

# THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: EXPERIENCE OF NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF KENYA

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## ***ABSTRACT***

*Most of the time, religion viewed as a motive for conflict and has emerged as a key component in many current and past conflicts. However, religion does not always drive violence; it is also an integral factor in the peace building and reconciliation process. So, this paper assessed the peace building contribution role of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), following the post-2007 election violence in Kenya. The National Council of Churches of Kenya took instant humanitarian and peace building roles during the 2007 election violence. There was the provision of psychosocial support to address issues of trauma occasioned by loss of lives and infliction of emotional and physical harm. In addition, it also conducted the provision of food and non food items. Moreover, capacity building workshops for church leaders were held to build their capacity in mediation and peace building skills. Furthermore, In addition, ecumenical joint services were held incorporating the Christians, the Muslims and the Hindus. Finally, the Council was involved in influencing the passage of pieces of legislation such as the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Act , National Cohesion and Integration Act, The Constitutional Review Act of 2008, and the Witness Protection Act in the Kenyan Parliament. In general, The paper deals with issues such as the general background of the role of religion in Africa as both source of conflict and peace building; the cause and impacts of 2007 election violence in Kenya; the background and the role of religious institution (National Council of Churches of Kenya) in the post 2007 election violence in Kenya; and my conclusion is included at last. In short, I tried to assess to what extent religious institutions should play a role in managing conflict based on religious connections in Africa by taking the case study of Kenya.*

## **KEY WORDS:**

Conflict Management, Religion, Institution, conflict, violence.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Religion touches upon the deepest levels of identity. It can mobilize people for war, but also for lasting peace. Religion in many parts of the world is contributing to violent conflict, although exaggerated in many cases (Smock. 2006). But, religion is a source not only of intolerance, human rights violations, and extremist violence, but also of non-violent conflict transformation, the defense of human rights, integrity in government, and reconciliation and stability in divided societies (Rasul, 2009).

Traditionally, religion in Africa has been an individual and collective source of meaning, hope, comfort and deliverance. However, despite the high social relevance of religion in Africa and the averred intense religiosity of Africans, a number of hypotheses still connect religion to conflict in the continent. Religion appears to be associated with conflict in many parts of the world

including Africa although concerns have heightened about the sustained violent conflicts in Africa (Essien , 2014).

On the other hand, there are also opportunities to employ the assets of religious leaders and religious institutions to promote peace (Smock. 2006). For instance, the role of Christianity for the enforcement of Truth and Reconciliation Council; peace processes in Mozambique, Nigeria, south Sudan, Kenya and others can be good examples to resolve conflicts. But, this paper gives emphasis for the case of Kenya election violence and conflict management with the help of religious institutions.

The violence that erupted in Kenya in late December 2007 and January 2008 following the disputed 2007 presidential election results was one of the most violent and destructive periods in the country's history. It is estimated that 1,300 lives were lost as a direct result of the violence and conservative figures estimate that 350,000 people were internally displaced (Ngari. 2012).

To resolve the election violence a number of groups and institutions were participated from local to international level. Among the groups involved in managing conflicts are religious based organizations ( Leremore, Kahara & Absalom, 2014).Therefore, the paper focused on the positive role of religious institutions of Kenya particularly for peace building in the post 2007 election violence, and the paper is expected to answer the following main questions

- ❖ To what extent religious institutions should play a role in managing conflict based on religious connections in Africa?
- ❖ How does religion play a role in the ways in which people work towards stability, build relationships and create sustainable peace?
- ❖ What do we consider to be the causes of the 2007/08 post-election violence in Kenya?

## **2. RELIGION AS SOURCE OF CONFLICT AND PEACE BUILDING IN AFRICA**

Religion can both encourage conflict and build peace, reflecting growing evidence that religious forces can play a constructive role in helping to resolve conflicts. Brief case studies of religious peacemakers – from Mozambique, Nigeria– demonstrate attempts, characteristically partially successful, to reconcile previously warring communities, thereby helping to achieve greater social cohesion, and providing a crucial foundation for progress in enhancing human development Jeffrey (Haynes,2009).

So, in one hand as cases described illustrate the creative contributions that religion can make to peace in places like Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Macedonia, Nigeria, and Sudan. As these cases illustrate, religious approaches to peacemaking do not provide a panacea, but can complement secular peacemaking productively (Smock. 2006).

