

**Islam and the Religious Dimension of Conflict in Kenya**  
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The circumstances of Islam in Kenya are so different from those in the Arab world (and in other countries with a majority of Muslims) that the prospect of a sustained radical Islamist movement at any time in the near future is remote. Nevertheless, the past few years have witnessed a number of violent incidents involving Muslims, from local conflicts within Muslim communities to anti-government urban riots, such as occurred in Mombasa and Lamu in 1992 and 1993.

This paper first looks at the nature of religious conflict and the general circumstances of Islam in Kenya, and then goes on to examine the kinds of religious conflict that involve Muslims, seeking to assess the causes of such conflict and effective ways of countering those causes.

**What is "religious conflict"?**

By the term "religious conflict" we do not refer only to religious or theological disputes between different religions (for example, Islam and Christianity) or within a single religious tradition (for example, the Sunni-Shi'a "conflict" in Islam). Rather we use the term more broadly to designate any conflict that comes to be expressed wholly or partially in religious terms, whether by one or all parties. Since the core issues of many "religious conflicts" are not religious, it would be more correct in such instances to refer to the "religious dimension of conflict", but for convenience of expression we use the shorter term "religious conflict".

**The nature and causes of religious conflict**

This paper is based on the premise that conflict expressed in religious terms usually reflects other kinds of tensions (economic, political, social, racial, ethnic, secular ideological), and that such conflict more often than not embodies several issues of contention. There is evidence that people tend to express their "secular" grievances in

religious terms when other avenues of protest are blocked or have failed, or as a desperate attempt to protect threatened interests.<sup>1</sup>

Groups in conflict may have real religious differences, but these differences in themselves may not be sufficient either to explain the conflict taking place or to assess the nature of that conflict. When the underlying causes are only partly religious, the conflict is not fully resolved by some kind of "religious" solution, for example, by giving Muslims in Kenya their own Islamic Religious Education syllabus in secondary schools. A "religious" solution is commendable, for it resolves some aspect of conflict, but it may only be a partial remedy offering temporary conciliation. Comprehensive resolution begins when the key causes of the conflict have been identified and addressed.

Religious (and other) conflict is especially difficult to resolve when it takes place across ethnic and cultural boundaries. Ethnic differences tend to exacerbate disagreement by reinforcing a "we-they" attitude, while cultural diversity can produce quite dissimilar perceptions, not only of the issues that need to be resolved, but of the means of resolution.

#### **The Muslim peoples of Kenya**

*"In our country Kenya, Muslims are not few in number, but their condition is weak and they are not prospering at all. No doubt the causes of this state of affairs are weakness of faith and lack of unity."* (Shaykh Muhammad Kasim Mazrui, former Chief Kadhi of Kenya)<sup>2</sup>

The Muslim peoples of Kenya are a diverse, heterogeneous, minority population weakened by internal divisions. One factor relevant to an understanding of their disunity is the existence of what we may call "ethnic Islam", that is, the existence of numerous distinct

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<sup>1</sup>For a study of religious movements as "displaced politics", see Terence Ranger, *Religious Movements and Politics in sub-Saharan Africa*, African Studies Association Annual Meeting, New Orleans, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> "Hapa petu Kenya Islamu si kidogo, lakini hali yao ni dhaifu na hawana mafanikio yoyote. Na hapana shaka kuwa sababu zilizowafanya hivi ni upungufu wa Imani na kukosekana Umoja." *Sauti ya Haki*, No. 1/81, p.3, Mombasa, 15th January 1981. *Sauti ya Haki* ("The Voice of Truth"), edited by Shaykh Muhammad Kasim Mazrui, began publication in Mombasa in August 1972; publication ceased in April 1982 after his death.

Muslim communities, in rural and urban areas, each with its own blend of ethnic, racial and sectarian traits. By drawing attention to this multiplicity of communities we do not discount the existence of a single Muslim *umma* in Kenya comprising the smaller Muslim communities scattered throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> We wish rather to underscore some of the barriers to achieving unity of faith in practical terms.

