Prayers, Politics, and Peace: the Role of Religious Institutions in Conflict Onset and Prevention in Mozambique and Tanzania

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Abstract

This study examines the divergent trajectories of Islamist militancy in Mozambique and Tanzania by analysing the role of formal and informal religious institutions in conflict onset and prevention. While Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province has been engulfed in a protracted insurgency since 2017, neighbouring Tanzania has largely avoided sustained terrorist violence despite similar risk factors. The study traces the historical evolution of Islamic governance along the Swahili coast, the marginalisation of Muslim communities under colonial rule and the post-independence establishment of national Islamic councils. It argues that institutional decay and fragmentation in Mozambique created a vacuum exploited by extremist actors, while internal reform and strategic engagement by Tanzania's Islamic council (BAKWATA) helped foster religious cohesion and mitigate violence. By highlighting the importance of institutional credibility, inclusivity and alignment between formal and informal religious actors, the study offers critical insights into how religious governance structures can contribute to or help prevent the escalation of violent extremism in fragile contexts.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Institutions, Violent Extremism, Islamist Militancy, Tanzania, Mozambique

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Islamist1 armed groups have expanded their operational footprint across multiple regions in Africa, evolving from localised insurgencies into transnational threats. These can broadly be grouped into the Sahel theatre, including the regions of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger; the Lake Chad Basin theatre, including the regions of Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria and Niger; the Horn of Africa theatre, including the regions of Somalia and Kenya; the North Africa theatre, including the regions of Algeria, Egypt and Libya; and the Southern African theatre, including the regions of Northern Mozambique and the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Serwat 2024). Understanding how and why these groups spread across states in some regions and not others is critical to countering them.

Since 2017, Cabo Delgado, a province in Mozambique, has been the epicentre of a violent Islamist insurgency led by ahlu Sunna Wal Jammah (ASWJ) against the government of Mozambique and its regional and international allies.2 ASWJ attacks were originally limited to the port town of Mocímboa da Praia and a few surrounding districts. However, the group has spread its area of activities to most districts of Cabo Delgado and southward into neighbouring Niassa and Nampula provinces. The conflict has claimed at least 5 800 lives, displaced several hundred thousand civilians and brought major Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) projects to a standstill (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project [ACLED] 2024). In contrast, Tanzania, which shares a porous 800-kilometre southern border with Mozambique, has seen only two significant attacks by ASWJ over the same period, both of which occurred in October 2020 on borderland villages in the country's Mtwara district. Concerns amongst security analysts that these attacks marked a new northward expansion by the group into Tanzania have not materialised (Oxford Analytica 2020). Despite Tanzania's proximity to the conflict and their history of domestic Islamist terrorist incidents, the country has seen a significant decrease in terrorist violence since 2017 (ACLED 2024).

Given these divergent security outcomes, it is important to ask why Tanzania has been able to contain the threat of sustained terrorist

[1] Islamism refers to a political ideology that seeks to implement Islamic law (sharia) and principles as the foundation of government and society. Unlike Islam as a religion, Islamism is a modern political movement that advocates for the establishment of Islamic states and the integration of religious doctrine into political governance. Islamist movements can range from those working within democratic systems to more radical groups that reject secular governance entirely. See: Esposito (1992:12).

[2] Ahlu Sunna Wal Jammah (ASWJ), which translates from the Arabic as "Supporters of the Tradition" are locally referred to as Al-Shabaab or "The Youth". However, they share no direct relation to Al-Shabaab in Somalia. In 2019, ASWJ pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, affiliating with its Central African 'wiliyat' or province, with non-contiguous territories in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Northern Mozambique—Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). Following this development, some refer to the group as IS-Mozambique or ISCAP, however, their relationship with the Islamic State is still unclear. Evidence suggests the group has received some limited financial and operational support from IS associates. IS also regularly feature successful ASWJ attacks in their media outlets (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

violence, while Mozambique has succumbed to it?

To date, scholarly literature on the causes and nature of the conflict centred in Cabo Delgado have identified a range of potential hypotheses. Some authors emphasise the role of domestic socioeconomic and political factors that have been instrumentalised by the ASWJ, including interethnic cleavages, political marginalisation, poverty and unemployment, lack of education, corruption and human rights abuses by the state (Pirio et al. 2018; Matsinhe & Valio 2019;Feijo, 2020; Hanlon, 2021). Others have focused on regional drivers, including the relationship between the insurgency and illicit economies and transnational extremist networks (Morier-Genoud, 2020; Heyen-Dube and Rands, 2022). However, less attention has been given to the role of formal and informal institutions or the interplay between them in preventing or fuelling conflict in Tanzania and Mozambique.3 Where institutions have received analytical attention in literature, it has not been in a structured comparative approach. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the formal and informal religious institutions in Tanzania and Mozambique and their role in fuelling or mitigating conflict.

Most definitions of formal institutions emphasise their rules, laws and organisational structures that are codified and officially recognised by the state or governing authority (Leftwich and Sen, 2010; North 1991) Whilst the definitions of informal institutions are much more varied, some scholars describe them as unwritten rules, social norms and practises that influence behaviour outside formal legal and organisational frameworks (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Other scholars—and for the purpose of this study—broaden the definition to include associations, cartels, organisations and civil society movements that play a role in shaping norms, influencing behaviour and providing governance functions outside of formal state structures (Sheranova, 2020).

This study draws on Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) typology of informal institutions, which classifies them as complementary, accommodating, substitutive or competing, based on their interaction with formal institutions. It expands this framework by linking these institutional dynamics to conflict trajectories, particularly in contexts vulnerable to violent extremism.4 By assessing whether formal institutions are effective and whether their interests converge or diverge with informal ones, the study outlines four potential conflict outcomes. It argues that institutional alignment and strength are key determinants of conflict intensity, with the highest risk of escalation occurring where institutions are both weak and misaligned.

