

East Africa  
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# Islam and Politics in Kenya

**Since independence there is widespread grievance among Kenyan Muslims who feel that the mainly Christian regime treats them as second-class citizens and discriminates against them economically and politically. The government, for its part, has fears that the influence of some foreign and local radical Muslims could disrupt peace and security in Kenya. The 1992–1994 Muslim disturbances along the coast, the twin bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998, and the recent bombing of a tourist hotel in Mombasa for which al-Qa'ida has claimed responsibility intensify these fears. Nevertheless the vast majority of Kenyan Muslims are moderate, reject violent extremism, and work to achieve equal rights by peaceful means.**

Kenya's six million Muslims form a significant minority, representing 20 per cent of the population. Their large number, combined with the fact that most of them are concentrated in economically and strategically important areas, gives the Muslims, at least potentially, considerable political weight. On the coastal strip and in the towns there, such as Mombasa, Malindi, and Lamu, Muslims account for more than 50 per cent of the population. On this strip live the Swahilis (all of whom are Muslims), Arabs, and people from various African ethnic groups that have adopted Islam. Another important group of Muslims in Kenya are the Somalis, who live in the Northeastern Province. Their number is estimated at about 600,000. There are also considerable numbers of Muslims in the large towns, including Nairobi. Among Kenya's Muslims there are various groups and denominations. Due to the fact that Islamic penetration into the area came primarily from Hadramaut, to the south of the Arabian Peninsula, and was spread by Sunni Shafi'i shaikhs, the great majority of Kenya's Muslims are Sunni of the Shafi'i school.

The Kenyan government, like the governments of Uganda, Tanzania, and most African countries, prohibits the formation of political parties based on religion. Therefore, religious leaders – Muslim and Christian alike – set up 'religious' or 'social' organizations through which they can express their views. Since independence, many such Muslim organizations have come and gone. Some of them were regional or sectional, others nationwide. They are supposed to deal with educational, religious, and social matters. Nevertheless, these organizations have frequently become involved in political concerns. The authorities in Kenya, like those in Uganda and Tanzania, have themselves established Muslim umbrella organizations and worked through them to obtain Muslim support and to influence and supervise their activities. Many of the key positions in these organizations are occupied by Muslims who support the government, among them assistant ministers and senior government or ruling-party officials. The main Muslim umbrella organization is the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM).

Since independence, the authorities have seen to it that Muslims are represented in the government – in the ruling party and in public institutions. Muslims have generally been represented in government by two or three assistant ministers who are loyal to the regime, out of a total of forty to fifty ministers and assistant ministers. The Muslim assistant ministers generally come from a very small circle. When President Moi came to power in 1978, Muslims were generally better represented and, for the first time, two Muslim ministers were appointed. Furthermore, in 1982, a Somali Muslim Chief of Staff was appointed. After the 1997 elec-

tions, there were 30 Muslim MPs out of 210 MPs (14.2 per cent).

There have been other concessions that the government has made since independence to gain Muslim support, especially in periods of municipal, parliamentary, and presidential elections, when the political importance of the Muslims is especially noticeable. Among these concessions were: making the Muslim festival of Id al-Fitr a national public holiday in Kenya; enshrining the position of chief *qadi* in the constitution (the chief *qadi* is the highest Muslim religious official in Kenya and he serves as the government's adviser in all matters pertaining to Muslims); deciding on issues connected to inheritance, marriage, divorce, and *waqf* (endowment set aside for religious purposes) in the *shari'a* courts by *qadis* appointed by the chief *qadi*; and taking into account Muslim values and practices in areas such as animal slaughter, autopsies, dress, and identity cards.

## Mutual suspicions

Muslim aspirations were not, however, fully satisfied, nor were their many complaints about discrimination silenced. Muslim discontent was particularly evident on the eve of the first multiparty elections in 1992. At the same time, government suspicions of Muslim aspirations, rooted in both historical and recent events, also intensified. The government's suspicions were first aroused by political developments on the eve of Kenyan independence when Muslims on the coast set up an organization called the Mwambao United Front (MUF) (Mwambao means 'coast' in Kiswahili). The MUF claimed that the Muslim inhabitants of the coast were a 'distinct social group' and should be granted autonomy or the option of seceding from Kenya to establish a separate state or 'rejoin' Zanzibar. In 1963, when Kenya became independent, the coastal population's hopes for separation or autonomy vanished, although they have re-emerged from time to time in different forms and have aroused displeasure and fear in the government. Likewise, the Somali Muslims in the Northeastern Province desired to join Somalia with which they had ethnic, linguistic, social, and religious affinities. After the British decided to include this area in independent Kenya, the Somalis boycotted the 1963 general elections that set the stage for independence. Thereafter, for several years there was unrest, and violent clashes occurred between Somali guerrillas, known as Shifta, and the Kenyan security forces.

