

# Trouble in Paradise: Mauritius Tries to Ward Off Islamist Radicalization

David H. Ucko | Tuesday, Nov. 28, 2017

In late 2014, Mauritian intelligence services discovered that a handful of Muslims from Mauritius had traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight for the self-proclaimed Islamic State. Many of those jihadi recruits were swayed and enabled by a small yet troubling network of ideologues in the tropical island nation, which is located in the Indian Ocean some 1,200 miles east of mainland Africa. Intelligence gathered by Mauritian field officers identified one individual in particular, a radical preacher named Javed Meetoo, as the network's leader.

Since he emerged on their radar, Mauritian officials have closely followed Meetoo's efforts to build his movement; many of the details included in this article were provided by a senior government official working on domestic counterterrorism efforts. In October 2015, Meetoo created his own educational society, Abu Faaris, which quickly established links with two Islamist social groups, Zam Zam and Al Huda Wan Noor society, both of which sympathize with Islamic State ideology. Since then, Meetoo's public addresses promoting Shariah law have become more prominent and daring.

Meetoo's group has insignificant support among the Mauritian population. A former colony governed at different stages by the Dutch, the French and the British, Mauritius is a multiethnic and multicultural country, made up of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Chinese, 90 percent of whom are Christian. Since attaining independence in 1968, it has remained peaceful, with insignificant communal tension. Indeed, many among the island's small population, which is just shy of 1.3 million, reacted with shock to the news that some of their own had gone to fight for the Islamic State and were encouraging others to follow suit.

Nonetheless, more signs are emerging that these radicalization efforts are bearing fruit, particularly among young Mauritians, among converts to Islam and among those swayed by financial or other incentives. This overall trend raises the risk of attacks against Western targets on the island, which is known for its international tourism, and against the government itself, which generally adopts progressive, pro-Western policies. Though Mauritius has not experienced terrorist attacks to date, ethnic



*The sun sets near the town of Flic en Flac, Mauritius, April 8, 2008 (dpa photo by Lars Halbauer via AP images).*

tensions do exist and provide the kindling for a possible escalation. Any terrorist violence would undermine tourism in Mauritius—a main source of its income—and further strain the communal bargain on which its political stability is based.

Islamist extremism thus represents a real, if unrealized (<http://www.firstpost.com/world/why-mauritius-must-wake-up-to-the-islamic-state-threat-fast-2555616.html>), security threat. More broadly, efforts in Mauritius to radicalize and recruit followers highlight the vulnerability of multiethnic societies to the challenges posed by identity politics. These challenges are particularly acute where, as in Mauritius, political power is divided explicitly along ethnic or religious lines.

***Despite widespread complacency, signs are emerging that radicalization efforts in Mauritius are bearing fruit.***

States with major ethnic, religious and linguistic divisions are common across parts of Africa and Asia, largely due to the ugly legacy of colonialism. Hence, there is ample opportunity for extremist groups to find similar entry points and potential pockets of support. As the Mauritius case shows, such states should not rest easy even if they have escaped terrorism and violence so far.

### **Fault Lines in the ‘Rainbow Nation’**

The different ethnic and religious groups in Mauritius include Hindu descendants of Indian indentured laborers, Tamils from southern India, Creole descendants of African slaves, Muslims from India, a Chinese community and a smaller community of Europeans. Through this influx of peoples, the country developed into a pluralistic and diverse society; some call it the “rainbow nation.” The general absence of conflict and strife, along with the island’s natural beauty—volcanic peaks, pristine beaches, turquoise waters—has bred a certain complacency about it being immune to the threat of violent extremism.

There is some merit to this view. Religious communities in Mauritius practice their faith without impediment, and there is not the type of discrimination that, in various Western contexts, has fueled radicalization. All governments have included Muslim ministers in their Cabinets, and the current government has a Muslim vice prime minister, so it is difficult to argue that Muslims are politically excluded. And yet, there are aspects of Mauritius’ politics and history that make it vulnerable to the spread of Islamist ideologies.