Though the overall Muslim population of Kenya is relatively small (estimates range from 6% to 25%), the concentration of this population in the Coast and North Eastern Provinces, where several Districts and towns have a majority Muslim population, makes this region prone to potential religious conflict involving Muslims. Two peoples of this region, the Somali and the Swahili, are exceptional in that they have a tradition of Islam going back many centuries and their very ethnic identity is deeply Muslim. A third indigenous Muslim people, the Digo, who adopted Islam more recently beginning towards the end of the 19th century, are also exceptional as the only Bantu-speaking people of Kenya to have become Muslim on a large scale. The presence of these three communities, the Somali (in the North Eastern Province), the Swahili (mainly in coastal urban centres) and the Digo (in Kwale District of the Coast Province), gives this region a marked, though not exclusively, Muslim character, quite distinct from other parts of Kenya.

Muslim communities are also found scattered throughout the interior of Kenya, in all the major towns and in a number of rural villages, but nowhere in the interior are they the dominant population. In rural areas they tend to live together in small communal groups, surrounded by their non-Muslim neighbours, with whom they have constant dealings and whose language they share. In Nairobi and the towns, they may be concentrated in certain quarters (for example, Kibera and Riruta Muslim Village in Nairobi), but this does not

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<sup>3</sup> "The polity or community over which the Muslim sovereign rules is the *umma*, the single universal Islamic community embracing all the lands in which Muslim rule is established and the Islamic law prevails." Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, p.32. In lands where Muslim rule and Islamic law are not established, the word *umma* is used in the sense of a "universal community of believers".

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prevent them from mixing freely and having constant friendly relations with their non-Muslim neighbours.

Summing up, we can say that large areas of the interior of Kenya have few Muslim communities or none at all. Where such communities do exist, whether in the rural areas or in urban centres, they tend to be small and physically isolated from other Muslim communities, and like most such communities often more concerned about local affairs than a national "Muslim agenda". Indeed these circumstances may explain why the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) has found little resonance within many Muslim communities, except among the younger generation for whom it represents an attractive focus of political protest in a familiar idiom. This is not to say that Muslims in Kenya do not have certain common interests and concerns, as will be discussed below.

#### **Ethnic Islam**

The existing pattern of Muslim population distribution is a result of the way Islam spread throughout the interior in the late 19th and 20th century. Only a small number of Africans in the interior came into regular contact with Muslims (usually in trading or administrative centres), and of those who did only a minority were attracted to Islam. Africans who adopted Islam usually retained traits of their pre-Islamic ethnic culture, and various local "ethnic" Muslim communities grew up, in such places as Mumias, Kendu Bay, Kisii, Nyeri, Chuka and Kitui. These communities inherited the dominant attributes of Swahili Islam (Sunni and the Shafi'i school of law), and embraced common traits derived from Swahili culture, notably Swahili cuisine, dress, dances and songs. They also came to use Swahili as the language of Islam, but they continued to speak their vernacular language in daily life, and in dealings with their non-Muslim fellow Africans, with whom they usually had far more frequent relations than with other Muslim communities. The diverse cultural circumstances and localized minority status of these new Muslim communities, many of whom had little regular contact with the wider Muslim world, meant that the *umma* in Kenya came to be fragmented by internal ethnic boundaries.

### Muslims and religious conflict in Kenya: internal debate

What does all this mean for Islam and conflict in Kenya? What kinds of religious conflict are Muslims involved in? How frequent is such conflict, and who are the other parties involved?

For purposes of analysis it is useful to distinguish between internal religious debate related to Islamic ideology and practice, and discourse among Muslims regarding their relations *ad extra* with the external non-Muslim world (including the State). A high proportion of religious conflict among Muslims in Kenya involves internal disputes centred on the control of religious institutions or associations, what might be called in academic jargon "the control of religious and ideological space".

