Beyond Violent Extremism: An Examination of Young Muslims Narratives on Social and Political Reform in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary studies on radicalization and violent extremism are riddled with panic and pessimism. The scholarly analyses have always portrayed gloomyoutcomes on violent extremism suggesting that extremists are adversaries to civilisations and have no value for human life. This is one side of the storyalthough it overlooks the voices and grievances articulated by extremists on social and political issues.A critical analysis of these articulations can be useful resources for scholarly interest having regard to the fact that extremists are product of our social settings whose grievances are worthy of highlighting. This studyanalyses the thoughts and contentions articulated by young Muslim extremists in Ghana as reflections of their aspirations for social and political reforms in modern time. Ghana offers a fascinating case of how young university students were fascinated with extremists' thoughts and thus became radicalized on account of diverse factors.Despite the fact that extremists in Ghana have become parts of global Jihadi trend with networks inNorth Africa and the Middle East, there has not been any scholarly work examining their narratives and motivations on social and political issues. Depended on ethnographic methods, internet sources and social media, the study argues that university students became fascinated with extremist narratives and consequently were radicalized.

Key words: *violent extremism, grievances, young students, Ghana, social, political and economic.*

INTRODUCTION

When Nazir AlemaNortey,a graduate from Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, first announced to his family that he has safely and joined the Islamic State in Libya in August 2015, it generated national debates about the conditions in university campuses radicalizing students into extremist networks in far distant countries.[1]

Nazir's migration to ISIS was followed with another graduate, Muhammad Abubakar, who it is believed that can manufacture bombs.[2]Yet, violent extremism is not immune and exclusive to one gender but cut across. A local media further reported that a Ghanaian female, Shakira Mohammed, is reported to have joined the militant organization, ISIS.[3]In all, there were a significant number of students and university graduates who were either radicalised or undertook migration to Islamic State in North Africa and Middle East. The rising numbers of young people joining the ISIS has compelled the Ministry of National Security to develop keen interest. It was reported that Ghanaian ISIS recruits represent the second largest from sub-Saharan Africa with over 100 people and followed by Senegal, Gambia, Chat, Niger, Eritrea, Mali among others.[4]

The question that many analysts kept asking is what motivates young students who hold promising future to embrace violent extremism? In response to this question, our preliminary analysis from the data demonstrates that the pull and push factors largely inform young students becoming fascinated with extremists' course. This article draws on the narratives of young students to outline their reactions to contemporary issues which have been implicated in their radicalization.

Contemporary studies on violent extremism are by nature alarmists. The narrative is that violent Islamic extremism is causing insecurity, which is also leading to loss of lives. In fact, Islamic extremism has been literally equated with terrorism, and this may bean inaccurate assumption. Yet, there have been many Islamists who have not become terrorists.

In short, many terrorists were not originally known as extremists.[5]However, these narratives gained credence and became widely accepted in view of the devastating impact of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in the United States.The attacks and subsequent oneshave considerably changed the scholarly study on security andthese studies are generating unending debates.While the implications of the attacks have been the focus of several scholarly works, some regimes including international organisationshave proposed radical measures andpolicy changes on their understanding of security issues across wide range facets.

Kundnani (2012) has succinctly observed thatthe study of violent extremismhas been circumscribed by the demands of counter-terrorist policy-makers rather than an attempt to objectively study it.[6]Not surprisingly, extremism has been one of such terms that have been subjected to diverse redefinitions in recent times. The term became not only a convenient instrument to run away from legal liability of act of terrorism but has been deployed ideologically for racial and religious profiling.[7]Some Western governments have deployed it synonymously to mean terrorism.[8]Equally, this simplistic and security-laden understanding has permeated the analyses of some academics in recent times.[9]This has undoubtedly blurred the academic boundaries but equally made nonsense of the distinction between these terms. In this sense, security expertshave become culprits in the manner that these terms have been overstretched and abused.

This notwithstanding, debate on the extent to which extremism has come to denote risky act of terrorism is unfolding and generating unending debates. Examiningthe literal meaning of the word extremism suggest that it is a neutral term which can either be positive or negative. To borrow Prinsloo (2018) definition, extremistsarepeople whoare extremely dissatisfied with the society as it is and therefore impatient with less extreme proposals to

changing it.[10]However, the qualification of the word extremism with violence has generatedmorecontroversies than ever whether it can be equated with terrorism or not.

