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To cite this article: Jacob Mwathi Mati (2015) Constraining Political Transformation: The Two Faces of Activist Religious Organizations in the Search for a New Constitution in Kenya, Journal of Civil Society, 11:4, 348-365, DOI: [10.1080/17448689.2015.1101248](https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2015.1101248)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2015.1101248>



Published online: 01 Dec 2015.



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Constraining Political Transformation: The Two Faces of Activist Religious Organizations in the Search for a New Constitution in Kenya

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ABSTRACT *Religious organizations are key structural components of Kenyan civil society that have played or continue to play a critical role in socio-political developments. In the last two and half decades especially, religious institutions have been among the principal actors shaping the mechanics and trajectories of Kenya's political order. But religious organizations' political behaviour, especially in the country's search for a new constitution, was contentious and remarkably inconsistent. There were moments of progressive actions but also behaviour that imperilled progress. This article probes this ambivalence of Kenyan faith groups in the struggles for a new constitution. It is argued that their political behavioural inconsistencies largely reflect an ethnic, class and, to a lesser extent, instrumentalized doctrinal or denominational schism that is ever present in the wider Kenyan society. By analysing how religious leaders and their organizations challenged political elite domination while remaining amenable to its influence, this article illustrates the contradictions of elite pacts in these struggles and how they constrained progressive transformation.*

KEY WORDS: Religious institutions/organizations, clergy, constitution/state reform struggles, Kenya

Introduction

Faith organizations have, since the colonial encounter, constituted a significantly influencing variable in the trajectories of Kenya's socio-political and economic development. In recent post-colonial political developments, the story of struggles for the transformation of the Kenyan state through popular demands for political liberalization, and later constitutional reforms since the early 1990s, would be incomplete without a critical review of the role of faith groups and the clergy.

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Often at great personal risks, an intrepid section of the Kenyan clergy took what was largely perceived to be a radical stance, to be among the leaders of collective action mobilizations for change from the late 1980s. The outright call for Kenya to liberalize its political space was itself first made by Reverend Timothy Njoya in a sermon delivered on 1 January 1990 at St. Andrews Church in Nairobi. This was after another clergyman, Bishop Henry Okullu of the Anglican Church of Kenya had a few weeks earlier drawn a ‘comparison between the events leading to the fall of Ceausescu’s dictatorship in Romania’ to predict the end of single-party dictatorships in Africa (Okullu, 1997, pp. 127–128 as cited in Karanja, 2008, p. 83). Three years earlier, on 5 October 1986, at a time when it was still regarded as high treason to do so, Rev. Njoya had ‘called on Kenyans to reclaim their humanity, sovereignty and freedom . . . by ending the one-party autocratic state and writing a new constitution’ (Njoya, 2013, p. 4). Together with occasional stinging pastoral letters and voices of Catholic bishops like Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki, these clergymen constantly rebuked excesses of the regime (Okungu, 2010). These bold calls were the harbingers to the two-decade long struggle for a constitutional transformation of the Kenyan state.

Given their role in these struggles, faith institutions and clergy effortlessly attracted the gaze of social scientists interested in understanding and theorizing contemporary Kenyan state reform process (see, for example, Bratton, 1994; Chacha, 2010; Gibbs & Ajulu, 1999; Karanja, 2008; Matanga, 2000; Maupeu, 2008; Ngunyi, 1995). Most of these scholars largely celebrate such clergymen and their institutions as radical and progressive. Some valorize ‘religious institutions as the most important institution in Kenyan civil society’, and religious leaders as some of the most influential organic intellectuals of our time (Bratton, 1994 as cited in Gibbon, 1995, p. 7). Only a few notable exceptions problematize the role of religious leaders and faith groups in these struggles (see, for example, Chacha, 2010; Maupeu, 2008).

That the cumulative pressure of the activist religious leaders, secular civil society, political activists coupled with ordinary citizens’ agency was instrumental in forcing political pluralism and a new constitution two decades later is not in doubt. However, it is the contention of the current analysis that the role of these religious institutions and their clergy was dichotomous. While a section of the clergy was part of the forces pushing for change, the same group would often, at crucial moments of this struggle, unite with factions of political elite opposed to change or whose vision of change was a self-serving one—to frustrate any radically transformative agenda (Mati, 2012). The critical question is: What motivated the political behaviour volatility of these activist religious groups?

A deep schism driven by ethnic, political economy, and doctrinal/denominational interests has always existed among the Kenyan clergy and their faith groups. On account of existing divisions, Karanja (2008) and Ngunyi (1995) categorize Kenyan religious groups’ attitudes to state reforms into two main rival camps. These are the activist pro-reform and the pro-status quo religious institutions. These authors assume categorical unity within the different camps and idolize the activist pro-reform group while painting the pro-status quo camp as spoilers.

This article is a corrective to the ubiquitous valorization of the role of activist faith institutions and clergy in the search for a new political order in Kenya, which has tended to pay little attention to how their behaviour constrained/stalled political change. The article based on interviews with religious leaders, political activists, politicians, and reviews of existing literature, shows that within the activist pro-reform camp, there have been

multiple cleavages. However, there have also been moments of extraordinary unity between different faith groups and clergy in the activist camp in the course of these struggles. But such unity has often been short-lived and always followed by deepening inter-religious divisions. This dualism of unity and division resulted in ambiguities, elongated the struggle, and led to erosion of trust that the clergy and pro-reform religious institutions hitherto enjoyed.