Let us take, for example, the institution of the mosque. In some Muslim countries, such as Egypt, mosques are controlled by the State. The government not only appoints the imam of every mosque, but imams are civil servants, whose salaries are paid by the government, thus ensuring a certain uniformity and government control.<sup>4</sup>

In Kenya, the institution of the mosque is decentralized. Most Muslim communities in Kenya have their own mosques, built and maintained through the joint effort of members of the community. A local elected committee supervises the running of the mosque, soliciting help as needed from the community and from other benefactors.<sup>5</sup> Where a single mosque serves more than one ethnic group, there is always potential for disagreement, particularly if one of the groups, for whatever reason, monopolizes positions of responsibility and control. Local rivalry for the control of the imamship, and membership

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<sup>4</sup> Such control allows the government to mobilize large numbers of civil and religious functionaries as Nasser did in 1965-66 to discredit Sayyid Qutb, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, pp.59-61.

<sup>5</sup> In the rural areas of Kenya, individual Indian Muslims are notable and generous benefactors of mosques used by African Muslim communities.

of the mosque committee, can also arise out of racial or ideological differences. Such rivalry may result in an attempt by one group to take over the mosque and imamship,<sup>6</sup> or to the building of a second Friday mosque in the same vicinity,<sup>7</sup> or simply to a prolonged state of tension.

The struggle for institutional control usually proceeds behind the scenes quietly and imperceptibly. Occasionally, however, such disputes erupt into public view, and give a glimpse of the kinds of tensions at work, tensions which at times are so intense and protracted that the government has been asked or forced to intervene:

"Over 100 Muslims marched to the District Commissioner's office on Friday afternoon, protesting the arrest of an Imam from Kakamega's Jamia Mosque, Imam Shaykh Sadala. The Muslims suspect that the arrest was prompted by a struggle over who should be the Imam at the mosque. Shaykh Sadala has been Imam for the last six years, but for the last two months a section of the Muslims who are of Somali origin have imposed an Imam on the mosque. The Muslims disclosed that whenever the imposed Imam took over the pulpit, the congregation marched out and left the Muslims of Somali origin to listen. They questioned the legality of this, saying that the trouble which has been simmering reached a peak when the Muslims of Somali origin ordered those who are not of their ethnic group to vacate the compound at the mosque as they wanted to form a new management committee."<sup>8</sup>

"Muslims in Kibwezi have appealed to the Government to intervene in the on-going wrangles between Africans and Arabs. According to Nadim Feroz din Khan the problem has been going on for three years. The Africans have complained that the Arabs have been blocking them from appointing an African Imam to man the Kibwezi Zahir Mosque, claiming that they (the Africans) are not versed in the teachings of Islam."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As took place in Riruta Muslim Village outside Nairobi when a faction of the community attempted to take over the village mosque by force in October 1992. (Kenya Times, 19th October 1992.) This conflict has since become a legal dispute, and the High Court has recently ordered the Chief Kadhi to supervise the Riruta Muslim Community elections to choose five trustees to manage the community's properties, which include a mosque, a nursery and primary school, a clinic, a Muslim cemetery and a *madrasa*. (Daily Nation, 12th December 1996.)

<sup>7</sup> Shaykh Muhammad Kasim Mazrui publicly lamented this state of affairs in Malindi: "It shouldn't be that the people of Malindi who from time immemorial have been holding Friday prayers together, as the *shari'a* requires, are today praying Friday prayers in two different mosques." (*Sauti ya Haki*, No.1/81, Mombasa, 15th January 1981.)

<sup>8</sup> *Standard on Sunday*, 6th December 1992.

<sup>9</sup> *Kenya Times*, 1st June 1994.