This study adopts the definition proposed by Nasser-Edineet al (2011)which suggests thatextremism is to 'provoke the target into a disproportionate response, radicalise moderates and build support for its objectives in the long term'.[11]Also, the working definition proposed by the Expert Group and quoted by Schmidon extremism and violent extremism(2013), defines it as 'socialization to extremism which manifests itself in terrorism'.[12]While Nasser-Edine definition offers a useful beginning, it does not give enough clarity on the distinction between religious extremism and terrorism. The diverse contestations thatreligious extremism and terrorism have been subjected to and shape the contour of scholarly literatureshave overlooked other relevant issues worthy of academic analysis. As these contestations cannot be resolved easily, focusing on the narratives of young extremists can provide a useful basis to add nuance to our understanding on what violent extremism is.

The surge in religious extremism in Africa has dominated the scholarly debates on how to counter it. This became necessary in view of the fact that the brute military approach was viewed not to be effective in providing solution to the surge of extremism. Consequently, scholars have introduced different approacheswhich aimed at countering religious extremism through disruptive approaches. These measures were fundamentally pre-emptive and focus on addressing all conditions which serve as the driving force for ideologically based manoeuvres to mobilise gullible followers.[13]As these approaches have not curbed the surge in religious extremism, there has been re-thinking whether voices articulated by extremists could provide a good basis to addressing conditions leading to extremism and thus acts of terrorism. This study builds on previous works studying religious extremism by focusing on the narratives of extremists as an analytical tool to understanding the conditions radicalising young people.

In what follows, I analyse the narratives of young extremistsin Ghanain the context oftheir critiques and aspiration for both political and social reforms in Ghana. Ghana offers an interesting casestudyof religious extremism in Africa. Since 2015, students in university campuses were becoming fascinated with extremist networks in North Africa and Middle East.The circumstances under which they became affiliated with extremist networks remains a puzzle and have been a subject of public discourse. The study further illuminates new insights into how extremists are adopting new modes of recruitment into violent extremism through intellectual discourse as peer exchanges of ideas and deliberations on global political issues is becoming so common.

Religiousextremism emerged in Ghana as a result of both young students'and graduates' dependence on internet for religious resources. Undoubtedly, the exposurewas exploited by transnational extremists to mobilise students into their network of extremismin their quest to build a viable Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The outcome of the mobilization drive generated interesting reaction among Muslim student unions in Ghana. While these external elements succeeded to recruit Muslim studentsandradicalisedthem locally,there were otherswho undertook the risky adventure to migrate to Islamic State of Levante and Syria (ISIL).

The background of these extremistshas generated scholarly debatesespecially how to classify them in respect of the boundaries between extremism and terrorism. Central to the debates is how can we conceptualise those students who have been radicalized but have not undertaken violent attack on the Ghanaian soil? Are the backgrounds of those who have joined the extremist networks in North Africa and Middle East the same as those who have been radicalized locally?Theabove scenarios,offer two useful distinctions for scholarly analysis.This notwithstanding, the aim of this study is to examine the narratives of young students who have been locally radicalised to add to our understanding on their ideology and

worldview. Yet, these extremists have not undertaken any attack on the Ghanaian soil, they have been articulating one form of grievance or the other on social and political issues which has received marginal interest in recent times.

This study takes inspiration from Alexander Thurston analysis of Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. Thurston(2020) argues that the Boko Haram represents the outcome of dynamicinteractions between religion and local politics.[14]He emphasizes that the emergence of Boko Haram in Maiduguri and not in Sokoto and Kano is significant because the level of poverty, corruption as well as the preponderance of radical preachers play a catalyst role in the birth of Boko Haram. He sees Jihadist movements as political movements which stimulate political development in different ways.Thurstorn's perspective provides useful basis to analyseyoung students' fascination with extremist networks and the voices they articulate on contemporary social and political issues in Ghana. Equally, Lapidus (1997) sees the activities of contemporary fundamentalist movements in Muslim world as reactions to the conditions of modernity and more specifically to the development of capitalist economies as wellas a rejection of sub-cultures of modernity. Heargues that the emphasis upon religious values is not necessarily intended to advocatefor a return to some past era but represents an effort to cope with contemporary problems.[15]This study is inspired by previous scholarly works which argue that radicalisation is a product of social and political crisis in modern time.[16]My argument is that as young extremists are products of our societies, their narratives and critiques represent useful means to assess their reactions to our contemporary political and social systems.

