to date, with 74 people killed and 71 injured by suicide bombers at restaurants screening the football World Cup. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, saying it was in retaliation for Ugandan support to the African Union Mission in Somalia (Al Jazeera, 2010)). There is also increasing involvement in collective actions and radical behaviours among youth and others wishing to address challenges affecting their lives.² Other violence in Uganda is characterised by a lack of clarity on those responsible. For instance, Al Jazeera reported between 2014 and 2016, unknown assailants killed a dozen leading

Muslim clerics: 'The government and police say that ADF insurgents, among others, are responsible. Others blame the killings on an ideological struggle within the Muslim community or fights over property and money' (Al Jazeera, 2016). Many observers, though, implicate the government, saying it is using the killings as an excuse to silence dissenting voices. The majority of those killed belonged to the Tablighi Jamaat and received Islamic education in Saudi Arabia during Idi Amin's presidency (1971–79).

In May 2016, Ugandan police announced the arrest of two Kenyan women on terrorism charges. More concerning was that this arrest was related to a similar one in Kenya in connection with a plot, apparently linked to Islamic State, to undertake anthrax attacks (Romaniuk & Durner, 2018, p. 159).³ A further wave of murders and kidnappings rocked Uganda in 2017–18 and in 2017, the bodies of 20 kidnapped women were found on the outskirts of Kampala, while in 2018, National Resistance Movement (NRM) lawmaker Ibrahim Abiriga was shot dead near his home (Africanews, 2018). Police recorded 70 kidnappings across the country in 2018 with the government blaming the murders on ADF (Wambi, 2018).

1. The UNDP identifies three categories of countries in Africa in reference to VE: 'epicentre', 'spill-over' and 'at-risk'. Epicentre countries are defined as being at the epicentre of the growth of VE: VE groups are present and enacting regular attacks on innocent populations. Spill-over countries suffer from the effects of the presence and operations of VE groups in a neighbouring country. At-risk countries exhibit some of the same socio-economic and governance-related factors as epicentre and spill-over countries but have no VE groups actively present. According to the UNDP (n.d., p. 4), Uganda falls under 'at-risk' along with Central African Republic, Tanzania and Sudan

2. Key Informant interviews with government representatives and CSOs.

3. Anthrax is a serious infection that can be used as a weapon of mass destruction (see 'Weapons of mass destruction', n.d.).

Framing the VE Discourse in Uganda

At the outset developing the P/CVE strategy the question was posed; ‘What is the problem that we need to respond to in the Ugandan context? Violence? Religion-inspired violence? Terrorism?’ The intention being to avoid overemphasis on religious dimensions, getting lost in the global discourse of extremism, only focusing on non-state forms of VE or missing important political and economic facets related to the process of radicalisation. As one member of the National Technical Committee (NTC) noted: “Formulating the question this way, we can then say an extremist in Uganda is one who violates central tenets, the national objectives enshrined in the constitution relating to democracy and national unity. ... [unfortunately] Government is using the term to frame opposition as terrorism. But opposition is not deviating from national principles. Rather, it is using a different path to power. Ugandans do not disagree on national objectives, and consider deviation through violent means is wrong.”⁴

The values of the National Ethical Values Policy, launched in 2013 to support the 1995 Ugandan constitution are: respect for humanity and environment; honesty – uphold and defend the truth at all times; justice and fairness in dealing with others; hard work for self-reliance; integrity – moral uprightness and sound character; creativity and innovativeness; social responsibility; social harmony; national unity; and national consciousness and patriotism.

Their violation allows a potential interpretation that VE includes acts committed by government officials or their institutions. At face value this is positive, although the head of the NTC noted in the PCVE Strategy validation workshop in 2019: “*The problem is not with the military or the police. It is, rather, individuals in these institutions who commit violent extremist acts.... Blaming government institutions in general for the violation of rights committed by an individual official or member of the military is not warranted.*”⁵ However, a research participant implementing CVE-relevant projects, noted that: “... *this inadvertently provides immunity for government institutions such as the military and security, which grossly violate these objectives through torture, for instance. How can we say it is specific individuals, not government institutions, that should be held accountable? If accountability is construed this way, we will not get into genuine state–society reform. If many individuals are getting it wrong, perhaps it is also because the way the institutions operate is fundamentally flawed.*”⁶

Other stakeholders consider government commitment to a more inclusive VE frame of reference, suspect. A prominent Ugandan Muslim activist in the CVE space expresses the concern: “*The notion of the national objectives as the framework within which we define VE is a good idea, but defining the boundaries of national interest and at what point we say somebody is violating*

