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Silent Religiosity in a Snivelling Nation: The Role of Religious Institutions in Promoting Post-conflict Reconciliation in Kenya

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the role of religious institutions in peace building, prior to and after the 2007 post-elections violence in Kenya. The author builds an argument that supports the view that religious institutions have a role to play in peace building. Using Klopp's (2002) conception about liberal versus illiberal nationalism, the author explains how religious institutions in Kenya can be a voice for the voiceless communities, especially during and after conflicts largely triggered by the political leaders in the country. The arguments presented bring to the forefront the role that religious institutions play in post-conflict situations to reconcile diverse ethnic communities, and offer some lessons learned about post-conflict peace communication.

Key Terms: Religious institutions, elections, post-conflict, ethnic cleansing.

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est d'examiner le rôle des institutions religieuses dans le maintien de la paix avant et après les violences postélectorales de 2007 au Kenya. L'argument de l'auteur confirme le rôle que les institutions religieuses doivent jouer dans le maintien de la paix. Se basant sur la conception de Klopp (2002) par rapport au nationalisme libéral et non libéral, l'auteur explique comment les institutions au Kenya peuvent devenir la voix des communautés qui n'en ont pas à cause des dirigeants politiques dans le pays, particulièrement durant et après les conflits. Les arguments du texte mettent en avant le rôle des institutions religieuses dans les situations de post-conflit, dans la réconciliation des communautés ethniques et dans la compréhension des leçons de la communication pour la paix.

Mots clés : Institutions religieuses, élections, post-conflit, génocide.

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Introduction

On 27 December 2007, some ten million Kenyans went to the polls in what was generally anticipated to be the most hotly contested and close-run presidential, parliamentary and civic elections in the country's 45 years since emerging from British colonial rule. President Kibaki trailed in the polls most of the time and only started catching up well into the tallying exercise. In the late afternoon of 30 December 2007, he was announced the winner by an extra 231, 728 votes over Orange Democratic Movement's (ODM) candidate, Raila Odinga. President Kibaki was then hurriedly sworn in for another term, notwithstanding raucous protests that the election had been rigged. These protests and an ODM press conference were abruptly silenced by a news blackout and security clampdown as armed soldiers hustled candidates, party agents, diplomats and domestic as well as international observers out of the Kenyatta International Conference Centre where the tallying process was taking place. Upward adjustment of already announced results from some populous pro-Kibaki constituencies, ostensibly favouring the President, fanned the flames of suspicion. Televised utterances by the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) Chairman, Samuel Kivuitu, only served to make matters worse, as did a hurriedly composed media statement released by four out of twenty-two commissioners, commenting on the twist of events and calling for tranquillity. Widespread and often ethnically motivated violence erupted and rapidly spread to various parts of the country.

The violence was of a magnitude that was hitherto inconceivable to many Kenyans and the international community that had known the country as an island of peace. From 29 December 2007, following the delay of the announcement of the contested results, to 29 February 2008 when President Mwai Kibaki and Prime Minister Raila Odinga signed the national peace accord, the country was in political and violent turmoil. The violence later turned out to be an ethnic cleansing process, left over 1,150 people dead, and over 300,000 others displaced.

On 4 January 2008, it was evident that Kenya was facing a crisis, with apparent killing and eviction of innocent ethnic groupings in several parts of the country, especially in Kisumu, Eldoret, Mombasa, Molo, Kuresoi, Kibera, Eastlands (Mathare and Kariobangi). Hundreds of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps emerged in several parts of the country, signifying the magnitude of the violence. Some citizens fled as refugees to neighbouring countries such as Uganda and Tanzania. Those accommodated in camps continued to suffer the crisis. With the need for protection and food, it was reported that women and young girls were

forced to provide sexual favours. The men providing security in these camps were also associated with the rape cases. Those who sought refuge in the camps at least saved their lives despite these events. Those who sought refuge in places thought to be safe havens, such as churches, faced the wrath of the rioting gangs. One sad story told by a Kikuyu lady suffices here, in an incident that led to the highest number of lives lost in one incident:

On 1 of January 2008 at around 10 a.m., I heard people yelling that some raiders were coming. I saw smoke coming from some houses in our village and the houses were burning. Everyone in the village started running away to the church (KAG). My mother who was 90 years old was with me at the time. I decided to take my mother into the church for safety. After a few minutes, I saw more raiders coming towards the church. We thought the raiders would not attack the church. The raiders were pushing many people into the church. The raiders threw some mattress into the roof of the church and threw more into the church. They were also pouring fuel (petrol) onto the mattresses. All of a sudden I saw fire break out. I took my mother towards the main door to get her outside, but there were many others scrambling toward the door as well. We both fell onto the floor. I wanted to save my mother from the burning church, but one of the raiders prevented me. I saw the fire had reached where my mother was. I heard her cry for help as the fire burnt her, but I could not help.