This study is structured in three parts. The first part outlines the general background of the study which is followed by empirical studies on extremist narratives. The second section outlines the impetus of religious extremism in Ghana by analysing how global politics acquired local political relevance. In the third section of this paper, Ianalyse the

contemporary narratives of young students radicalised to illustrate what extremism is, using Ghana as an example. The last section sums up the conclusion of this paper highlightingthe implications of young extremists' narratives on social and political issues. How do extremists undertake mobilization in public has been raging subject that is generating unending debates? The next section addresses this question.

Contemporary Radicalisation and Extremist Mobilisation

Contemporary scholarships have been grappling with the question on how extremists attract people into their networks. This question is attracting diverse commentaries though have not been exhaustive. It is becoming clear that extremism does not emerge out of vacuum but depends on cause-and-effect binary in people's social life.This question has become necessary in parts as a result of recent findings which suggest that terrorism does not thrive on coercion but rather arising from people conviction with extremists course.[17]Also, recent studies have equally discounted the previous analyses which portrayed extremists as mentally challenged or under psychopathological distress.[18]The analysis which depended on the neurological and biological disposition between males and females and their potential role inviolent extremism,emphasise that males are more aggressive and violent than females.[19]However, recent studies rather see extremists as normal people who hold strong conviction about political and social issues around them.[20]Interestingly, since these previous analyses were not scientifically and empirically grounded, these perspectives were thus discarded.

While the debateabout people attraction toextremistcourseisunending,it, however, illustrates how multiple factors are contributing to the discourse. This notwithstanding, it is increasingly becoming clear that people fascinationwith extremist thoughts is not borne out of irrational sensationalism and fanaticism but rather they are reacting to social and political grievances around them.

Thus, recent scholarly works from diverse disciplineshave been ponderingon the question of how extremists undertake mobilisation in public. Central to the argument is that extremists' success in mobilisation is a result of the clarity of theirthoughts and narratives. While they may be obsessed in highlighting the contemporary ills of the society, in the end, their discourse is not only intellectually stimulatingbut logical and verifiableon everyday life and events. In the perspective of Amghar Samir, 2009, radicalization in Europe and France is an outcome of everyday experiences that young people encounter and emanated from injustices, exclusion as well as political repression from their home countries.[21]For Olivier Roy, the radicalisation of Western Muslim youth while it may often be considered a spill-over of the crisis in the Middle East, it is stimulated by youth revolt as a result of frustration and alienation.[22]

Nevertheless, recent scholarships have gone beyond viewing the radicalisation of young people as outcomes of social exclusion, injustices and alienation but exploring how people become attracted to extremist networks.Alexander Schmidt is the leading scholar in this discipline. He argues that the strength of extremist mobilisation rests with the power of their narratives. However, the term narrative is ill-defined which makes it difficult to situate it for a precise analysis.According to Corman, 'there is little consensus about what the term narrative is and how it is used'.[23]

Consequently,Patterson (2022)delves into what the term could mean. She argues thatnarratives do not exist in vacuum;they involve pool of resources (cultural tradition, heroic events and previous stories) through which actors depend on to produce meaning for the audience.[24]In extending this discourse into Islamic tradition, it highlights how religious scriptures and historical events provides useful resources in shaping Islamic narratives.

Schmid also offers an alternative way of understanding the term narratives and its power in mobilisation. He emphasises that narrative is embedded in communication and propaganda

which are indisputable resources for mobilisation.This underscores the relevance of charismatic figuresin stimulating the narrative discourse. He further explains that narrative is the cornerstone upon which extremists justify their violent tactics, propagates their ideology and to win gullible masses and new recruits.[25]Thus, the resilient of extremistmobilisation strategy is depended on the effectiveness of their narrative which target the masses with convincing arguments.

Equally, scholars like Harvelson and Corman argue that narratives are powerful resources for defining cultures and framing action to influence audience into a certain direction.[26]Thus, they outline the significance of the course and set the agenda for the audience to emulate. The uniqueness of extremist narrativesis underscored by the fact that they offer alternative forms of rationality deeply rooted in culture by interpreting local frame, events and strategically encourage some kinds of personal action'.[27]Narratives are not only significant in religious and social spheres but they are equally relevant in political mobilisation.Dimitriuargues that 'narratives are relevantresources deploy by political actors to construct a shared meaning to shape perceptions, beliefs and behaviour of the public'.[28]

As there has been renewed interest in the multiple meanings that the term narrative is, scholars have offered alternative ways of understanding it, which simplifies its meaning by equating itwith propaganda and communication.In their masterpiece work,*Whatis Propaganda and does it differ with persuasion,* Jowett et al (2012) argue that propaganda is the 'deliberate, systemic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response thatfurthers the desired intent of the propagandist'.[29]Thus, ethical consideration plays a lesser factor in propaganda as it highlights its primary focus is to shape people mind for a desirable goal and direction of the propagators.

