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The Church and Ethnopolitical Conflict in Kenya: 1982-2013¹

David K. Tarus²

The chapter examines the role of the church in addressing the problem of ethnopolitical conflict in Kenya from 1982 to 2013. Though ethnocentrism within the Kenyan Christian community goes beyond the years cited to the colonial period and the immediate years following independence, the intensity of the problem after 1982 calls for special attention. The single event that marks political change in Kenya is the 1982 attempted coup. Although this was not successful, the coup heightened opposition against Moi's rule and thus, 1982 marks the beginning of the recent history of Kenya, a history in which three phases may be identified in the relationship between church and state: a united church (1982–2002); a divided church (2002–2007); and a recovering church (2008 onwards). The thesis of the chapter is that the church in Kenya generally exhibited a robust socio-political engagement in the 1980s and 1990s but lost its prophetic voice from 2002 to 2008 mainly because of ethnocentrism and the co-option and compromise of the clergy by the government and the opposition. The chapter, which is based on archival and library materials, broadly examines the roles the mainstream Protestant, evangelical, and Roman Catholic churches and their umbrella organizations, the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), the Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya (EFK)—now called the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya, (EAK), and the Kenya Catholic Episcopal Conference (KCEC)—now called Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB), played in their quest for social cohesion. In doing so, the chapter highlights the failures of Kenyan churches in addressing the problem of ethnopolitical conflict.

Key words: Ethnopolitical, cohesion, ethnicity, tribalism, conflict, church, Kenya, evangelical.

Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Church in Kenya: A Unified Voice (1982–2002)

The period 1982–2002 saw a generally unified Kenyan church against social injustice including tribalism. The church spoke in one voice in most cases. Protestant bishops teamed up to push for justice, democracy, and ethnic cohesion especially during the years preceding the introduction of a multiparty political system in Kenya. Rev Timothy Njoya of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), Bishop Zablon Nthamburi of the Methodist Church in Kenya (MCK), and Bishops John Henry Okullu, Alexander Kipsang Muge, and Archbishops Manasses Kuria, and David Gitari of the Church Province of Kenya (CPK) were instrumental in pushing for social justice, cohesion,

¹ The Journal of Social Encounters thanks the Rev. David Tarus and Langham Publishing for permission to reprint this essay, which appeared as Chapter 8 in *Forgiveness, Peacemaking and Reconciliation*, edited by D. K. Ngariya & R. L. Reed (Langham Global Library, Carlisle, UK, 2020). This paper originally appeared as Chapter Two in *A Different Way of Being: Towards a Reformed Theology of Ethnopolitical Cohesion for the Kenyan Context* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Monographs, 2019) written by the same author.

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and democracy in Kenya.³ The bishops used the media (television and radio), publications, and their pulpits to achieve this purpose. Such include, among others, the NCKK newspaper *Target* and the various talk shows delivered at the state-owned Voice of Kenya (VOK) later renamed Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). A good example of these talk shows is Bishop Gitari's six-part series delivered at the VOK after the assassination of JM Kariuki in 1975.⁴ Bishop Gitari summarized this sociopolitical engagement and the risks it involved with the following words:

Bishop Okullu was very vocal. Bishop Muge was very vocal. Timothy Njoya was very vocal. I spoke out at every occasion. There was great reluctance by the government to enter into dialogue with church leaders. Live broadcasts of church services were stopped. Only churches who praised the government were allowed on the air. There was a lot of stiffening of the part of the government.⁵

Bishop Njoya led in preaching fiery sermons against Moi's one-party regime. In a New Year (1 January 1990) sermon preached at St. Andrews PCEA in Nairobi, Njoya audaciously compared Kenya's one-party rule to the monolithic communist regimes in Eastern Europe, which, for him, would one day collapse as Nicolae Ceausescu's regime had collapsed in Romania.⁶ Thus Njoya avowed that Kenya had no option but to embrace multipartyism. In addition, he condemned patronage and tribalism, which had derailed Kenya's progress.⁷

Similarly, Bishop Okullu preached a comparable sermon at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Kisumu.⁸ Okullu offered why he opposed single-party system of government: "I am infinitely suspicious of one-party system of government being capable of safeguarding and promoting human rights, because it is there to promote a colonization of the mind and to assist its leaders in staying in power for life. One party government only encourages idolization of leaders and the party and non-accountability to the people."⁹