The article has five sections. First, it provides the conceptual linkages between religion and politics in social theory. It then maps the historical linkages between the main religious institutions and the Kenyan state. In the third section, the article illustrates the fluidity of relations between activist religious organizations and other actors in four waves of contention¹ in contemporary constitutional reform struggles. Here, the article shows that the political behaviours of faith institutions in the first three waves stole the wind from the sails of pro-reform movements, while the fourth illuminates an opportunity for a radical rupture that created conditions necessary for delivery of a new constitution in August 2010. The final section is the conclusion.

Religion and society in social theory: Some conceptual issues

Despite divergent viewpoints, social theory converges on the importance of religion as a key component of social structure, whose interactions with structures of the economy and politics significantly shape society. For the purposes of this article, Marx's idea of religion as an important tool for creation and maintenance of social order is useful in framing the contradictory role of faith groups and their leaders in the struggles for a new constitutional order in Kenya.

Marx conceived religion as part of a superstructure of ideologies that determines and dominates all that 'men say, imagine, conceive' (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 42). For Marx, religion offers the dominated an illusory understanding of the world, but also ways of coping with the adversity of alienation. Such illusion apportions existing material conditions to forces beyond human control. Marx (1844) asserts:

Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. . . . *Religious* suffering is, at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people. (NP)

Marx's view of religion is faulted on a number of fronts. For the current analysis, the key criticism is that since Marx's 'ideology is deduced from social or economic changes, his theory cannot account for the introduction of new ideology into society [because] religious innovation represents a deviation from the pre-existing social order' (Furseth & Repstad, 2006, p. 31). Where Marx fell short, others have further refined his ideas. In our case, Gramsci is a leading Marxist, whose concept of hegemony helps us to appreciate the dialectical nature of domination. For Gramsci, domination is complex and involves a combination of coercion and consent; and is maintained through institutions of state and civil society that organize and reproduce dominant/hegemonic ideology through legal codes

and due process. The hegemonic order, for Gramsci, rests not just on the ruling class control of the economic system, but also in how they use civil society to affect the consciousness of all members in society. Religious institutions, alongside other non-coercive social institutions such as schools and trade unions that mediate between the state and economy are, for Gramsci, what constitute civil society. While autonomous, civil society works in cooperative arrangements with the state. Indeed, for Gramsci (1971, p. 238), civil society is the ‘sturdy structure . . . of a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks’ that protects the state, solicits consent through persuasion of the dominated classes, and legitimizes the hegemonic order. It is what Gramsci calls ‘traditional intellectuals’ in civil society who ensure this.

But Gramsci’s conception of civil society is dialectical because it is a contested arena in which struggles for material, ideological, and cultural control of society happens. This conception is a useful apparatus for envisioning how change can be incited. For him, transformation is possible through ‘war of position’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238). This entails winning the control of the institutions of civil society so as to develop an alternative hegemony. For Gramsci, organic intellectuals embedded with the subalterns are key levers in the transformation project because they articulate the revolutionary theory on behalf of, and in the interest of, the subaltern class.

The dialectics of Gramsci’s hegemony incorporating an active, non-coercive role of civil society in both the formation and maintenance of hegemonic order, but also its transformative potential, help us to analyse religious institutions and their leaders’ role in struggles to transform the Kenyan state. Furthermore, the Gramscian approach offers a useful framework for evaluating the contentious role of the Kenyan clergy, and in a sense, debunking the hyperbole that the activist clergy were organic intellectuals of these struggles. Specifically, the Gramscian approach allows the current analysis to map the political behaviours of the various religious actors and how these abetted either transformative reforms or the status quo. This mapping reveals that these struggles have been a battle between organic and traditional intellectuals, who were ‘organizers of masses’ (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5) on both sides of contention. It is the balance of social forces at different waves of contention that dictated where these religious leaders stood in the spectrum of reform actors resulting in either progressive transformation, or in elite deals and bargains that stifled progress. As such, the Gramscian approach allows the current analysis to demonstrate how dominant religious actors in the Kenyan state reform contestations mobilized for support in legitimization of specific elite interests, using religious affinity. Using the Gramscian lens, I offer in what follows, a schema of faith groups and their relationship to the state with a view to illustrating that religion has been a key non-coercive instrument for domination in Kenya.

Religious institutions, state and society in Kenya

Present-day ethno-religious identities in Kenya reflect an enduring impact of encounters between indigenous Africans with conquering powers from the Muslim Arab World, and later Christian Europe, during the colonial penetration epoch. The establishment of modern-day Kenya, like for many other African countries, entailed an intercourse of different societies, cultures, politics, values, and worldviews. This interaction did not happen on equal terms. Rather, the symbolic and physical violence of the invading powers resulted in destruction and rearrangement of indigenous cultures and worldviews.

For starters, under the guise of a mission to civilize the native, religion was used to justify colonial invasion. Moreover, religion was an important epistemological repertoire for pacifying and quashing resistance of indigenous societies and, by extension, for manufacturing consent.

Religious institutions further ensured reproduction of the colonial state through the provision of social services, especially education and health. Arguably, the introduction of western education and its accompanying institutions by Christian missionaries had one of the most influential legacies in manufacturing the enduring consent of the dominated Africans. Besides leading the assault for epistemological dislocation of indigenous societies, western education also aided the kleptocratic colonial state with non-coercive apparatus to control local populations. For this reason, and the fact that the colonial state and early Christian missionaries had a common origin, certain religious institutions have historically been perceived to be appendages of the state that aid dominant political and cultural forces in Kenya (Gibbs & Ajulu, 1999; Karanja, 2008; Maina, 1998; Ngunyi, 1995). Moreover, such religious institutions have been key actors in the social contentions in both colonial and post-colonial Kenya. While Ngunyi (1995) and Maina (1998) single out the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Africa (PCEA) and the Anglican Church in Kenya (ACK) to amplify this point, the entire spectrum of Christian denominations are implicated here.