The far-reaching outcome of propaganda which aims to incite the public into a particular coursehas been the subject of analysis by some experts. The analyses demonstrate

that propaganda has the power to reduce complex issues to simple cliches by creating the dichotomies of black and white, us and them and good and evil.[30]However, the term propaganda is considered obsolete in modern communication strategies and its instead new terms like public affairs, publicdiplomacy, strategic communication and psychological operations are used. This notwithstanding the varied designations that the term has assumed, the overall agenda in its deployment is to effect and disseminate certain information to change attitude and behaviours of audience.

Yet, narrative finds its meaning in propaganda, its effectiveness in mobilization is derived from master narrativewhich has been explained as transhistorical that is deeply embedded in a particular culture.[31]By transhistorical, Halverson explains that it means what people are indoctrinated into through repetition while by culture he meant shared characteristics by an ethnic, social or religious group.

As religious narratives are embedded in master narratives they contribute to political and social mobilization in diverse ways.[32]Beyond shaping group identity, narrative can motivate and incite an individual into risky action/ behaviourfor political and social change. Importantly, religious narratives often retell histories of heroic action and momentous historical encounters encouraging contemporary hearers to repeat the deeds of past heroes.It is in this light that Halverson et al argue that Islamic master narratives assist Muslims to make sense of past events, connecting new to existing information, justifying actions and orienting action towards future goals (Halverson et al. 2011).Like Halverson, Scheifebein (2006) and Sane (2011), identify goals of Islamic extremist narratives which include legitimation, propagation and intimidation.[33]This highlight how narratives are just the means to an end than being an end in themselves.

Some of the master narratives in Islam include, the pharaoh; an arrogant tyrant who refuses to submit to God. Jahiliyya which meansthe state of ignorance before the advent of

Islam. The battle of Badr; a small army of Muslims defeating the large army of unbelievers of Makkans. Hypocrites: those who outwardly manifest to be Muslims but secretly undermines the religion. Crusaders; infidel invaders who occupy Muslim lands and must be repelled. Nakba: catastrophe for Palestinians and Muslim world as the state of Israel was imposed over the land of Palestine. Seventy-two virgins; the reward for those who sacrifice themselves through militant Jihad. While narratives shapeextremists' mobilisation strategies in recent times, the extent to which this has contributed to radicalisation of students in Ghana is analysed below. It demonstrates that the role of narratives in mobilisation have no geographical limitation.

GLOBAL PROBLEMS; LOCAL CONCERNS AND RADICALISATION IN UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

In this section, I examine how extremist narratives play catalyst role in students' mobilization in Ghana. As a prelude, however, I analyse the demography of these studentsand how their backgrounds partly play roles in their radicalization. I begin the analysis with ethnographic, social media content as well as exploring the modes that external extremists deployed to radicalize young students. I argue that young students were vulnerable to radicalization due to the intellectually fascinating thoughts propagated by the extremists on social and political issues in university campuses in Ghana. This has further been augmented by the fact that the young studentsradicalised were inexperience to comprehend complex social issues pertaining to religion which will have required expert mediation. Also, the low level of and the lack of Islamic education among the students partly predisposed them to manipulation by external extremists leading to their radicalisation.

Ghana offers a fascinating example ofhow young students and graduates from university campuses were becoming radicalized for diverse reasons. While this remains a puzzle to many observers,the ensuing analysis underscores howglobal events affecting Muslims

elsewhere can become catalyst of mobilization at the local level. As a phenomenon of globalization, religious issues are becoming more homogenized as the internet is providing instant access to information and mutual communication across distances made easier than before.[34]

The uniqueness of the Ghanaian context is related to the agency and space involve in the radicalization. Many observers could not come to terms with the fact that students and university campuses were becoming agency and sites of radicalisation. This may, however, overlook how contemporary radicalization thrives on ideas that and benefits from dispassionate intellectual debates and the motives interpreted in diverse ways depending on the individual backgrounds.