In addition, in many settings religious organizations and their leaders, due to the trust and moral authority they hold from broad-based constituencies, are uniquely positioned to facilitate post conflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts (USID, 2009). For instance, in West Africa, in response to civil wars in Sierra Leone and Guinea, and ongoing violence in Liberia, interreligious councils—composed of representatives from Muslim, Protestant, and Catholic groups—provided leadership and resources to rebuild communities, and advocated for refugees.

These networks attempt to maintain requisites for building peace across national and regional boundaries.

The same is true in Kenya violence. The NCCCK members reported that the Council was involved in various facets of peace building, including humanitarian assistance such as the provision of food and non food items to those who were internally displaced and psychosocial support to relieve trauma to those affected by the violence through counseling and performing arts (Githigaro, 2012).

In efforts to promote peaceful co-existence at the local levels, the council forged partnerships with other religious leaders such as the Hindu and the Muslim communities to promote peaceful co-existence among warring communities through peace meetings and dialogue forums. At the national level the council was involved in various peace building efforts, such as engaging in dialogue with the two key disputants of the crisis and being involved in the African Union led mediation efforts, as well as advocating for transitional justice mechanisms. Thus, this paper highlights the peace building efforts undertaken by the National Council of Churches of Kenya NCCCK) in post election violence (ibid).

On the other hand, religion is divisive and a factor in conflict, but it is often exaggerated as the cause of conflict. For instance, in Nigeria tens of thousands of Nigerians have died in religious warfare over the last decade. The public perception prevails that religion is a principal source of international conflict, but the role of religion as a force in peacemaking is usually overlooked. Religious leaders and institutions can be mediators in conflict situations, serve as a communication link between opposing sides, and provide training in peacemaking methodologies (David Smock, 2008). So, African (Traditional) and modern religions may offer African solutions to many problems of conflict in the region of Africa. But, religion can be a cause of conflict as it is evident in Sudan: the Christians and Muslim conflict (Daniel, 2010).

### **3. CAUSE AND IMPACT OF POST 2007 ELECTION VIOLENCE IN KENYA**

Kenya was left with deep scars by the violence that erupted in the aftermath of the disputed Presidential election of 27 December 2007. In just a matter of weeks, Kenya was transformed from one of Africa's most stable democracies into chaos. Political and ethnic violence left more than a thousand people dead and over 350,000 people were forced to flee their homes (Dercon and Gutiérrez , 2010).

Violence was triggered by disputed presidential elections of 2007; a number of underlying issues had contributed to the violence. The causes of the violence were multi -faceted such as ethnicity and tribalism, competing political interests, feelings of being marginalized, unresolved issues such as land and youth unemployment . The triggers of the violence however were electoral malpractices and the mishandling of the presidential elections vote tally at Kenyatta International (Githigaro, 2012).

### **4. BACKGROUND OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF KENYA (NCCCK)**

The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) was founded in 1913 during the United Missionary Conference at the end of which representatives from four missionary

Institutions signed to a constitution to establish the federation of missions. The organizations were: Church Missionary Society (current day Anglican Church of Kenya), Church of Scotland Mission (current day Presbyterian Church of East Africa), United Methodist Mission (current day Methodist Church in Kenya) and African Inland Mission (current day African Inland Church) (Githigaro, 2012).

The mission of the Council is to:

- 1) Promote fellowship and ecumenism;
- 2) Nurture a common understanding of the Christian faith and mission;
- 3) Build the capacities of the membership; and
- 4) Enhance the creation of a just and sustainable society.

The Council has a national reach with its areas of operations divided into nine regions. They include Central, Lower Eastern, Upper Eastern, Nairobi, Coast, South Rift, North Rift, Western and Nyanza (ibid).NCCCK has vast experience in the area of peace building and conflict management. Past interventions have included responses to resource-based conflicts, border conflicts as well as responses to the 1992, 1997 and the 2007 ethnic clashes.

## **5. PEACE BUILDING AND HUMANITARIAN ROLE OF NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF KENYA (NCCCK)**

As many literatures stated the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) took immediate and long term humanitarian and peace building roles during the 2007 election violence. For instance Githigaro (2012) described in the following manner:

First, regarding the Immediate Responses to the Post Election Violence, steps taken initially after the eruption of violence were to mount a humanitarian response in the provision of food and non food items. Then, there was the provision of psychosocial support to address issues of trauma occasioned by loss of lives and infliction of emotional and physical harm. Progressively, community forums with the involvement of church leaders were held to restrain the youth in particular to stop engaging in violence.

In relation to long-term Programs for Healing and Reconciliation a number of interventions were undertaken by NCCCK to promote healing and reconciliation following the Kenyan 2007 post poll violence. One was the mounting of a psychosocial support program to enable victims of the post-election violence to heal psychologically from the trauma they underwent.