The PCEA and the colonial state sprung directly from the same stock—Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC), the precursor to the colonial state in Kenya (Ngunyi, 1995). It was the IBEAC that invited the Church of Scotland Missionaries (CSM)—the present-day PCEA—to Kenya in 1891. The PCEA remained intimately connected to the colonial state. The first CSM missionaries settled in Kikuyu areas. To date, the majority of PCEA adherents remain of Kikuyu ethnicity.

The ACK, originally set up by two German missionaries Ludwig Krapf and Johann Rebman as the Church Missionary Society in 1844, was handed over to the Anglican Missionaries after Kenya became a formal colony of Britain. From then on, the Anglican Church became the official religion of the colonial state. The earliest concentration of Anglicans was at the Coast, where Krapf and Rebman had first set up camp. However, as the colonial state spread, so did the ACK which today is found in many parts of the country with the highest concentrations of Anglicans in Western Luo Nyanza and Central Kenya regions.

The proximity of the Anglican Church to the state symbolized physically by the ‘erection of the bishop’s house next to the governor’s residence . . . created a perception among Africans that the Church was itself an instrument for buttressing colonial rule . . .’ (Maina, 1998, p. 141). Such perceptions ignited resentment and struggles against cultural and political domination. Religion served as a key repertoire of the social imaginaries that the dominated Africans used in mobilizing their resistance. This development corroborates the Gramscian conception of civil society as a site of contestation for hegemonic dominance. Specifically, indigenous quasi-religious and ethnic movements such as *Gikuyu Karing’ a*, *Dini ya Msambwa* and *Legio Maria* emerged as key counterforces (Maina, 1998; Ngunyi, 1995). Sociocultural grievances that centred on resistance to the banning of practices such as female circumcision, wife inheritance, polygamy, killing of twins, and worship of traditional gods were at the heart of the emergence of such indigenous ethno-religious protest movements (Karanja, 2008; Maina, 1998).

As if to underscore the fact that the colonial state and Christian missionaries were Siamese twins, resistance efforts by natives elicited a twin counter-reaction. On the one

hand, Christian religious institutions condemned the emergent African religious groups as evil. Furthermore, churches preached 'loyalty to the state and obedience to the law' as dictated by God (Ngunyi, 1995, p. 130). At the same time, the state resorted to coercion and banning of these indigenous quasi-religious protest movements. The PCEA, the ACK and the Christian Council of Kenya (CCK—the predecessor of National Christian Council of Kenya and present day National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK)) were the paragons in the cultural opposition to emergent quasi-religious and ethnic nationalist movements. At the height of the Mau Mau insurgency in the 1950s, for instance, these religious institutions actively intervened in political matters, seeking to 'detach sections of the peasantry from the Mau Mau and nationalist movements' (Ngunyi, 1995, p. 132).

The strategy for doing this was multi-pronged. First, the CCK, intent on ensuring a perpetual reproduction of their cultural hegemony, embarked on cultivating what Ngunyi (1995) calls a 'successor group of responsible clergymen'. They consecrated Obadiah Kariuki and John Kamau as bishops. The two were ethnic Kikuyus. Their consecration resulted in contradictory outcomes. Instead of condemning the liberation struggle, they started lobbying for dialogue. Bishop Kariuki's visit to Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's first post-independence president who was imprisoned early in the uprising period, sent a clear signal that CCK identified with the liberation struggle (Ngunyi, 1995).

This shift illustrates the dynamic role played by religious institutions and their leaders in the making of modern Kenya. Such fluidity is further illustrated by the relationship between state and religious institutions in the post-colonial era. Indeed, in the post-colonial period, there were greater shifts in relationships between these religious institutions and the state, especially after African clergy took over their leadership (Gibbs & Ajulu, 1999). As with the colonial period, the role played by religious institutions in post-colonial society informed the nature of the new relationships. More importantly, there is evidence to support the claim that the African clergy was largely driven by ethnic affinities in taking positions that shaped their relationship with the post-colonial state. For instance, while the differences within the Anglican top leadership may have been ideological, it cannot escape mention that Bishop Henry Okullu, an ethnic Luo who was more confrontational towards the Kenyatta regime and against the official stand of the Anglican Church, was a close associate of Oginga Odinga, fellow Luo, and Kenyatta's greatest critic. Furthermore, the Anglican Church, which remained heavily dominated by the Kikuyu and Luo, only changed its tune against the state after Moi, a Kalenjin, became president. Indeed, during Moi's rule, except for Bishop Muge, the clergymen who criticized him were non-Kalenjins.

Mainstream civil society literature has useful models on civil society–state relationships. Najam's (2000) Four-Cs model is particularly instructive in its observation that the relationship between state and non-governmental institutions is a product of congruencies or divergences of means and ends in the policy process. Given that contemporary Kenyan constitutional reform contentions had hallmarks of policy processes, Najam's Four-Cs model is useful in explaining the fragmented nature of relationships between different actors in this process. Najam identifies four tendencies defining such relationships: Co-operation, complementarity, co-optation, and conflict. For Najam (2000), when civil society and state seek similar ends and have similar means, they cooperate. Conflict occurs when state and civil society consider each other's goals and strategies to be antithetical. Complementarity happens when state and civil society seek similar ends but prefer dissimilar means (Coston, 1998; Najam, 2000; Young, 1999, 2000).

Lastly, when they prefer similar means but dissimilar ends, there is co-optation (see also Bratton, 1990; Commuri, 1995; Fisher, 1998; Pearce, 1997; Tandon, 1989).