In both Tanzania and Mozambique, the analysis of formal religious institutions will focus on the state-sponsored Islamic councils, which serve as official interlocutors between the government and Muslim communities. In contrast, informal institutions will encompass a range of local Islamic groupings, including independent clerics, community-based networks and unaffiliated religious movements operating outside formal state oversight.

1.1. Summary of findings

Among the most important formal institutions in representing Muslim interests and fostering religious harmony in both Tanzania and Mozambique, have been national Islamic councils. Established in the wake of independence, these councils were intended to serve as intermediaries between the state and Muslim communities, advancing Muslim interests and addressing socioeconomic disparities rooted in Christian-dominated colonial legacies. Crucially, they were also meant to resolve intrafaith disputes by providing a centralised authority capable of mediating between different Islamic sects and schools of thought. In doing so, they were tasked with guiding religious practice in ways that harmonised with the values of democratic and multifaith societies, while reinforcing broader legal and social frameworks.

However, despite these aspirations, both Tanzania's BAKWATA and Mozambique's CISLAMO struggled to fulfil their institutional mandates. Over time, they came to be seen by large sections of their respective Muslim populations as corrupt, co-opted by political elites and unresponsive to community needs. This crisis of legitimacy coincided with the rise of a new generation of Salafi5 clerics and the expanding influence of transnational Islamist networks. As a result, both countries experienced fragmentation within the Islamic sphere

[3] Peter Bofin (2022), in examining Tanzania's success in containing terrorism identifies Tanzania's national Islamic Council as an important role player as part of a series of security-related, political and administrative measures by the state. Jannis SaalFeld (2019) examines the establishment of national Islamic Councils in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Mozambique and finds their failures created political environments conducive to collective radicalisation. Similarly, Liazzat Bonate's (2010) extensive work on the history of Islam in Northern Mozambique and the wider Swahili coast, identifies failures in Mozambique's national Islamic Council as a driver of political violence. This study will draw from all three of these authors' work.

[4] There is no universal agreed upon definition of violent extremism (VE). However, UN policy frameworks and resolutions generally characterize it as the advocacy, support, or use of violence to achieve political, ideological, or religious objectives, particularly when such actions are rooted in extreme ideologies that reject principles of pluralism and tolerance. See, for example: United Nations General Assembly. (2015). Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General (A/70/674). United Nations.

[5] *Salafism* refers to a conservative Islamic reform movement that advocates a return to what its followers consider the pure and unadulterated practices of the early generations of Muslims (the *salaf al-salih*). It emphasises strict adherence to the Quran and Hadith, often rejecting later interpretations or innovations (*bid'ah*) in Islamic thought. See: Wiktorowicz (2006).

and the proliferation of informal religious associations operating beyond the control of the national councils.

While this institutional decay created vulnerabilities in both settings, Tanzania was able to stem the escalation of extremist violence through a combination of internal reforms within BAKWATA and strategic engagement with more conservative Islamist actors. Importantly, these efforts unfolded in a context where state security institutions also demonstrated greater capacity and coordination in responding to emerging threats. The relative strength and responsiveness of Tanzania's security apparatus likely played a decisive role in complementing religious institutional reform and preventing the entrenchment of militant networks. These dynamics offer important lessons for Mozambique, where the national Islamic council has yet to achieve similar levels of institutional cohesion or public legitimacy, and where efforts to contain VE may also hinge on strengthening both religious and security governance.

1.2. Structure

This article will begin by providing a short history of the spread of Islam along the Swahili coast and its appropriation by African communities. This will be followed by an examination of how European colonisation changed interreligious power dynamics in the region and embedded administrative, educational, and economic systems that would create lasting socioeconomic disparities between Muslims and Christians. The role of Islam as a force for collective mobilisation against colonial rule will be discussed along with some of the difficulties in managing diverse Islamic movements in the post-colonial era. This will be followed by examining the performance of national Islamic councils in Tanzania and Mozambique, and their respective ability as formal institutions to mediate intrareligious disputes and mitigate violence in the face of increasingly radical Salafi movements in the region. Finally, lessons learned and potential recommendations for policy and practise will be provided.

2. Tracing the crescent: The spread of Islam along the Swahili coast

Islam has a rich and longstanding history in Africa, dating back to the seventh century. Over time, successive schools of Islamic thought have become appropriated by African communities in unique ways and deeply woven into the cultural, political and social fabric of societies across the continent. The way in which Islam has been practised in East Africa has also been influenced over the centuries by shifting power dynamics in the region related to Omani and Portuguese conquest, the slave trade, European colonisation and post-colonial state building, among other factors (Wynee-Jones and LaViolette 2017).

Arab and Persian traders originally introduced Islam to communities along the Swahili coast over a 1 000 years ago. Kufic inscriptions in the Kizimkazi Mosque in Zanzibar, for example, are thought to be from the 1100s (Sheriff 2020). These trade networks not only facilitated the movement of goods between Africa, the Middle East and Asia, they also served as conduits for the transmissions of ideas, beliefs and customs. Over time, coastal communities in East Africa began to adopt and adapt to Islamic practises, with intermarriage between Arab traders and African local Bantu-speaking women creating mixed Arab-African populations (Mwaliwa 2018).

The emergence of powerful city-states like Kilwa, Zanzibar and Pemba, ruled by the Shirazi clans of mixed Persian, Arab and Indian influences, served as hubs of Islamic scholarship and cultural exchange. Swahili emerged as a lingua franca, blending Bantu and Arabic elements and became a vehicle for spreading Islamic teachings (Mwaliwa 2018).