Tensions between the Muslim community and the state can be traced to the mid-1980s. The government,

then led by Anerood Jugnauth's center-left Mouvement Socialiste Militant, or MSM, was steering the country to industrial and economic development. In 1982, however, the coalition between the MSM and the more left-wing Mouvement Militant Mauricien, or MMM, fractured. The few Muslim elements within Jugnauth's MSM defected to join the MMM, then headed by a Christian. The perceived disloyalty pushed Jugnauth to launch a communally inspired electoral campaign guided by the exclusionary, implicitly anti-Muslim slogan, "Tear up the weeds and protect our mountains." The Jugnauth government favored Hindu domination in all spheres of public life, which effectively excluded Muslims, especially in the civil service. After the MSM-MMM coalition fell apart, there would be no Muslim Cabinet minister for the next two years.

Other government actions during this period also inflamed relations with the Muslim community. In 1984, in response to perceived political meddling, the government shuttered the Libyan embassy and declared Libya's ambassador persona non grata. In 1987, it abolished the Muslim Personal Law, stripping nikaah, or the Muslim marriage contract, of legal standing. The government's reasoning was that the country could not have two laws regulating marriage, one for Muslims and one for non-Muslims, particularly as Islam allows men to marry up to four women. Instead, legislation adopted from the French civil code would regulate all marriages, causing consternation within the Muslim community. Today, Muslims are free to contract several marriages, but only one can have the legal standing of a civil marriage.



*The Jummah Mosque in Port Louis, Mauritius, April 10, 2008 (dpa photo by Lars Halbauer via AP images).*

In the early 1990s, a number of Islamist outfits formed with the aim of re-Islamizing the Muslim community. The Zam Zam Islamic Center, funded with Saudi money, emerged as an education-oriented, ostensibly nonviolent Islamist civil-society organization that was engaged in mobilizing the Muslim community, promoting conservative Islamist norms and establishing a schooling system for Muslim children. In 1999, Al Huda Wan Noor was established as a Salafi organization seeking to educate and inform Mauritian Muslims of “proper” Islamic teachings and practices. These organizations are still active in Mauritius and benefit from strong ties to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

It was also in the 1990s that the Saudi-educated Cehl Fakeermeeah created the Hizbullah Party, seeking to challenge the Hindu-Creole dominance in government. The party won five seats in Port Louis, the capital, in the 1996 municipal elections, but its progress was quickly derailed by a sensational story that testified to a previously unseen capacity for violent extremism on the island. In 2000, Hizbullah was found to have established a “death squad” involving seven of its members. The squad set up a remote training camp in the highlands of Mauritius and engaged in bank robberies and a number of politically motivated murders. During a manhunt, three death squad members committed suicide, while the remaining four were arrested. The ensuing investigation implicated Cehl himself as the instigator of the unit, leading to his imprisonment from 2000 to 2003, when he was exonerated due to a lack of evidence.

This episode placed a significant strain on communal relations. To the government, it was an effort to maintain law and order, but Cehl and his followers saw it as a politically motivated crackdown (<http://muhammad-ali-ben-marcus.blogspot.com/2010/07/muslims-in-mauritius-face-persecution.html>). Stories soon emerged of the abusive conditions Cehl faced while incarcerated, including allegations of torture, which further inflamed tensions. Since his release, Cehl has continued to engage in politics and has formed a new party, the Mauritian Solidarity Front, or FSM.

## **Recent Tensions**

Islamism, then, clearly has a foothold in Mauritius. Even though they lack mass support, Islamist leaders have the resources and networks necessary to agitate and mobilize whenever opportunity calls. Within a multiethnic polity that must at all times balance communal interests, it is not difficult to find the necessary causes and incidents around which to rally support. For example, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the proposed promulgation of a Prevention of Terrorism Act became a major flashpoint. Muslim leaders argued that the new policy would unfairly target the Muslim community, given the perceived tendency to conflate terrorism and Islam, particularly in the West. As it happened, then-President Cassam Uteem, a Muslim, refused to approve the new act and resigned in solidarity with the Muslim community. Polarization increased further when the then-chief justice, Ariranga Pillay, became president and went ahead with the proposed legislation. Muslim resentment against the Hindu-majority government escalated, prompting a campaign of Islamization to defend and promote Islam as a religion and identity.