The bishop's courageous sermons had two major effects. First the sermons rallied the KANU government against Njoya, Gitari, Kuria, Okullu, and Muge, the five most vocal clergymen.¹⁰ These five clerics had been outspoken since the 1980s resisting the *mlolongo* (queue-voting) system of the KANU regime and urging Christians to set a good example of neighborliness. In the *mlolongo* system, voters would line up behind their preferred candidate and then the election presiding officer would do a head count before declaring the winner. In most cases, the candidate with the shortest line got declared the winner. Bishop Manasses Kuria termed the voting system "unchristian, undemocratic and embarrassing" while Bishop Muge referred to it as totalitarian.¹¹ Bishop Okullu said the queue system "produced some of the most blatant and cruel vote rigging

³ The Weekly Review, "The Outspoken Clergyman," 5–6; The Weekly Review, "Okullu Ready for 1994," 3–5; The Weekly Review, "Njoya at it Again," 3–6; The Weekly Review, "Okullu's Volley," 6–9.

⁴ Gitari, *Troubled*, 33–34.

⁵ Crouch, *A Vision*, 95–96.

⁶ The Weekly Review, "Njoya at it Again," 3.

⁷ The Weekly Review, "Njoya at it Again," 6.

⁸ The Weekly Review, "Clerics kick up storm," 5–6; Oluoch, *Christian Political Theology*, 20.

⁹ Okullu, "Ethical Considerations," 103.

¹⁰ The Weekly Review, "The Question of Opposition," 8.

¹¹ The Weekly Review, "The Queue-Voting Furore," 19.

and cheating that has been practiced in Kenya.”¹² NCKC leaders urged KANU “to find an alternative method” of voting or otherwise they will ask Kenyan Christians to refrain from taking part in elections.¹³

Because of their resistance, the bishops were condemned. Bishop Okullu was branded a “prophet of doom who should be shunned by every peace-loving Kenyan”¹⁴ while Timothy Njoya was referred to as a “tribalist bent on causing chaos in Kenya.”¹⁵ Gitari said that he “was in several instances referred to as a tribalist, a political activist, a champion of political groupings, a member of *Mwakenya* (the underground political movement) and a messenger of foreign masters.”¹⁶ These criticisms did not deter the clerics from critiquing the KANU regime.

Second, the sermons rallied the opposition against the KANU government and bolstered the push for multiparty democracy. The opposition team, the civil society, and the church united to oppose the dictatorial trends of the KANU regime and to push for multiparty politics. Even the then US Ambassador, Smith Hempstone, agreed with the clerics that Kenya must accede to multiparty democracy.¹⁷ Several politicians including Kenneth Matiba, Paul Muite, Philip Gachoka, Charles Rubia, and Bishops Henry Okullu and David Gitari held night meetings to strategize how to plan campaigns for multiparty democracy.¹⁸ These meetings resulted in several rallies and street protests.

In response, the KANU regime marshaled its forces to stop the protests. For instance, on 7 July 1997 hundreds of demonstrators who had met at Uhuru Park grounds in Nairobi were brutally assaulted including those who sought refuge at the All Saints Cathedral, a church adjacent to the park.¹⁹ Several clerics including Timothy Njoya and the provost of the cathedral, Rev. Peter Njoka, were beaten up. The clergy and the opposition condemned the brutality as a sign of the government’s infringing on religious freedom, suppression of its citizens, and disregard for the sanctity of human life.²⁰ Following the incident, Archbishop Gitari called for a “cleansing” service of the cathedral. Thousands of people attended the televised meeting. Gitari preached from the book of Daniel 5, warning President Moi that God’s hand would soon write “Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin” on the wall of State House if he continues to hinder reforms.²¹

However, not all Protestant bishops accepted multi-party democracy. Bishop Lawi Imathiu of MCK and Bishop Muge of CPK issued a joint press statement supporting one-party rule.²² They contended that multiparty system would precipitate ethnic conflicts in Kenya. Interestingly, Bishop

¹² Oluoch, *Christian Political Theology*, 17.

¹³ Oluoch, *Christian Political Theology*, 85–86.