4. Member of NT, Kampala, 29 September 2018

5. Head of NTC, Munyonyo, 22 August, 2019

6. Interview, Kampala, 24 September 2018

*them is problematic. We have a national ethical guideline. Am I a violent extremist if I do not observe the national ethical guideline? Interpretation is tricky.*⁷ The concern is this may provide government an excuse to repress civil society in the so-called national interest. Externals have also noted this danger. The US State Department acknowledges GoU contributions in countering terrorism in the HoA but notes; ‘at times it [has] labelled conventional criminal acts as terrorism and levelled terrorism charges against journalists, public officials and others it deemed were acting against its interests, potentially

diverting attention and resources from core counter terrorism (CT) goals’ (US Department of State, 2018). Academic works also observe the government’s instrumental CVE agenda, warning of the danger of shifting development assistance to the security sector by overstating the security threat posed by VE. Romaniuk and Durner (2018, p. 170) for instance argued: “...*Uganda’s embrace of counterterrorism has been characterised by strategic rent-seeking, to garner security assistance from abroad, alongside a preference for militarised responses.*”

Violent Extremism and Religion in Uganda

The broad framing, in theory reduces the possibility of unfairly demonising religions, but Muslim CVE practitioners suggest a dissonance in understanding of the drivers of VE with government and Western donors emphasising an ideological dimension, which may feed into Islamophobia. They observe that donors dictate the CVE agenda in Uganda and focus on Islam, while in fact, political and domestic violence are more pressing problems. They consider the role of ideology minimal even were there a focus on religious violence, rather, poverty has created fertile ground for VE. Their view is the Ugandan Muslim community is marginalised, and so vulnerable to extremist messages. Most recruited youth do not know about Islamic ideology and are, instead attracted by material incentives with rebels or terrorists promising economic

deliverance.

A representative of the Ugandan Catholic Church also made a contextual argument for broadening the focus, noting that VE not only besets Muslim areas as it applies equally, if not more, in Karamoja [north-eastern Uganda]. “*I have worked in Karamoja for years and learnt their sense of marginalisation and alienation. I recall a Karamojan saying, ‘I hope the radicals will come here’, as if lamenting violent extremist organizations (VEOs) were not operating in Karamoja. It is the same in Kasese.*⁸ *We need to listen to aggrieved people ... They are in the process of being radicalised. Listening can heal social wounds.*”⁹ Other critical voices link VE with broader geopolitics and Western governments’ foreign policy towards the Global South and Muslims in particular.

7. Interview, Kampala, 13 August 2019
 8. Human Rights Watch reported that violence erupted on 26 November 2016 in the town of Kasese, the capital of the Kingdom of Rwenzori when the Uganda National Police raided the government offices of the kingdom (HRW, 2018).
 9. Catholic Church representative, National PCVE Strategy Validation Workshop, Munyonyo, 22 August 2019

The complexity of who is a violent extremist - Non-state and State actors

A focus group discussion with CSO staff in Kampala¹⁰ threw further light on the contested nature of VE raising points such as: Who is a violent extremist? It is nonsensical to limit VE to non-state actors.... Who is a terrorist – for instance, the LRA or NRA [National Resistance Army], or both? Who started the violence? Where did the LRA go? The government needs someone to blame, such as ADF, because it needs an enemy.

Others suggested there are also cultural extremists with ‘so-called kingdoms’ increasingly becoming exclusive, undermining national cohesion. The insinuation being that government has rehabilitated kingdoms for political purposes rather than to deepen political freedom. This is a two-edged sword as, when kingdoms become insubordinate, they run into trouble resulting in conflicts such as that between the Rwenzori kingdom and security forces [1997–2000], or the Buganda riots [2009].

Some Ugandans courageously name the government as a violator of national objectives, citing examples of GoU loss of commitment to the constitution and national objectives, such as: changing requirements for presidential candidates to be under 75 years old and the term limit.¹¹ The sense of political entitlement implicit in perceptions of Museveni’s son being prepared as his ‘succession plan’ and the de facto

privatisation of the state economy illustrated by Museveni’s reference to recent discovered oil as ‘my oil’.¹²

Respondents also explored the distinction between a terrorist and a rebel: Is ADF an insurgent or terrorist group? Calling them terrorists is an exaggeration to make them look abnormal. Those focusing on ideology do not want to address structural factors. What ADF wants is political power. That is the end game, not terrorism. If we answer the question of who is terrorist and who a rebel, we will get solutions to our problems. Imprisoning Muluku [leader of ADF] is not the solution. Uganda needs a national reconciliation.¹³

This resonates with Mohammed Abu-Nimer’s criticism of CVE interventions that focus more on ideology than structural drivers. In his ‘Alternative approaches to transforming violent extremism’ (2018), he notes (p. 6): “When [CVE] initiatives are presented as a cure and often as an effective response, they sometimes ignore the deep-rooted infrastructural factors driving violent extremism. The question to ask is what is their added value, considering factors such as collapsing educational institutions, corruption, discriminatory governance and lack of a national vision, lack of policies to ensure the basic collective and individual freedoms, control and censorship of media and territorial occupation systems.”