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"A fight broke out during Friday prayers at the Aqsa Mosque in Kisauni between the local Muslim community and the officials of the Islamic Foundation after the local Kisauni community numbering more than 300 were forced to listen to a sermon given by a Muslim preacher who does not conform to their cultural values. A local Muslim preacher Ustadh Bampini, who had been invited by the local Muslim community to lead the prayers, was about to mount the stairs to the Minbar (pulpit) to deliver the Friday sermon when he was blocked by an official of the Islamic Foundation. The official told the congregation that Ustadh Bampini had no authority to deliver the sermon. He said that the person who had been delegated the duties of delivering the sermon was Ramadhan Alwa Juma. The congregation who had packed the mosque for Friday prayers then rose up and demanded the removal of the intruder to let Ustadh Bampini lead the prayers."<sup>10</sup>

The importance given to controlling mosque leadership is clear when one understands that much of the ideological debate revolves around such religious practices as *maulid* and funeral prayers, which are usually carried out by the imam. These practices, considered *bid'ā* by the Wahhabis, have been a part of Swahili Islam, and of the various ethnic varieties of Islam in the interior, for as long as can be remembered. Almost all rural African Muslim communities have had a tradition of celebrating *maulid*, and many Kenya African Muslims first embraced Islam attracted by the *maulid* celebrations.<sup>11</sup> The celebration of *maulid* has thus come to symbolize the ideological conflict between "popular" Swahili Islam and Wahhabi Islam.<sup>12</sup>

Competition for control of ideological space also emerges in relation to the syllabus for

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<sup>10</sup> *Kenya Times*, Sunday, 12th March 1989. The Kisauni Aqsa mosque dispute is a good example of Sunni-Shi'a rivalry: the Islamic Foundation is a *Sunni* organisation, while the other group at the mosque is backed by the Bilal Muslim Mission, a *Shi'a* organisation." (*Sunday Times*, 5th July 1992). There are numerous public comments about Shi'a activism in Kenya: "Debate on Shi'ism has recently intensified, particularly in Mombasa. It is obvious that efforts are being made to spread it even in traditionally Sunni Muslim areas...The present courage [sic] is a political one to boost the contention of supremacy for the Muslim world to counter Saudi Arabia, rather than a spiritual one." Letter to the Editor by Haji Seif M. Seif, *Daily Nation*, 6th January 1990.

<sup>11</sup> An African Muslim once told me, "Islam is *maulid*"; he clearly was unable to conceive of Islam without the celebration of *maulid*.

<sup>12</sup> Recently a Maulid Committee has been founded in Nairobi to counter anti-*maulid* teachings. *The Muslim*, No.28, October 1994, p.1. In promoting an annual *Milad un-Nabi* (Birthday of the Prophet) festival, the Cultural Centre of Iran in Nairobi finds itself in an unusual ideological alliance with Sunni Swahili Islam.

teaching Islamic Religious Education in government schools. Shaykh Abdilahi Nassir, a spokesman for the Shi'a Muslims in Kenya, has accused the Kenya Institute of Education (KIE), the government body that supervises curriculum development and the writing of textbooks for primary and secondary schools, of publishing Islamic books with an anti-Shi'a bias; the Director-General of the Islamic Foundation, Mr. Aktar Rao, was quick to defend the KIE against this accusation.<sup>13</sup> And parents of children studying Islamic Religious Education have cautioned teachers of religion who have Wahhabi views not to force these views on their students.<sup>14</sup>

The recent formation of a *Majlis ul Ulama* by a number of Kenya Muslim scholars can be viewed as an attempt, not just to control, but to create ideological space. As might have been expected, this initiative was quickly condemned (as being unrepresentative) by those of opposing points of view who were not invited to participate.<sup>15</sup>

A final point for consideration related to the imamship is the opportunity that it gives religious leaders to comment on all aspects (including the political) of the secular world. Imams of individual mosques are often reported as praying for the President.<sup>16</sup> Imams are also reported as using their position to criticize the political leadership in the country. To date the most extreme case of such negative commentary has been that of Shaykh Abdulaziz Said Rimo, the imam of the Noor Mosque (Ukunda, Kwale District) who was sentenced to six years' imprisonment for sedition, accused of delivering a Friday sermon,

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<sup>13</sup> *Kenya Times*, 10th December and 15th December 1990.

