



RESILIENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN BENIN AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

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With violent extremism snowballing into reality as a major concern that impedes development, the rulers of West Africa have grown more worried and uneasy. Against a backdrop of bitter reality, Benin is geographically reinforced being surrounded by three countries that are still enormously experiencing terrorism-fueled issues. Given the difficult military approach as an option to put into action at a large scale, Benin attaches more emphasis on revisiting and reconsidering its security policy towards the people of Benin and their various organizations to develop strategies that prevent violent extremism. The civil society plays a critically important role in implementing such strategies; the pressing question that needs to be addressed: Does this civil society have the legitimacy and ability to better ensure resilience and resistance against violent extremism?

DIVERSITY AND FRAGMENTATION

The Civil society in Benin, which looks very much like the colors of the spectrum, consists of associations, non-governmental organizations, advisory bodies, networks and professional organizations, local chiefdoms, sheikhdoms, youth and women groups, sponsors and other development influencers. It stands to reason that citizens desperately need the civil society to stand by their side in all fields, which the government turns a blind eye to. Despite the great coordination efforts made, these civil society institutions are still poorly organized; their orientation is often impacted by their need to collect resources from development aids, which make many civil society institutions blatantly opportunistic, with the loss of their true identities and continued adaptation to the interests and visions of the donors.

The civil society is manifested in several trends: secular, sectarian, ethnic, and traditional. Secular institutions are often better than others, but they often prevent violent extremism less than others do, as they contribute

more to improving comprehensive governance that meets the needs of different societal segments, especially the most vulnerable groups, while they also provide high-quality public services. Secular institutions have an indirect relationship with the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) policy, and they contribute at an early stage to reducing the frustrations associated with irrational governance, which is one of the main sources of extremism. It is imperative for these institutions to raise their efficiency and improve their capabilities against terrorism efficiently in a more precise and at a larger scale across the PVE policy.

ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS

Islamic associations, non-governmental organizations and sponsors are essential components of the civil society bedrock, and have a direct contribution to the PVE policy. Their main activity in humanitarian work is displayed in collecting donations of all kinds, healthcare, providing aid to victims of natural disasters and building social infrastructure. The members of such institutions also give speeches and organize educational seminars and dialogues for vulnerable groups to help them to steer clear of extremism and intolerance.

These religious institutions are associated with international networks connected to North African countries, Gulf countries and others, such as Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Algeria, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Such a connection enables them to obtain big funds for humanitarian aids, or scholarships for students who enroll in Islamic schools and various educational institutions. Some of these resources are used to meet the personal needs of their employees and to protect them from the temptations of extremist groups.

Given the high standard of living for the officials of such institutions amidst an environment where grinding penury is glaringly rife, some suspicions related to money-laundering are raised. Therefore, they are being tracked by the National Financial Information Processing Unit, which is the government's tool in combating money laundering and terrorist financing. The finance provided in abundance within their societies seems to be a tool for the ideological and methodological influence to recruit unemployed, desperate, frustrated and discontented youth against the officials due to the miserably unstable conditions. They advocate a new and

strict fundamentalist, elitist Islam, which is sometimes more ferocious against the government. However, their activity is supported by the societies in which they are active. With this in mind, it may contribute to the development of intolerance and extremism among the youth. For this reason, a degree of suspicion may be raised against the Islamic civil society, and despite its contribution to standing against violent extremism, the reality is still shrouded in mystery and the interpretations are multiple and conflicting.

LOCAL NOTABLES AND LEGITIMACY

Local notables include religious leaders, sages and members of traditional chiefdoms and sheikhdoms; some participate in education, interfaith dialogue, preaching and training, while others intercede in resolving conflicts and settling disputes or societal crises, and sometimes practice some traditional actions to organize social relations and achieve community resilience and cohesion, such as congregational services, prayers, sacrifices, ritual incantations to ward off bad fortunes, and pleading and supplicating with blessings to bring good to their lands and citizens. Their efforts often fail because they are often the protagonists of disputes related to the succession of a local sheikhdom or imamate (imamah). They are also exploited by politicians to be involved in political games that spoil their neutrality and jeopardize their contributions to achieving the desired society-based resilience.

HUNTERS' CRISIS

Traditional hunters make an important and visible contribution to the country's security system, and they perform dual work of surveillance and security; they gain most of their livelihoods from the surrounding prairie and forests resources that they know well. Some of the educated youth have turned into forest guides, while others have become security assistants on roads that have become the scene of frequent robberies, and get involved in the fight against poaching and theft. Today, however, most of them suffer enormously and feel desperately frustrated due to the ban on hunting in parks and forests, and then due to the republican police reform process that replaced them with police officers on the highways, depriving them of an important financial resource; working in these places generates some cash grants for them in appreciation of their great efforts. Today they sustain

abject poverty and fatigue, and this is likely to make them succumb to any temptation, reducing them to illegal poachers or guides to terrorists in the wilds and forests.

IMPORTANCE OF RADIO

Radio in Benin is one of the most important means of expression, as it enables people to express their opinions and exchange ideas in open and public discussions, in which messages of education and awareness are broadcast to the masses.

By radio, sermons are published, and programs of interfaith dialogue are broadcast. Radio per se performs the difficult task of organizing the paths of different religious orientations, ensuring that they do not clash or provoke conflicts or have a negative impact on the societal structure due to different sects, beliefs or religions. Sometimes these media are exploited for sectarian goals.

In general, the civil society in Benin is characterized by extreme diversity and opportunism.

To ensure the resilience of different social groups, the civil society needs to be more professional and specialized, and needs to pay more attention to current security issues.

The civil society in Benin is still able to adapt to its environment; once well strengthened, the civil society will be able to firmly withstand the challenges of resilience against terrorism and violent extremism.