To start with, radicalisationemerged in Ghana as a lone-wolf phenomenon in one of the public university campuses. However, as the phenomenon largely thrives on ideas, it subsequently attracted students from other universities. The extent to which extremist thoughts became widespread among the students was an outcome of poor governance of Muslim students' union religious activities where the lack of both religious infrastructure and resource persons plays central role. The void created in the leadership and management of Muslim students' religious activities in university campusesprovided the incipient means of their radicalization. In the ensuing milieu, the lack of religious resources compelled them todepend on internet sources for religious guidance which exposed them to extremist networks and groups.

The peak of this crisis saw discussion in students' religious platforms dominated by global political issues than deliberation on religious matters. The spate of political instability in Muslim parts of the world in North Africa and Middle East became the subject of discourse among the students during their daily or weekly discussions. In the view of a student leader, the pattern of weekly religious discussion rather shifted to discussing about geo-political

issues. This aroused considerable passion among the students who felt that Muslims elsewhere were at the receiving end of Western superpowers.[35]It was difficult to conclude whether the students'sentiment were real or perceived. As in other contexts, the solidarity developed by these students degenerated into radicalization where they conceived to mobilise peers to join forces to fight the perceived infidel crusaders invading Muslim lands.[36]The extent to which the demography of these students stands unique and contributed to their radicalization is analysed below.

The fact that students in public universities were the target of the radicalization menace highlights a unique and contemporary demographic trend. The findings from the analysis departs from previous empirical studies elsewhere which argue that people become radicalized on account of ignorance, illiteracy, poverty and among others.[37]On the contrary, the analysis from the fieldnotes suggests how students and graduates from universities are rather becoming radicalized. A question has been asked why are students and graduates from secular institutions of higher learning are becoming the target of extremist mobilisation drive? The answer to this question highlights the fact that the target of students for mobilization into extremist networks is not a means to an end. It rather emanates from the special skills that these university graduates possess which ISIS intends to harness to build a viable Islamic state and Caliphate. This, thus, refocused their agenda of mobilizing students and graduates from secular universities to meet the need for human resource to establish viable political institutions. In specific terms, the ISIS mobilization largely focuses on graduates in the sciences and engineering, with the exception of few graduates in the social sciences in Ghana.[38]

In terms of religious education, majority of young students radicalised in Ghana do not have the benefit of the traditional Islamic education, the Madrasah education. The ethnographic analysis demonstrates that those who had a level of Islamic education did not

exceed the middle education and represented less than 10%.[39]These students are ignorant to religious teachings which thus predisposed them to radicalisation.The age dynamics of the demography also demonstrates the fact that people within the ages 18-38 years were those radicalised. While this may highlight the age bracket of people transitioning in education, it also raises question about their vulnerability to radicalisation due to inexperience to comprehend complex issues.

The socio-economic background of the extremists further underscores the fact that they come from underprivilege background whose families are unemployed or underemployed. While some families whoare employed in the formal sector earn less than the minimum wage, others undertake menial jobs for living. Thus, it is difficult to partly rule out the economic motive behind the radicalisation as some of the youths were attracted by the potential opportunities for employment in the Arab world.

In terms of gender, a few numbers of Muslim women became victims of extremist mobilization drive. There were those females who were having marital challenges but for unknown reasons joined the extremist networks and had embarked on journey to ISIS controlled areas. Similarly, young women whose partners initially settled in the ISIS areas lured them to join with a view to consummate their marriage. This demonstrates how one gender may influence the other into radicalization due to love or family crisis.

While the demographic characteristics of the young extremists may portray the extent of their vulnerability to radicalisation, I outline how the process of radicalisation among students waspropagated in the university campuses. Considerable evidence points to the fact that a majority of the students who were radicalized were victims of peer influence and bad socialization which was aided by modern technology.[40]

In simple terms, young extremists created cells in the university campuses which enable them to take leadership positions in mosques and satellite religious centres as Imams.

Consequently, recognised as an Imam, this exudes a sense of respect for the extremists in the eyes of the students and set the tone to moderate religious discourse in the mosques along their agenda. University campuses were turned since 2015 into arenas of contestation of religious ideas by the extremists, though framed with the lens of global political issues.