¹⁴ The Weekly Review, “A Dissenting Patriot,” 15.

¹⁵ The Weekly Review, “A Heated Debate,” 23; The Weekly Review, “Njoya at it Again,” 6.

¹⁶ Gitari, *Troubled*, 240.

¹⁷ Hempstone, *Rogue Ambassador*; Ngotho, “The Day Democracy Visited,” 5.

¹⁸ Gitari, *Troubled*, 256.

¹⁹ The Uhuru Park grounds has been a venue for so many other political rallies. The 7 July 1990 meeting, and other subsequent meetings every 7 of July, referred to as Saba Saba (Seven Seven), borrowing from Tanzania’s revolution day, which falls on the same day, inspired great struggles for justice in Kenya. For more on the Saba Saba struggles, see, The Weekly Review, “A Strike for Freedom,” 3–6; The Weekly Review, “Show of Force,” 4–6.

²⁰ The Weekly Review, “A Strike for Freedom,” 6; The Weekly Review, “A Blessing for the Mothers,” 17.

²¹ Gitari, *Troubled*, 260.

²² The Weekly Review, “A Heated Debate,” 23.

Imathiu had served as a nominated Member of Parliament during Kenyatta's presidency (1974–1979) and the MCK had benefited a lot from both Kenyatta and Moi's governments. This historical reality might have informed Imathiu's non-confrontational stance against the Moi regime.²³

However, even though Imathiu and Muge did not support multipartyism, they, especially Muge, condemned ethnocentrism in Kenya. Bishop Muge, who at the time was the chairman of NCCCK's Justice, Peace, and Reconciliation Committee, paid a heavy price for his opposition to KANU.²⁴ On 12 August 1990, Peter Habenga Okondo, the Labor Minister, issued a warning to both Bishop Okullu and Bishop Muge that they "would see fire and may not come out alive" if they went to Busia for a church service.²⁵ Bishop Muge defied him and attended the service at St. Stephen's Church in Busia on Sunday 14 August 1990. On his way to Eldoret, Muge was killed through a road accident. Muge joined the list of other prominent personalities mysteriously killed in Kenya.

According to Margaret Crouch, Muge died "a champion of justice, peace, and human rights," and "a true nationalist, a martyr to the truth."²⁶ He was not afraid to speak his mind against tribalism in all areas, including the church and NCCCK. At one time he wrote, "The NCCCK in Kenya is like a rotten apple. To the best of my knowledge, the NCCCK has nothing to lecture our nation because all the evils, which eat our nation such as tribalism, favoritism, nepotism, and other-isms, have found shape in NCCCK."²⁷

Comparable to the activist-oriented Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church also united in pushing for socio-economic justice, democracy, and social cohesion in Kenya. Under the leadership of Cardinal Mourice Michael Otunga, Archbishop Rafael Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki, Archbishop Zacchaeus Okoth, and Archbishop John Njue, the Roman Catholic Church produced several pastoral letters highly critical of the government and KANU.²⁸ For example, in February 1992, the Roman Catholic bishops issued a joint statement saying, in part, "The continuation of Kanu rule is a hazard to the genuine evolution of democracy in Kenya as evidenced by the brutal tribal clashes West of Nakuru."²⁹ On 22 March 1992, eighteen Roman Catholic bishops issued another pastoral letter accusing the government of complicity in the violent ethnic clashes prevalent in parts of western Kenya since October 1991 where more than sixty five people had died and thousands rendered homeless.³⁰

Individual bishops issued similar calls. Bishop Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki condemned the Meteitei ethnic strife of 1992 saying, "These tragic happenings are orchestrated by irresponsible statements made in Kapsabet, Kapkatet, Kericho, and Narok."³¹ Bishop Manasses Kuria declared that all peace loving Kenyans should resist politicians who capitalize on ethnicity for personal gains; "anything that is likely to cause disharmony, strife and chaos is evil; it is even satanic" and must

²³ Okulu, *Quest*, 128.

²⁴ His courageous actions are recorded in Otieno, *Beyond the Silence of Death*.

²⁵ Okullu, *Quest*, 120.

²⁶ Crouch, *A Vision*, 158.

²⁷ The Weekly Review, "A Controversial Churchman," 5–7.