<sup>14</sup> *The Standard*, 1st November 1990.

<sup>15</sup> "The names [of persons elected to the *Majlis*] represent a heavily **wahhabite** [sic] trait, one of which is none other than Sheikh Muhammad Musallam, a known Saudi Embassy worker. The propagation of **wahhabi** views and declaration of other *madhhabs* as non-Muslim is a well known fact." *The Muslim*, No.28, October 1994, p.1.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the *Kenya Times* of 6th April 1992, which reported Shaykh Muhammad Omar, Imam of the Kitale Pangani Mosque, as praying for the long life of President Moi and for the ruling party KANU to win the forthcoming general elections.



in which he said that he had no confidence in President Moi and that the government of Kenya should be overthrown.<sup>17</sup> In general, such commentary seems to follow an ethnic or political pattern, with imams from areas of the country that support the ruling party commenting positively, and criticism emanating from areas where the ruling party has less support.

What conclusions can we reach with regard to internal Muslim disputes in Kenya? In Muslim countries like Algeria and Egypt, internal religious conflict can have serious public repercussions, since it tends to encompass the entire population, even those persons not particularly interested in the issues in dispute. In Kenya, if other means of resolution fail, the Muslim parties usually seek government intervention or have recourse to civil courts, and such disputes rarely affect non-Muslims. At most the conflict becomes a news item to be read about, as happens with the religious quarrels that occur from time to time in Christian churches. These local conflicts are nothing to be surprised or alarmed about; they come and go in all religions. Where they persist or are especially prevalent, however, they should not be ignored, for they may point to broader deeper divisions and be indicative of more serious discord.

#### **In defence of religious integrity**

Much of the public agenda of Muslims is aimed at defending their religious and cultural values against secularization and Christianization. These values, which receive the universal support of all Muslim communities in Kenya, constitute a common religious denominator of Muslim identity, and thus provide a common idiom of protest. In this connection, certain key topics have dominated relations between Muslims and the secular authorities of the State: the need to allow Muslims to be governed by Islamic law, respect for the Islamic code of dress, provision of food in government institutions in accordance with required Islamic norms, and public regard and facilities for Muslims (for worship and

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<sup>17</sup> *The Standard*, 15th February 1990.

the celebration of feasts) equal to those accorded to Christians.

Since these are matters on which Muslims are known to hold unanimous views, the government and the President have tended to give them due recognition, using important public occasions to make political capital out of concessions or decisions favorable to Muslims. Thus, towards the end of 1990, when the wearing of the *hijab* by Muslim girl students became a major public issue, the President himself assured Muslims at a large rally in Mombasa that no one would force Muslim school girls to dress in a way contrary to their faith.<sup>18</sup> Shortly afterwards Muslim students at two major boys' schools, in Nairobi and Nakuru, protested that they did not have any place to pray, and they were not allowed to say their prayers as stipulated by their religion.<sup>19</sup> Similar issues have been raised by Muslim students at schools in Kiambu and Murang'a Districts, who boycotted meals in the dining halls, claiming that the meat had not been slaughtered in accordance with Muslim ritual<sup>20</sup>, and by Muslim students in government schools in Nairobi who were not given time off to celebrate the Idd at the end of Ramadhan.<sup>21</sup>

A major issue of concern to Muslims is being allowed to follow Islamic Law, particularly as it relates to marriage, divorce and inheritance. When the Law of Succession (Chapter

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<sup>18</sup> *Daily Nation*, 11th January 1991. The main dispute arose at Changamwe Secondary School, in the outskirts of Mombasa, when the (non-Muslim) Headmistress refused to allow Muslim girl students to wear the *hijab*, and subsequently suspended one of the students for doing so. A similar case took place at Khalsa Boys and Girls School in Nairobi, where Shamta Juma sued the school for damages after not being allowed to wear the *hijab* to class, and at a school in Marindi near Homa Bay. *Kenya Times*, 23rd February 1990; *Kenya Times*, 3rd October 1990; *Kenya Times*, 19th December 1991.