But how have Najam's Four-Cs tendencies empirically exhibited themselves among the religious groups in the contemporary state reform struggles in Kenya? In post-independence Kenya, religious organizations continued playing an active role in the provision of social services, engaging in policy processes, advocating on behalf of the poor and marginalized, and even in human rights crusades, democratization, and state reform struggles. This multiplicity of roles means that relationships between religious organizations and the state are multiple. For instance, human rights and state reform crusades and alternative leadership approaches propagated by religious establishments such as ACK, PCEA, and Catholic Church resulted in confrontation. The shift to confrontational activism by these older religious establishments was gradual and came within a wave that saw the introduction of the American brand of Pentecostal Christian denominations. These developments brought with them new dynamics of the church–state relationship.

As already noted, commentators such as Ngunyi (1995) and Karanja (2008) identify two broad categories of the relationships between religious institutions and the state in contemporary Kenya's reform struggles as the loyalist pro-status quo and the radical activist religious institutions. In the loyalist pro-status quo basket, they put all religious institutions under the Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya (EFK) ecumenical body. The main institutions here are the Africa Inland Church (AIC), the African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa (AIPCA), the Deliverance Church, the Redeemed Gospel Church of Kenya, and the Church of God in East Africa. Groups under the EFK share several characteristics. First, they sided with the Moi/KANU regime in opposing change. In the post-Moi era, they joined ranks with other Christian denominations and Hindus to strongly oppose any concessions to Muslims during the 2003–2004 National Constitutional Conference. Second, the membership composition of some of these groups is largely drawn from ethnicities that supported the Moi/KANU regime. For example, AIC (predominant in Ukambani and Kalenjin ethno-regional areas) seemed more amenable to patronage politics of the day, especially in view of the fact that they preached the gospel of prosperity—riches and property. This gospel, which resonated with plunder of public resources under the Moi regime, was used in patronage politics. Some of the AIC leaders (e.g. Bishops Yego and Birech) were alleged to be recipients of patronage resources such as public land from the Moi regime (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights & Kenya Land Alliance, n.d.).

Third, all religious institutions under the EFK, save for the AIC, arrived in Kenya from America in the post-independence era. They are perceived in certain quarters as a representation of 'American cultural imperialism [because they are] supported by American money and spearheaded by American missionary personnel' (Karanja, 2008, p. 68). These external cultural forces, in cahoots with the state, are said to have shaped contemporary social formations and contentions. This is particularly so because EFK though formed in 1976, remained dysfunctional until in 1980 and gained prominence only after 1990 when it became a political project of then President Moi to counter the rising tide of activist religious institutions (Ngunyi, 1995). Specifically, Moi instigated some religious organizations, chief among them the AIC, to defect from the NCK to EFK on the guise that NCK's 'political profile was incompatible with biblical teachings' (Ngunyi, 1995, p. 142). With American Pentecostal Christian money and strengthened by Moi's political patronage, EFK's purpose was to compete with the NCK and to bolster the

Moi regime and keep politics beyond the reach of ordinary Christians (Ngunyi, 1995, p. 143).

The ACK, PCEA, NCK, the Catholic Church, Seventh Day Adventists, the Organization of African Instituted Churches, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, the Muslim Consultative Council, and the Hindu Council of Kenya fall under the activist grouping. These groups have been hegemony in these struggles. As illustrated below, while relatively progressive in their activism, these religious institutions have also largely been spoilers who time and again ganged up to undermine any radical transformation agenda.

There were at least two key reasons to explain their duplicity: Ethnic and theological. While scholars such as Karanja (2008) and Ngunyi (1995) underplay the role of ethnicity as a driver for the activist group's political behaviour, the post-Moi era clearly belies this. It is the contention here that during Moi's time (1978–2002),² ethnicity was well camouflaged under theology. For example, the loyalist group instrumentalized Romans 13:1–2 to distance themselves from what they called political agitation by the activist group.³ The EFK remained consistent in their support for the Moi/KANU regime. However, after the defeat of KANU in the 2002 elections, the quicksand on which they argued for state support was washed away as the EFK group lost out when Moi left office. In the event, they sided with activist Christian denominations in opposing the state-sanctioned 2005 constitution draft. This shift exposed the contradictions not only within this group, but also among Christian groups more broadly.

The shift after the 2002 elections that brought President Mwai Kibaki to power must be understood from two perspectives. First is the nature of patronage politics under the new 'regime'; in the early days, the Kibaki regime was not openly engaged in buying loyalty from religious groups and was not intent on manipulating religious groups to win support. Second, it needs to be understood that EFK membership came from the same regions as the political leaders opposed to the new regime and its draft constitution (the Kamba and the Kalenjin, in addition to the Luo and Luhya). The coming together of the opposing Christian camps (EFK and the so-called radical/progressive NCK-affiliated groups and the Catholic's Kenya Episcopal Conference) should also be understood within the context of content of the draft constitution, especially the prevailing perception among most Christian leaders that the draft favoured Muslims. This was central to the disintegration of the Ufungamano Initiative—an inter-faith movement that had been central in the push for new constitution (Mati, 2012). Arguably, this closing of ranks between the Christian groups further exposed contradictions within the so-called radical or progressive group.