Since then, the authorities in general closely monitor Muslim political activities and take harsh measures when these activities seem to threaten the government. The Islamic activities of foreigners in Kenya are watched especially closely. Nevertheless, until the emergence of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK), the mutual suspicion between the government and the coastal Muslims seldom led to violent confrontations.

## The Islamic Party of Kenya

In January 1992, immediately after the government acceptance of a multiparty system for the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, several Muslim activists in Mombasa established the IPK. Until that time, Kenya had had a one-party system. The government refused to recognize

the IPK on the grounds that it was a religious political party and thus violated the principle of the separation of church and state. At this stage, the IPK's demand for recognition won wide support from Muslims, both from the coastal strip and from other parts of the country. In Mombasa, especially, IPK supporters became the main political force and the government's refusal to recognize the party caused violent disturbances there in May 1992. This was the first of a series of clashes between IPK activists and government forces that continued sporadically for nearly two years.

The outbreak of violence reflected Muslim grievances and deep feelings of discrimination. During the colonial era and since independence, Muslims have repeatedly complained that the mainly Christian regime discriminates against them and treats them as second-class citizens. For example, they are normally under-represented in public institutions. Before colonialism they were the most culturally advanced group and were the rulers of Kenya's coastal region, whereas today Muslims are less advanced than the Christians and lag behind in education. They have been denied land ownership, while Christians from the interior have been given land on the coastal strip and control the main sources of income there, especially tourism.

Against this background of Muslim dissatisfaction, a young shaikh, Khalid Balala, appeared on the scene and became the main exponent of Islamic extremism in Kenya during the violent disturbances of 1992–1994. Balala demanded the legalization of the IPK, stressing that in Islam there is no separation of religion and state and that politics is part of religion. Initially he enjoyed wide Muslim support and became the uncrowned head and spokesman of the IPK, which became much more radical under his leadership. His supporters, especially the youth, and some extremist elements began to clash with the security forces. Balala publicly demanded that President Moi's regime be overthrown, and accused him of despotism and corruption. He also called on Muslims to be strict in observing Islamic practices, especially daily prayers. He demanded that the *shari'a* law be applied in all spheres of Muslim life. Balala advocated violence to achieve these aims.

The wave of violence in Mombasa surprised and concerned the authorities and reawakened the deep suspicions dating from the attempts by the Muslim coastal strip to break away from Kenya at independence. There was also apprehension lest the unrest spread from Mombasa to other Muslim centres, as indeed happened in Lamu and Malindi. Eventually the government succeeded in crushing Balala and the militant Muslims, using the carrot-and-stick and divide-and-rule tactics. Extremists were arrested and brutal force was used against them. On the other hand, the regime began to look more favourably on the demands of moderate Muslims. In addition, the United Muslims of Africa (UMA) was established by government supporters as an opposition to the IPK.

The 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam by foreign Muslim extremists assisted, it is suspected, by some locals highlighted again the problematic relationship between the Muslims and

the regime. The government shut down several Muslim NGOs and deported some non-indigenous workers who were suspected of links with radical Middle Eastern organizations, on the grounds that they posed a threat to security. The Muslim community was enraged by the crackdown on the NGOs and leaders of all persuasions condemned the government action. They claimed that, by shutting down only Muslim NGOs immediately after the bombing, the government had put the onus of responsibility on the Muslim community. President Moi met with SUPKEM leaders and made some conciliatory gestures to the Muslims, but radical Muslims continued to criticize the government and attacked the West in general and the US in particular. This division between moderates and radical, as well as ethnic, religious, political, and personal rivalries within the Muslim community, weaken them in their confrontation with the regime.

It is likely that Islam as a religion will further expand and gain strength in Kenya. In its non-extremist form, it may well assume a greater political role in the light of the political progress Muslims are making in the field of education and the increasing numbers of Muslim intellectuals, journalists, and politicians. The prolonged struggle against government policies has fostered Muslim solidarity and self-consciousness, even among non-observant Muslims. The majority of Muslims are moderate, tolerant, and pragmatic and know that the government will never tolerate secession. The Kenyan government, for its part, needs to be more understanding and responsive to justified Muslim grievances, to provide Muslims with equal opportunities, and make greater efforts to integrate them into government and public life.

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