

# AN ODE TO SILENCE: The Church's abdication of its role in society

The Church in Kenya struggles in silence while endemic corruption ravages the public and private sectors of the country. On this matter, I'd rather lament with [Prophet Jeremiah](#) when he supplicated the appalling backsliding of his people by asking: "Is there no Balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is the wound of my people not healed?", rather than sing in faith, the Negro spiritual affirming: "There is a balm in Gilead to heal a sick, sick soul..."

Wounds inflicted by corruption on this nation will need a more "potent balm", yes, more than an "expert physician", for neither the laws enacted so far nor the commission instituted to deal with the scourge have proven effective.

The law is clear: Corruption, active and passive bribery, abuse of office and bribing a foreign public official are outlawed under the Anti-Corruption and Economic Crimes Act 2003, which is further reinforced with the Bribery Act of 2016 ostensibly to aid in the fight against the supply side of corruption.

Comprehensive enforcement of Kenya's anti-corruption framework, however, remains a challenge because of weak and corrupt public institutions.

But in choosing silence in the face of this obscene level of corruption, perhaps at the counsel of the English poet Thomas Carlyle ("Silence is Gold") or the American rock song by the Tremeloes ("Silence is Golden, but my eyes still see, Silence is Golden, but my eyes still see..."), the Kenyan Church is abdicating its unique and vital role in society. What has become of the once-vibrant voices within the Church who challenged the draconian Moi rule, risking their lives for a just cause?

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Pope Benedict XVI is emphatic about the role the Church should play in society. He [defines](#) the Church's role in the political sphere as primarily education (understood not as schooling, no matter how important that is): "The Church must awaken man's receptivity to the truth, to God, and thus to the power of conscience. It must give men and women the courage to live according to their conscience and so keep open the narrow pass between anarchy and tyranny, which is none other than the narrow way of peace."

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He also highlights the need for society, both local and global, to recover the divine element in our humanity, which includes moral consensus, without which society flounders and humanity is endangered.

There are some though, who would rather have an aloof Church and one that is measured in contentious matters of public concern. Stephen Carter, the Yale scholar, in his book, [The Culture of Disbelief](#), laments that "our public culture more and more prefers religion as something without political significance, less an independent moral force than a quietly irrelevant moralizer, never heard, rarely seen."

Could it be that the dearth of the prophetic voice is a sign of a Church struggling to define itself and its societal role in the post-2003 era? Kenya needs to hear what the Church is thinking and saying on corruption. The Church cannot extricate itself from politics because it cannot refrain from the task of reflecting on the implications of its faith within our political context. It has reason to intervene, for we cannot afford the haemorrhaging of this country through corruption.

A 2016 [survey](#) released by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) indicated that the rate of economic crimes in Kenya is 25 per cent above the global average. It further revealed that every record set against stealing is broken. In the year 2015 alone, economic crimes rose to 61 per cent from 52 per cent in 2014 and maybe worse today. Philip Kinisu, a retired auditor and a former chairman of the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) [told Reuters](#): "Kenya is losing a third of its

State budget - the equivalent of about \$6 billion (KShs. 608 billion) - to corruption every year.”

Our plight did not escape the notice of former United States President Barack Obama during his visit in 2015. He rightly criticised Kenya’s corruption, inequality, and tribalism before an audience, which included President Uhuru Kenyatta and his Cabinet, at Kasarani Sports Centre in Nairobi.

Obama [quoted a study](#) showing that every year corruption costs Kenya 250,000 jobs. He said rising prosperity in the economy was leaving out the vast majority of the people, the burden of which is borne by the poor.

This is exactly what Samuel Paul of the Public Affairs Centre in Bangalore established in “*Corruption: Who Will Bell the Cat?*” His [study](#) found that in five Indian cities, poor households were much more likely to pay “speed money” for public services than households in general. Consequently, when access to public goods and services requires a bribe, the poor may be excluded. Given their lack of political influence, the poor may even be asked to pay more than people with higher incomes. Furthermore, when corruption results in shoddy public services, the poor lack the resources to pursue “exit” options, such as private schooling, health care or power generation.

We can learn from the struggles of the 1980s, during which Galia Sabar, Professor of African Studies at Tel Aviv University, observed that limited political association paralysed the process of transforming information and ideas into action. As such, she gave credence to the emergence of informal individual activism and the culture of defiance that was growing day by day.

On the frontline of Kenya’s individual Church activism during the Moi era were the Anglican Church’s Bishop Henry Okullu of Maseno South Diocese, Bishop Alexander Muge of the Diocese of Eldoret, Bishop David Gitari, the Anglican prelate of Mt. Kenya East diocese, and Rev. Timothy Njoya, a moderator in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA). These clerics triggered the much-needed change in the country through their political engagements.