²⁸ See Gifford, *Christianity and Public Life*, 36–39; The Weekly Review, "The Church Factor," 5.

²⁹ The Weekly Review, "New Radicalism," 11.

³⁰ The Weekly Review, "Moving Into the Political Arena," 20.

³¹ The Nairobi Law Monthly, "The Nandi Clashes," 19.

be stopped.³² Likewise, Bishop Cornelius Korir of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Eldoret and Bishop Longinus Atundo of the Bungoma Diocese condemned ethnic-based violence in the Rift Valley and Western provinces.³³

Thus, during this pro-liberation struggle, the church in Kenya generally worked together across their denominational divides. The NCKC and the Catholic Church formed the National Ecumenical Civic Education Program (NECEP) to provide civic education to Kenyan voters and politicians under the chairmanship of Bishop Henry Okullu.³⁴ In addition to civic education, NECEP coordinated two inter-parties symposiums in May and June of 1992 “to discuss national issues, particularly the spate of ethnic clashes” prevailing throughout the country.³⁵ NECEP joined hands with other concerned citizens to form the National Election Monitoring Unit (NEMU), with the idea of monitoring the 29 December 1992 General Election by ensuring that peace, order, and democracy prevailed.³⁶

The courage of the leaders extended to the corridors of power. The Catholic Church and the NCKC, under the leadership of the chairman of the Kenya Episcopal Conference, Archbishop Zacchaeus Okoth, and the Very Rev. George Wanjau, respectively, took a strongly worded joint statement to State House titled, “People Have Lost Confidence in You” addressed to President Moi condemning the violence of 1992.³⁷ The statement is hereby quoted in part:

What [brings] us here is nothing less than the life or death of Kenya, the question of the lives and future of hundreds of families who have been treated inhumanly, butchered, slaughtered. The scenes are truly heartbreaking. No human being can be left unmoved. Anyone who carries responsibility before the nation, even more before our God and Father, must be forced to stop the bloodshed and human misery at once . . . Unless you change your present policies, Kenya will not be Kanu but a cemetery for thousands of its sons and daughters . . . Why do you not commit your administration officers, your police, and army to capturing these men? . . . Why have leading government ministers who made provocative statements and ordered non-Kalenjins out of Rift Valley province at public meetings in Kapsabet, Kaptagat, and Narok in September 1991, not been prosecuted or censured in any way? Your Excellency, you cannot deny what we have seen. . . whether you like it or not the truth is that the people have lost confidence in you and those close to you.³⁸

The bishops went ahead to make public the details of the joint statement, and this greatly angered President Moi terming it a “violation of secrecy and trust.”³⁹ But for Archbishop Manasses Kuria, “the statement concerned a grave matter of public national interest” and thus the bishops’ actions were “a divine right and most patriotic.”⁴⁰ For Linus Mwangi of the PCEA, “anything whispered

³² Gatabaki, “Peace,” 37.

³³ The Weekly Review, “Fresh Outbreak of Violence,” 16; The Weekly Review, “Lawlessness,” 19.

³⁴ Okullu, “Render unto Caesar,” 151.

³⁵ The Weekly Review, “The Church Factor,” 3; The Weekly Review, “United by a Common Cause,” 16.

³⁶ Okullu, “Render unto Caesar,” 152.

³⁷ The Weekly Review, “People Have Lost Confidence in You,” 21; The Weekly Review, “Dressing Down,” 20.

³⁸ The Weekly Review, “People Have Lost Confidence in You,” 21.

³⁹ The Weekly Review, “Violation of Secrecy,” 21.

⁴⁰ The Weekly Review, “Violation of Secrecy,” 21.

in secret would be shouted on the rooftops.”⁴¹ However, not all bishops supported the publicity of the statement. Others, like Bishop John Njue of the Embu Catholic Diocese, Bishop Longinus Atundo of the Bungoma Diocese, and Rev. Stephen Njenga of the CPK Kasarani, Nairobi, condemned the leak as unethical and a breach of trust.⁴²

What about Evangelical Churches?