<sup>19</sup> *Kenya Times*, 30th January 1991, a statement by forty Nairobi School Muslim students that their headmaster is not allowing them to conduct prayers; *Daily Nation*, 27th November 1991, a statement by the student members of the Alhudaa Muslim Society of Nakuru High School, who claim that they do not have a suitable "prayer house" where they can say their prayers five times a day.

<sup>20</sup> *Kenya Times*, 9th February 1991.

<sup>21</sup> *The Standard*, 7th April 1992. The two schools involved in this case were Pangani Girls School and Moi Girls School, whose headmistresses were said to have denied more than 35 girls time off to celebrate the Idd festival with their families.

160 of the Laws of Kenya) came into effect on the 1st July 1981, it applied to all citizens of Kenya, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. On the 13th December 1990, after numerous requests from Kenya Muslims, the Kenya Parliament amended the Law of Succession to exempt Muslims from the Law and to allow them to follow Islamic law in all matters related to inheritance. President Moi capitalized on this issue by stating publicly, prior to the passing of the amendment, that "there was need to amend the Law to reflect the wishes of the Kenyan Muslim community".<sup>22</sup> An indication of the importance attached by Muslims to the matter of inheritance is the fact that as soon as the amendment was passed, Shaykh El-Maawy, a former chairman of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, appealed to the government to review all cases of inheritance that had been dealt with before the Law of Succession had been amended.<sup>23</sup> Along similar lines, Muslims have consistently opposed the draft Marriage Bill (which has never been passed into law), which would bar them from following Islamic marriage law.<sup>24</sup> Minor aspects of the law are also the subject of appeal: Muslims have asked the government to amend the use of the word "Mohammedan" by substituting the word "Islamic" in the official title of Kenya laws, for example, the Mohammedan Marriages and Divorces Registration Ordinance (Chapter 155 of the Laws of Kenya).<sup>25</sup>

No topic is too small to form the basis for protest: when the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) discontinued the only Islamic religious programme and reduced the number of special Ramadhan programmes from four to one, the Muslim community reacted.<sup>26</sup> The Kisumu Muslim Association rejected the appointment of a non-Muslim

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<sup>22</sup> *The Standard*, 1st September 1990.

<sup>23</sup> *The Standard*, 17th December 1990.

<sup>24</sup> Statement by the Secretary of the Mombasa Branch, Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, *Kenya Times*, 9th November 1991.

<sup>25</sup> *The Standard*, 19th February 1992, Letter to the Editor by Ghalib S.A. Jahadhmy.

<sup>26</sup> *Kenya Times*, 24th October 1991, letter to the Editor from Abdulla Ali, who asks whether the abbreviation KBC now stands for the Kenya Bible Corporation.

headmaster by the Kisumu Municipal Education Authority and refused to hand over the school which had been built by the Muslim community of Kisumu.<sup>27</sup> Kenya even has its own case, parallel (though approached quite differently) to the *Satanic Verses* affair: the Chairman of the Muslim community of Kitale called on the government to ban a book entitled *The Quran is not the book of God*, claiming that the book will create antagonism between Muslims and Christians.<sup>28</sup>

### **Tensions with the external (non-Muslim) world**

Though in general Muslims get along well with Christians and are not characteristically hostile to Christianity, there are occasional incidents (such as the burning of a Christian Church in Siyu in 1990) that reveal Muslim-Christian tensions in specific localities. Such incidents are the exception rather than the rule. The activity that most promotes inter-religious tension seems to be "street preaching" and public religious rallies, whether Christian or Muslim (Jeevanjee Garden or Tononoka style). Such preaching has been banned in Tanzania (though the ban is not altogether successful), where it had reached much more provocative levels than in Kenya.

