

Islamic Fundamentalism and Pagad: An Internal Security Issue for South Africa?

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- *The Islamic character of People against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad) is alarming, given the actions of armed Islamic fundamentalist movements internationally. But, aside from the obvious threat posed by vigilantism, does Pagad pose an internal security risk for South Africa?*

Despite Pagad's insistence that it is not a Muslim organisation, it is undeniably a South African Muslim phenomenon. Whether Pagad poses a threat to the internal security of the country remains a controversial issue. Its leaders claim the police have become impotent in the face of the rule of the powerful gangs, partly due to the power of the gangsters and partly due to the corruption in the police force. According to Pagad leaders, their actions have given hope to a crime-afflicted community.

However, it is inevitable that vigilante groups themselves become criminals through the means they choose to achieve their goals. The extent to which state structures are prepared to tolerate vigilante groups will be decisive in the course of future events. In the case of Pagad, there has been a very inconsistent approach by the state towards vigilante actions over the past two years.

The police have so far proven unable to effectively eradicate the gang problem in the Western Cape. Add to this the mobilisation of a very strong belief system such as Islam, and it becomes clear that the security forces are facing a very difficult task in trying to control the movement.

Islam in South Africa

To understand the evolution of Pagad, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the origin of the Muslims in South Africa. Muslims entered South Africa from three separate directions and during different periods. The first Muslims at the Cape were Mardyckers from Amboya who arrived in 1658. The Mardyckers were registered as slaves and employed to protect the Dutch colonial settlement from attack by the San (Mayson, 1970). Together with the local converts to Islam, they were referred to as "Malays," despite the fact that less than one percent came from today's Malaysia.

The second stream of Muslims arrived in South Africa much later than the Cape Muslims. This group arrived in 1860 as indentured labourers from Gujarat, Bombay and, on a smaller scale, Madras and Calcutta. They responded to the recruitment campaign of colonists who were looking for a cheap and efficient labour force for their sugar plantations. Today, the descendants of this group are concentrated in Gauteng, the Northwest, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal (Esack, 1996).

In 1871, a third group of Muslims, of Indian descent, came to South Africa. They were called the "passenger" Indians because they paid their own fares to this country. This group, also known as the "Zanzibars", settled in and around Durban. In spite of the obstacles that Indians encountered in South Africa, they spread throughout the country and by 1880 had moved to the Northern Province and the Cape.

Although Muslims make up only 2% of South Africa's population today, they have come to play an important role in the socio-economic and political affairs of the country. For example, more than

10% of all members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers are Muslims. Among the many influential positions held by Muslims are Mandela's legal advisor, his autobiographer, the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Amnesty Committee, the secretary of the South African Police Service and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court .

The majority of Muslims in the RSA, as elsewhere in the world, are the Sunni Muslims. The Shi'ite Muslims are the more militant group. However, there are some members of this extreme minority located in Cape Town, comprised mostly of Muslim activists and scholars.

The Muslim community is one of the most religious and traditional groups in society. According to Farid Esack, the dominant Muslim voice is committed to gender equality, freedom of speech, association, and the separation of religion and state: "While many do not live according to the tenants of Islam, most are prepared to die for it" (Esack, 1996)

The Islamic People

Muslims believe that God called Mohammed as a prophet to establish the Islamic religion. Born in Mecca in 570 AD, Mohammed is said to have received his first revelations from God in 610 AD. As an Islamic preacher, Mohammed fled to Medina in 622 AD, to escape imminent arrest. His flight was so important in Islamic history that Muslims have based their calendar on it (Gawrych, 1995).

In Medina, Mohammed founded the universal Islamic community, and local tribes submitted to his authority. He extended his activities beyond preaching and became involved in politics, trade, taxation and other areas essential to government administration. He became a statesman and conqueror.

As the Islamic faith expanded into other areas, so war became an integral part of this religion. From 622 to 632, Mohammad's influence grew from Medina to encompass much of Arabia. Jihad (to strive, struggle or fight) became the term associated with war

There are two types of Jihad in the religious sense. The Greater Jihad (al-jihad al akbar) refers to the personal struggle of the heart, where the believer strives to overcome personal temptations and the carnal self. This inner struggle is Jihad's highest form. The lesser Jihad (al-jihad al-asghar) is the outward struggle of Muslims against those attacking the faith and requires using the tongue, hands or sword. Islamic teaching thus ennobles military service and war for the faith. In fact, God promises eternal life to any Muslim who dies fighting "in the path of God" (Gawrych, 1995).