Kikuyu men attempting to defend their church and loved ones were hacked to death with machetes, shot with arrows, or pursued and killed. The death toll for this horrific incident was 17 burned alive in the church, 11 dying in or on the way to the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital in Eldoret, and 54 others injured who were treated and discharged.

After the signing of the National Peace Accord, tranquillity slowly returned but the damage had been done. It was now time to start the peace building processes, which of course was a huge burden if left in the hands of the government alone. This article highlights the role of religious institutions in addressing the post-conflict issues before and after the post-election violence. Drawing from existing published literature, newspaper reports, post-conflict commissions of inquiry reports and personal experiences, the article takes a dual perspective of analyzing the successes and failures of religious groups in the peace building processes in Kenya, especially after the post-election violence of 2007.

History of Election Violence in Kenya

In order to understand the need for the involvement of religious groups in peace building processes, it is imperative to highlight the root causes of

conflicts and violence that have led to the absence of peace. The term 'peace' has been viewed from different theoretical perspectives. Generally, peace is described as a state of freedom, rest, quietness and calmness. In peace and conflict studies, the terms 'negative peace' and 'positive peace' are applied quite habitually. Negative peace describes the sheer absence of war or violent conflicts, whereas positive peace denotes a more inclusive comprehension of a variety of factors related to the creation and institutionalization of justice and freedom (Bangura 2007:34). The complexity of these factors not only contributes to the absence of war, but also augments the totality of peace in the human society. This means that positive peace reflects the need to gratify human needs as well as contribute towards the achievement of human rights.

Prior to the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya, the threat to peace in the country could be seen in the ethnic and land clashes that had occurred over the years, and the rise of youth militia movements such as Mungiki and Kalenjin warriors. The violent activities of these movements have been well documented by scholars such as Jacqueline Klopp (2002), Mutuma Ruteere (2008), Musambayi Katumanga (2005) and David Anderson (2005). Additionally, the works of Klopp (2002), Ndegwa (2005) and Odhiambo (2004) depict how ethnic and land clashes have characterized many parts of the Rift Valley and Western provinces since the introduction of multi-party elections in 1992. The ethnic clashes are attributed to former president Daniel arap Moi regime's desire to preserve its political, social and economic position. According to Klopp (2002), the regime pioneered the *Majimbo* (federal) system of leadership that incited the local community (Kalenjins) to evict the minority ethnic groupings in the Rift Valley province.

Reports by the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) indicate that from 1991 to 1996, over 15,000 people died, and over 300,000 were displaced in these areas. In the run up to the 1997 general elections, new violence erupted at the Coast, killing over 100 people and displacing over 100,000. Other incidents of politically instigated clashes occurred between 1999 and 2005. How then do we understand what could possibly explain the violence following the 2007 elections? How does this help us understand the role of religious institutions in reconciling diverse ethnic groups in Kenya?

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the role of religious groups, a theoretical approach that contextualizes the issues relevant to this study is offered. Using Klopp's (2002) theory of liberal versus illiberal nationalisms, this article explains

how political leadership in Kenya impacted on the events that followed the 2007 general elections. Klopp (2002) observes that illiberal, uncivil nationalism results from ethnic mobilization which unscrupulous leaders can organize and exploit for narrow political interests. On the other hand, liberal nationalism is understood as a rallying call by such bodies as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and reformers to counteract the actions of proponents of illiberal nationalism. However, Klopp, referring to the work of Mamdani (1996), argues that the latter approach has been profoundly ineffective as a mobilizing strategy for reform, especially against the existing despotic form of the African state. All the same, Mamdani's observation should not prevent us from examining the role that NGOs and civil society, including religious institutions, play in organizing for peace. As Mathijs (2008) observed, since the early 1990s, civil society has played a significant role in peace-building, and in particular, contributing to good governance and democracy (Mathijs 2008). Mathijs attributes the active participation of civil society to the fact that they are politically neutral. They are also liberal in their approach and in many cases are able to make decisions not influenced by political leaders.

