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RELIGION AND THE PREVENTION OF ELECTION VIOLENCE: LESSONS FROM KENYA

By Simon Polinder

It is a regular occurrence in the United States: politicians appearing as speakers in a church. Former Vice President Mike Pence spoke about his book on his vice presidency at a church in Atlanta after a religious service (Fox 5 Atlanta 2023). It can also happen the other way around. For example, when religious leaders joined together in prayers for Donald Trump at the White House (Kennedy 2022). In 2022, the group Pastors for Trump was launched. At one of their meetings, a popular right-wing preacher said that the people in his movement want to establish a theocracy, because they believe God should “take over the government” (Lemon 2023).

In Kenya it was also common for political leaders to perform in church buildings or religious service during election times. Kenya is a very religious country with a predominantly Christian population (about 85 percent) and a significant Muslim minority (about 11 percent). In 2021, however, churches in Kenya decided to no longer offer a platform for politics, because violence threatened to break out around elections. This is a good example of what

religious organizations can do to foster peace and prevent post-election violence.

This year the United States will have high-stakes elections. Many Americans will remember the political violence that emerged after the presidential elections in 2021, resulting in the storming of the Capitol on January 6. Many people in the United States and abroad were shocked: how could this happen in the so-called beacon of freedom and democracy? Can anything be done to help prevent this from happening again in 2024? And, more specifically,

Abstract: Religious organizations, including churches, can play an important role in promoting peace and stability. This role is not always recognized by policymakers and academics in the West. This essay shows how many churches in Kenya recently excluded politicians from their religious gatherings and denied them access to the pulpit. They did this to help prevent violence from breaking out around the elections. With the upcoming elections in the United States, churches and church leaders could learn from their Kenyan colleagues. Americans should cherish the separation of religion and electoral politics since it is meant to prevent politics from becoming corrupt or religion becoming untruthful.

Keywords: election violence, Kenya, United States, religion, politics, churches, corruption

can religion be part of the solution instead of just part of the problem?

Kenya's Example: How Religion Can Help Keep the Peace

Despite terrorist attacks since the 1970s, Kenya was seen as a mature democracy in Africa until 2007 (Carotenuto and Shadle 2012, 1). When post-election violence broke out in 2007, the most violent to that point in Kenya's history, that image tilted. From then on, electoral violence and political strife became increasingly linked to the fight against terrorism. As a result, ethnicity, religion, and politics became intertwined. The parties involved such as the media, civil society, politicians, religious institutions, and citizens were seen as politically tainted, partisan, or compromised. Because of the intertwining of religion, ethnicity, and politics, the situation is always tense around elections. Politicians try to get certain religious groups on their side and, as a result, enter the realm of religion. Similarly, religious leaders may try to influence believers to make certain political choices.

A line was drawn in 2021. The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) took the decision to no longer open houses of worship to politicians. In their statement, they expressed concern that politicians are constantly bringing messages of hatred, division, and dissent into the church. "They wanted to prevent a politics of hatred and division leading to an us-versus-them mindset in times of elections" such as in 2007. Church leaders were also instructed not to nominate or appoint political candidates as "the God-ordained candidate" (Mutinda 2021).

The NCCCK is an association of Christian organizations and churches registered in Kenya. Founded in 1913, it has been working for about 100 years for citizens' rights, democracy, education, and speaking out against state violence. The NCCCK unites numerous Protestant churches with millions of members and was nominated for the 2023 Nobel Peace

Prize in part because of the efforts mentioned above.

Until 2021, it could happen that during church services on Sundays, politicians would drive by in flashy cars, accompanied by people carrying cash to buy a new building or a sound system for the church. In return, the politician then entered the pulpit midway through the service to deliver a message that often had little to do with the Bible. Excerpts of this performance then often appeared on television. In their attempt to take away each other's voters, it sometimes even happened that politicians clashed with each other during church services. Consequently, religious leaders banished

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politicians from the pulpit. They accused them of unedifying and divisive calls that desecrated the church. As Catholic Archbishop Anthony Muheria explained, "Partly priests are to blame for the capture of the church by politicians.

There was need to return the practice into its purity" (Onyango 2021). The head of the Anglican Church, Archbishop Jackson Ole Sapet, argued that it was a mistake to allow politicians space in the church. That practice had to stop and that is why this ban was necessary.

Initially, it was only church organizations belonging to the NCCCK that repelled politicians from the churches, but later others joined in, although the Methodists chose to admit just anyone because they did not want to discriminate toward some of their members. Muslim leaders also joined the decision and explicitly supported it. This was not for the first time, by the way; after the unrest of the 2007 elections, Christians and Muslims also worked together in the Inter Religious Forum (Mwaura and Martinon 2010, 39–46; Tenaw 2018, 4–7). For example, Islamic scholar Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome, who is also associated with The Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM), an umbrella organization of all Islamic organizations in Kenya, indicated on television in early-2023 that he supports the initiative and that regulation is needed more

broadly than just at the weekly meetings (Citizen TV Kenya 2023). It also happens that prayer meetings are organized for peace but these are in fact political meetings in disguise. He argues that the prayers must be sincere, otherwise they will not be answered. Now this is not the case because at these meetings the prayer is completely politicized.

Real pursuit of peace is possible only if politicians are kept precisely out of these meetings, and when religious leaders not only pray, but also organize forums, and make a statement through the press towards political leaders. “The relative peace we enjoyed during the election is because of the role religious leaders played in trying to tame the political temperature in the country,” Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome argued (Citizen TV Kenya 2023). The above demonstrates how influential Muslims and Christians are in the Kenyan public sphere, as well as their commitment to the political and social issues in society.

Conclusion

The United States might not be as religious as Kenya, but recent developments in the United States show to what extent religious leaders and ideas, politics, and even the media have become intertwined. This might lead to very tense situations during the coming Presidential elections. The example of Kenya shows, however, that religious organizations can make an important contribution to promoting peace and security. For example, by re-assessing the way religious organizations and leaders are relating to politics and the way religious organizations allow politicians to use their infrastructure and podiums. (However, a caveat must be made. It could be

that the sociological conditions of the United States concerning religion and politics are so different from Kenya that the lessons drawn might not have the full desired effect; see Cremer 2023, 243, 250, 252, 260–262.)

The distinction, not separation, between religion and politics is a matter of maintenance. The relationships between religion and politics can sometimes grow skewed over time. This maintenance is not only a responsibility of politics, but also of religion. Religious organizations must know their limitations and should welcome corrections when others tell them they are overstepping their boundaries. On the other hand, it is also the job of religious organizations to sometimes say uncomfortable things about politics and society. It may be tempting for religious institutions and organizations to have political influence in the short term, but if doing so damages the separation between religion and politics, it is not worth it. Years ago, based on my experiences in the United States, I wrote a column about religion and politics. From my stay in the United States and the classes I took at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, I learned that the separation of religion and politics is not meant to keep religion out of public and political life, but to make politics and religion aware of their uniqueness and distinctiveness. If one loses sight of that, politics risks becoming corrupt or religion becomes untruthful (Polinder 2014). As Campbell and Putnam (2012) once stated, mixing religion and politics is bad for both. In short, separate the religious from the political, but also relate them to each other constructively. ❖

About the Author

Simon Polinder, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at Utrecht University (NL). His research is on the role of religious leaders dealing with violent extremism and terrorism in Kenya and Nigeria. He wrote a dissertation on religion and international relations (theory). He also edited the volume *Christian Faith, Philosophy, and International Relations* which was published with Brill.

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