Muslims have also been involved recently in a number of land disputes with: 1) the Leisure Lodge, a private hotel in Diani, seeking to demolish a mosque to make way for a golf course;<sup>29</sup> 2) a private developer at Kibera, who claims land belonging to the Muslim cemetery there;<sup>30</sup> and 3) the Jua Kali artisans in Nyeri town, who have been allocated the

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<sup>27</sup> *Daily Nation*, 13th January 1994.

<sup>28</sup> *The Standard*, 28th December 1990.

<sup>29</sup> The Muslim community of Diani, which has been granted a court injunction restraining the hotel, has sued the Commissioner of Lands and the Kwale District Planning Officer. (*Daily Nation*, 16th January, 1997)

<sup>30</sup> *The Standard*, 1st November 1996.

local Muslim cemetery.<sup>31</sup> Given the large number of land disputes throughout the country, such conflict is rather more indicative of nation-wide circumstances, and cannot be considered peculiar to Muslim communities.

### **Foreign Muslim organizations**

Sensitive to the needs (and vulnerability) of local Muslim communities, international organizations (including governments) of various foreign Muslim countries have turned them into the venue of an on-going religious "cold war".<sup>32</sup> Saudi Arabia, Iran and other Muslim countries sponsor various Islamic activities and institutions in Kenya (the Iranian Library and Cultural Centre opened in Nairobi in October 1991 is a prime example), often in competition with each other, and offer scholarships for study overseas. There is also evidence that Muslim influences are entering Kenya through the activities of Tanzania-based organizations. One incident in particular, a mass rally to be addressed by the "Uache Biblia iseme" group of Tanzanian preachers, sparked off demonstrations in Mombasa in October 1987.

This kind of foreign activity is usually carried on quietly with a minimum of publicity. Generous offers are made to build modern new mosques or *madrasas*, and to pay the salaries of the imam and religious teachers, usually on condition that the local Muslim community hands over control (and sometimes the title deed of the land) of the mosque or *madrasa*, and allows the donor agency to appoint the imam and teachers. In this way, many Muslim communities have acquired modern mosques and *madrasas*, together with recurrent financial aid, on a scale far beyond what their own means or local donations

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<sup>31</sup> *Daily Nation*, 18th December 1996. According to the newspaper report, more than 2000 Muslims clashed with the police when they forcibly tried to bury a body at the disputed site.

<sup>32</sup> "Shaykh Muhammad Amana, Chairman of the Islamiya Society of Kenya, has claimed that Saudi Arabia and Iran are sponsoring strife among Muslims in the country." *Kenya Times*, 15th May 1990.

could have provided.

Though it is too early to judge the long-term effects of foreign influence and competitive overseas aid and influence, indications are that while such assistance may improve the material conditions of Islam, it creates further divisions among Kenya Muslims, who are coming under the influence of a variety of Islamic traditions, which not only differ from Swahili and Somali Islam, but which are conflictive among themselves. Thus, the effect may be a further weakening of unity and an increase in internal tension and conflict.

### **Confrontation with the State**

*"Section 3.1.1.: To serve as a political party committed to the establishment and maintenance of a God conscious constitutional government."*

*"Section 3.1.2.: To be a consultative, democratic and just political movement that shall seek to transform the people of Kenya into a strong willed, morally and socially committed and tolerant nation that values justice, peace, democracy, unity, love, cooperation and participation of all Kenyans in national development."*

(Constitution of the Islamic Party of Kenya, 7th February 1992)<sup>33</sup>

The violent anti-government protests and riots that broke out in Mombasa in May and September 1992, and in Lamu in September 1992 and August 1993, reflect the deep prevailing frustrations of Muslim coastal communities. Though the government has acceded to many Muslim demands in the fields of education, law, dress code and freedom of worship in schools, Muslims still perceive that many of their social and educational needs are disregarded (for example, the registration of Islamic Teacher Training Colleges), that their cultural and religious values continue to be threatened, if not disrespected, under a secular, Christian-dominated government, and that they have been neglected and