In the mid-2000s, the government decided to ban the use of loudspeakers to announce the Muslim call to prayer, or adhan. The rationale was that the amplified calls, occurring five times per day beginning at 5 a.m., were disruptive to public life. The Muslim community viewed this action as discriminatory and as an infringement of their rights. Some groups held demonstrations and appealed to the few Muslim ministers in government to resign. The government ultimately relented, yet it was all too easy for leading Islamist voices to fit the episode within the broader narrative of a war on Islam.

In recent years, Hindu-Muslim relations have been marked by increased tensions. In March 2016, during the Hindu Maha Shivratri festival, which honors the god Shiva, a group of Muslims damaged a structure set up to receive pilgrims in the southern part of the island. In retaliation, members of a Hindu socio-cultural group targeted the perpetrators of the attack and severed the wrists of a 26-year-old Muslim man. Flashpoints such as these have resulted in sporadic disturbances and vandalism, with mosques, houses, Hindu temples and public buildings being targeted.

Despite these tensions, the vast majority of Mauritian Muslims express no grievance with the state or its people. Still, a combination of communal frustration and religious nationalism has compelled some, led by Meetoo, the radical preacher, to campaign for greater rights for Muslims and for a greater role for religion in public life. For this minority, the emergence of al-Qaida and the Islamic State accelerated the process of radicalization and provided ready-made arguments with which to seek new followers. Indeed, the tensions inherent to managing communal relations would not have assumed such gravity without the compounding effects of globalization and the use of social media to transmit Islamist ideology, anti-Western propaganda and promises of self-redemption through conflict.

### **A Radical Leader, and His Strategy**

Meetoo is an adherent of a strict Tahweed interpretation of Islam that, much like the ideology of the Islamic State and al-Qaida, condemns adherents of other Muslim sects as apostates. He is a staunch believer in the need to implement Sharia law in Mauritius to protect Muslims and their way of life from the vices of impurity, capitalism and other Western influences. Meetoo is an articulate speaker and is well educated, having attended the highly ranked Royal College in Port Louis for his secondary schooling. More crucial to his ideology, he enrolled at the International Islamic University of Islamabad in Pakistan, where he completed his master's and doctorate. From there he traveled to Afghanistan, which was under Taliban rule, to deliver lectures to students, and he has also lectured at the Doha Academy of Tertiary Studies in Mauritius.

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In 2015, he set off, with his family, to the Middle East, presumably hoping to settle in Islamic State-controlled parts of Syria. Rebuffed in Turkey, the family returned to Mauritius, where the authorities, unable to convict Meetoo on terrorism charges, have kept a close eye on his activities. Now 40 years old, Meetoo has made a career for himself as a businessman, and lives in Port Louis with his wife and four children.

To date, Meetoo's strategy has been limited to proselytization. On Sundays and holidays, his organization, Abu Faaris, distributes pamphlets throughout the island. Additionally, the group conducts door-to-door canvassing within non-Muslim communities to encourage conversion, promising jobs, affordable housing, a one-time 100,000-rupee incentive payment—worth around \$3,000—and other perks. Those targeted include poor or disadvantaged Hindus and Creoles who are susceptible to promises of a better life. The sales pitch can include promises of funds, power, adventure, romance and, more abstractly, a sense of belonging in “the struggle.”

Meetoo and members of his group hold talks and prayers out in the open, atop a hillock in Port Louis, where they have in the past displayed the Islamic State banner. During these rallies, they encourage those gathered to join hands and fight against non-Muslim communities to avenge Muslim blood spilled in the Islamic State's “caliphate.”

Meetoo also brings his message to local mosques, where he is often permitted to speak after the prayer. As the older, generally more moderate worshippers leave, Meetoo is left with a small group of younger students who are more easily manipulated. Meetoo's message is punctuated with the projection of films of Syrian victims, mainly children dying under bombardments, so as to convey a sense of Western oppression. This message sells: Meetoo has been given a platform in other mosques and forums, where he crafts an image of the “real Muslim man” denouncing injustice and fighting for dignity.