Ngunyi (1995) and Karanja's (2008) exaltation of the activist camp as 'radical and progressive' is fallacious. Indeed, both fail to capture internal contradictions within the activist group, who periodically aligned themselves with anti-democratic factions of political elite (both in power and in opposition) to stop transformation. Indeed, many progressive social struggles have often capitulated under the leadership/influence of the activist religious groups. It is my suggestion, therefore, that just as with pro-status quo group, the activist groups' inconsistencies were directed also by ethnic, personal, and political economy interests, especially in the context of the patronage politics of the time.⁴ To understand why these were key drivers, it deserves mention that the leading lights in the so-called radical activist clergy were predominantly from the Kikuyu and Luo ethnic groups. In the wider Kenyan society, elite factions from these ethnic groups were the real vanguards in the anti Moi/KANU state struggles. As such, despite framing their struggles as against social and economic injustices perpetuated by Moi, it is difficult to separate these

sentiments from views of their ethnic constituencies. This is especially so after the defeat of the KANU regime in 2002 when cleavages within the activist group became manifestly ethnic.

Let me illustrate the inconsistencies in the activist religious group through the four key waves of contention in Kenyan constitutional reforms. These waves are:

- 1) The Coalition for National Convention (CNC). CNC emerged out of contentions that led to repeal of Section 2A⁵ and the subsequent 1992 general election. Formed in 1992 to push for reforms, CNC was initially a collaborative effort of emergent human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and factions of activist religious leaders. Despite what was largely seen as a progressive stance in pushing for political pluralism, the activist clergy refused to lead their organizations to embrace CNC in pushing for more fundamental reforms before the 1992 general election. Instead of support for CNC's 1992 election boycott campaign until there were fundamental reforms, NCKK and the Episcopal Conference of Catholic Bishops joined the nascent opposition political parties in forming the National Ecumenical Election Programme (NECEP) to spearhead civic education in preparation for elections (Mutua, 2008; Mutunga, 1999).
- 2) The National Convention Executive Council (NCEC) 1997 wave. Here, despite earlier promises to support NCEC, clergy from mainstream activist religious groups, in particular the NCKK, Catholic Church and the ACK, joined opposition political parties to back dialogues initiated by the Moi/KANU state under the 1997 Inter-Parliamentary Parties Group (IPPG) agreements. With this, activist religious organizations assisted Moi/KANU in outmanoeuvring NCEC.
- 3) The Ufungamano Initiative formed in 1999. Here, divisions between different faith groups precipitated a crisis during the National Constitutional Conference process and the subsequent 2005 constitutional referendum.
- 4) The divisive role of faith groups and their leadership in the 2007 general election and the ensuing post-election violence illustrates the last wave in this analysis.

The analysis of the political behaviours of the activist religious institutions and clergy across these four waves reveals that these organizations were the pendulum in the contentions between the state and secular civil society organizations. By siding with either the state and political parties or activist secular civil society (the traditional protagonists in these struggles), activist religious institutions tilted the balance of power. Furthermore, this analysis reveals that religious organizations' activism was mostly self-serving and that when they cooperated with activist secular civil society, they mostly scuttled progressive efforts and, by extension, buttressed the status quo. Let me illustrate these conclusions.

Self-serving religious activism

From the late 1980s, a section of the clergy, including Timothy Njoya, Henry Okullu, David Gitari, Alexander Muge, Manasses Kuria, Ndingi Mwana'a Nzeki, and Lawford Imunde, took an increasingly confrontational stance against excesses of the then single-party state. With rising political intolerance, religious leaders—most notably from the Anglicans, Catholics and Presbyterians despite their historical pro-establishment stance (during the colonial and Kenyatta eras)—re-established themselves as voices of dissent

against single-party state excesses (Maina, 1998).⁶ Arguably, except for Muge, all activist clergymen came from ethnic groups (mainly Kikuyu, Meru and Luo) opposed to the Moi regime. The reasons for these ethnic groups' opposition to Moi largely lie within the neo-patrimonial political culture that ensures that the Kenyan president best represents those from his own ethnic group. As such, the Kikuyu and Luo perceived Moi as representing only interests of his native Kalenjin group. This is not to overlook the fact that existing opposition was framed on governance issues—and less about tribal nature of politics. However, it is the behaviour of these clergymen in the post-Moi era, especially in remaining silent while the Kibaki government had its fair share of maladministration issues, that betrays the ethnic orientation of their stance against the Moi state. For instance, clergy like the Catholic Archbishop (later Cardinal) Njue and Rev Mutava Musyimi amongst others were zealous critics of the Moi/KANU state's excesses, but largely remained silent on the same evils done by the Kibaki regime.

The confrontational stances adopted by these clergymen invited the wrath of the state. Some suffered physical harassment, detention, or assassination, or were defrocked. Paradoxically, such acts hardened them. It was this section of the clergy, teaming with radical elements in secular civil society and factions of opposition political activists, who incubated struggles for reforms. The specific triggers for calls for the total overhaul of the constitution were multiple and fragmented.

The existing fragmentations were convolutedly ideological and ethnic. The key ideological division was on whether the Kenyan governance problem was structural or managerial (Mati, 2013). The structural camp, which included nascent human rights NGOs and the Law Society of Kenya, advocated for fundamental constitutional changes. The managerial camp included nascent opposition political elites who argued that what was needed to turn Kenya around were technocratic managers because the constitution was not bad.⁷ In the managerialism school, deep ethnic divisions existed between Kikuyu and Luos, the two main ethnic groups in the Forum for Restoration of Democracy-FORD—which was the main opposition movement that had forced Moi to capitulate and allow for the return of multi-partyism. These divisions resulted in the split of FORD a few months prior to the December 1992 general elections.

Attempts to bridge these divisions prior to those elections were led by the NCK who organized two symposia in May and June 1992 bringing together religious organizations, secular civil society organizations, and the nascent opposition political parties to discuss unity among those who advocated for state reforms (Mati, 2013; Mutua, 2008; Mutunga, 1999; Nasong'o, 2007). While such attempts did not yield unity, they led to the birth of CNC as the first ever coalition of forces seeking a national dialogue on state reforms. But CNC stagnated soon after its emergence because demands from secular civil society for fundamental reforms did not match the interests of opposition politicians (Mutunga, 1999). Religious groups also failed to offer decisive leadership, instead, choosing to side with the nascent opposition parties because they too were horrified by CNC's radical transformation agenda (Mutunga, 1999).

