



Misery and Magic Fuel Mayhem in Cafunfo

By Rafael Marques de Morais



Amid public outrage, there were claims that the security forces had used excessive force against peaceful demonstrators - but the truth lay elsewhere. “Within a day of the news of terrible bloodshed during a protest march in the diamond-mining town of Cafunfo, some people had already drawn conclusions”, says Rafael Marques. “It took me months of investigation to get to the truth.”

The undisputable facts were these: when participants in a banned march clashed with security forces in Cafunfo on 30 January 2021, at least a dozen people were killed and many more were injured. Two members of the security forces were lucky to survive a gruesome assault by multiple protestors wielding scythes and machetes.

Over nine months of meticulous inquiry, award-winning journalist and activist Rafael Marques gathered the evidence into a new book that reveals how traditional belief in magic was a major factor in mobilizing a vulnerable and illiterate group of people and inciting them to commit violence.

The author of several books and reports on this remote and troubled area, Marques made repeated visits and spent a total of 40 days on the ground collecting testimony from over 100 witnesses, including demonstrators and security force members, to determine what really happened.

The result of those months of painstaking inquiry is his new book *Misery and Magic fuel Mayhem in Cafunfo*. It is a comprehensive account of what led to the unsanctioned demonstration and how the tragedy unfolded.

Sifting alternative versions of the 'truth'

With meticulous attention to detail, Rafael Marques lays out the context behind the march. How decades of neglect and underdevelopment have led to hunger, poverty and desperation. How cynical local figures distorted regional history to make a flawed case for autonomy. How leaders of this banned separatist movement manipulated locals into believing the world was watching as they paraded their anguish. And how these same leaders organized two days of fasting with shamans conducting "magic" rituals to convince those on the march that they were immune from harm and could fly away.

Locals said more than 20 people were shot and killed – the authorities say it was six. Rafael Marques's investigation found that at least 13 people were confirmed to have died while at least 16 were injured and six people remain unaccounted for. However, he cautions that this is not a "definitive number" given the "highly confused situation" on the ground.

The contrasting accounts of eyewitnesses – both those who took part in the protest and members of the security forces – speak for themselves. Marques impartially and faithfully records their version of events as well as that of the authorities who claimed they came under unprovoked attack.

Diamonds and despair

Marques's book was officially launched on 18 October in Cafunfo itself. This place is an anomaly in Angola; not officially a town or municipality, the population has grown around the extensive (and often privately owned) diamond mining operations. Little or nothing of the wealth generated has gone into providing essential services such as electricity, paved roads, piped water or into establishing a local political administration.

Nine out of every 10 residents in Cafunfo live below the poverty line, barely able to muster a single meal per day. The absence of any state presence other than security allowed third parties to radicalise these desperate locals who were induced to believe that they were legally allowed to stage a march to publicise their situation.

In fact, the demonstration was unauthorized and in contravention of emergency laws introduced to limit public gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Previous encounters with police and military led some participants to arm themselves with agricultural tools "for self-defence". Scythes and machetes were used in a gruesome attack on poorly armed security forces in different locations, leaving two men hacked to within an inch of their lives.

At a third location, security reinforcements faced with a front line of protestors maddened by hunger and the rituals that made them feel invincible, finally opened fire in what they said was self-defence.

As the evidence is laid out page by page, it becomes clear that a few politically ambitious, unscrupulous individuals took advantage of an illiterate populace with traditional animist beliefs in supernatural powers to mobilize and control large numbers of people into a cult-like membership of an illicit organization and incite them to violence.

After sifting through the disparate accounts, Marques was able to establish both a chronology of events and the astonishing role played by shamans and the use of botanical, or herbal, concoctions to create the conditions for a violent confrontation.

“The magic rituals were instrumental in mobilizing the masses, most of them uneducated peasants or field workers, into a tactical command group targeted against the constitutional and political authorities.”

“Some of those who took part felt they had extraordinary powers that enabled them to use violence to confront the security and defence forces [who were mobilized to prevent the unauthorised demonstration from taking place]”.

Marques’s conclusion was that “the demonstration was not a peaceful one, and the participants’ faith in their magic powers created the condition for violence.”

Over several days, a select group of men were forced to fast, consume and apply herbal preparations they were told would make them immune to harm, and after a sleepless night of dance, prayer, incantation and in some cases the consumption of alcohol, they were sent out, before sun-up, armed with long knives and wooden staves to confront a mainly unarmed group of police and border guards charged with preventing an illegal gathering.

“Many of them were fired up, believing they were untouchable. Many were famished, had not been allowed to sleep and were in a sort of religious fervour when they set out. They were repeatedly told there would be no retreat and they had to press on. Imagine their mental state when they encountered impromptu and makeshift attempts to bar their advance. Even in the face of warning shots fired over their heads.”

The first casualty was a police inspector, brutally hacked about the head and body. The second was a demonstrator, allegedly struck by a bullet (or alternatively hit in the head by a companion’s machete). With little or no ammunition, the police and border guards kept retreating and the marchers kept pressing on towards the main police station and security forces’ residences. An army colonel unarmed and with his hands up, pleading for them to stop, was attacked in a flurry of flashing machetes, and left for dead.

By the time the “frontline command” reached a third roadblock, this time manned by soldiers reinforcing the hapless police and border guard detachments which had already suffered two casualties, the scene was set for all-out combat. Some survivors still claim they only got away because magic allowed them to fly over the melee into safety.

In his book Marques enumerates all the factors that led to this tragedy. “Ignorance, misery, negligence and political incompetence created a fertile ground for radicalization in Cafunfo, and in the face of government intransigence, other political forces seized the advantage.”

Rafael Marques has organized a round-table conference of all interested parties in the region to open channels of communication and has also made recommendations for government, mining interests and local communities to improve conditions on the ground and pave the way for self-sustaining economic development to lift this neglected community out of misery and prevent any future tragedies of this kind.

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