The close-knit nature of students' life in university campuses which facilitated interpersonal interactions among peers was exploited by the extremists to invite credulous for religious camping. In KNUST young extremists initiated various forms of religious camping since 2015 with their peers where considerable times were spent outside campus to deliberate on issues of global politics and their impact on Muslims. The outcome of these camping led to exchange of ideas on political, social as well as dissemination of audio-visual speeches of prominent extremists such as Anwar Awlaki, Jibril Musa, Osama bn Laden among others. Consequently, some of the students who became fascinated with extremist narratives joined the network through migration to ISIL.

Young extremists further exploited the use of modern technologies beyond the dissemination of audio-visual clips to creating virtual leadership through social media.[41]This became the most enduring in students power politics as it led to the fragmentation of the student leadership. These platforms became the most insidious means that sensitive materials were circulated to members through which others were guided to emigrate to Islamic State of Syria and Levante. The next section analyses the narratives articulated by young on social and political issues.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ILLS IN THE EYES OF EXTREMISTS

This section highlights the views articulated by radicalized young people on social and political issues in their bid to recruit gullible followers into their network.The views articulated by these extremists not only offer useful means to discern what constitute

extremism but provides useful basis to analyse their assessment of contemporary social and political issues in Ghana. The sense that one getsfrom their narrativesis that they see the larger society drifting away from the ideal values in politics and social norms. As outlined earlier, religious extremism did not emerge in Ghana out of vacuum; it was a result of interactions of local conditions with global political events which birthed young extremists. Thus, the issues articulated by young extremists were largely reflections of both global political and local conditions.

This section largely depends on the outcome of ethnographic fieldnotes with young extremists in addition to the materials they circulated in the social media, internet sources.[42]The study relies on data from interaction with those students who participated in extremist religious activities but were not radicalized. It highlights how peers' deliberation on social and political ills of modern societywithout moderation from experienced mentors may drive them into violent extremism. The lack of expert mediation on students activities may lead to oversimplification of complex religious issues which are beyond the understanding of untrained person.

Central to thenarrative articulated by young extremists on political issues is the nature of contemporary politics.Their narratives on politics revolve around what I may termpoliticised Islam which is seeing Islam as more of political instrument than religious. This is partly understandable because the context in which these young students were radicalized in Ghana was inspired by ISIS political agendathan religious ideation. As ISIS proposed to establish an Islamic State and a Caliphate spanning from Middle East to North, these young students were attracted to the political agenda of ISISwhich thus accounted for the politicisation of Islam.The discourse articulated by these young extremists largely exploitedcontemporary political upheavals in Muslim parts of the world such as events in Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Libya to win the solidarity of their audience.

In their intellectual prognosis of political issues, young extremists attribute political challengesin Muslim world to Western imperial agenda to dominate. Theirability to make references to Muslim countries where political upheavals are ubiquitousand share audio-visuals of political events elsewhere makes it easier for the credulous to believe in their discourse. The audio-visualclips most often highlight the level of the perceived mass killings which have taken placesin some countries.Undoubtedly, viewing these materials on political eventselsewhere, one is tempted to believe in their narratives since the audio-visuals provide incontestableevidence.

Like their critique of global politics, young extremistsare critical of local political issuesin Ghana. They see the trend of politics in Ghana as enmeshed in corruption and economic mismanagement. Their appraisal of both local and global politicsin negative terms are largelyaim at discrediting the system as a whole in order to legitimize their agenda. They do not see how Ghana has benefited from multi-party democracy rather than partisan politics and cronyism that the system perpetrates.

Indeed, young extremists have become disillusioned with democratic governance. They see the systemrather benefiting few partisan loyalists at the expense of providing welfare for the ordinary masses. In an interview, an extremist outlines his reservation about democracy arguing that "*what is rather clear is that a community support for a particular political party will drive them development than those which voted against the regime*" (Interview, anonymous #1, Accra, 2016). This in his view is not only against the state protocol on distribution of national resources but Islamic ethics. One gets a sense that by being overly critical against democratic governance system,it justifies their reception to ISIS's political course.

An extremist raised a rhetoric question on thelegitimacy of contemporary political leadership on the perceived high level of corruption in Ghana"*why will I endorse this facade*

electoral process which produces corrupt leaders when my action will be questioned by Allah onYaumulQiyama[judgement day]" (Interview, anonymous #5, Accra 2018). While this post may suggest that this extremist and his cohorts shun on democratic politics, beneath this critique, however, is their agenda to offer an alternative political system.The overall import on highlighting on the social and political ills of Ghanaian societies is to suggest that the system is not worth dying for.The sense is that a Muslim should always embark on a course that pleases Allah to earn him a reward in the hereafter.