The union of opposition parties and religious institutions is illustrative of Najam's (2000) cooperative relationship based on a confluence of interests. Specifically, political parties as well as activist religious institutions were content with confining reforms to contestations for political power rather than anything that would radically upset their privileged status (Mati, 2013; Mutunga, 1999).

As CNC retreated to oblivion, it bequeathed its radical transformation agenda to the Model Constitution project led by the Kenya Human Rights Commission, Law Society of Kenya and the International Commission of Jurists. The Model Constitution project's *Proposal for a Model Constitution* was a useful imaginary that drew interest and support from the NCKK and the Catholic Church. This support was instructive in further framing and popularizing the issues at the heart of demands for a new constitution as dear to many Kenyans and not just to select middle-class NGO activists. The new impetus resulted in the formation of the Citizens' Coalition for Constitutional Change (4Cs) on 6 January 1995 as a coalition of activist organizations in civil society, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, lower classes, women, and the youth in these struggles.

But the unity of activist religious groups and secular civil society was short-lived. New fractures emerged from intensified conflict between a stubborn state and an intrepid activist civil society. At the height of this contention in late 1997, activist religious organizations abandoned civil society and sided with the state and politicians. Below, I explain how and why this happened.

Cooperation and scuttling influences of religious institutions

With the support of activist religious leaders, 4Cs intensified its conscientization activities with a view to bringing more forces to be sympathetic to constitution reform demands. 4Cs advocated for a National Conventional Assembly (NCA) as the best way forward to discuss constitution making. By the time the first NCA was held in April 1997, there were discernible differences between opposition political parties and activist secular civil society within 4Cs. These differences were throwbacks from earlier stances of politicians' interests only in minimal electoral reforms. Additionally, opposition political parties deeply distrusted the activist civil society. Fearing being overshadowed by civil society's activism, which by now had gained significant traction, opposition politicians refused to cooperate in pushing for more radical reforms (Murungi, 2000).

Despite these setbacks, the reform train received a boost of energy through the formation of the National Convention Executive Committee (NCEC) mandated with ensuring the NCA idea becomes a reality. As a compromise between civil society and opposition politicians, leadership of NCEC was entrusted to religious leaders and women's organizations that were seen as moderates (and therefore acceptable to politicians), compared to the more radical civil society activists. But mobilizing support from the women's constituency, NCKK and the Episcopal Conference posed serious challenges for NCEC because leaders of these groups failed to take up leadership positions as envisaged. The refusal of NCKK and the Episcopal Conference was driven in part by economic self-interests because they already had ongoing donor-funded constitution making-related projects that they did not want to abandon. Furthermore, NCEC's agenda was seen as too radical. Nonetheless, individual Christian denomination leaders from the Methodists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM), and the Hindu Council of Kenya had direct representations in the NCEC leadership.

The subversive role of activist religious groups in the reform struggles was revealed when then President Moi on 1 April 1997 secretly met religious leadership for what is believed by those close to NCEC to have been a suspicious co-optation agenda detrimental to the reform train (Mutunga, 1999). When it became apparent that the Moi/KANU regime, buttressed by indecisive clergy and opposition political parties, would not relent

to calls for reforms, NCEC radicals adopted a different strategy to take the reform message directly to the grassroots. NCEC aggressively campaigned for a boycott of the 1997 general election unless comprehensive reforms were put in place. With a highly conscientized and mobilized citizenry, many Kenyans heeded calls for mass action that NCEC organized between May and October 1997. The increasing violence during these mass actions forced Moi to search for ways of outmanoeuvring the rising tide. The activist religious institutions and clergy, together with opposition political parties, were his partners in the treachery that followed. This duplicity is illustrative of what Oliver and Meryer (2003) refer to as co-evolutionary dynamics between protest movements and their targets. Such co-evolution entails learning and adjusting in response to each other's actions in an effort to outmanoeuvre each other.

In our case, such learning informed the scheme that was hatched after police descended on 7 July 1997 on peaceful demonstrators who had taken refuge at All Saints Cathedral. Twenty-one people were killed and many others, including Rev. Njoya, a co-convenor of the NCEC, were beaten senseless and left for dead.⁸ The clergy were incensed by the desecration of a place of worship. There were widespread local and international condemnations. Western donor countries threatened economic sanctions unless the Moi regime dialogued with the opposition. Moi capitulated. On 15 July 1997, a clearly besieged Moi called the leading clergy from all faith groups to State House to dialogue on the way out of the impasse created by continuing riots (*Weekly Review*, 1997a, 1997b).

As he talked to the clergy, Moi also sent political emissaries to factions of the opposition for a political settlement. These efforts led to negotiations for minimum electoral and administrative reforms through the IPPG reforms with a promise that comprehensive reforms would be initiated after the 1997 general election. IPPG came to be seen by many, including donors who had supported NCEC, as the 'rational and less threatening alternative' (Mutua, 2008, p. 107; Lamba interview, 23/10/2009). Religious leaders and opposition politicians abandoned NCEC mass action *en masse* and went to parliament to negotiate for minimal reforms, leaving the NCEC tide to wither. The IPPG process and its outcomes forestalled the derailing of the 1997 general election. More fundamentally, the IPPG ensured the preservation of hegemonic interests. The IPPG also explains why the next phase of these struggles was heavily dominated by activist religious organizations.