Religious institutions are viable mobilizing agents given that they comprise of citizenry who come from diverse backgrounds, and if well organized, might have an advantage over other civil organizations in the peace-building process. Additionally, they have the capacity to 'preach' peace from the very heart of all diverse communities in Kenya. Even though these institutions might not have an equal political voice in comparison to their counterparts in the political arena, they have the capacity, through mobilizing the congregants, to condemn the injustices of the political system. The challenge at hand however is ensuring that these institutions are willing to rise above partisan politics and engage citizens – their followers – in the process of averting violence and building peace.

In the discussion to follow, the article brings together perspectives that reveal how religious institutions and leaders have a central place in promoting peace. Belshaw (2001) notes that if there are any special groups that live, understand and identify with the poor in Africa, it is religious groups. For most of these groups, the doctrinal understanding is that stewardship encompasses taking care of the environment as well as humanity. This is a practical form of love that is geared towards helping the sick to be healed, the hungry to obtain food and the homeless to gain access to shelter. Their conception of holistic development is one that is guided by universal principles of peace. It is in this perspective of engaging in philanthropic services that Zalot (2002) asserts when arguing that even

given the goodness of God's creation, humanity nonetheless is still called upon to create, shape and bring order to this creation so as to allow human beings become fully human. The following are some examples to support Zalot's statement.

Batson (1993:4) observes that religion has given rise to celebrated acts of selfless concerns for others. He gives the examples of Albert Schweitzer, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi. That Albert Schweitzer's deep religious conviction led him to sacrifice personal prestige and comfort to provide medical care for thousands; Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of a society in which all people, black and white, would be free was essentially a religious vision; religious conviction lay behind Mahatma Gandhi's life of asceticism and non-violent protest; Mother Teresa, even as her own health deteriorated, did not cease to express her religious faith by caring for the needs of the poorest of the poor. Contemporary religious groups and leaders need to be inspired by such examples when confronting their role in the zones of conflict that have arisen in many African nations. This call is further emphasized by Rasmussen (1994), who argues that the notion of a separation between the spiritual and the material is clearly foreign to the Biblical perspective of development. He notes that spiritual is the rich inner life of cherished values, meanings and loyalties that comprise the mysterious central identification of selfhood, as well as the value content of the whole cultures.

It is against this theoretical background that the analysis in this article proceeds to consider the role different religious institutions played in the peace-building process before and after the Kenyan post-election violence of 2007-2008. The goal is to examine the successes and failures of religious institutions in mobilizing citizens in the peace-building processes following the post-election violence.

Participation of Religious Institutions

The task here is to explain the nature of participation of religious institutions prior to and after the elections. The analysis focuses on whether their participation was active and or passive in the context of the four national accord agendas set for the coalition government to reconcile Kenyans. What role did religious groups play in this political wrangling in Kenya?

Critical Historical Role of the Church

Mue (2008) utilizes a critical-historical approach to explain the failure of religious groups, and specifically the role of the church, in post-colonial Africa. He argues that the church supported the colonial administration

but did not act to condemn the social injustices of the colonial era, preferring instead to engage in political diplomacy with colonial powers. The same can be argued about leadership in African churches after independence that did little to condemn the injustices of the political leaders of the time. In Kenya, the history of the presidencies of Jomo Kenyatta and Arap Moi provides sufficient evidence of terrible injustice, notably the assassinations of senior and junior political leaders who dared expose the ills of the government. Other injustices included harsh laws and restrictions on press freedom and academic freedom, elections rigging and corruption. These injustices took place as religious groups and their leaders watched in silence, especially during the Kenyatta regime.

Nevertheless, with the introduction of multiparty politics in 1992, a few courageous church leaders became vocal critics of the political establishment. These religious leaders include Bishops Henry Okullu, Alexander Muge and David Gitari of the Anglican Church of Kenya, Ndingi Mwana'a Nzeki of the Catholic Church, Reverend Timothy Njoya of the Presbyterian Church of Kenya, and Reverend Mutava Musyimi of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), among others.

How then did religious groups respond to the post-election violence? As members of civil society embarked on peace-building efforts, the participation of religious groups was minimal. They were not really visible at the national level in championing the rights of the displaced and assisting the peace-building process, as was the case with many NGOs. This record does not speak highly of church leadership, and hardly conforms to the words of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere when he observed: 'Everything which prevents a person from living in dignity and decency must be under the attack from the church and its workers' (Okullu 2003:19).