Citing the February 1990 edition of *Finance* magazine, Sabar in [“\*Politics and Power in the Kenyan Public and Recent Events: the Church of the Province of Kenya\*”](#), said: “Irrespective of how much we might belittle their social standing, the clerics represent the most cohesively structured, the most firmly organised and

the most solidly unified institution in the country.”

Stephen Kapinde, a lecturer at Pwani University’s Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, observes how the vitality of the pulpit as a stable platform for change and the sermons of Bishop Gitari (at a time when the state had censored nearly everyone and proscribed gatherings of more than three people) gave credence to the Church in political discourses. The prelate and his peers developed a culture of resistance through the pulpit.

Prof. Robert Press, in his book, *Peaceful Resistance: Advancing Human Rights and Civil Liberties*, gave more insight into this culture by observing that:

Individual activists can only do so much in their role as ice-breakers in the reform process. Organizational activists build on their advances but need the presence of members of the public at their events to make a serious bid for reforms. The public, in turn, needs the forum for the activists to express their discontent. Together the resistance sends signals to the regime, the public and international officials and agencies that the demands for change have substance and visible public support.

For this reason, the clergy blazed the trail for democratic reforms from their pulpits. Amazingly, such activism was thought by many to defile the pulpit, while in essence, the clerics used the space to liberate the people of Kenya, thereby living up to their calling to be “salt” and “light” in the world.

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For instance, Deputy President William Ruto has been a [darling of Churches](#) during funds drives, notwithstanding the fact that he has been named in a litany of [corruption-related scandals](#). Indeed, former Prime Minister Raila Odinga in 2015 [described](#) him as “the high priest of corruption in Kenya.”

The Anglican Church had an explicit stand on the widespread habit of inviting public figures as guests of honour at fund-raising events. Following the Provincial Board of Christian Community Services consultation on “The Theology and Philosophy of Development” held at St. Julian Centre between 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> May, 1983, the Church issued protocols to protect the likely erosion of the Church’s prophetic role in society:

Inviting public figures as guests of honour at Church *harambees* or giving them prominence in a church function merely because of the money they bring is not in accordance with our Christian principles. It tends to silence the prophetic voice of our church leaders (A report of the CPK Consultation on Theology and Philosophy of Development, 1989: p. 5, ¶4).

Today, however, several Anglican Churches have overlooked this protocol and indulged the said politicians on their pulpits, thus diluting their prophetic voice. How would they escape the tag of being an accomplice to corruption? They should have heeded Joseph Kamaru’s warning in his song, *J. M. Kariuki*, “*gûtirí múicì na mùcudhìrìria*” (there is no difference between a thief and a mere observer).

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According to British evangelist and theologian G. Campbell Morgan, “Sacrilege is defined as taking something that belongs to God and using it profanely. But the worst kind of sacrilege is taking something and giving it to God when it means absolutely nothing to you.” If we accept this, then the Church would have committed double sacrilege in this indulgence: Knowingly giving platform to sanitise corrupt money in the name of God, and perpetuating delusion that that is [investing in heaven](#).

How do I answer my friend Joe Kobuthi’s query: “What does it mean when the Church goes quiet or turns a blind eye to corruption to the extent that a politician like Ruto can claim his contributions to churches to be ‘investing in heaven’?”

The Church, by indulging in questionable money being “invested” in its programmes, undermines its own ability to help the poor. Proper “investing in heaven” is investing in Christ. St. John Chrysostom (347-407 AD), one of the

greatest Early Church Fathers of the 5th century, warned: “Of what use is it to weigh down Christ’s table with golden cups when he himself is dying of hunger? First, fill him when he is hungry; then use the means you have left to adorn his table. Will you have a golden cup made but not give a cup of water? What is the use of providing the table with cloths woven of gold thread and not providing Christ himself with the clothes he needs? What profit is there in that?”

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How about using one’s position in government to save the annual 250,000 jobs lost to corruption? Wouldn’t that give many Kenyans opportunities to feed their hungry, and not to leave them to stare at Church tables embellished with gold? Investing in heaven would mean putting to proper use the US\$6 billion lost to corruption to provide for proper health services and housing for homeless Kenyans.

The Kenyan public is livid at the multi-million-dollar scandals that have failed to result in high-profile convictions. They accuse politicians and top government officials of acting with impunity and encouraging graft by those in lower posts.

Again, Kinisu opines the real drive to stamp out corruption has to come from public pressure for change. Yet in an environment of fear and intimidation by corruption cartels and politicians, it becomes nearly impossible to set up any social movement against corruption.

A curious episode in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* is instructive, as it well depicts our challenge on corruption:

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us”.

It is not freedom from corruption, but rather the freedom to take a stand against it, that we must all pursue. If the Church is to retain its credibility and relevance,

I believe it needs to utilise its eminent position to influence public opinion on matters affecting the nation. I would like to believe that, sooner or later, it will recover its earlier prophetic fervour for the sake of the public good and provide the moral leadership we so desperately need today in the epic fight against corruption.