The arrival of the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century disrupted the dominance of Arab and Persian trade networks along the Swahili coast. When Vasco da Gama arrived in 1498, for example, he noted that much of Mozambique's coastal towns and cities were subject to the rule of the Sultan of Kilwa, who was able to maintain control of coastal gold and ivory trade (Bonate 2010). Many Swahili city-states like Kilwa and Mombasa, resisted Portuguese control, leading to violent clashes. In other places such as Malindi, ruling Swahili elites sought alliances with the Portuguese as a protection against rival clans. The construction of Fort Jesus in Mombasa (1593), which served as an administrative base to control trade, impose taxes and tariffs on Swahili city-states and suppress rebellion, emerged as a symbol of Portuguese dominance in the region (Bonate 2010).

Despite being closely associated with the Catholic church, after initial confrontation between the Portuguese and Swahili-Muslim communities, the Portuguese pursued no concerted effort to interfere in the international religious affairs of the region, preferring to maintain control through distant administration and local rulers and sultans (Bonate 2010). However, economic exploitation by the Portuguese led to periodic Swahili rebellions, often with the support from the Ottoman Empire and Omani Arabs who were also vying for the dominance of the Indian Ocean trade networks (Campbell 2016).

In 1698, the Arab rulers of Oman captured Mombasa from the Portuguese bringing Zanzibar under the control of the Sultan of Oman

who maintained this rule up until the late nineteenth century. Trade in ivory and slaves, along with exports of cloves, vastly increased Zanzibar's wealth, and Stone Town became one of the wealthiest and largest cities in East Africa. Under Omani rule, Islam became further entrenched, particularly among coastal elites who benefited from trade wealth (Bonate 2010; Sheriff 2020).

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Northern Mozambique and Swahili leaders became deeply involved in the international slave trade. This was in part due to their location near ports and their roles as middle-men between mainland African slave suppliers and slave buyers from across the Indian ocean (Bonate 2010; Campbell 2016). This also saw more inland African societies embrace Islam and further merge traditional African spiritual practises, like ancestor worship, with Islamic teachings (Premawardhana, 2019). A unique feature of some Muslim communities in Northern Mozambique, for example, were that they were matrilineal (Bonate 2010). However, these practises would later be challenged by successive waves of more reformist Islamic thought.

The spread of Islam along the Swahili coast illustrates a dynamic interplay between faith, culture and power over centuries. While Islam was initially introduced through Arab and Persian trade networks, African communities embraced and reshaped its practices to align with local traditions, resulting in a distinctive synthesis of Bantu and Islamic influences.

3. Muslim exclusion and resilience under colonial rule

The arrival of British and German colonial powers in East Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries profoundly reshaped Muslim polities, disrupting long-standing trade networks, imposing new administrative systems and challenging traditional Islamic authorities. Colonial systems also introduced new disparities around access to education, healthcare and employment, which favoured Christians over Muslims. In response, Muslim communities sought to strengthen their identity and position by forming various associations and informal institutions, laying the groundwork for greater political mobilisation during the independence era.

The Berlin Conference (1884–1885) and subsequent treatise served to delineate borders between Portuguese, British and German colonial territories in East Africa. The German empire established a colony in Tanganikya, named German East Africa, while Zanzibar became a British protectorate in 1890. Following Germany's defeat in World War I (WWI) and the Treaty of Versailles, Tanganyika was transferred to British control in 1920. Tanganyika became a United Nations (UN) Trust territory under British administration in 1947—a status it kept until its independence in 1961 (Sheldon and Penvenne 2025). Zanzibar was ruled as a British protectorate up until 1963 when the Zanzibar Act of the United Kingdom (UK) made provision for full self-governance as an independent country within the Commonwealth. However, only a year later, the Zanzibar revolution saw the last reigning sultan, Jamshid bin Abdullah, deposed and the establishment of a new socialist government led by the Afro-Sharazi Party (ASP) (Sheldon and Penvenne 2025). In April 1964, Zanzibar merged with mainland Tanganyika, creating the United Republic of Tanzania within which Zanzibar remains an autonomous region. By the nineteenth century, Portuguese control over the Swahili coast had diminished considerably, and was predominantly confined to Mozambique (Bonate 2010). Without the strength to develop the region on its own, Portugal favoured leasing large tracts of land to private companies. However, the Portuguese government eventually terminated the charters of the major concession companies in the 1940s and 1950s, bringing all of Mozambique under direct Portuguese rule, until gaining independence in 1975 (Bonate 2010).

Under both German and British rule, colonial policy consistently favoured the spread of Christianity over Islam in Tanganyika. British control used Article 438 of the Versailles Treaty, Article 22 of the League of Nations and Command Paper No. 2374 to establish colonial state-missionary partnerships as a vehicle for spreading Christian education across its colonies in Africa (Seimu and Komba 2024). While this education system primarily aimed at producing a workforce tailored to the administrative and economic needs of colonial governance, not intellectual advancement, it left Muslims with fewer opportunities to access colonial government jobs (Seimu and Komba 2024). The British also did little to support madrassas or integrate them into the formal education system (Bertz 2015; Dilger 2021). The limited access Muslims had to education during the colonial period has created a stratified education landscape, elements of which persist today (Dilger 2021).