Religious institutions' capture of reform struggles

Among the key outcomes of the IPPG package was the enactment of the 1997 Constitution of Kenya Review Act. While the Act set the legal framework for comprehensive constitution reforms, NCEC-allied groups dismissed it because it lacked constitutional anchorage and therefore was open to Moi's manipulation (Nzomo, 2003; Oyugi, 2003; Warigi, 1997; *The Economic Review*, November 3–9 1997). Nonetheless, the IPPG deal was an expansion of political opportunity for reforms, especially because it became a significant reference point in the next wave of mobilizations.

These mobilizations started because of a stalemate occasioned by the political elite's (ruling and opposition) refusal to agree on a formula for sharing slots allocated to political parties in the Review Commission as spelt out in the 1997 Review Act. This intransigence punctured the perceived class unity between religious and political elite. More fundamentally, it offered religious leaders a rare opportunity to shed their affinity to political elite

and led them to embrace the radical idea of a process of constitution reforms outside of the state under what became the Ufungamano Initiative (Mati, 2012).

Two mutually reinforcing variables explain the Ufungamano Initiative's emergence. First is the structure of political opportunities and constraints. Second is agency of religious leadership in mobilizing discontents among disparate actors to respond to emergent political opportunities and constraints. Specifically, immediately after the 1997 general election, Moi reached out to one of his erstwhile nemeses, Raila Odinga and his National Democratic Party (NDP)—the third largest party in parliament—for cooperation so as to increase his support numbers in parliament. It was Moi and Odinga's chicanery in frustrating popular participation in the reform process that became the reference point upon which hitherto strange bedfellows of opposition politicians, religious leaders, and radical NCEC-allied civil society groups congregated to seek collective action solutions. A series of consultations between these groups developed a vocabulary of claims to inalienable rights of the Kenyan people to make their constitution and finally gave birth of the Ufungamano Initiative that launched a constitution-making process that was in direct competition with the state process.⁹ In recognition of the political opportunities offered by the IPPG deal, the Ufungamano Initiative framed its battle with state as based on probity and fidelity to the 1997 Review Act.

The Ufungamano Initiative's process, despite its lack of legal backing, did pose a crisis of legitimacy to the state's Raila Odinga-led Parliamentary Select Committee process. But the Ufungamano Initiative was riddled with many ambiguities. This was because it brought together naturally competing radical civil society groups and traditionally conservative faith groups with different 'subjective elements of identity consciousness' (Melucci, 1989). As such, despite its relative success in forcing the state-led process to pursue face-saving measures through a merger, the Ufungamano Initiative's contradictions revealed themselves in the negotiations for this merger from 2001. Personal and institutional interests coupled with structural constraints led to a merger that was largely a co-optive elite bargain. Yet again, many religious leaders auctioned the popular will to the state.

With the merger, the Ufungamano Initiative became yet another classic story of limitations to movements once absorbed into rigid power structures. Specifically, the merger resulted in another hurdle in the march towards a new constitution. This was especially after the 2002 general election that saw a win by a coalition of political opposition-led by actors allied to the Ufungamano Initiative. With the new National Alliance Rainbow Coalition (NARC) regime in power, most of the pro-reform groups dropped guard and their leaders were co-opted into the power structures of the new regime. As the new power elite began to entrench themselves, reforms took a back burner. Further inter-religious differences emerged between Christians and Hindus on the one side against Muslims on the other, over the content of the proposed constitution.¹⁰ These, coupled with intra-elite ethnic differences fuelled by political malcontents within the NARC, conspired to frustrate state transformation efforts in the 2005 constitutional referendum.

Post-2005 constitutional referendum

The developments leading to and after the 2005 referendum to approve a new constitution resulted in 'total loss of moral legitimacy' by activist religious organizations, according to some.¹¹ This was because increased frictions exposed binaries of ethnicity and theological

doctrine in the political divisions that plagued the country since the fallout in NARC soon after the 2002 general election. The immediate post-2002 transition fallout between Raila Odinga and Mwai Kibaki precipitated by disagreement over power sharing, mutated and found its way into the constitution-making process. At the National Constitution Conference, two distinct camps, one led by Odinga and another one pro-Kibaki, emerged. While the differences between the two camps seemed ideological, soon, ethnic rivalries emerged as the defining feature. Religious leaders were sucked in as new alliances emerged which further fragmented Christian community leadership. As the 2005 constitution referendum approached, the NCCK and the Catholic Church, for instance, seemed to be imploding as different church leaders took conflicting positions on reform matters.

There were also spirited attempts to scuttle the process, some led by religious leaders. For instance, there was an attempt to unseat the Constitution Commission Chair—Yash Ghai—through a motion moved by Rev. Musyimi who was seen as having a soft spot for the Kibaki side of government. After he failed in his attempt, Musyimi left the conference and mobilized what remained of the Ufungamano to produce a rival draft of the proposed Constitution dubbed the *Ufungamano Initiative Draft* further aiding the prevalent acrimony. From then on, it seemed that the same powers that had been pushing for a new constitution were either no longer interested or unwilling to yield ground to any deal that did not favour their positions. It was in this context that the same activist religious groups joined their erstwhile nemesis—KANU—and a renegade faction of NARC reconstituted as a loose counter-movement to campaign and win against the government-sponsored constitution.