10. FGD with staff of a CSO, Kampala, 27 September 2018

11. Parliament removed the two-term limit from the 1995 Constitution in 2005

12. This is a reference to Museveni’s self-understanding as the sole protector of Uganda’s oil finds. He is cited as claiming ‘[That’s] my oil’ and warning that he ‘won’t allow anybody to play around with it’ (Mwesigwa, 2016)

13. FGD with MSF staff, Kampala, 26 September, 2018

The Institutional and legal Landscape in Response to VE

In Uganda, responding to terrorism and VE is regarded primarily as an affair of national security. Security agencies therefore play a central role through a state-centric, top-down approach which oversees local interventions. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) and the Ministry of Defence are responsible for the defence and security of the country and work closely with the presidency. The MIA is the principal CVE agency and among its responsibilities, it oversees the Amnesty Commission, established to reintegrate former rebels, including ADF-NALU and LRA fighters and others, who renounce terrorism into the community.¹⁴ Attempts to establish a national Counter-Terrorism Centre (NCTC) in Uganda, such as in Tanzania and Kenya, have not yet been successful. Although a head was appointed in 2014, the body is not yet functional. Instead, there is an ad hoc Joint Anti-Terrorist Task Force that includes military, intelligence and security services with police taking the lead.

Uganda has enacted various laws to deal with threats of violent extremism. In May 2017, the government passed the Anti-Terrorism Amendment Bill, expanding definitions of 'terrorism' and 'acts of terrorism' to better align with international standards. The Uganda Police Force Directorate of Counterterrorism is the lead law enforcement entity charged with investigating, disrupting and responding to terrorist incidents, but resource and training gaps, as well as corruption, have affected its overall capacity (US Department of State, 2018). Legislation has also been enacted to counter financing of terrorism and Uganda is a member of the Eastern and South African Anti Money Laundering Group, a Task Force style regional body. Uganda is also active at regional and international levels, as a member of IGAD, the East African Community, the Partnership for Regional East African Counterterrorism, and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.

The Government Policy response and National PCVE Strategy¹⁵

Uganda has been developing a national PCVE strategy since 2017 overseen by a National Technical Committee, housed within MIA. The draft strategy, has ten priority areas and was validated by stakeholders in August 2019. It adopts a 'whole of society' approach; involving, participation and support of government, non-government,

civil society, private sector and local communities in responding to a societal problem. While government consulted more broadly, seeking stakeholder views through the validation workshop - a positive step - nevertheless discussions in the process identified a few limitations:

14. Interview with a representative of the MIA, Kampala, 29 September 2018

15. This section draws on a focus group discussion with MIA staff

The national frame: Could provide the basis for governance reform and to hold government accountable. However, government practices are often seen by critics as contravening national objectives. Their championing the principles while simultaneously undercutting them undermines the sincerity of the effort.

Limited Civil Society participation in the policy process: Global best practice encourages substantive civil society involvement¹⁶ and while the strategy declares a 'whole of society' approach, the scope and depth of consultation have been limited. So far, only ten public consultations, and only 25 CSOs and human rights organisations out of hundreds, participated in the validation workshop.¹⁷ This perhaps reflects a broader relationship with civil society. As noted by Dyrenforth (2018, p. 33), 'the greatest impediment to implementing effective P/CVE policy in Uganda is the government's hostile relationship with civil society.'

The preponderance of security institutions: The NTC is highly securitised with all its members from security and intelligence, and none from civil society.

Human rights and governance issues are given inadequate attention: Validation workshop participants noted the original draft of the strategy, emphasised human rights and governance issues entailing political reform to address structural drivers of VE. In the final draft however, they are only given lip service.

Conflict-sensitive framing: The language of the strategy should be revised to be more conflict-sensitive. For instance, in identifying VEOs, it indiscriminately mentions the Salafi community. Salafism is a broad spectrum, and using such sensitive terms in a national document could alienate an entire community.

The theory of change underpinning the strategy needs to be evidence-based: The National Strategy assumes a direct link between poverty and extremism. However, the literature suggests no broad identifiable patterns in socio-economic backgrounds of violent extremists (Ranstorp, 2016; Allan et al., 2015) and McCullough and Schomerus (2017, p. 4), note the paths to VE are multiple: 'A comprehensive literature review finds the evidence supporting a clear link between poverty and extremism is mixed.'