Islam is not a monolithic whole, however, even when it comes to understanding Jihad. Muslims agree on the basic concepts of Greater and lesser Jihad and revere martyrdom, but major differences exist concerning the place of Holy War in the modern world. Islam is divided into various groups, each with its own interpretation of the Muslim holy book - the Quran - and the prophet Mohammed's sayings and deeds.

Modernism and Revivalism

One Muslim division is between the modernist and revivalist. Modernist Muslims interpret their faith in terms of modern ideas, such as evolution, the political idea of democracy and women's emancipation. Revivalists reject Western constructs and call for restoring traditional Islamic ideas.

Revivalists believe in literal creation, accept the Quran as Allah's actual writings, and press for an Islamic state based upon Sharia - Muslim law derived from the Quran and Mohammed's teachings. Revivalists are sometimes called fundamentalists because they wish to return to their faith's original principle (Kibble, 1995)

Islamic Fundamentalism

"Militant" Islamists believe that their primary obligation is to act against states which they see as embodying contemporary "ignorance" - jahiliyya. Jahiliyya must therefore be confronted and eradicated through insurrection directed by a "believing minority." Their primary strategic aim is to undermine what they see as the state's principal foundation: its hybah, the perceived invincibility that it cultivates among its people. To undermine this hybah, militants demonstrate the state's failure to protect its key leaders and strategic installations (Karawan, 1997).

The second strategic aim of the militants is to weaken the state by destroying its main revenue sources for example, the oil and gas industry in Algeria and tourism in Egypt. By doing so, militants hope to undermine popular support for the regime, preventing it from providing the necessary protection services to citizens .

The third objective of militants is to provoke ruling elites to strike back indiscriminately with emergency laws, mass searches and widespread arrests regardless of legal process, disrupting normal life and restricting people's movements. The resulting popular resentment is intended to fuel opposition and to create a social atmosphere receptive to militant ideas. Militants thus challenge not only the regime, but also other Islamists who accept the idea of reforming (Karawan, 1997).

The Islamic fundamentalist picture is one of fanaticism, violence, and intolerance. Such characteristics almost ensure that any positive Islamic elements are neither seen nor heard. Similarly, the Muslim-linked South African movement Pagad is criticised by the media as being anti-state. Pagad, which sometimes operates outside the law, is seen by many as a fundamentalist group with ulterior motives.

Islam and the Struggle

Since their arrival on South African shores, Muslims have been engaged in a struggle against oppression and dictatorship. Shaikh Mattura, for example, was the first prisoner on South Africa's notorious Robben Island. Other examples are the murder, in detention, of Imam Abdullah Haron in 1960, the running battles with apartheid security forces in the 1980s and the police killings of student Mohsin Jeeah in 1994. For many Muslims, the Pagad phenomenon is just a continuation of a proud heritage to fight for justice (Jeeah, 1996).

The Islamic movement in South Africa began in the 1950s under the auspices of academics and professionals in the Western Cape. These academics and professionals received their religious inspiration from modern movements in Pakistan and Egypt (the Muslim Brotherhood) and the anti-collaborationist politics of the Non-European Unity Movement in the Western Cape. This movement's religious dimension, for example, empowered the youth to challenge the religious leadership's silence on apartheid (Tayob, 1996).

Since then, the Islamic movement has concerned itself more directly with social and political issues. In the eighties, progressive formations such as the Call of Islam (established in 1983) and the Muslim Youth Movement (established in 1970) joined the larger democratic movement in the fight against social and political inequalities in South Africa.

In 1980, motivated by the Iran-Iraq war, Achmat Cassiem, after years of imprisonment and banning, steered Qiblah - a militant, fundamentalist force - towards the adoption of international Islamism (Tayob, 1996). Qiblah had played a militant role in the anti-apartheid struggle of the eighties with its slogan "One solution, Islamic Revolution." It had called for a boycott of South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. Qiblah defended the political positions of Black Consciousness and Pan-Africanism, presenting all its arguments in Islamic revolutionary terms.

However, the key to understanding Qiblah may be the personality of its founder. Cassiem has long been insisted on being referred to as "Imam", initially to enhance his community position with the

apartheid security and judicial system. It is not unusual to hear his supporters referring to him as "the Imam "

A few of Qiblah supporters were instrumental in setting up Pagad. Although some of them made irresponsible statements lending credence to assertions of fundamentalism, Pagad's main objective is to free the community from drugs and gangsterism.