Christianity was similarly crucial to the formalisation of direct Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique. As highlighted by Bonate (2010), in her historical overview of Islam in Mozambique, Portugal adopted a system known as Indigenato, fashioned after the French code d'Indigent (native code). This system was instituted through policies such as the Acto Colonia (1930) (colonial act), Carta Organica do Imperio Colonial Portugues (1930) (organic charter of the Portuguese colonial empire) and Reforms Administrativa Ultramarina (1933) (overseas administrative reforms). Collectively, Bonate (2010) argues that these policies meant "Africans became colonial subjects living within the jurisdictions of 'local traditional customs and usages', administered by indigenous authorities (regulos/regedores) appointed by Portuguese administrators (p. 584)." Like national Islamic councils to come, the early association of Muslim regulos with the colonial

regimes caused controversy and internal conflict within Muslim communities (Bonate 2010). Catholicism, Bonate (2010) argues, was as a crucial marker of Portuguese culture, viewed by the colonial government as a vehicle to "nacionalizacao" (nationalise) and "portugalizacao" (portugalise) colonial subjects. Teaching the precepts of Catholicism was made obligatory in all schools, while the government worked in partnership with the Vatican to expand mission schools throughout the country. Portugal adopted an assimilationist stance towards its colonial subjects. Subjects could opt for status of assimilado, provided they could prove they had adopted Portuguese customs, language and culture, including dress code. Importantly, Bonate (2010) notes that, unlike African Christians, African Muslims in Northern Mozambique could not become assimiladoes without having to denounce their religion.

Despite marginalisation under British and Portuguese colonial systems, the number of Muslims grew in both Tanzania and Mozambique during the first half of the twentieth century. This can be attributed to the arrival of new Islamic Sufi orders, which challenged older Islamic authorities tied to clan and chieftainship, and sought to uplift and develop Muslim communities sidelined by colonial authorities.

As Bonate (2010: 584) writes:

> *These new Orders transformed local conceptions and practices of Islam. For example, in contrast to the authority of the old Muslim rulers, the Sufi leaders claimed an authority of religious learning ('ilm) and of written authorization (ijaza), situated within a chain of transmission (silsila/isnad). These features had nothing to do with the hereditary power and legitimacy of an African chieftainship or Shirazi families. However, local chiefly clans fought hard and managed to appropriate an Islamic authority inked to the Orders, which contributed greatly to a significant expansion of Islam.*

These Sufi orders were instrumental in establishing new inclusive Muslim organisations that, regardless of race, tribe or sect, were dedicated to Muslim progress in the face of colonial economic and social marginalisation. Influential informal institutions emerged, such as the East African Muslim Welfare Society (EAMWS). Founded by Sheikh Hassan Bin Ameir of the Qadriyya Sufi brotherhood and Mufti of Tanganyika, EAMWS was dedicated to advancing Muslim education, economic and social interest across the East Africa region, indicating early forms of Islamic mobilisation and Pan-Islamic thought (Juma and Islam 2017).

The colonial period in East Africa was a time of profound upheaval for Muslim communities, embedding socioeconomic disparities that heavily favoured Christian populations while marginalising Muslims. This era of exclusion not only reshaped traditional Islamic authorities, it also sowed the seeds of resistance and mobilisation (Lomeier 2007). Muslim communities responded to colonial injustices by forming Sufi-led networks and welfare organisations, which promoted education, social progress and unity beyond racial or sectarian lines associated with former Islamic centres of power like the Shirazi clans. These early efforts laid the foundation for Islamic resilience and the emergence of Pan-Islamic movements, showcasing how faith became a tool for both spiritual and political empowerment in the face of systemic colonial discrimination (Lomeier 2007).

4. Post-colonial politics and the establishment of national Islamic councils

Islamic leaders and organisations in East Africa were instrumental in the nationalist and independence movements of the twentieth century. By mobilising Muslim communities marginalised under colonial rule, they fostered unity and resistance against imperial powers. Groups like the EAMWS championed education, economic progress and political participation, aligning their goals with broader liberation movements. However, following independence, these same leaders and organisations, while embraced within independence movements, posed a threat to newly independent states dominated by predominantly Christian political elites seeking to consolidate their power and a centralised authority (Bofin 2023). To mitigate these potential threats, ruling parties in both Tanzania and Mozambique encouraged or actively participated in the establishment of national Muslim councils as a form of monitoring and control.

The Tanganyika independence movement was initially led predominantly by influential Muslim traders among the coastal elite (Saalfeld 2019). Figures such as Ali Said, for example, were instrumental in the establishment of the Tanganyika African Association (TAA). The TAA, founded in 1929, began as a social and cultural organisation for Africans from diverse backgrounds living under British colonial rule. As Iliffe (1979) argues, the TAA was the institution through which many diverse ideas and ambitions were woven into a more focused political nationalism which formed the foundation of the TAA's successor movement—the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). However, colonial education and administrative systems of the 1950s led to the rise of educated Christian elites who came to dominate TANU and after independence in 1961, the Tanganyika government (Loimeier 2007).

In 1961, following the independence of Tanganyika, the EAMWS headquarters were moved to Dar es Salaam. During the struggle for independence, the organisation had evolved from a social welfare institution focused primarily on Muslim social and cultural issues, to Tanzania's de facto Muslim council. The EAMWS was able to bring together both nationalist/pro-socialist and pan-Islamic/anti-socialist factions within Tanzania's diverse Muslim communities (Saalfeld 2019). However, while the wider independence movement could embrace a diversity of political and ideological voices, a newly independent Tanzania, inheriting a Christian-dominated colonial governance structure, found it more difficult (Bofin 2023). The EAMWS's mobilising strength, its access to foreign ideas and finance through its transnational structures and the charismatic nature of some of its leaders posed a problem to President Nyerere (Bofin 2022). Nyerere's socialist vision for Tanzania and efforts to minimise ethnic and tribal differences through his Ujamaa programme6 were at odds with elements of EAMWS who supported a more capitalist outlook and pan-Islamic vision for Tanzania's Muslim community (Saalfeld 2019). Relations between leading members of the EAMWS and Nyerere quickly deteriorated. In 1963, Tanganyika's Justice Minister and Chairman of the EAMWS resigned in protest of the president's efforts to create a single party state, which came into being a year later (Saalfeld 2019). Following the Arusha declaration,7 with growing tensions between nationalist-pro-socialist and capitalist/pan-Islamic factions within EAMWS, the government dissolved EAMWS and supported the formation of the Baraza Kuu la Waislamu Tanzania (BAKWATA) (The National Muslim Council of Tanzania). Headed by Muslim leaders loyal to TANU's vision, the new council effectively became part of the wider party-state machinery under TANU's single-party vision for Tanzania (Saalfeld 2019). BAKWATA leadership decided against issuing membership cards, as every Tanzanian Muslim was officially considered a member (Gilsaa 2012, as cited in Saalfeld 2019).