PCVE programming housed within CT institutions encourages securitisation of the P/CVE space: P/CVE programming in Uganda, as in Kenya, is housed within CT institutions but the Kenyan experience has shown, this can lead to further securitisation of the CVE space; in effect self-defeating. Coordination between CT and CVE programming is one thing, but subordinating CVE to CT is a different matter.

The need for harmonisation between the strategy and related policies: Other policies are being developed that have a direct bearing on the effectiveness of the PCVE Strategy which highlights the need for a national framework and body to harmonise them to avoid the danger that efforts will be duplicated.

16. e.g. see the UN PCVE framework and PVE Plan of Action (UN, 2015)

17. The umbrella organization HURINET (Human Rights Network - Uganda) alone includes 60 human rights organizations.

The National PCVE Strategy Priorities

1. Establish a coordination mechanism among relevant institutions at national and local level
2. Community engagement (enhancing social cohesion, building resilience, shunning of violent extremist activities and reporting propagators of VE ideologies and activities)
3. Dialogue, conflict prevention and resolution
4. Strengthen good governance, human rights and the rule of law
5. Empower youth
6. Empower at-risk communities
7. Promote gender equality and empowerment of women
8. Empower educational institutions to develop capacity to resist VE
9. Develop a communications strategy to counter and provide alternative narratives to violent extremist ideology
10. Empower authorities of prisons, remand homes and rehabilitation centres.

Civil Society Responses to Violent Extremism

The CVE field in Uganda is not large, but CVE practice remains an important part of local communities, despite apparent increasing pressure from the state to constrain civil society space.¹⁸ At present, CVE-related activities appear limited and fragmented, despite many national CSOs actively working on it. State scrutiny is high, funding is low and interestingly, most CSOs implementing CVE projects are Muslim organisations. Key intervention areas are education and justice, aiming to address Muslim marginalisation, while ideological responses aim to counter religious interpretations potentially undermining social cohesion, and tolerance.

Addressing Structural Drivers of Marginalisation: The intent is to redress structural drivers of VE, undermining VEOs trying to hijack legitimate Muslim grievances. CSOs in the education sector focus on reforming traditional Islamic education while enhancing Muslim access to secular education. The former is also part of a counternarrative strategy against extremist messaging and to mitigate conflicts between mosques and among sheikhs. *"We need to look at warning signs: how do we know our children are radicalising? We control and manage through our structures, such as mosque registration. An unregistered mosque is difficult to control... who are they accountable to? We also need to monitor the curriculum of madrasas: what is being taught, and*

*by whom? We designed a curriculum to instil values such as tolerance. Some schools are resisting it, though."*¹⁹ More contentious in the discourse of Muslim marginalisation is access to justice. Some Muslim CSOs implement projects in the justice sector. A senior leader of such a CSO noted: *"Many Muslims are unduly accused of terrorism, generating the feeling that Islam is under attack. What is needed is due-process-of-law to allay their fear the judiciary is not neutral. We are engaged with the judiciary to help improve state-society (Muslim) relations by advocating for due process of law."*²⁰

Addressing the ideological Dimensions of VE: Although the general sentiment in Uganda's CSO community is to emphasise the structural drivers of VE, the role of religious ideology is also recognised, albeit in a much more nuanced manner than the government's current framing of it. According to several Muslim CSOs, imams at the grassroots level are often illiterate and unskilled. So, they aim to equip them with interfaith dialogue and peace and conflict resolution skills, and information and communication technology skills. Simultaneously they strive to build peoples' resilience sensitising young people on the Qur'an, engaging with the concept of jihad, so they aren't manipulated, as well as aiming to disassociate Islam from violence.

18. As evidenced by the NGO Act giving strong powers to government and limiting activities and space for NGOs

19. Interview of respondent from UMSC 22 August 2019

20. Interview with CSO leader Kampala, 23 September 2018

Conclusion

The Ugandan government has adopted an innovative framing for their PCVE strategy based on national principles and a 'whole of society approach'. Nevertheless, the current emphasis tackling VE is on CT and security-based approaches focused principally on Muslim ideology rather than addressing structural drivers of extremism such as poverty, and deep-seated political and social inequities. At its most concerning this approach blurs understanding of who is considered a VEO, but also risks providing opportunities for those in government who wish to interpret issues, events and perspectives in a light that allows them to behave in ways that further their own political agendas and may constrain civil society and political and religious freedoms. Ugandan CSOs on the other hand, tend to favour 'soft' approaches addressing structural drivers of VE including marginalisation, lack of access to Justice or opportunities to participate in governance. Ideological issues are addressed, not only to counter ideological and religious messages advocating violence, but also to improve opportunities to develop through better education and improved livelihood skills. Greater space, funding and acknowledgement of civil society's role and approaches to VE are required to ensure success in addressing this complex issue.