This negative perception by young extremists on the democratic system in Ghanais equallyaffecting their ability to participate in electoral and political process. The peak of my ethnographic fieldwork occasioned the 2016 general elections for both presidential and parliamentary in Ghana. An extremist argues that he refused to participate in the election because he did not want to endorse any corrupt party to win the election. When I asked whether he knows that exercising a political franchise is an obligation as enshrined in theconstitution? His response was that he will not want to be tied to a system that undermines Islamic values.

In the view of this extremist,democracyis "*the system that has the notion that laws are for the people, are made by the people and is for the people"* (Anonymous #1, Interview, Accra, 2016). He thus concluded that it is the people that manipulate the laws, in contrast with the nature of Islamic law which derive their basis from Allah.

While the above analyses demonstrate that the political system is becoming less attractive to these young extremists, they are equally not oblivious about proposing an alternative political system which may work for Ghanaians. The alternative political system that these young extremists proposed rather is an Islamic political system which has never been experimented anywhere in modern times.

Young extremists advocate that Muslims should embrace the Khilafa system which is viewed as a universal Islamic system of governance. In their view, the Khilafa system was the system of governance practiced by the successive four rightly guided caliphs and was subsequently adopted by some Muslim dynasties.

The religious theology shaping the Khilafa system is*tawhid hakmiyya*which means that matters of laws and judgment must emanate solely from the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet. However, it is difficult how an ordinary Muslim may understand what they meant by the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet since these texts have been interpreted by different Muslims of diverse shades. The answer to this question has been given simplistically in a focus group discussion, arguing that the interpretations of religious textsmust be decided by the leadership to Muslim community. The community ought toproperlyconstitute the religious elites or council called, Ahlul-Hall Wa'l-Aqd. This means those religious elites who not only qualify to elect or depose a caliph but can take crucial decision on behalf of Muslim Ummah.A question was asked whether Muslims in a minority state like can Ghana can strictly implement this form of Islamic law in contrast with the democratic system that we practice. These extremists regardless of their gender argue that Muslims must strive as individuals to live by Allah's command and forsake the worldly things as the starting point. It illustrates the the fact that young extremists' have becomediscontent with theGhanaian democratic governancesystem which thus is give them the impetus to believe in utopian theocratic political Islam.

Analysing the economic issues from the perspectives of young extremists reveals that theseareintertwined withtheir appraisal of political economy. Thus, they see African backwardness in development resulting from the mismanagement of the economy. Part of the reasons why these young extremists have outlawed civic participation in democratic process is because they believe that most elites involve in politics for personal gains than to

contribute to nation building. Thus, these young extremists see Islam as providing the solution. An extremistdeclared that"*Ghana can only regain its glory days if the political leaders have incorporatedthe fundamental Islamic principles in the management of the economy*" (Interview, anonymous #2, Kumasi, August 28, 2017).The critical posture that these young extremists have demonstrated in their narratives underscores the sheer dislike of the political system that they live.

Consequently, young extremists encounter a dilemma on how to overcome the unfriendly political system that they find themselves. The answer to this question has been simplified in an advice that membersshould migrate to Islamic State in Syria and Levante. Hijra (migration) carries a significant spiritual undercurrent in the worldview of extremists in general. In the perspective of extremists, migration from Daru al-Harb (abode of war) to Daru al-Islam (abode of Islam) is done to please Allah. Strictly, abode of war is a generalized worldview in their narrative to imply that where the political system is not favourable for the proselytization and growth of the Islamic faith.Migrating signifies the quest for spiritual certainty of a believer. Thus, it was not strange to realise that a significant number of students and university graduates in Ghana undertook migration to extremist organisations in North Africa and Middle East,a trend which has been ongoing since 2015.[43]

Part of the motive for the migration to North Africa and Middle East is not purely borne on religious and political reasons. Economic consideration partly plays a role. A student ever asked an extremist who have joined the Islamic State in Libya about the latest development in the battle field, the latter responded that "We are conquering the lands… the rate at which we are taking lands is a blessing an indication of expansion of Islamic State… we are establishing an Islamic police force, hospitals and financial centres…it is blessing from Allah" (a text message from Mohammed Abubakar to an anonymous friend) (Interview,

anonoymous #3, KNUST in 2016). Arguably, the average gullible young man who encounters this narrative may be swayedto embrace the group.