Evangelical churches generally stayed away from social issues. They chose not to be part of the pro-liberation movements spearheaded by Protestant and Catholic churches. They considered NCKK to be social oriented and preferred to work with the Evangelical Fellowship of Kenya (EFK), now called Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK) because they considered it to be gospel oriented.⁴³ Rev. Jonah Chesengeny and Rev. Isaac Simbiri who at the time served EFK, concluded that the NCKK was “arrogant and anti-government”⁴⁴ while Rev. Arthur Kitonga, of the Redeemed Gospel Church, believed that the NCKK’s public engagement was an example of a serious loss of spiritual vision.⁴⁵ Scholars point to several factors, which might have informed the evangelical churches’ lack of involvement in sociopolitical issues.

First, evangelical churches were pro-establishment while NCKK was pro-opposition.⁴⁶ Bishop Arthur Kitonga of the RGC urged Kenyan Christians “to preach obedience to the government and the established political order” while Bishop Japhet Omucheyi of the Overcoming Faith Church of Kenya and Father Juma Pesa of the Holy Ghost Coptic Church urged Christians “to desist from involving themselves in politics.”⁴⁷ Bishop Birech of AIC told Margaret Crouch that the AIC preferred to critique the government “in love” as opposed to “shouting it from the rooftops” as the NCKK does.⁴⁸ Thus these churches did not take an active approach to critique the state as the NCKK did.

Second, ethnicity shaped the political leanings of evangelical churches. For instance, the AIC, which has a significant Kalenjin and Kamba presence, supported President Moi, a Kalenjin. A columnist observed, “The complete antithesis of the likes of Kuria, Okullu, and Nzeki are the AIC’s Bishop Ezekiel Birech [a Kalenjin] and the Rev. Jones Kaleli [a Kamba], as is evident from the sermons they deliver at the televised religious services attended by President Moi every Sunday.”⁴⁹ This ethnic factor was not unique to evangelical churches. As the next section shows, ethnicity shaped political choices of Anglican and Catholic Christians, greatly intensifying during President Kibaki’s presidency, especially from 2002 to 2008.

Third, biblical and missional reasons shaped the evangelical position on social engagement. Evangelicals argued that the Church, as Paul teaches in Romans 13, is called to pray and to support

⁴¹ The Weekly Review, “Violation of Secrecy,” 21.

⁴² The Weekly Review, “Violation of Secrecy,” 21–22.

⁴³ The Weekly Review, “Honest Broker,” 6. See also Okullu, *Quest*, 120.

⁴⁴ The Weekly Review, “A Partisan Role in Politics,” 12. See another critique of the NCKK and the Roman Catholic church because of their pro-opposition stance in The Weekly Review, “A Poor Pastoral Strategy,” 3.

⁴⁵ The Weekly Review, “A Partisan Role in Politics,” 12. See also The Weekly Review, “Honest Broker,” 6.

⁴⁶ See Oluoch, *Christian Political Theology*, 33; The Weekly Review, “The Church Factor,” 3–5; The Weekly Review, “A Partisan Role in Politics,” 12.

⁴⁷ The Weekly Review, “Honest Broker,” 6.

⁴⁸ Crouch, *A Vision*, 139.

⁴⁹ The Weekly Review, “Honest Broker,” 7.

the government and not to oppose it.⁵⁰ Also, since power comes from God, no one should resist those in leadership; to oppose the government is to oppose God. Therefore, they argued that civil disobedience, protests, and other forms of agitation are uncharacteristic of biblically-centered Christians. On the missional front, evangelical churches perceived their call to be that of saving souls, which for them, must be clearly distinguished from socio-political engagement.⁵¹ For them, the primary task of the church is to win souls not to engage in politics. Bishop Okullu observed,

Some churches have left the Council [NCCK] over these issues. . . These church leaders tend to be more conservative evangelicals who see the Gospel message as for only saving souls. In some of these churches it is largely a question of the leadership. The AIC, for example, is one of the largest Protestant churches in Kenya. Many ordinary folks in that church expressed sorrow that the church pulled out of the Council. They are convicted that NCCK is doing the right thing, and that conviction extends to the political arena as well as ecumenical.⁵²