The term 'church' refers to any religious institution that has a vision and mission based on the core values of its faith. The task then, seems to rest squarely on the religious leaders who must not only denounce evil in society but also enable the faithful to fulfil their roles. According to Okullu (2003), the clergy may not have the capacity to restructure an economic system, but they have a duty to state that a system which leaves the majority of people unable to access basic human needs is immoral and unjust. Instead, as Orabator (2002) observes, religious groups in Africa tend to be reactive bodies that watch as events unfold and that fail to act to prevent the crumbling of what could otherwise have been salvaged. It is only after the situation is out of hand that the groups hasten to collect and bind together the pieces when it is already too late. But people expected

that religious groups would intervene, and voices from sections of Kenyan society challenged the groups to act.

The Churches and the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC)

The Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) was established in 2008 to address human rights violations following the post-election violence. The TJRC was seen as an effort to overcome the impunity enjoyed by inciters of violence, and to promote reconciliation. It was assumed that the religious institutions would take a lead in the effort. However, at the time the TJRC was agreed upon, religious groups were unable to point out with conviction that the TJRC process was state-owned and skewed by political interests. The reason for this state of affairs was that in the run-up to the 2007 general elections, several religious groups were seen as being openly partisan along ethnic lines. The media reported on 'prophesies' by leaders of various Christian churches regarding who would win the presidential elections. The churches also had their preferred presidential candidates, according to geographical and ethnic boundaries. Similarly, in Mombasa, Muslims campaigned for their fellow Muslim candidates.

When the violence erupted, the religious groups could not then rise above political partisanship in order to counter the tide of violence. They were not in a strong position to condemn the post-election violence largely instigated by certain political leaders. As a result of the religious alliances, over 300 churches were burned during the post-election violence, an indication that religious institutions, especially the churches, were no longer respected.

However, after being silent for almost one year, the religious groups came out in defence of justice and human rights. The public condemnation of the president and prime minister centred on the failure to punish corruption in high places, to deal with extra-judicial killings by the police and to resettle thousands made homeless by the post-election violence (*Daily Nation*, 20 February 2009). The cheers by Kenyans on witnessing this public act were an indication of what they had expected of the religious leaders after the violence. For example, the Hindu council leadership castigated the coalition government as follows:

You [referring to the President and the Prime Minister] have been reluctant to punish your friends who are greedy, you have neglected the IDPs; you have not acted decisively on insecurity and extra-judicial killings. Kenyans hoped that the two of you would unite the diverse ethnic communities into one united nation of Kenya; that you would punish those who

break the law even if they are your friends; that you would turn your faces from corruption and greed; that you would resettle the IDPs back to their homes; that you would facilitate the creation of jobs for the unemployed especially the youth; but all Kenyans are witnessing are disagreements within the Grand Coalition instead of cohesion and there have been little or no effort towards healing and reconciliation. Kenyans are now disillusioned with your leadership and you should take responsibility for the status of the nation. We urge you to take charge and restore dignity and unity, equity and justice for all the people of Kenya. We pray that God will help you to overcome the challenge facing our nation with courage and devotion (*Daily Nation*, 20 February 2009).

Another public act was a formal apology by the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) for taking sides during the 2007 general elections. This was an effort by the churches to recover their credibility, and show their commitment to support the peace building and reconciliation process. At the same time, an inter-religious forum consisting of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), the Episcopal movement, the Hindu society and NCCCK remained outspoken about the ills of the political leaders in the country. One example illustrating this collaboration was the NCCCK's One Million Signatures initiative that sought to mobilize Kenyans in all administrative provinces to support the prosecution of leaders who had instigated the post-election violence.

Similarly, a group of churches formed the 'wheels/caravan of hope' (*msafara*) initiative. This is a peace initiative that co-ordinated prayers for the nation and food distribution to internationally displaced persons all the way from Mombasa, through Nairobi, Nakuru, Eldoret and to Kisumu. Other initiatives by the churches included collaboration with the provisional and district administrations. For example, churches in the Rift Valley province joined the Rift Valley provincial commissioner to reconcile communities most affected by the 2007-2008 violence. In the months of February through April 2009, religious groups and other civil organizations were actively involved in persuading the president and the prime minister to resolve their differences amicably.

These initiatives show that at last the religious groups desired a peaceful Kenya. What is significant in the diverse responses is their condemnation of corruption among political leaders and poor governance. Philip (2008) argues that, in the long and difficult process of peace building in post-conflict states, corruption has increasingly been identified as a major obstacle to success and as something whose eradication should be of high priority.

The ills of corruption and the lack of political will to reconcile Kenyans and fully implement peace for displaced persons to return to their homes continue to render Kenya vulnerable to ethnic animosity and even more violence.

