

THE MEDIA, TERRORISM AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF MUSLIMS IN KENYA

Abstract

Muslims constitute just about 10% of Kenya's population and their perceived marginalization in the country's politics since the colonial period has often led them to retreat from the political scene. However, the democratization process that has energized the development of the media as well as the upsurge of terrorism seems to be transforming the participation of Muslims in Kenyan politics. This paper illustrates how the war on terror and the emergence of Muslim media have influenced the increasing visibility of Muslims in the political scene. From the previous peripheral status, they are now entering national political alliances that can protect their interests and in doing so, Muslims are edging towards influencing national politics in Kenya. The paper thus concludes that the war on terror and the liberalization of the media have been a boom for the mobilization of Muslims to participate in national politics in Kenya.

Key words: Kenyan Muslims, Media liberalization, Political marginalization, Access to the

Media, Political mobilization, War on Terror.

Introduction

Muslims are a minority² in Kenya and have subsequently occupied a peripheral status in the country's political space. At independence in 1963, the influence of Muslims in politics and administration was minimal or almost negligible. They were not visible in the hierarchy of power. Due to their perceived marginalization by the state, Coastal communities generally, and the Swahili in particular, started the *Mwambao* (coastal strip) movement. This was a movement by a small group of individuals to maintain the autonomy of the coastal strip, then the domain of the Sultan of Zanzibar, as a separate independent entity with Mombasa as a free port (Jewel, 1976: 14). It was hoped that such autonomy will empower the Muslims to determine their political course. After a while, this so-called "Coastal Strippers" faded from the political scene, but their ideas would resurface in the constitutional review debate from the mid 1990s in the form of

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2 The exact percentage of Kenyan Muslims is a polemic issue, depending on who is being asked. The Muslims perceive themselves to be about 30%. Some Christians will estimate Muslims to be less than 10%. Recent census place them to be about 10% (Central Intelligence Agency (2009). "Kenya". The World Factbook. Retrieved 23 January 2010.

Majimboism (a call for federalism). In the meantime, the Muslim remained absent from the national political scene.

By the 1980s, the only Muslim voice at the national level was the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM), while at the local level, the traditional religious leaders commonly known as *Kadhis* (religious judges) and *Imams* (Mosque leaders) spoke on behalf of the communities. However, since the dawn of the new millennium, there has been an improvement in the participation of Muslims in national politics. Today we have a number of national Muslim bodies which include, among others, National Muslim Leaders Forum (NAMLEF), Majlis Ulamaa Kenya (MUK), Kenya Council of Imams and Ulamaas (KCIU), and Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK).

NAMLEF is a national umbrella platform of all leaders of Muslim organizations that desire to see Kenya as a just, harmonious, peaceful and a prosperous country based on good governance, constitutionalism and the rule of law, pro-poor policies and enhanced democratic space. The aim of NAMLEF is to see all Kenyans effectively participate in shaping their destiny and the positive uplift of the status and welfare of Muslims in Kenya. It also envisions the correction of historical and structural injustices and marginalization meted on the Muslim through perceived deliberate policies and programmes by the state.

The question that this paper seeks to address is what has led to the sudden change in the mobilization of Muslims to participate in national politics? We attempt to answer this question by paying specific attention to the emergence of Muslim media, thanks to the democratization process that has given way to the liberalization of the media; and the upsurge in the war on terror that has resulted into the suspicion of Muslims as the main perpetrators of terrorism.

Democratization and Muslim access to the Media in Kenya

Kenya has seen three presidential regimes, all of which have exhibited authoritarian tendencies that have undermined the freedom of the media as well as people's access to the media. The climax of such authoritarianism was the 24-year regime of President Arap Moi from 1978 to 2002. A culture of fear, uncertainty and sycophancy characterized the one-party political system. Suspected enemies of the regime, both real and imagined, were detained, tortured, and forced to confess on trumped-up charges of treason and sedition. There was absolutely no freedom of the press. Like in many other African countries, Kenyans had to struggle to bring an end to the single-party system in 1991. Even during Moi's multiparty era, media houses that published alternative views from those of the state were still harassed and sometimes closed down.

The real change in the freedom of the media in Kenya came with the Kibaki regime from 2003. Having won the elections on the platform of good governance and development, it is instructive that the Kibaki government opened up the political space to facilitate freedom of association, assembly and expression relative to the Kenyatta and Moi eras. Unlike his predecessor who straddled the entire political scene like mighty colossus, President Kibaki adopted a *laissez faire* style of leadership. This resulted also in the freeing of both print and electronic media from excessive State control.