Fourth, self-interest and the desire for state patronage shaped evangelicals' political leanings. Many church leaders argued that the growth of the church and its programs depended on the support of the government. Thus, resistance and agitation against the government hinders outreach and mission work. A happy and peaceful government equals a happy and a peaceful church and therefore, the government must be supported. Therefore, evangelicals supported the government and in return the government supported evangelical churches and their programs. For example, President Moi allocated several tracts of land to the AIC church and the Africa Brotherhood Church (ABC) to build churches, schools, and hospitals. Several Pentecostal churches too received huge sums of money from the President.⁵³

The NCCK condemned hate speech utterances prevalent during the pre-election campaigns of 1992. Under the leadership of Rev. George Wanjau of PCEA, the NCCK's task force named and condemned several politicians known for instigating ethnic violence.⁵⁴ Also during the meeting, the chairman of the NCCK's Justice, Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Bishop Henry Okullu, harshly criticized the opposition parties for their failure to unite together for the sake of the Kenyan people; "Our people are asking," he said, "What has gone wrong?" "Where shall our true liberators come from?" "Must we be condemned to walk in the darkness of oppression for yet another decade?" "Must we move from dictatorship to anarchy?"⁵⁵

Since it was clear NCCK was more in tune with the opposition than the KANU government, the NCCK bore the brunt of Moi's presidency to the extent that it was almost deregistered.⁵⁶ But the NCCK did not cede its ground. They published a document called *A Kairos for Kenya*, similar to what their counterparts in South Africa had published calling for the end of apartheid.⁵⁷ With a

⁵⁰ Gifford, *Christianity and Public Life*, 217.

⁵¹ Parsitau, "From Prophetic Voices," 251. Oluoch, *Christian Political Theology*, 32.

⁵² Okullu, "Render unto Caesar," 148.

⁵³ Gifford, *Christianity and Public Life*, 215–20.

⁵⁴ The Weekly Review, "A Report on Ethnic Violence," 14. See also The Weekly Review, "Stop This Heinous Atrocity," 10–11.

⁵⁵ The Weekly Review, "United by a Common Cause," 16.

⁵⁶ The Weekly Review, "A Partisan Role in Politics," 12.

⁵⁷ NCCK, *A Kairos for Kenya*.

foreword by John W. de Gruchy, the South African document was signed by 156 individuals representing 20 denominations and focused on calling the church and state to engage in social-political reforms in South Africa.⁵⁸ The Kenyan document focused on conquering one-party dictatorship. Drawing from the South African experience, the NCKK contended that the Government of Kenya oppressed the people just like apartheid oppressed the people of South Africa. The *A Kairos for Kenya* called for political reforms and the necessity of a “Kenya We Want” national convention.

During the 1997 national election, the NCKK, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Institute for Education of Democracy formed an election monitoring group to monitor the elections. The Joint Election Monitoring group, as it was named, published a report on the elections titled, “Report in the 1997 General Elections in Kenya.”⁵⁹ Jacqueline Klopp asserts that the NCKK was the first ever church-based organization to “document the nature, dynamics, and human consequences of the violence.”⁶⁰

On Tuesday 27 January 1998, 200 Catholic priests, nuns, and brothers from the Nakuru Diocese, under the leadership of Bishop Peter Kairu, presented a protest letter to the Rift Valley provincial commissioner, Mr. Nicholas Mberia, in which they condemned the Government of Kenya for its complicity in the ethnic strife.⁶¹ The statement from the Catholic Bishops is hereby quoted in part as follows:

It is against this background, and out of our steadfast love and genuine concern for this nation that we are compelled to make the following appeals to the president: 1) To fulfil the pledges that he made to Kenyans as he sought their votes, to unite the country and to bring lasting peace in his last tenure of office, as his legacy; 2) To put an end to the violence immediately, because we know that he is able if he so wishes; 3) To dismiss from his cabinet those well-known ministers who have hitherto uttered inflammatory statements that have always led to ethnic violence. There must be firm action if he wants to put an end to impunity and enhance respect for the law; 4) To respect and accept defeat from certain areas and from certain communities, which did not vote for him in the recently concluded general election, in the same way that they have accepted the presidential results; 5) To concretely assure Kenyans that ethnic violence will not spread to other areas as is now feared; 6) To respect the oath of office that he took barely three weeks ago even if he is not eligible for re-election in the next general elections.⁶²

More than condemning the violence, the Church did something to help the victims of the ethnic strife who numbered about 200,000 people.⁶³ The Roman Catholic Church put up several camps for the internally displaced in several parts of the country, including Thessalia in Kericho,

⁵⁸ Kairos Theologians (Group), *The Kairos Document*.