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<sup>33</sup> The Islamic Party of Kenya was officially launched at a press conference on the 15th January 1992. The Government of Kenya refused registration by notice in the *Kenya Gazette* of 26th May 1992.

marginalized politically and economically in the modern Kenya state.<sup>34</sup>

A feeling of alienation is particularly strong among urban Muslim (and non-Muslim) youth at the coast, who are often unemployed but see wealth and economic prosperity (whether of up-country Kenyans or tourists) all around them. It is not surprising therefore that the newly formed Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in 1992 appealed in particular to this group and attracted its main support from them.<sup>35</sup> Government denial of registration (*Kenya Gazette* of May 26, 1992), and the ability of the Party to promote active confrontation with the secular power of the State enhanced its standing and prestige.<sup>36</sup> With its most outspoken leader in exile and many of its young supporters overseas, the IPK has been dormant now for some time, but it is likely to re-emerge to promote confrontation in one form or another as the 1997 elections draw near.

From the name "Islamic", one might be led to believe that the foundation of the Islamic Party of Kenya was the expression of a national Muslim religious consciousness. Indeed, Amos Wako, the Attorney General, stated that the party was denied registration because it was based on religion, contrary to the Constitution.<sup>37</sup> Scrutiny of the Constitution of the

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<sup>34</sup> There is a general feeling among all the peoples of the Coast and North Eastern Provinces, not just among Muslims in those provinces, that they have had less opportunities than people from other Provinces, and that as a consequence they are less well integrated into the modern economy, and have benefitted less than other peoples of Kenya during the post-independence years. For a detailed analysis of the causes and consequences of marginalization, see Judith K. Geist, "Coastal Agrarian Underdevelopment and Regional Imbalance in Kenya", Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1981; though primarily an economic study, Geist shows how a defensive and reactive communal identity has emerged among the peoples of the Kenya coast in response to marginalization

<sup>35</sup> For a recent analysis of the socio-economic bases of militant political Islam, see Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, Routledge, London, 1991, particularly Chapter 7, in which Ayubi shows that a high proportion of members of the *Ikhwan* in Egypt are young students, workers and unemployed persons of depressed economic circumstances.

<sup>36</sup> For a summary of the events of the first few months of IPK's existence, see Donal B. Cruise O'Brien, "Coping with the Christians: The Muslim Predicament in Kenya", in H.B.Hansen and M.Twaddle, *Religion and Politics in East Africa*, James Currey Ltd., London, 1995, pp.213-215.

<sup>37</sup> *Daily Nation*, 26th June 1992.

Party shows, however, that it is essentially a non-sectarian document, which stresses civil and human rights, with reference to Islam appearing only in its name. And events subsequent to its founding have shown that a national Muslim political consciousness does not yet exist in Kenya. The failure of the party to gain broad national support among Kenyan Muslims, or even from some of its own members at the coast, who protested the merger of IPK with Ford-Kenya, one of the official opposition parties,<sup>38</sup> has demonstrated that the political reality of Islam in Kenya is not so much one of national unity, as of a fragmented multiplicity of ethnic Muslim communities, which are influenced in their political behaviour more by local circumstances than by Islamic values or ideals.

There are signs, however, that a national Muslim identity may have begun to emerge, as Kenya Muslims become more conscious of their common experience as marginalized members of the same secular state. We may be witnessing the beginnings of a growth of Muslim religious "nationalism" in independent Kenya, analogous to the growth of African political nationalism in British colonial Kenya, though at present this is a rather spontaneous and intangible phenomenon, whose future development is too uncertain to predict. The priorities of the Kenya government should be, not just to avoid or minimize conflict with its Muslim peoples, but to do everything possible to respond to their religious and cultural needs, and at the same time foster their full and harmonious integration into all sectors of society and the economy.

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<sup>38</sup> The Chairman of IPK, Lamu, Abdunnassir Skandar, resigned in protest at the merger, and 200 members of the party in Lamu criticized the merger. (*Daily Nation*, 30th November 1992.)