

“Terrorism,” as Interpreted in Media: The Pitfalls

By Newton Sibanda and Benedict Tembo

To quite many people, Islam and terrorism are synonymous. The media, too, has not helped demystify the perceived link between Islam and terrorism, thereby creating a misconception that Muslims are inherently terrorists. The situation has not been any better after the September 11 attacks in the USA. Contributors Newton Sibanda and Benedict Tembo take a look at the prejudices creeping out of media against the Muslims, and its effects.

LUSAKA, ZAMBIA—A Zambian Sikh sending off his family to Pakistan nearly died from embarrassment when a Zambian journalist usually respected but this time around drunk, scorned him at the Lusaka International Airport. The journalist had tagged him an agent of Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network—in the presence of his wife, son, daughter-in-law and several Muslims headed for Mecca for the annual pilgrimage.

Apart from the humiliation of being branded a Bin Laden agent on account of his physical appearance, the man believes he was taunted so because of his Asian descent. “We took it lightly because he was drunk,” said the target of the attacks, who preferred to be called Singh.

The family’s experience, however, is not an isolated one but a reflection of the counter-terrorism being played out in the media and how it has impacted on Muslims worldwide. “Those things are very normal. I have travelled the whole world, [and] in some cases, Muslims have been harassed,” Singh said.

The incident took place four

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months after the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington. The Zambian journalist’s outburst on, albeit in drunken stupor, illustrates people’s perceptions about Muslims since 9/11.

Prejudice by the predominantly Christian Zambian society against Muslims, most of whom are Asians has been a common and burning issue of the day in Zambia. Last year for instance, some young Muslim pupils and teachers at Makeni Islamic School in Lusaka were assaulted after some Zambians accused them of leading a secluded life which barred non-Muslims from their society. It was only government intervention that it was proved that in fact, the ratio of

Zambian teachers to Muslims was about the same.

Most of the pupils on the other hand, although taught some Muslim norms are Christians. But the hatred by most Zambians towards Muslims does not seem to abate even when Zambia embraces all religions. To a number of Zambians, Muslims have been narrowed down to self-conceited Asians and Arabs whose fundamentalism has overtaken their sense of reasoning.

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Ibrahim Mamadou, a west African Muslim living in Zambia, decries such portrayal as it is fanning hatred against all Muslims. Media, he said, should strive to foster love between oppressed and oppressor. The more those who control the media build hatred, the more problems they create for the world, he added.

“It’s very unfair because not everyone can be a terrorist. Even a Chris-

tian can be an extremist but here (Zambia) fortunately, the constitution states (Zambia) is a Christian nation tolerant of other religions," said Mamadou.

Much of the blame can be attributed to the ignorance of writers unfamiliar with the tenets of Islam, says Abdulah Aziz Kosa, national chairman of the Ahlibait Foundation of Zambia, a grouping of Shiite Muslims.

According to Kosa, one of the first indigenous Zambians to enter Saudi Arabia and who lived in the Middle East for nine years to study Islamic (Sharia) law, the powerful media controlled by the west has painted a picture that Muslims are terrorists. "Many writers are not well-versed in Islam, so, my appeal to Muslim nations is that they should accommodate journalists so that they can better understand Islam," said Kosa.

"Islam stands for peace and a Muslim is someone who is at peace with God," he said. "Islam does not promote terrorism. A fundamentalist is someone who adheres to principles of religion but we don't condone extremism."

The Islamic nations, on the other hand, are scared to react to the powerful west because they can be slapped with sanctions that would weaken their economies. "They can boycott their oil," Kosa noted.

"My view is that Christians, Muslims and other religions must dialogue because our aspirations are all the same, to go to heaven. But we cannot go to heaven through the barrel of the

gun," he said.

Muslims are further consolidating as a result of a global attempt to demonise them, he said. "Those who want to eliminate terrorism are busy claiming to fight it while in fact they are perpetrating this."

Sheikh Shaban Phiri, Director of the Islamic Propagation Centre in Lusaka, believes the word "terrorism" is a misnomer maliciously used by America and its controlled media as a shield to commit atrocities on Islamic nations.

Terrorism, according to Phiri, is a creation of the media through American intelligence so as to legitimise their persecution of innocent people. "No reasonable person of any civilised society will accept the suggestion that 'terrorism' is an act that causes great fear only to the lives of Americans and the Jews, to the exclusion of all others," said Phiri. "It is fallacious to hold that proposition; it is repugnant to natural justice."

But that is exactly the perspective that has been forced upon media, which has been conditioned to these unjust images, without regard for international law and human rights, Phiri added. Phiri believes terrorism, as covered by and played out in media, has been used as a shield to diminish the strength of the Muslims and the spread of Islam worldwide. "The propaganda has nothing to do with either Arabs or Afghans. Anyone who supports Islam or opposes American policy is subjected to such hatred and cruelty."

"One might ask why media has failed to maintain its independence and freedom in its approach toward issues of such delicate nature. The only possible answer is that media is funded and controlled by the same enemies of Islam," he said.

"The globalised media has been used to deliberately destroy Islam, which is equated with terrorism simply because Muslims believe that success comes as a result of people's submissiveness to Allah alone, and not to the American trinity of America the father, Israel the son, and Britain the holy ghost, all but one acting together against natural justice and order of God," Phiri said. "There is one fundamental principle that the media ought to know about Islam: The more people speak against it, the more Islam spreads out like a bushfire."

Another example is the biased use of terminology by the global media, such as the use of the word tribes for Africans and ethnic groups for whites, tribal wars for Africans and ethnic wars for whites. The global media quite often creates stereotypes through its biased selective use of terminologies for different groups. ↻

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