The Aim of Pagad

Pagad was formed in Cape Town in 1996 as a community reaction to the lawlessness and crime in the townships of the Cape Flats. Almost every family living in these townships has been affected or victimised by this scourge. According to the commander of the Police Gang Investigation Unit, Superintendent Al Heylinger, there are presently between 35 000 and 80 000 active gang members in the Cape, belonging to 137 gangs. Rape, drug abuse, murder and crime are the daily experience of South Africans living in these townships.

In reaction to this situation, Pagad aimed to eradicate the gangs and drug dealers so as to free the community from the violent activities by gangs, as well as the distribution of drugs. The group's first taste of headlines was when its members, under the leadership of Cassiem, targeted the Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar. They invaded his home late at night in February 1996, demanding that he take action against drug lords and gangsters. Pagad then carried on with its campaign, delivering ultimatums to drug lords, and marching on their homes. But, despite these actions, neither the drug merchants nor the government took much notice (Jeenah, 1996).

Pagad argues that its actions are a natural response of citizens feeling the failure of the state to protect them. By May 1996, support for Pagad had grown to about 6 000 people. According to Ms Abidah Roberts, Pagad's national secretary, support for Pagad during 1997 was hovering around the 100 000 mark. A survey by the Institute for a Democratic Alternative for South Africa, in fact found that 80% of the community supported Pagad.

Pagad is not structured as a formal organisation with a specific constitutional code of conduct or organisational administrative procedures. According to Roberts, Pagad comprises 11 substructures: social welfare, legal, network and distributions, secretariat, security, finance, medical, education, media, the senior citizens' forum and the disciplinary committee. Roberts describes Pagad as a non-profit movement, receiving most of its income in donations from the community.

Pagad's Modus Operandi

Pagad usually begins an action with an emotional meeting, generally at the Gatesville Mosque, before supporters go out to the houses of identified drug dealers. At the identified house, drug dealers are threatened and are given a 24-hour warning to stop dealing in drugs. There have also been scores of late-night attacks on the houses of alleged drug merchants all over the Peninsula, many of which the police have linked to Pagad.

While the involvement of Qiblah in Pagad is the subject of much speculation, Pagad's meetings clearly rely on the Islamic discourse nurtured by the anti-apartheid movement in general, and in Cassiem's version in particular. Quranic verses appealing for unity are recited at the end of every meeting, with members holding hands over their heads, not unlike scenes in the civil rights movement. The atmosphere and motivation is certainly and unmistakably Islamist.

Despite repeated attempts (petitions, memoranda, marches and meetings), Pagad has not succeeded in gaining the necessary support to address the crime and drug problem in the townships. The failure of more moderate means of action resulted in individuals in Pagad adopting more militant means (Manjra, 1996). However, this shift to a more militant modus operandi led to severe internal conflict within Pagad.

Pagad Leadership

During the period of October to November 1996, after months of intense public exposure, solidarity broke when Pagad's chief commander, Muhammed Ali Parker, accused Qiblah supporters of wanting to take control of Pagad. Parker was expelled from the movement. Soon after Parker's removal, original Pagad leaders such as Farouk Jaffer, Nadthmie Edries and Ismail Effendi also broke away. They claim to still head the "real" Pagad, but their opponents disagree.

This internal split in the leadership cadre of Pagad had a negative effect on the organisation. Over the past six months, Pagad has maintained a low profile, with fewer and fewer marches. The reasons are not entirely clear, but some claim that Pagad's influence is on the wane and its members are steadily becoming disenchanted with its refusal to work within the law.

Some critics have expressed the opinion that Pagad's efforts to shut down the gangs and drug trade have not been unsuccessful, but have unified the gangs in the face of a common and belligerent enemy. Academics such as Wilfred Sharf (Institute of Criminology at UCT) maintain that Pagad has failed to recognise that the gangs are very sophisticated. Pagad's approach to the gangs has been "elementary and impoverished" which possibly explains their lack of success.

According to Senior Superintendent Jeremy Veary, Head of the Police Intelligence in the Western Cape, leadership squabbles have rendered Pagad largely ineffective: "There are probably less than 200 committed supporters at present, while the leadership has split over the use of violence versus non-violence in combating gangsters."

Pagad is a disparate group with several conflicting perspectives. An organisation is only as strong as its leadership. In Pagad's case, underlying ideological differences and personality clashes among the leaders might harm the organisation.

