

DEVIL ON THE CROSS: How the church in Kenya lost its religion

After the 2002 general election that brought the Mwai Kibaki-led Rainbow Coalition into power, the church in Kenya took a vow of silence. Following the 2007 disputed election and its violent aftermath, Oliver Kisaka, a Quaker minister and vice president of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, alluded to the church's 2002 vow of silence. In an interview in 2008 with *Religion & Ethic Newsweekly*, the minister stated:

"We have assumed that our religion is deep enough. The truth is that it is not deep enough. When push came to shove, there were ministers who sided with their ethnic communities. In other words, they were not prophetic to their ethnic communities. The right thing would have been to tell the community, 'You cannot do this. You can't burn other people's property, even if you are aggrieved.' But they were silent."

If the church took a vow of silence in 2002, then in 2007 it took a cue from the soldiers at Golgotha who divided and cast lots for Christ's tunic. The country did not just go into that year's general election divided right down the middle, it also split the body of Christ. In the two subsequent general elections after 2007, church leaders have pledged allegiance to different coalitions, and have gone as far as "prophetically" declaring that their preferred candidate has been chosen by God. Which makes one wonder if the Christian God is schizophrenic.

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But it was not always this way. In the high noon of former President Daniel arap Moi's dictatorial regime, there were clergymen who, Sunday after Sunday, served the strongman ample doses of reality and religious checks. Clergymen who spoke against the excesses of the Kanu regime were, by and large, not beholden to pseudo denominational-tribal blocs. (The exception was the African Inland Church (AIC), which was Moi's home church, and is the go-to church for many Kalenjins.)

Kenyans love using the term, “our very own” to appropriate a person or property. The sight of the Big Man - who in his heyday was Churchgoer Number One - in the best seat in the pew every Sunday can make both the clergy and the laity to think that they are a law unto themselves. And if the Big Man, is “our very own” then we can do as we damn well please.

Nothing illustrates this “our very own” syndrome than a disturbing story in *International Religious Freedom Report 2003*:

“In January 2002, Egerton University officials barred approximately 300 worshippers from the AIC from conducting services in the Lord Egerton Castle, which has been the subject of a longstanding property dispute between the University and the AIC. According to the AIC, President Moi allocated the castle and the 50 adjacent acres to the Church in 1995; according to records at the Ministry of Lands, the property belongs to the chaplain and two other individuals. President Moi issued a statement soon after the January 2002 incident indicating that the castle and surrounding property belonged to the University; however, AIC leaders urged their followers to ignore the statement.”

One of the thorns on the side of Moi was the sharp Bishop Alexander Kipsang Muge of the Anglican diocese of Eldoret. Bishop Muge paid the ultimate price for speaking against rampant land grabbing, the autocracy of the Kanu regime and endemic corruption. He died in a mysterious road accident after defying the then Labour Minister Peter Okondo’s threat that, if he visited Okondo’s Busia backyard, he would not leave alive.

As early as 1974, Anglican Bishop Henry Okullu was advocating for political pluralism. But he would take this campaign notches higher after Moi ascended to power, calling out myriad excesses in Moi’s dictatorial leadership. In 1990, Okullu made his displeasure known after the assassination of Foreign Affairs Minister Robert Ouko.

Interestingly, Moi called on Okullu in the early 1990s for guidance on a whole range of issues, mostly relating to post-election violence after the first multiparty elections in 1992. Political pundits believe the wily Moi was trying to assuage and silence this vocal critic by pulling him closer to political power and further from pulpit-pounding.

If the government is the proverbial horse, then the Presbyterian Church of East

Africa (PCEA)'s Reverend Timothy Njoya is the indefatigable gnat that has been biting the horse's backside if and when it seems like it is becoming too big for its saddle. And for his efforts, Reverend Njoya has endured physical beatings by Moi's security apparatus to within an inch of his life.

Sometimes dissent takes time to foment. In his *Holier Than Thou* blog post, Patrick Gathara notes that after independence "churches were initially reluctant to criticise the increasingly authoritarian bent of the Kenyatta government...no individual of the church challenged the nation and "those in authority" in the mass media till David Gitari's radio sermons following the assassination of J.M. Kariuki in 1975."

Then there was the late Archbishop David Gitari of the Anglican Church of Kenya, who spoke boldly for multiparty politics and against economic and political injustices, and challenged the excesses of Moi.

When a leading Pentecostal minister was asked in 1992 which party he supported, he replied that the Bible instructed him to support AGIP, which was an acronym for "Any Government in Power". However, supporting AGIP - aka Kanu - was a quid pro quo arrangement. In return for their support, these ministers and their ministries got land, miscellaneous state favours, unchecked access to State House, cash handouts and money during church-building harambees.

It is noteworthy that the prelates who stood against Moi came from religious institutions - such as the ACK and PCEA, the Catholic Church under Bishop Ndingi Mwana'a Nzeki and the Methodist Church under Bishop Lawi Imathiu - that were backed by centuries or score years of history. It can be argued that these institutions - and, by association, their clerics - had earned their stripes and collars. That, unlike the new Pentecostal "ministries" that started crawling from under the cross' woodwork in the 1980s, these giants did not have the shelf life of a packet of *maziwa ya nyayo*. That their history, structures and global influence gave them courage and faith to stand up when, like in Daniel's case, Moi and his apparatchiks threatened to hurl them in the lions' den.

The babies in the church sphere, who were mainly Pentecostal "ministries" - and mostly one-man armies - just folded up at the juggernaut that was the state as they could not afford to upset their tithes and offering cart.