The route to the establishment of Mozambique's national Islamic Council was influenced by the civil war (1977–1992) and there was a need for government to consolidate its base of support in the face of Resistencia Nacional Mocambicana (Mozambican National Resistance Movement, Renamo) aggression. Over the course of the 1940s and 1950s, Sufi Islam had become widespread in Northern Mozambique. However, by the 1960s, these orders began to be challenged by a southern-dominated Salafi movement led by Saudi-educated cleric Abubacar Ismael Mangira. Mangira openly challenged Mozambique's Sufi leadership, and publicly derided Sufi Muslim's "unIslamic" forms of mysticism, such as ancestor worship, saint veneration and collective dancing and drumming rituals (Bonate 2010). Looking to shore up its base of support in the context of the Mozambican War of Independence (1964–1974), the Portuguese government chose to support the more popular and entrenched Sufi leadership against Mangira's reformist agenda. Consequently, Mangira shifted his focus, presenting himself to Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique Liberation Front, Frelimo) as a devout nationalist (Bonate 2010; Saalfeld 2019). While initially this move was unsuccessful, in time, Mangira's courting of Frelimo paid off.

Following independence, in line with Frelimo's Marxist-Leninist agenda, the party took a strong anti-religious stance during their first years of rule. This included the nationalisation of religious properties, expulsion of missionaries, closure of religious schools, banning of religious education and restrictions on religious festivals and public expressions of faith (Bonate 2010; Saalfeld 2019). However, Frelimo quickly realised that such an aggressive anti-religious posture risked alienating potential allies and moved to a more pragmatic stance (Bonate 2010; Saalfeld 2019). In January 1981, the Conselho Islâmico de Moçambique (Cislamo) (The Islamic Council of Mozambique) was established at a meeting between the government and a group of predominantly reformist clerics, with Mangira appointed as the institution's chief coordinator (Saalfeld 2019). In early 1982, another national Islamic organisation, the Congresso Islamico de Mocambique (the Islamic Congress of Mozambique), was launched. The Islamic Congress, comprised a variety of pre-colonial Muslim movements and associations, including the dominant northern Sufi orders, all shared an anti-Salafi stance.

Unlike Tanzania where BAKWATA was the only formal national Islamic council, Mozambique had a more fractured religious landscape. Following their establishment just a year apart, the Islamic congress and Islamic council quickly came to compete for Frelimo's attention and party patronage (Bonate 2010). These dynamics still play a role in intrareligious tensions within Mozambique today.

5. Institutional decay

National Islamic councils have been established throughout post-independent African countries. While their role, responsibilities and legal status differ, ostensibly they are intended to fill several cultural, political and religious responsibilities. These include, for example, providing

[6] The Ujamaa programme was a social and economic development initiative launched by President Julius Nyerere in the 1960s as part of his vision for African socialism. Rooted in the Swahili word "ujamaa", meaning "familyhood" or "brotherhood", the programme aimed to create a self-reliant, egalitarian society by emphasising collective ownership, communal living and cooperation. The programme was part of Nyerere's broader effort to avoid interethnic conflict by forcing different communities to come together. See: Jennings (2002).

[7] The Arusha Declaration was TANU's landmark policy documents outlining President Nyerere and TANU's vision for a socialist and self-reliant independent Tanzania. It played a pivotal role in Tanzania's post-independence governance landscape.

religious guidance and leadership by unified interpretations of Islamic teachings and jurisprudence; issuing fatwas (religious rulings) and resolving doctrinal disputes; and offering guidance on Islamic practises and holidays. These also include administrative affairs, such as overseeing the management of mosques, madrassas and Islamic charities; regulating the training, certification and conduct of imams and other religious leaders; managing Islamic endowments and distributing resources for community benefit. In addition, Islamic councils are generally expected to act as mediators in disputes involving Muslim individuals or communities, and work to prevent interreligious or intercommunal tensions (Whyte 2021).

The first two decades following the establishment of BAKWATA in Tanzania, the council proved extremely ineffective and was embroiled in several corruption cases. Addressing the major interreligious education inequality between Christians and Muslims in independent Tanzania was a central task of the council. However, they were unable to build a single new secondary school or successfully establish an Islamic university for over two decades (Chande 1991; Bofin 2022). Founding members, including Adam Nasibu, the council's secretary general and Masasi, the chairman, were both caught in major embezzlement scandals (Saalfeld 2019).

Similarly, in Mozambique, Cislamo's proximity to a Christian-dominated political elite widely perceived as corrupt, undermined its credibility. So too did their failure to advance key Muslim interests. Following the end of the civil war, the relationship between Frelimo and Cislamo further strengthened as the party sought to consolidate power. In 1992, President Joaquim Chissano set out to recruit prominent Muslim leaders from Cislamo directly into Frelimo. In the 1994 legislative elections, 20 Cislamo members from Southern Mozambique were elected into parliament on a Frelimo ticket. As a parliamentary caucus, the Movimento Islamico (Islamic Movement) campaigned, among other things, for the recognition of the Eid festivals as a national holiday (Bonate 2010). The bill establishing the new holiday was passed in parliament. However, strong interdenominational church opposition led President Chissano refused to sign it into law, calling for a Supreme Court review which ultimately deemed the bill unconstitutional (Bonate 2010; Morier-Genoud 2020).