The opening of the political space prompted by this process also led to the rapid expansion and diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) which

the Muslim community was quick to adopt to further their interests. Rapid Internet diffusion has led to a mushrooming of cyber-cafes charging users less than a dollar per hour. These units have become crucial sites of Kenyan Muslims' engagement with the global Muslim *ummah*, of enhancing their knowledge of Islam through cyber-literacy, and of networking with and between (cyber)-communities with shared interests.

The introduction of domestic satellite dishes in Muslim homes that broadcast Islamic programs from the Middle East and Asia has also impacted on Kenyan Muslims' new understanding of Islam and their Islamic identities. It is via this global transnational Islamic networks mediated through the media that most educated Kenyan Muslim activists develop an interest to creatively use media outlets to engage in public discourses about the place of Muslims in Kenyan politics. This trend has enhanced Muslims' perception of their citizenship and it is steadily improving their political and economic participation within the predominantly non-Muslim nation.

Among the emerging Islamic media that have significantly contributed to the mobilization of Muslims to participate in politics is *The Friday Bulletin*. This is a weekly publication of just four pages produced in Nairobi by Jamia Mosque Committee. At first it was a publication of a page or two, which was distributed every Friday at the Jamia Mosque in Nairobi. However, Muslim activists associated with *Daawa*³ Groups within Nairobi have always circulated copies of this small magazine to other Muslims in Kenya. Since November 2006, this magazine is available as an online publication hosted on www.islamkenya.com. It is available to other Muslims across the globe and Kenyan Muslims in the Diaspora have a chance to be acquainted with Kenyans Muslim issues back home. The Bulletin is also circulated through e-mail as an attachment forwarded by ardent young Muslims utilizing the cyberspace as a forum to discuss Islamic issues. This magazine is normally subjected to text analysis to bring out the issues that have helped to sensitize Kenyan Muslims' voting preferences.

There is no central theme in this magazine, but it tends to raise issues that affect Kenyan Muslims on a daily basis. Issues discussed include spiritual matters such as prayers, fasting, pilgrimage to Makah, and Alms giving. It also discusses contemporary issues bordering on the welfare of Muslims such as educational matters, politics, social issues that have transpired across the week. In short it serves as a resume of what the editors discern as important events of the week affecting Muslims. As such, diligent Muslims have a chance to glimpse the weekly events. This magazine has become an active instrument for Muslims to engage in political discourse about what is presumed to be injustices meted out by the Kenyan government. The sentiments expressed therein shaped the Kenyan Muslims perception on which side to lean on, in the 2007 general elections.

The War on Terror and Muslim Political Alliances in Kenya

The political mobilization of Kenyan Muslims has been shaped by a number of happenings in the Kenyan political scene. The major issue is the war on terror that was seen to be targeting only Muslims. As a result, it shaped the voting patterns in the 2002

3 Daawa means propagation of Islam through lectures, missionary activities and giving out pamphlets to Muslims and other interested parties.

Kenyan general elections, the 2005 Referendum on the Constitution, the 2007 general elections, and even the recent terror attack in Uganda by the *Al-Shabbab* Militia.

Kenyan Muslims have always conceived themselves as marginalized and alienated from the national politics and in particular the political leadership. The employment sector was seen as closed to many Muslims. As a result of the oil boom in the 1970s and 1980s, many young Muslims went to work as expatriates in Saudi Arabia where the remuneration was good with the minimal education that they had.⁴ For almost two decades Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf served as a safe haven for some Kenyan Muslims to work and progress economically. The war that broke out in Somalia in 1991 during the time of Siad Barre, brought another opportunity for mass exodus of another batch of young Kenyan Muslims to migrate to the West posing as refugees. Hence, many found their way to United States of America as well as United Kingdom.

The Gulf War of 1991 brought a draw-back to some Kenyan Muslims as the lucrative jobs in the Arabian peninsular were threatened. The pay went down and it was as well as what some youth could make in the local *matatu*⁵ industry per month. This brought about disillusionment to the Muslim populace. The place they had hitherto turned to for solace was shattered. There was need for mobilization to find their place within their own government. This is part of the genesis for political mobilization and the building of alliances to safeguard their chance to share in the political leadership. However, this ardent desire to be part of Kenyan leadership is being marred by the war on terror.

The first sign that Kenya had entered the terrorist circuit was in December 1980 when terrorists sympathetic to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) bombed part of the world-famous five-star Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi.⁶ At least 16 lives were lost and hundred of people were injured. A Jewish family owned the Norfolk Hotel. In August 1998 US Embassy buildings in Kenya and Tanzania were bombed, resulting in at least 250 deaths. The attack was directly linked to Osama bin Laden. In November 2002 suicide bomber terrorists calling themselves 'Army of Palestine' attacked, wounded, and killed patrons at another Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya. Almost simultaneously, the attackers shot at an Arkia Airline taking off from Mombasa International Airport for Israel. None of the 271 passengers in the plane was injured. Al Qaeda was blamed for the attacks.