These speaking engagements are complemented by online propaganda. Two Islamic websites, “Islaampure” and “Islam4Mauritius,” have recently featured propaganda criticizing the country's multiculturalism and promoting the vision of an Islamist, Shariah-governed theocracy. In a recent YouTube video (now removed), a Tamil convert to Islam who goes by the nom de guerre Abu Shuaib al-

Afriki lauds the wonders of the Islamic State and offers to facilitate Mauritian extremists' travel to Syria. In Creole, the local dialect in Mauritius spoken by nearly everyone, al-Afriqi denounces the vices of Western society and exhorts fellow Muslims to fulfill their religious duty and support the Islamic State.

Another approach of Meetoo is to challenge local scholars on controversial Islamic topics in the media. So far, few Muslim representatives have paid him much mind, but he has started a social media campaign to engage his critics more aggressively. His websites, though not officially violating any laws, are a vehicle for Islamic State propaganda, including its magazine Dabiq, as well as other online sources.

Meetoo's success in growing his audience prompted the government to bar him from a key mosque in the capital in 2015. The move prompted Meetoo to create his own structure, the Abu Faaris Institute, to sustain recruitment efforts and proselytism. The institute is estimated to hold an estimated 135 core members. Because many of these members, including Meetoo himself, hail from the business community or are independently wealthy, they have access to significant funds, which are used to attract new recruits. To extend its reach further, Abu Faaris has joined forces with the Zam Zam Islamic Center and Al Huda Wan Noor, which share a broadly similar ideology. Since these groups operate madrasas throughout the country, such partnerships provide an additional way to reach and radicalize Mauritian youth.

All this spells trouble for Mauritius. Until recently, authorities were primarily concerned with the threat of Mauritian citizens traveling to join the Islamic State. The declining fortunes of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and its calls for supporters to carry out attacks in their home countries, raise the potentially more immediate challenge of local radicals like Meetoo inciting terrorist activity at home. In the long term, the potential indoctrination of the country's youth amounts to a generational challenge that the government must learn how to counter.

## **The Government Response**

The Mauritian government has long been aware of the threat of terrorism. The Prevention of Terrorism Act passed in 2002 strengthened the national legal system and gave the police added powers of detention and investigation when dealing with alleged terrorist suspects. In 2009, a Counter Terrorism Unit was set up under the National Counter Terrorism Committee. The unit collects, analyzes and disseminates terrorism-related intelligence and reports directly to the prime minister's office. Further measures are being taken to strengthen intelligence-gathering and close legal loopholes relating to tracking foreign terrorist fighters and radicalization.

At the same time, Mauritius prizes and has sought to preserve its open and diverse society. Though the MSM party, in power since December 2014, is led by Jugnauth, the same prime minister whose actions in the 1980s exacerbated feelings of alienation among the country's Muslims, Jugnauth has recently taken steps to address religious tensions. His Cabinet includes four Muslims, one of whom is the vice prime

minister. In 2015, he appointed Ameenah Gurrib-Fakim, a Muslim, to serve as president of the republic—a largely ceremonial but still symbolically important position. Other steps include opening up a Mauritian embassy in Saudi Arabia, increasing the number of visas available to Muslims looking to make the Hajj pilgrimage, and setting up a national Urdu television channel on the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation, even though Urdu-speakers account for less than 2 percent of the population. To guarantee greater Muslim representation within the top echelons of the police, the government has also reserved two of the six deputy commissioner posts for Muslim officers.



*Mauritian Prime Minister Anerood Jugnauth arrives to attend the heads of state session of the India-Africa Forum Summit, New Delhi, India, Oct. 29, 2015 (AP photo by Saurabh Das).*

The approach is, by and large, sound, but further reforms are needed given the growing seriousness of the threat posed by Islamist radicals. The government correctly recognizes the majority of the Muslim population as law-abiding, with no interest in violent extremism. Yet its view of Meetoo and his cohorts as a low-level threat is dangerously complacent. Although there has not been any violence to date by this group, or even any violation of Mauritian law, the previous violent turn of the Hizbullah party suggests pre-emptive measures are necessary to avoid bloodshed.