6. Institutional fragmentation and conflict

In both Tanzania and Mozambique, the national Islamic councils' ties to non-Muslim authoritarian elites undermined their credibility and institutional efficacy, fuelling discontent and leading to factionalism within these institutions and the wider Muslim community. At the same time, Salafi clerics, educated abroad and critical of what they saw as compromised Muslim leadership, exploited this discontent, mobilising support and connecting with militant networks advocating for violent subversion of the socio-political order (Bonate 2010).

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait first began offering scholarship opportunities to East Africans as early as the 1960s, coinciding with the rise of their influence in the Islamic world after oil wealth greatly boosted their economies (Ali 2016). However, in the 1980s, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other gulf states began to support the building of Islamic educational institutions in East Africa and greatly expanded their scholarship programmes. State-sponsored organisations like the Saudi-based al-Haramain Foundation or Kuwaiti-based African Muslim Agency (AMA) were crucial in supporting a new generation of Muslim leaders throughout the region (LeSage 2014; Ali 2016; Bofin 2022;). In Tanzania, one such leader supported by the al-Haramein Foundation was Sudanese cleric Sheikh Abbas Mustafa who became an influential figure within an intra- BAKWATA force trying to reform the institution and push a more hardline Salafi agenda. However, while some returnees found work within BAKWATA, the majority became part of Ansar al-Sunnah,[8] an informal network of individuals privately-owned organisations seeking to purify local Islamic practises in Tanzania (Saalfeld 2019).

In the early 1990s, historic efforts were made by Muslim President Ali Hassan Mwinyi to introduce multi-partyism in Tanzania. In this context, internal tensions within BAKWATA and public criticism of the institution had reached a high point (Saalfeld 2019; Bofin 2022). In 1991, an important conference was held at the University of Dar es Salaam, which brought together leading representatives from across the Muslim community, including Muslim scholars, civil servants, leaders of local Sufi orders and members of the Ansar al-Sunna movement. Boycotted by BAKWATA leadership, the conference formed a taskforce to oversee the drafting of a revised BAKWATA constitution (Saalfeld 2019). Acting on the instruction of the taskforce, a large crowd unlawfully occupied BAKWATA's headquarters in Kinonondi. Government intervention forced mediation between old BAKWATA leadership and its contenders by initiating the creation of a ten-member-committee—consisting of five members from each group. However, the mediation process broke down when it became clear the BAKWATA establishment were unwilling to undertake any substantial reform (Saalfeld 2019).

Over the next two decades, Muslim civil society in Tanzania became increasingly fragmented, creating space for both the emergence of domestic militant movements and infiltration by regional and international militant Islamist networks. Failed BAKWATA reformers established the Baraza Kuu la Jumuiya na Taasisi za Kiislamu Tanzania (Supreme Council of Islamic Organisations and Institutions of

[8] The Arab name Ansar al-Sunnah roughly translates into "defenders", or "saviours" of the "sunnah", or the body of traditions and practises of Prophet Muhammad.

Tanzania, Baraza Kuu). However, after Baraza Kuu failed to effectively institutionalise and establish a countrywide structure, several constituent movements broke away to establish their own associations and networks, such as the Jamaat wa Ansar al- Sunna Tanzania (The Congregation of the Ansar al-Sunna in Tanzania, JASUTA), and the Shura ya Maimamu (Council of Imams/Mosque Leaders, Shura) (Saalfeld 2019; Bofin 2022). Hardline clerics such as Sheikh Ilunga Hassan Kapungu and Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda began to gain a wider following, mixing calls for reform with more overly anti-state and anti-Christian messaging. Sheikh Ponda's Simba wa Mungu (God's Lion) were involved in the physical takeover of several moderate mosques, which led to his arrest in 2012 by the Tanzanian government and violent confrontations between his followers and the security services (LeSage 2014). More fundamentalist movements in Zanzibar also began to emerge, including Imam Me- jlis (Imam Society) and Daawa Islamiya (Islamic Call) who openly challenged the rule of traditional Muslim authorities (LeSage 2014; Saalfeld 2019). One such movement, Ju- muiya ya Uamsho na Mihadhara ya Kiislam (also known as the Association for Islamic Mobilisation and Propagation, UAMSHO) led by Sheikh Farid Hadi was implicated in a series of terrorist attacks against more moderate Zanzibari clerics who were not supportive of their call for full Zanzibari independence from Tanzania and the enforcement of strict sharia (LeSage 2014).

In addition to domestic militancy, evidence of connections between regional and international militant networks began to emerge. The Al-Qaeda orchestrated simultaneous bombing of the United States embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam; Tanzania was an early indicator of the growing strength and ambition of transnational Islamist terrorist organisations. Among those implicated were Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, a Tanzanian citizen who was later captured and tried in connection with the attacks. Ghailani played logistical roles in preparing for the bombing in Dar es Salaam, including purchasing gas cylinders and a truck used in the attack (Shinn 2007). Two years later, a Zanzibari, Qaed Sanyan al- Harithi, was involved in the October 2000 USS Cole bombing (Shinn 2007). The emergence of Al-Shabaab in Somalia in 2005 and its spread into Kenya and Uganda through local affiliates like the al-Hijra group, caused an additional security concern for Tanzania. By 2012, Al-Shabaab affiliates, such as Emrah Erdogan and Hassan Ali Iqbal, were beginning to be intercepted travelling through Tanzanian airports on their way to Somalia. In 2012, UN investigators identified the Ansaar Muslim youth centre (AYMC) (formally known as the Tanzanian Muslim youth union) as providing material support to Al-Shabaab (Bofin 2022). By 2013, multiple Al-Shabaab training and indoctrination camps had been identified and dismantled by Tanzanian authorities (LeSage 2014). However, the use of different media platforms and growing Internet penetration in the region meant that al-Shabaab linked militant clerics, like Kenya's Sheikh Aboud Rogo and Sheikh Abubakar Sharif Makaburi, which enabled them to easily spread their message across borders. Even today, over a decade since Sheikh Rogo was assassinated, recordings of his speeches are still widely used by East African Islamist militant groups for propaganda and indoctrination purposes (International Crisis Group 2018).