Pagad and Gangsterism

The low-intensity warfare between Pagad and the gangs on the Cape Flats started in May 1996 when Pagad declared its intent to "take out" gangsters and drug dealers. Accusing government of being ineffectual in dealing with crime, Pagad gave an ultimatum to the Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar demanding, inter alia:

- the death penalty be made mandatory for drug dealers;
- that the assets of gangsters be confiscated;
- that R10 000 bail be imposed on drug users;
- that no bail be granted to drug dealers;
- that sentences for first offenders be more severe; and
- control be stepped up at harbours and airports.

But Pagad's repeated attempts brought no results whatsoever. The gangsters, on the other hand, have used slick media tactics, claiming that they are victims of apartheid, its poor education system and the Group Areas Act, which resulted in their being dumped into ghettos. They claim that peddling drugs is their only source of income.

In the meantime, there has been an increase in the availability of drugs in the country. The gangs have become increasingly sophisticated. They are no longer merely bands of "skollies" (young, coloured hooligans involved in petty crimes, mischief, alcohol-abuse and gangsterism), but well-organised drug cartels with international connections and interests in legitimate business.

Highly organised and well-connected gang bosses preside over vast business empires. drug dealing, prostitution, extortion, gun-running, armed robbery, organised burglary and dealing in stolen goods.

The bottom line is money. Many innocent women and children are killed in the crossfire as they continue their war for power and turf.

Some of the gangs have their roots in the almost 300-year-old prison gangs in the country. The gang rivalry today destabilises prisons to such an extent that maintaining discipline has become a virtual nightmare for correctional service officers and the security forces.

The Security Forces

Pagad emerged out of the inability of state structures to deal with crime, violence and the drug trade on the Cape Flats. The question may well be asked why are the security forces unable to address these problems?

It appears as if the police are unable to intervene timeously so as to pre-empt attacks. There are also allegations of police complicity in the drug trade, making it difficult for the police service to get to the bottom of the activities of gang syndicates.

Then there is the problem with staff and budget costs. Police statistics, for example reveal that a total of 465 399 policeman hours at a cost of R7 235 492, was spent monitoring Pagad marches, and 1 338 police vehicles-including armoured vehicles-were used at a cost of R312 599 during 1997 in the Western Cape. The monitoring of such events removes the already thinly spread police force from other normal policing functions.

The South African National Defence Force (SANDF) too has allocated a large personnel contingent to help monitor Pagad demonstrations. There is an entire full-time division operational 24 hours a day, seven days a week to assist the police to fight against gangsterism and drugs in the Western Cape.

A combined SAPS and SANDF operation, named "Operation Recoil" during August and September last year, resulted in more than 200 people being arrested for the illegal possession of weapons, drug smuggling and stolen vehicles in the Western Cape (Mare, 1997).

The use of the SANDF in this internal security role has placed tremendous pressure on its financial resources, given the cuts to the defence budget. The budget for the SANDF has been cut by 59% since 1989 and the continuing reductions in the budget are seriously affecting the capacity to assist the SAPS in combating crime (Department of Defence, 1996).

A Serious Threat?

How serious is the threat posed by Pagad to the authority of the democratic state? There is no evidence that Pagad's agenda goes beyond its founding principle, which is ridding the community of drug barons and gangsters. The problem, however, is that the new South African nation, having just emerged from the repression of apartheid, has become terribly obsessed with individual rights.

Such rights, which are absolutely necessary, can shake the tightrope in any society if they are not balanced with the rights that law-abiding citizens should enjoy. According to a recent Idasa survey, 29% respondents have problems accepting the legitimacy of state laws protecting its citizens (Department of Defence, 1996). Thus, while each individual gangster and hardened criminal's personal security are guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, similar guarantees do not exist and are not enforceable for the security of communities from criminals.

The media coverage of Pagad's activities has been alarming. Much was made of reports claiming that "the threat of Islamic extremist fundamentalism has arrived on the South African doorsteps." The killing of Staggie (leader of the "Hard Livings" gang) for example, has posed many ethical questions for the Muslim community. It cannot be denied that the manner in which he was killed is

unacceptable in Islam.

Vigilante and irresponsible behaviour by individuals in Pagad could seriously diminish its effectiveness on the fight against criminals by shifting the focus from the real issues to that of Islam-bashing. Such behaviour could also create the impression that it is acceptable for people to take the law into their own hands.

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