The delay in implementing peace building and reconciliation mechanisms is what continues to rally religious leaders to challenge the Kibaki-Odinga coalition government to overcome partisan politics and to come to the aid of Kenyans in the Rift Valley, Western and Nyanza provinces who still feel unsafe and unprotected from their fellow citizens in their own country.

Proposals Towards a More Active Role

Wainaina (2009a) recommends that religious groups should fearlessly join the international community and continue to urge the government to hold perpetrators of human rights violations to account, and also to support initiatives to strengthen judicial independence and the establishment of a society based on the rule of law and human rights. This is one of the ways to address the root causes of ethnic rivalries. The causes, for example, of land squabbles in most parts of the country are known. These have not only been documented in research done by Kenyan and other scholars. They are also evident from the reports from commissions formed by both the government and private bodies to investigate the land clashes in the Rift Valley and Western provinces in the late 1990s (see Klopp 2002; Odhiambo 2004; Ndegwa 1997; Turner and Brownhill 2001; Mueller 2008). Clearly, religious institutions should be in the forefront in advocating a long-lasting solution to the burning issues that lead to violence in the country.

In particular, Mue (2008) urges religious groups to take the lead in fighting tribalism and forging an abiding spirit of nationhood. The groups should condemn the ethnic politics that has divided the country's 42 ethnic groups, commonly referred to as 'tribes', in an effort to form a united Kenya. Equally important is the need for these groups to call for a fair distribution of resources such as land, which has remained a central issue in giving rise to widespread ethnic conflict.

Finally, religious institutions should endeavour to give hope where there seems to be no hope. They should mobilize citizens to embrace peace and nationhood, and not to seek to establish ethnic enclaves. In sum, advocating social justice should be the priority of all civil organizations in the country.

Lessons Learned About Post-conflict Peace Communication

The experience of religious institutions reveals some useful lessons about post-conflict peace communication. For the most part, religious institutions

have the potential to communicate peace messages. Many of them are grassroots-based and can use their doctrinal foundations to reach the majority of people and positively impact on them for the betterment of their communities. Diverse religious groups could overcome political partisanship because of their focus on spiritual and human wellbeing, a virtue which cuts across ethnic enclaves. In situations where the political leadership fosters ethnic and tribal perspectives, spiritual conviction that favours nationhood then becomes a tool to (re)unite citizens. In this role, religious groups have to emphasize the need to embrace compatible cultural values, meaningful relationships and spirituality. These are the building blocks to promote meaningful interactions in post-conflict settings.

Another important element of post-conflict communication is the willingness of religious groups readily to own up to their mistakes, and to their failure to act on behalf of those they serve. This is a communicative act that encourages leaders to rally for a new beginning that seeks to foster reconciliation. Rosenberg's (2005:3) concept of non-violent or compassionate communication founded on 'language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions and a powerful process for inspiring compassionate connection and action' is what religious institutions need to focus attention on.

At the same time, communication in post-conflict setting involves raising critical questions about the protection of human rights and the promotion of ethical values and good governance. The gesture by the NCKK to focus attention on issues concerning the economic and political rights of citizens is to be seen as an attempt to communicate humanity.

Overall, the participation of religious groups, even though it came late, enables us to see the meaning of the saying 'better late than never'. Many Kenyans can attest to the positive acts and motives of these institutions as a result of their involvement in peace-building initiatives following the election violence. The religious leaders engaged by reflecting on their mistakes and formally apologized. Thereafter, they embarked on the task to organize their constituents to act for peace. In my view, these are communicative acts that allow those involved in the peace building and reconciliation process to reflect on their actions and change what needs to be changed. In all, it is a way of communication that calls for a redefinition of the role of community structures to realize that, in the words of the NCKK official Oliver Kisaka (2008), these institutions embody traditions of renewal, redemption and forgiveness.

Conclusion

Religious institutions as community structures need to use every available opportunity to speak up for citizens and to publicly assume the leadership in the fight against injustice and political corruption in Kenya. As Orobator (2002) argues, these institutions need to modify and apply doctrines that promote humanity. So far, the extent to which these groups act and respond in preventing conflicts facing Africa remains inadequate. The Kenyan experience, notably the late response by religious institutions, teaches the need for these institutions to remain neutral (politically) and committed to promote humanity and not wait to do so only in times of conflict. Their positioning in society gives them the opportunity to champion strong and effective community ties that favour a vision of one Kenya built on ideals of a nation and nationhood rather than ethnic enclaves.

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