Between 2012 and 2017, Tanzania saw a major spike in Islamist violence in both Tanganyika and Zanzibar. These included the violent takeovers of mosques by Islamist actors, the assassination of local government officials and members of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) (Party of the Revolution) party; attacks on churches and priests; and the bombing of tourist sites (LeSage 2014). Tanganyika saw some of the most serious incidents. In November 2013, police uncovered a significant arms cache and training complex in Tanganyika's Kilindi district and in May 2014, seven soldiers of the Tanzanian Peoples Defence Force (TPDF) were killed in a sustained engagement with an armed group linked to al-Shabaab in the Tanganyika's Amboni Caves complex (Bofin 2022).

The Southern Pwani district also saw some of the worst violence of this period. Between 2015 and 2017 over 40 police officers, local government officials, and local leaders of the CCM were assassinated by Islamist actors (Bofin 2022; Walwa 2022). Young clerics associated with the region's Islamist milieu attempted to take over local mosques or establish their own, which served as sites of militant recruitment and radicalisation. They quickly came into conflict with local communities and authorities. A strong security crackdown in early 2017 led those militants not killed or captured, to disperse south into Cabo Delgado, Mozambique, or northwest to Eastern DRC (International Crisis Group 2022).

In Mozambique, Cislamo's failures and perceived corruption, saw several younger members defect in the late 1990s and establish a new organisation, ASWJ. Research on the organisation is limited. Some scholars argue its members were motivated by frustration towards Cislamo's perceived corruption and institutional failings. It was also perceived by some to be dominated by Mozambicans of South Asian descent who were biased against Black Africans (Bonate 2010).

ASWJ founders belonged to a cohort of young northern clerics who received scholarships distributed by Cislamo in the 1990s to study in the Middle East. It appears that members of ASWJ split from the main group in the mid-2000s. In the early 2010s, this sect increasingly came into confrontation with local communities in Cabo Delgado's Balama, Mucujo, and Mocimboa da Praio districts (Habibe et al. 2019). This included attempting to forcefully ban the sale of alcohol in the area, prohibit children from attending public schools and access medical services and overtaking a local mosque (Habibe et al. 2019; Feijo 2020). Following persistent calls by local community members, in 2017, Mozambican police eventually intervened and detained several alleged members of the sect. However, police intervention came too late and in October 2017, around 30 members of the sect attacked three police stations in Mocimboa da Praia killing several policemen and raiding their armouries.

Over the next two years, the sect wase able to successfully recruit members and expand an insurgency by tapping into local grievances and leveraging ethnic tensions. As Feijó (2020) argues, just as the sect was establishing themselves in Cabo Delgado in 2015:

> The arrival in power of a Makonde President coincided with a greater affirmation of the State in the control of natural resources (namely precious stones, but also timber and ivory) interrupting local economic circuits. The situation reinforced speeches of victimisation and denunciation of the State's capture process by specific ethnic groups. This situation has reemerged historical resentments of the coastal populations, skilfully capitalised on by radical Islamic groups, who have found there an important social base of support.

In the initial years of the insurgency (2017–2018), the group primarily targeted civilian populations, launching attacks on villages in in Macomia, Mocímboa da Praia and Palma districts, with further activity in Nangade, Pemba, Muidumbe and Quissanga districts of Cabo Delgado. In 2019, the formal affiliation of the group with ISCAP was broadcast via Islamic State (IS) media channels. As argued by Bofin (2023), over the coming years, affiliation with IS sharpened the group's messaging, positioning them with a clearer ideology focussed around establishing a regional caliphate governed by sharia law; challenging the state's authority; harnessing local grievances and targeting Liquid Natural Gas (LNG) projects.

Over the course of 2020–2021, the security situation in Cabo Delgado significantly deteriorated. The rate of political violence events peaked in June 2020, however, the attack on Palma in March 2021 represented a major inflection point in the conflict. The attacks led TotalEnergies to evacuate their staff from the nearby Mozambique LNG project on the Afungi peninsula and declare a force majeure. In July 2021, Rwandan and Southern African Development Community security forces were deployed to the province in separate missions under different mandates. The Tanzanian government deployed additional security forces to its southern border and closed the Namoto-Kilambo and Negomano-Mtwambaswala border crossings—the two largest official border posts connecting Cabo Delgado with Mtwara, Tanzania.

Since 2022, ASWJ has dispersed, and shifted to operating in small mobile groups. However, despite a general improvement in the security situation in Cabo Delgado, ASWJ has shown an ability to evolve strategically and operationally and survive in the face of national and regional security forces (Bofin 2023).

The institutional failures of BAKWATA and Cislamo fragmented Muslim communities, creating a vacuum that militant actors could exploit. Younger, foreign-educated clerics leveraged these fractures to establish informal institutions which could ostensibly fight for those Muslim communities tired of the status quo and frustrated at the failure of national Islamic councils to adequately represent their interests. In both cases this fragmentation ushered in periods of violence, demonstrating the dangerous consequences of weakened religious governance in volatile socio-political landscapes. However, while Mozambique still faces a deepening insurgency, Tanzania has been able to contain the escalation of violence and conflict within its borders.