To be truly effective, the government's response must go beyond traditional, security-oriented



counterterrorism practices, such as surveillance and intelligence sharing. While monitoring and border-protection measures must be sustained, such efforts should form part of a broader national strategy that responds to the social, political and economic vulnerabilities that Meeto0 exploits.

The strategy should incorporate new and effective steps in countering violent extremism, geared toward reducing opportunities for radicalization. This approach is non-prosecutorial and community-driven, enabling the identification of individuals and networks at risk as well as pre-emptive interventions to change their trajectory. As suggested by past international experience with countering violent extremism, promising avenues include opening up forums for direct interaction between citizens and the government via enduring local-level partnerships based on trust and common interest. This work is wholly separate from the government's traditional counterterrorism policies. Countering violent extremism is not an intelligence-gathering exercise, and will fail if it is seen as punitive or as stigmatizing.

There should also be a public relations campaign to counter the narrative that Meeto0 and his group use to attract followers. A critical component of this campaign should frame Mauritius' multiculturalism as an invaluable asset rather than as a problem to be managed. The government must also engage the media to communicate its response to the threat of radicalization, in order to be transparent and avoid misunderstandings related to these efforts.

Over the medium and long term, the government will have to address the economic and political factors that give more radical ideologies a foothold. Economically, the state must look after pockets of the population that have been left behind despite economic growth. Creating job opportunities for the country's 24,500 unemployed youth—of whom 5,000 are university graduates—would help reduce the appeal of Meeto0's anti-government rhetoric and of the financial incentives he provides. Revenue from a tax on private companies under the Corporate Social Responsibility framework could be used to finance vocational training and courses on entrepreneurship. It is also necessary for the government to invite foreign investment not just in the niche sectors of tourism, offshore business and financial services, as is currently the case, but also in rural areas where poverty is more pronounced.

Politically, authorities must modernize the electoral system to ensure a stable, responsive, and fairly representative government in line with the evolution and aspirations of the Mauritian nation. As of now, when candidates register to stand for elections they are required to declare the community to which they belong. Such practices entrench divisions that can lead to identity-driven conflict. It is true that Mauritius' "Best Loser System," by which ethnic minorities are ensured some representation in parliament, virtually guarantees a measure of political power for minorities, but it does so on the basis of their ethnicity or religion and therefore hampers the development of a truly Mauritian nation.

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A better way forward would be to replace the current electoral system of first-past-the-post with one of proportional representation, a recommendation already made in a 2014 government white paper. The idea would be to move away from the winner-takes-all formula by which relatively successful parties are excluded entirely from power. In this manner, minorities would either be represented proportionally, if votes are cast on the basis of identity, or—ideally—parties would mobilize on the basis of policy, creating a healthier and more vibrant Mauritian democracy.

### **The Value of Prevention**

The governance structures are already in place to implement these steps. What is required, however, is for counterterrorism to become a greater concern politically. To date, the government's emphasis has been on economic affairs, and there is a reluctance even to discuss terrorism for fear of threatening the tourism sector and communal relations. This type of thinking may reap short-term benefits, but over time it could prove fatally counterproductive.

A revamped approach would involve boosting police and intelligence capabilities to respond to the threat both online and on the ground. Meanwhile, the government must address the perceived political grievances of some members of the Muslim community and work hard to gain their trust. Combined with a strategic messaging campaign and actions to coordinate regionally and internationally on counterterrorism, such efforts will deny Meetoo's group entry points for recruitment and possible attack.

With a balanced strategy, the government can sustain its economic and development achievements while addressing a mounting threat to law and order. Both visionary thinking and pragmatic decision-making are needed to respond in a commensurate manner to a real threat—while upholding Mauritius' standing as a safe tourist destination where different ethnic communities live in relative harmony.

*David H. Ucko is the director of the Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program (CTFP) and an associate professor at the College of International Security Affairs, National Defense University. He is also an adjunct professor at the Johns Hopkins University and an adjunct fellow at the Department of War Studies, King's College London. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not an official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government. Follow him on Twitter @daviducko (<https://twitter.com/DavidUcko>).*