A close up of the major titles of some of the articles in the Muslim publication that year 2007, started on a mobilizing note for Muslims. In issue number 194⁷, it begins with a title "Fight for Your Rights or Be Enslaved". The choice of words in this article rouses the interest of the reader to want to know exactly what are these rights envisaged in it. The article, authored by Farouq Machanje, a coordinator of NAMLEF and a MUHURI (Muslim Human Rights) activist, commences by pointing out that the Kenyan economy had achieved a 5.8% growth. However, that growth has not improved the lives of the Muslims. Several issues were raised that affect the Kenyan Muslims and serve as basis of arguments that can make the Muslims "enslaved". These issues are

4 Hassan Muhammad, Oral Interview, 12th July 2008, Mombasa.

5 Matatu is a Nissan 14 seater car used to shuttle both within a town and within different towns in Kenya.

6 Otenyo, Eric E, NEW TERRORISM Toward an explanation of cases in Kenya Published in African Security Review Vol 13 No 3, 2004

7 Farouq Machanje, The Friday Bulletin, The Weekly Muslim News Update, January 05, 2007.

instances of arbitrary arrests, torture, holding suspects incommunicado, censure of Muslim based Non-Governmental Organizations, and allowing the United States of America to have bases in Kenya especially in areas considered strategic such as Wajir and Isiolo. The arrested Muslims are subjected to what some Human Rights activists consider inhuman conditions. They are denied medical attention as a result of the torture meted out as well as legal representation. The article appealed to Muslims that 2007 is an electioneering year and hence should exercise their rights to be free.

In the following issue, number 195⁸, it carries yet another title: "Muslims protest over State harassment". It criticizes the agenda of arbitrary unrests, torture, holding suspects incommunicado and even handing over Kenyan Muslims suspects to other nations for interrogation. These major vices cited are as a result of the 7th August 1998 bombing of the USA embassy in Nairobi as well as a failed attack on an Israel plane and a bombing of Paradise Hotel in Kikambala, Mombasa in November 2002. These two events denote the initial attacks and rounding up of a section of Kenyan Muslims on the charges of colluding with international Muslim terrorists. These two events saw the capture of over 200 Kenyan some of whom were shipped to Guantanamo Bay (Soares & Otayek, 2007, 157-176). Reference is made that for all these injustices to be surmounted, Kenyan Muslims need to consider a change of leadership in the government.

Issue number 196 carries a headline: "Voting Power to avenge state harassment, Muslims resolve". These were sentiments echoed by Muslim protesters on the 12th of January 2007, after Friday prayers. The protesters vowed to avenge "the years of persecution at the hands of Kibaki regime" by mobilizing Muslims to vote out the government.

The chairman of NAMLEF, Abdillahi Abdi told the protesters, "We are not ready to accept the injustice done to us particularly by this government we helped to put to power. As we voted for it, we will also ensure that it is voted out. We are no longer prepared to be bribed by famine relief to vote for a government which does not have the interests of Muslims". These sentiments were being expressed at the dawn of election year to alert the government that the Muslim vote might be lost if they do not give a hearing to their grievances.

In the same article, it was expressed that no intimidation from the government will bar the Muslims to be mobilized to vote against the government. The time at which this article went to print was after many Kenyan Muslims had been rounded up in towns bordering Somalia on the charges of being sympathizers of Union of Islamic Courts. The arrested Kenyans were handed over to Ethiopian and American governments. The government was called to take care of other pressing needs of Kenyans like the epidemic of Rift Valley fever which had then infested the North Eastern Province of Kenya instead of chasing "terror mirage".

The same agenda appeared in the following issue number 197, whereby the anti-Kibaki campaigns were done in Mombasa. In particular Sheikh Khalifa, the chairman of unregistered Islamic Party of Kenya said, "We cannot support a government that is fighting Muslims. If the government has decided to please the Americans by oppressing Muslims, then it is ready to lose our support".

Hence the voting trend was seen as the only way to oust Kibaki out of govern-

8 Friday Bulletin, The Weekly Muslim News Update, January 19, 2007.

ment and usher in an era of emancipation for the Kenyan Muslims. This will be seen as retaliation against the “oppressive regime of Kibaki”. Muslims went further in their campaigns to seek attention and air their grievances by threatening to disrupt World cross country Championships that were held in Mombasa on 24th March 2007 (Issue No. 200).