7. Back from the Edge: Institutional Reform and Convergence in Tanzania

Since 2017, despite concerns of conflict spillover, Tanzania has experienced just two attacks by ASWJ, both of which occurred in October 2020 on borderland villages in the country's Mtwara district (ACLED 2024). Moreover, targeted assassinations of local government officials in the Pwani region, which was prevalent between 2015 and 2017, has ceased. Violent takeovers of mosques and killing of moderate clerics in regions such as Mwanza have also largely subsided and Tanzania has not witnessed any sustained clashes between security forces and militant groups anywhere near the scale of the 2013 Amboni Caves incident.

In a study of Tanzania's ability to contain widespread instances of terrorism9 within its borders, Bofin (2022) outlines several factors which has led Tanzania's more militant leaders and informal institutions to come into a modus vivendi with the state and by proxy, BAKWATA. In 2015, when intrareligious violence in Tanzania was at a high, Sheikh Abubakar Zubeir bin Ally Mbwana became the third leader of BAKWATA. One of his first priorities was to improve relations between the council and some of the country's more religiously conservative informal institutions. He did this through activating Article 103 of the council's constitution which allows for the establishment of a Majlis Tansiq (coordination council) comprising members from across Muslim organisations, including the chairman of the Tanzania Islamic Foundation (TIF) and leader of the Baraza Kuu. Both the TIF and Baraza Kuu were previously associated with promulgating a highly confrontational stance towards the government and BAKWATA in the 1990s, which led to several violent incidents. Directly engaging these influential voices in addressing violence helped to strengthen the credibility of BAKWATA and marginalise jihadist elements (Bofin 2022).

This contributed to a reorientation of institutions associated with hardline Salafism from confrontation with the state towards settlement. For example, in July 2017, Sheikh Salim Barahiyan, head of the Africa Muslim Youth Centre (AMYC) which in 2012 was identified by UN investigators as supporting al-Shabaab, began to speak out publicly against Muslim groups that declared takfir10against fellow believers and challenge the state violently and illegitimately. In one speech, Sheikh Barahiyan spoke of Muslim institutions being 'infiltrated by a group that identifies as Salafi...these groups have entered our country, and are dividing it" (Tanzanian Islamic Foundation 2017 as cited in Bofin 2022: para 29). Similarly, other informal Islamic institutions which had only a decade earlier participated in violent demonstration against "mfumo kristo" (the Christian system), moved from a more confrontational agenda to social service provision, particularly education–more acceptable for the state. This allowed these institutions to maintain their access to foreign donor fundings, while compelling them to assert greater control over local mosques and madrasas (educational institutions) under their control (Bofin 2022). Today, both the AMYC and TIF have extensive education programmes and operate dozens of schools (Bofin 2022). In response to guarantees by Uamsho to not engage in public activism towards Zanzibari independence and institution of sharia, the government agreed to release over 100 prisoners associated with a spike in terrorist attacks in Zanzibar in 2012–2013 (Bofin 2022).

The evolution of BAKWATA underscores the potential for formal institutions to adapt and reclaim their roles in fostering conflict resolution and intrafaith unity. Over time, BAKWATA's reforms allowed it to partially overcome its earlier inefficiencies and corruption, enabling it to better fulfil its institutional responsibilities and re-establish some legitimacy within Tanzania's Muslim community. This period also marked a significant shift in the relationship between formal and informal institutions, as BAKWATA's interests began to align more closely with those of informal networks such as ASWJ, the Tanzanian Islamic Foundation and other hardline groups.

8. Conclusion

This study has shown that the divergent trajectories of Islamist militancy in Mozambique and Tanzania cannot be fully understood without considering the interaction between formal and informal religious institutions. Drawing on Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) typology, the analysis demonstrates that where institutions are both misaligned and weak, as in the case of Mozambique, there is a greater risk of conflict escalation. In Mozambique, the national Islamic council (Cislamo) failed to maintain credibility or cohesion, enabling informal institutions like ASWJ to evolve into substitutive and ultimately competing actors. These informal groups filled the vacuum left by decaying formal structures, initially attempting to provide religious guidance and community leadership, before actively undermining state authority and formal religious governance.

In contrast, Tanzania's formal religious institution, BAKWATA, though initially compromised by inefficiency and public distrust, undertook substantive internal reforms that fostered a more complementary relationship with informal religious actors. By strategically engaging Salafi-inspired networks and integrating their interests into a broader institutional framework, BAKWATA was able to neutralise extremist narratives and redirect activism toward constructive forms of engagement, including education and social services. This process of institutional convergence, underpinned by dialogue and strategic coordination, played a central role in containing the domestic spread of Islamist militancy.

[9] This article employs the understanding of terrorism reflected in various UN instruments and resolutions, recognising that no universally accepted legal definition exists. The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) and subsequent resolutions condemn 'criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act'.

[10] Takfīr is an Islamic term referring to the act of declaring another Muslim to be a non-believer. Takfir has been at the centre of theological debates, particularly with the rise of extremist groups such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda who are perceived by many scholars to have weaponised takfir to label other Muslims as apostates and justify their actions against them.

It is, however, important to note that religious institutional alignment alone does not account for these divergent outcomes. Tanzania's relatively robust and coordinated security institutions likely played a decisive role in complementing these religious reforms, enabling the state to disrupt militant networks, deter violent spillover from Mozambique and uphold public order. Conversely, Mozambique's weaker security architecture has struggled to contain the insurgency and protect local communities, amplifying the consequences of religious institutional fragmentation.

Ultimately, this comparison highlights how both institutional interactions, whether complementary, substitutive or competing, and the strength of broader governance systems, particularly in the security sector, shape conflict trajectories. For policymakers, fostering alignment between formal and informal religious institutions while concurrently investing in capable, rights-respecting security institutions, should form the cornerstone of any strategy to mitigate violent extremism and associated acts of terrorism in fragile contexts. Mozambique's experience underscores the urgency of such reforms, while Tanzania's approach offers practical lessons in institutional resilience and coordinated conflict prevention.

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