

Religious Motivation for Political Engagement in Kenya

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Linda Ochola-Adolwa, the executive pastor at Mavuno Church in Nairobi, states “Should we just leave politics to the politicians? Should a few individuals dictate how our lives in the city are lived? We cannot afford to be passive observers while all hell breaks loose around us. Nairobi is not neutral; you must influence or be influenced.” This church’s motto—turning ordinary people into fearless influencers of society—suggests a different strategy for engaging with the political, economic and social forces in Kenya. My dissertation project examines Mavuno and other churches and builds a foundation for better understanding the dynamics and interplay of religion and politics in Kenya. By specifically examining Christianity and what types of direct and indirect influence churches and pastors have on the formation of political beliefs and behavior within Kenya, my study contributes insight into how churches continue to play an important role in Kenya’s political development. However, literature on good governance and democratization in Africa marginalize these institutions—despite a wealth of studies on religion and politics in the United States demonstrating the importance of clergy and churches influencing political belief and behavior. Religious institutions and ecclesiastical elite remain powerful sources of influence for many Africans, but are little understood politically.

In surveying this relationship, my study makes a distinction between the public and external communications of churches with the more private and nuanced aspects of inner church life. This internal perspective reveals the nature and impact of church governing structures and ensuing effect on political engagement. In using four Nairobi churches as case studies, the project is structured



around five domains, each designating a specific realm of influence where religion intersects politics. When woven together, these domains provide a systematic account of Christian churches and leaders’ influence on laity political belief and behavior. These five domains are labeled as: 1) pastor to pulpit, 2) pulpit to pew, 3) pew to pew, 4) pew to politics, and 5) politics to power.

Preliminary conclusions are oriented around four arguments. First, Africa’s “Big Man” syndrome often describes the political elite, but it may also apply to ecclesiastical leadership, whose churches are not necessarily model “schools of democracy.” Second, the concept of “vicarious satisfaction” is applicable beyond the perpetual elevation of corrupt political leadership and is particularly relevant to “prosperity gospel” oriented churches where toxic leaders produce toxic followers. Third, new breeds of churches, including Mavuno, are distancing themselves from previous trends of religious reticence and apolitical approaches and

are instead engaging the political realm in constructive dialogue and private initiatives that bring together local people to provide local solutions to local problems. These types of churches also demonstrate greater accountability and transparency and effectively model and develop the types of leaders needed to bring good governance to African political systems. Finally, I use the Kenyan 2010 constitution referendum as a macro case study to demonstrate the influence of religion on a major political event and posit that local understandings of power will pose several challenges to the new constitution’s devolution process.

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