They wanted to curtail the event in order to gain audience with the government over the issue of releasing purported terror suspects that were held in jail. These suspects have not had access to legal representation. However, the rally was called off because such an event would have been used by hooligans to disrupt peace and have the blame pinned down on Muslims. The world cross country championships took place amidst tight security. Suspicion of terrorism being associated with Muslims has been seen as volatile act to deepen hatred against Kenyan Muslims and Islam.

These sentiments make Kenyan Muslims’ grievances to be at times associated with what is happening to the Global Muslim Ummah. Conflicts involving Muslims in the Middle East, the Soviet Union, Somalia, and Sudan are viewed by Kenyan Muslims as a world-wide propaganda against the Muslims. These concerns of the Muslim Ummah elsewhere in the world attract sympathy of Kenyan Muslims and hence the notion of worldwide persecution of Muslims. Kenyan Muslims are not left out in their show of solidarity with other Muslims.

In particular; issue number 206 explained that Kenya’s role in Somali renditions was ‘shameful’. This was as expressed in the report of New York-based Human Rights Watch that accused Kenya of playing an active role in the arbitrary detention, expulsion and enforced disappearance of individuals fleeing in the Somali conflicts. These are some of the issues Kenyan Muslims would see resolved if the then government was voted out.

In fact by the end of June 2007, the Chief Kadhi Sheikh Hammad Muhammad Kasim encouraged Muslims to participate in the 2007 elections (Friday Bulletin, Issue No. 219). He urged Kenyan Muslims to register as voters saying, “choose leaders who would champion the interests of the community...Let us vote in leaders who have our interests at heart. This is our inalienable right that no one can take away from us”. The Chief Kadhi was then launching voter education campaign in Mombasa. The aim of this campaign was to clear misconceptions that Muslims are prohibited from participating in the electoral process.

However in his bid to simply inform Kenyan Muslims that they have a right to vote, he went further to pass judgment that the then government was biased against Muslims. This move shows the lengths at which Kenyan Muslim leaders tried to ensure success to vote out “Kibaki’s unjust regime”. These actions by Muslims groups like Muslim Human Rights (MUHURI), NAMLEF, SUPKEM, Majlis Ulamaa and KCIU encouraged Muslims first to register as voters in large numbers.

Secondly as early as June 2007 Muslims were already looking out for favorable political parties to ally themselves with so as to enhance their chances of voting out the anti-Muslim regime. This is because the conduct of the 2005 Referendum on Constitutional Reform, saw Muslims voting overwhelmingly against the Draft Constitution. From that time until July 13th 2006, the Chief Kadhi was sidelined in state functions. In the days leading up to the Referendum, Kenyan Muslim leaders had presented to the government a memorandum of urgent issues affecting their community. President

Mwai Kibaki reassured the Muslims that the raised issues would be taken up by his government. However, there was no positive outcome of this meeting.

As the Election Day approached, the Muslims leaders intensified their vocal campaigns against the Kibaki government. Imams in various parts of the country were called in to take an active part in the political discourse by providing necessary information to the Muslims.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the democratization process has energized the development of the media as well as the upsurge of terrorism has been transforming the participation of Muslims in Kenyan politics. This paper illustrates how the war on terror and the emergence of Muslim media have influenced the increasing visibility of Muslims in the political scene. From the previous peripheral status, they are now entering national political alliances that can protect their interests and in doing so, Muslims are edging towards influencing national politics in Kenya. They still feel that more can be done in trying to de-link Muslims and actions of terrorism in Kenya. Also Muslims want to enjoy full citizenship instead of being seen as second rate citizens. They have began the long walk to political integration in Kenya.

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МЕДИЈИ, ТЕРОРИЗАМ И ПОЛИТИЧКА МОБИЛИЗАЦИЈА МУСЛИМАНА У КЕНИЈИ

Резиме

Муслимани чине само око 10% становништва Кеније и њихова доживљена маргинализација у политици земље од колонијалног добра често их је водила повлачењу с политичке сцене. Међутим, чини се да процес демократизације, који је подстакao развој медија, као и пораст тероризма, трансформише учешће муслимана у кенијској политици. Овај рад илуструје како су рат против тероризма и појава муслиманских медија утицали на повећање видљивости муслимана на политичкој сцени. Након ранијег периферног статуса, они сада ступају у националне политичке савезе који могу штитити њихове интересе и, чинећи то, почињу да утичу на политичке прилике у Кенији. Сходно томе, овај рад, закључује да су рат против тероризма и либерализација медија подстакли мобилизацију муслимана у политичком животу Кеније.

Кључне речи: кенијски муслимани, либерализација медија, политичка маргинализација, приступ медијима, политичка мобилизација, рат против тероризма.

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