Second, capacity building workshops for church leaders were held to build their capacity in mediation and peace building skills and this enabled them to preach reconciliation in their areas of operation.

Thirdly, intra and inter-ethnic dialogue forums were held in areas identified as hotspots for the violence in efforts to bring reconciliation among bitterly divided communities. In addition, ecumenical joint services were held incorporating the Christians, the Muslims and the Hindus. These served to reinforce the message of peace through various religious teachings. A key underlying theme was that the respective religions advocated for peaceful co-existence and that their followers would be expected to foster a culture of peace (NCCCK 2008).

Finally, regarding the Policy Advocacy the National Accord of 2008 put in place a power-sharing agreement between the Party of National Unity (PNU) and the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). For the NCCCK, policy advocacy was and continues to be a strategy for long-term healing and reconciliation. The Council was involved in influencing the passage of pieces of legislation such as the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Act, National Cohesion and Integration Act, The Constitutional Review Act of 2008, and the Witness Protection Act in the Kenyan Parliament.

The other facet of advocacy that the Council was involved in was in the domain of transitional justice. Additionally, as part of advocacy, NCCCK was involved in monitoring the process of the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation Project (KNDR) as parts of efforts to ensure that the reform process was underway following the signing of the National Accord on February 28, 2008, a process that laid the framework for a coalition government for the sake of national unity. Among other issues, the Council continued to lobby the government to address the plight of internally displaced persons in areas such as compensation and resettlement.

Even after the stop of the post-election violence, there was a sustained push for the government to implement key reforms to stabilize the country. This reflected the NCCCK's commitment to ensuring an amicable settlement of the conflict and to urging the government to address the root causes of the violence through appropriate interventions despite some limitations/challenges some internal division within the church; lack the capacity of peace building theory and practice; some groups or individuals may have reservations about working with actors of a different religion; religious peace actors may be perceived to be proselytizing, by actively seeking to attract religious membership or conversion. So, the question is to what extent religious institutions should play a role in managing conflict based on religious connections in Africa?

There is no doubt that a number of religious traditions are destructive. Nevertheless, it is wrong to articulate ambiguities and limitations of religion without considering the constructive role of religion in public life. Religious contributions, from the viewpoint of statecraft, are often ignored by local governments and foreign policy practitioners, which, if properly used, could be an incentive to the process of peace building. Politicians and policymakers fail to recognize the role that religious peacemakers can play in building trust and facilitating processes of reconciliation and peace building. Opportunities lost include the joint application of religious and political virtues that could lead to a peaceful resolution of differences rather than a resort to violence (Aquiline, 2002).

Therefore, in my opinion since some of the traditional values of religion – including honesty, justice, fair play, tolerance and respect for others – are necessary for the maintenance of any society, perhaps even more so for a globalised society in general and Africa in particular that has no single cultural tradition. In addition, actors in a conflict may employ religious authorities or religious language to mobilize followers and widen their base of support. Religious actors engaged in peace building can draw on a common worldview, Theological language, and shared Values by adherents to gain support for peace. In short, conflict management based on religion and religious institutions should be enhanced in Africa since Africans have been characterized by religiosity. Infarct, there has been growing trend in Africa to solve conflicts on the bass of religion as the case Mozambique, south Africa and other western states of the continent.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Religious institutions frequently have a special relationship with the affected populations that can dampen conflict drivers, strengthening conflict mitigation efforts, or both. That means, religious leaders and institutions are often considered trustworthy and credible by the local population due to their established roles in their respective communities. In addition, religious institutions may have a shared and respected set of values with different sides of the conflict. Values, including forgiveness and reconciliation, in religious texts and teachings can inspire communities to change attitudes and actions at a basic level and transform worldviews at a deeper level to understand “others” in the conflict positively.

Furthermore, religious institutions may have unique leverage as spiritual leaders that allow them to influence and sway communities in ways that secular players in the conflict may not. This unique leverage increases the likelihood of expanding support for peace.

Thus, despite challenges it faced the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) played a great role for the conflict management of 2007 election violence in Kenya. In general, since religious institutions have a deep understanding of the local context and to all levels of power community, nation- giving them the ability to work to address conflicts successfully on multiple levels. Finally, I would say, that there has been a kind of revolution in thinking about violent conflict and the constructive role of religion that a growing interest among religious practitioners in conflict resolution, mediation, conciliation, and other non-violent techniques has been increased in Africa.

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