As the 2007 general elections approached, a deep schism was evident among religious groups in Kenya. While Christian institutions were generally divided along ethnic lines and supported competing political groups, Muslims largely acted as a united front and supported the Raila Odinga-led opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) that had been created as a movement in opposition to the Mwai Kibaki's government-authored draft constitution which was rejected in 2005 referendum (Maupeu, 2008). The 2007 election also helped to rekindle embers of ethno-traditional religious movements such as Mungiki, whose role in the post-election violence is a subject of the ongoing court cases at the International Criminal Court. But the violence was also a blessing in disguise that reinforced the need for a new constitution to ensure that political disputes would be amicably arbitrated in future. It is this disruptive power of violence that forced a political marriage between ODM and the Party of National Unity and with it, the truce among elites, which was a condition necessary for elite bargains that delivered a new constitution in 2010. However, even in the 2010 constitutional referendum, ethnic as well as doctrinal divisions dictated the positions especially of Christian religious organizations and their leadership.

Deepening cleavages post-2010

To a large extent, it was the deepening of ethnic cleavages manifesting as ethnicity-based political mobilizations and weak state institutions unable to manage intra-elite competition fuelled divisions igniting the 2007/2008 post-election violence. Religious leaders and the organizations they led were not left out of these divisions, which took a heavy toll on ecumenical unity. Even in the post-2010 referendum period, save for occasional joint press conferences on issues such as opposing gay and lesbian rights or on terrorism that has

plagued the country in recent years, the kind of ecumenical unity reminiscent of the Ufungamano Initiative days has been absent. Religious leaders remain divided especially along ethnic, religious and denominational lines in support of particular political inclinations, while deep suspicions between Muslim and Christian leadership, especially in light of increased challenges of radical Islam in Coastal and North-eastern Kenya, and the associated profiling of Muslims and certain ethnicities in the so-called war on terror, make unity highly improbable in the foreseeable future.

Even with a new regime in power since 2013, religious groups remain largely divided. As such, despite expressing many misgivings on specific clauses of the constitution, they have been unable to mount a spirited campaign, as have Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD) and the Council of Governors. Arguably, this is because the leadership of activist religious institutions is highly dispersed among individuals from the most populous ethnic groups who rarely agree on many political issues.

Conclusion

Ordinary Kenyans have always looked to one or more forms of leadership for guidance. The highest trust for such guidance is on the religious leaders more than any other form of leadership. Afrobarometer (2006) indeed confirms that a majority of Kenyans hold religious leaders in high regard and often consult them on various issues more than they consult political leaders and bureaucrats combined. From the 1980s, Kenyans yearning for change looked upon the leadership of activist religious leaders who, no doubt, were instrumental in these struggles. But the contribution of the activist clergy and their institutions has been fluid and complex. Indeed, despite perceptions that activist religious organizations have been progressive forces that have occasionally spoken truth to power, the article has demonstrated that many of them have also been spoilers and co-conspirators with political elites in frustrating radical reforms. In the Gramscian sense, they have capitalized on the trust that Kenyans have in them in manufacturing consent in the preservation of the hegemonic order. Even as they pushed for reforms, many of the activist religious leaders had an aversion to anything that would fundamentally unsettle their relative peace and comfort. Nonetheless, it is my contention that the support-and-abandon see-saw between the different contenders in these struggles is also illustrative of co-evolutionary dynamics between protest movements and their targets—they learn from each other.

The main import of the article is an acknowledgement that contrary to some popular notions that venerate activist religious leaders, the Kenyan case illustrates that these religious leaders cannot always be trusted as agents of transformative change.¹² Their struggle has been more of a result of polarization of elite interest than pursuit of a radical transformation agenda. Just like other social institutions in Kenya, ethnicity of adherents and leaders influences religious institutions and their political behaviours. This is why religious organizations' activism has mostly been self-serving and in aid of dominant forces in Kenyan society. When they cooperated with activist secular society, religious institutions mostly had destructive influences. Such destructive influence and betrayals of the popular have been hallmarks of these cyclical and duplicitous struggles, where activist religious institutions, who at certain epochs positioned themselves as champions of democratic struggles, have often times turned against the very ideals they fought for. Murunga and Nasong'o (2007) are right in observing that the Kenyan transformation is beset by limited emancipative capacity of leadership.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Waves of contention is utilized here to refer to 'a 'strong increase and subsequent decrease in the level of contention' (Koopmans, 2004, p. 22).
2. Moi era can be divided into two phases: Moi under the single party regime (1978–1991); and Moi post-1991 under political liberalization when pressure for constitutional changes began in earnest. In the single-party rule, only a few clergymen dared question the state. After political liberalization, there was an extraordinary realignment and emergence of two significantly influential camps of religious groupings in terms of their relationship with the Moi state, especially with regard to state reform issues.
3. Romans 13:1–2 states: 'Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.'
4. Some members of the clergy in both the anti-Moi and pro-Moi camp were recipients of patronage largesse in the form of land or *Harambee* cash from politicians. Some have in the past been nominated to parliament. In the post-Moi era, some were appointed to serve in important constitutional commissions and have since transited to become politicians.
5. This was the clause introduced as Constitution of Kenya Amendment Act No. 7 of July 1982 making Kenya a de jure one-party state. It was repealed in December 1991.
6. Gitari, interview 21/09/2009.
7. Zein, interview 07/10/2009.
8. Interviews: Gitari, 21/09/2010; Njoya, 29/09/2009. See also Mutunga, 1999; Njoya, 2007.
9. Interviews: Wandati, 17/09/2009; Athman, 12/10/2009.
10. The opposition to the draft constitution by the Christian religious leaders during the 2005 referendum was based on a misinterpretation of contentious issues of reproductive health/rights (abortion) and the inclusion of the *Kadhi* (Islamic) courts.
11. Ombok, interview, 24/10/2009.
12. It is no wonder therefore that a poll conducted immediately after the 2010 referendum showed that only 19% of Kenyans trusted church leaders completely, while 38% of the population did not trust church leaders at all (see Menya, 2010).

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