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The Ndungu Land Commission Report states:

“Ngong Road Forest is located between Jamhuri Park, St. Francis Church, Karen and Langata Roads, Bomas of Kenya, Langata Women’s Prison and Kibera. It was gazetted as a forest reserve in 1932 at a time when it covered an area of 2,926.6 hectares. Various excisions have taken place over the years for public and private development. They include Lenana School, Extelcoms, St. Francis Anglican Church, PCEA Mugomoini, Langata Cemetery, the War Cemetery, Kenya Science Teachers College, the Meteorological Department, ASK Showground. By 1978, the forest covered 1,328.2 hectares”.

The report further states that, as was the case in Karura Forest, the bulk of the illegal and irregular allocations of Ngong Forest occurred in the late 1990s and involved fraudulent transactions. And the church has been complicit in some, if not many, of these transactions.

Church leaders who were suckered by Moi’s charms were, by design or default, cut to the size of a mustard seed, forced to sing Moi’s song and, before they could cross themselves, were according him deity status when they unashamedly called him “Mtukufu”, a title that loosely translates to God or Our Lord.

A story is told of how former President Moi once summoned Christian religious leaders to a State House rendezvous. The dress code was dog collars. No butts. The Kenya Assemblies of God’s (KAG) head, Reverend Peter Njiri, and his entourage must have missed the memo. They showed up at State House dressed to the hilt, in suits and ties, minus the obligatory dog collars. The men of God were frozen at the gate. Their pleas and prayers that they had been invited by “Mtukufu Rais” fell on deaf ears. It is alleged that this why KAG missed out on the parcels of land that were dished out during that prayer meeting. The flipside is that, in that instance, the missing dog collar saved KAG from joining the

compromise choir.

Speaking of choirs, Galia Sabar-Friedman writes in *Church and State in Kenya* that on 13th September 1984, President Moi stated:

“I call on all ministers, assistant ministers and every other person to sing like parrots. During Mzee Kenyatta’s period, I persistently sang the Kenyatta tune until people said: This fellow has nothing except to sing for Kenyatta. I say: I didn’t have ideas of my own. Why was I to have my own ideas? I was in Kenyatta’s shoes and therefore I had to sing whatever Kenyatta wanted. If I had sung another song, do you think Kenyatta would have left me alone? Therefore you ought to sing the song I sing. If I put a full stop, you should also put a full stop. This is how this country will move forward. The day you become a big person, you will have the liberty to sing your own song and everybody will sing it.”

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As recently as 2014, the then Nairobi Senator, Mike Sonko, almost bestowed the title “Mtukufu” on President Uhuru Kenyatta. Sonko called President Kenyatta, and - playing to the gallery - put the president on speaker phone after the National Construction Authority demo squad descended on Kenya’s largest church auditorium, Winners’ Chapel, in Nairobi’s South B area. Sonko’s impudent intervention and the impromptu presidential veto stopped the legal process in its tracks.

This is what endears a political leader to both the clergy and the laity, even if the politician is as guilty as sin. After pulling that saviour stunt, Sonko could have added another feather, in addition to Kamba elder, to his cap: that of church elder.

Such dalliances are veritable slippery slopes. Because, after being wined and dined and seduced into Caesar's bed, clergymen cannot clap back at Caesar's hands, even if those hands have Luciferian tattoos all over them.

In Kenya Christian lexicon, "getting into ministry" is one of the most abused terms. "Getting into ministry" can be likened to a get-rich-quick scheme, with many broke and busted types taking this ministry route, not to fish for man, but for mammon. Which is why, in 2014, the government put a brake on the registration of new ministries to curb this menace. But to be in the government's good books, many church leaders dabble in the art of doublespeak, besides being life members of AGIP. And so it was no wonder that this March, President Kenyatta played an overt political card when he overrode his Attorney General and lifted the ban on the registration of churches. It is anyone's guess whose praises such church leaders will harp.

Nowadays, politicians have taken the rule right of Moi's handbook; they have made it a habit of attending church services on Sunday, kneeling on the altar and being anointed, even if the previous day they were on a hate-mongering murderous mission. Sacrileges that would have made the likes of Okullu, Gitari and Muge lose their religion have become common occurrences. They are mostly perpetrated by the new Pentecostal preachers on the block, although the established preachers and churches have, by dint of their deafening silence, become accomplices to this crime against Christians' collective conscience.

Change of regime also means change of heart. Or is it a case of who pays the fiddler calls the tune? Some prelates who were vocal agents of change during the Moi days hit the snooze button when they got into the August House, or became mouthpieces of the status quo. A good example is Reverend Mutava Musyimi who became a government apologist after he went to parliament on a Jubilee ticket.

After the 8th August general election, many church leaders were unequivocal in "prophetically" stating that President Kenyatta's re-election was the will of God. The Supreme Court ruling put their so-called prophetic pronouncement in crosshairs. The bombshell ruling implies that if the devil is a liar, he has some co-conspirators in the Kenyan clergy.

And whereas Ndingi Mwana 'a Nzeki did not shy away from speaking up even if

he earned the ire of the powers-that-be, John Cardinal Njue has maintained a studious silence and has been accused of playing footsie with State House.

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The aforementioned just goes to show that many Christians in Kenya do not have pastors, but slaughterhouse lords. There are few prophetic voices, and many profiteers. That is the price sheep pay when their shepherds divide and turn the body of Christ into pounds of flesh.