The social life of young extremists is underpinned not only by personal isolation and loneliness from the larger society but they are equally critical about the pattern of the Ghanaian social setup. They are more fascinated discussing about morality and virtues. On the other hand, they are disenchanted with youth sub-cultures of boy-girl friend relationship and the perceived fornication among others. A post by young extremist on his social media page reads"I prefer to die in an Islamic State than living in a land of infidels where my eyes commit zina (fornication)".[44]Another extremist lamented that whenever he sees young ladies who expose their breast in public, he feels like whipping them with a cane. He concluded that "if stripping naked is a symbol of civilization then animals are more civilized than humans" (interview, anonymous #6, Accra 2019).

Someof the extremists who are avid critics about the social settings in which they live have not only become lonely individuals but have stopped watching and monitoring both local and international news. During my visit to the residence of an extremist, I have observed that he/she is not using television and sofa chairs. I asked why he/she does not watch television. The response is that it is full of misleading information by western media to undermine Muslims.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyse young Muslim narratives on social and political reforms in the context of Ghana experience with violent extremism. Ghana encountered a unique dimension of violent extremism in university campuses as young students and graduates became fascinated with extremist networks in far distant countries and thus were radicalized. The circumstances behind their radicalization are still unfolding. The question that this article

sought to answer is why werestudents in university campuses radicalized and became vocal critics about political and social issues in Ghana.The data analysis demonstrates that young students were radicalized on account of leadership voidin the management of Muslim students' religious activities. Consequently, these students encountered desperation in their quest for religious resources which compelled them to depend on internet sources for religious guidance. The void in religious leadership intersected with global political events affecting Muslims elsewhere and provided the catalyst of mobilization of these students to sympathise with fellow.

Because these students were fascinated with ISIS's political agenda, the discourse that they stimulated was largely shaped by politicised Islam where Islam was viewed as a political instrument. The study demonstratesthat these students were delusion with modern democratic system of governance and the pattern of contemporary politics in Ghana. They view the political space as characterized by cronyism and partisan interest than national interest. Thus, people and communitiesare rewarded withbenefits and development because of their loyalty with a particular political party's agenda, whereas those who did not support are denied.

The narratives of young extremists on economic issues highlighthow they see the Ghanaian economy is riddled with corruption and mismanagement in diverse ways and thus undermining national development. They believe that people engage in politics not because they want to contribute to national development but to amass wealth. Interestingly, analysing the social narratives of the young extremists brings to focus their aversion to moral permissiveness which they claim is characterized the Ghanaian social milieu.

Young extremists' critical assessment of the political and social life in Ghana are not without agenda setting. While their assessments of local politics were negative, they proposed the Khilafa system as an alternative political system to address myriad of social and political issues. Islam is viewed by these extremists as offering a comprehensive political and

system that must embrace. In spite of the fact that the Khilafa system of governance has never been experimented and tested anywhere, young extremists are fascinated with this utopian Islamic worldview. This article concludesthat to address the challenge of students becoming radicalized in university campuses the management of the education system in Ghana ought to factor the religious needs and interest of minority religious group. The sheer neglect of Muslim students in the provision of religious infrastructures and resource persons not only generate national tension but is being exploited by external extremists to radicalize students.

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[38] This is an outcome of data analysis I undertook among those students who embraced ISIS political agenda.

[39] Focus Group Discussion with young extremists. KNUST 2017.

[40] Reading their posts in social media highlight this point. Most of the students radicalized largely express grievances over political events in North Africa and Middle East, than issues within their immediate environment.

[41] Students' leaders were alarmed on the extent to which some members have created parallel leadership through the social media which shifted the efforts of GMSA leadership to mobilise students under one umbrella. This was evident in Kwame Nkrumah University and University of Ghana. Some of the groupings include al-Nurr, Sadaqa Train and Ghana for Syria Refugees among others.

[42]My analysis of the activities of young students radicalized through their social media posts and oral interviews summarises this perspective. While most of the social media links have been pulled down for security reasons, few of such links illustrate. https://web.facebook.com/nii.alema, https://web.facebook.com/search/top?q=shereef%20nii%20mensah, https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100004464168417. This notwithstanding, most of the data source were generated through interviews with those young extremists

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