⁵⁹ Institute for Education in Democracy, *1997 General Election*.

⁶⁰ Klopp, “The NCKK,” 193.

⁶¹ See The Weekly Review, “Oh, Not Again!,” 6.

⁶² The Weekly Review, “A Call to End the Violence,” 7.

⁶³ See, The Weekly Review, “Oh, Not Again!,” 4.

Kamwaura and Elburgon in Nakuru, and Burnt Forest in Eldoret.⁶⁴ Similarly, NCKK sponsored camps in Eldoret town, Soi, and Turbo, while the Quakers had camps in Chwele and Bungoma.⁶⁵

Though the Church united in its condemnation of ethno-political conflict in the 90s, it oftentimes failed to exemplify ethnic cohesion. A few examples illustrate this failure. First, there were reports of impartiality during the relief efforts offered to victims of ethnic violence. Bishop Ndingi of the Catholic Diocese of Nakuru allegedly concentrated relief work on the mostly Kikuyu Nakuru District, while neglecting the predominantly Kalenjin, Kericho District.⁶⁶

The second example is the election of bishops. The election of Bishop Stephen Kewasis, a Pokot, to replace Bishop Alexander Muge, a Nandi, of the CPK Eldoret Diocese, is a good example of a church election decided on the basis of ethnicity. The Nandi Christians of the Anglican Diocese of Eldoret rejected the election of Kewasis just because he was not a Nandi, though Kewasis finally became the bishop through a court verdict.⁶⁷ In Kajiado, the Maasai rejected the election of Rev. Bernard Njoroge, a Kikuyu, from being the first bishop of the newly created Kajiado Diocese, threatening “that fresh tribal clashes would erupt in Kajiado if Njoroge attempted to discharge his duties as bishop in the new diocese.”⁶⁸ The Maasai Anglican Christians rejected Bishop Njoroge because “he is a stranger in the diocese.”⁶⁹ After two years of resistance, the Maasai Christians finally got one of their own, Rev. Jeremiah Taama, as the Bishop.

Another example is the creation of several dioceses in the CPK Church. Ethnicity dominated the creation of Katakwa Diocese in Busia District. For more than five years, the Teso-dominated Katakwa region fought a dramatic and protracted battle to break away from the Luhya-dominated Nambale Diocese of Bishop Isaak Namango. Finally, the CPK leadership under Archbishop Manasses Kuria granted the Teso Christians their own diocese of Katakwa on 1 January 1991 under the leadership of Bishop Eliud Okiring.⁷⁰ This ethnicization of ecclesiastical leadership in the Anglican Church affected its credibility. It also provided precedence for the church for aggrieved Christians from a particular community to use ethnicity to create a new diocese for themselves from any of the existing dioceses that currently encompass disparate ethnic communities within their jurisdiction.

The Anglican bishops also divided along ethnic lines in their support of political leaders.⁷¹ Archbishop Manasses Kuria preferred to support Ford Asili chairman, Kenneth Matiba a fellow Kikuyu, for the presidency, while Henry Okullu, the bishop of Maseno South openly supported Ford Kenya’s Oginga Odinga, a fellow Luo.⁷² The Rev. Elijah Yego of the Eldoret Diocese, a man who had earlier opposed the election of Bishop Stephen Kewasis because he was not a Nandi, supported President Daniel Arap Moi, a fellow Kalenjin. Reverend Yego called all non-Kalenjins

⁶⁴ The Weekly Review, “Oh, Not Again!,” 5.

⁶⁵ The Weekly Review, “Oh, Not Again!,” 5.

⁶⁶ The Weekly Review, “Honest Broker,” 6.

⁶⁷ The Weekly Review, “A Stormy Enthronement,” 18.

⁶⁸ The Weekly Review, “Controversy Deepens,” 14. See also, The Weekly Review, “Ethnicity in the CPK,” 12–14.

⁶⁹ The Weekly Review, “Controversy Deepens,” 14.

⁷⁰ The Weekly Review, “A Stormy Enthronement,” 18; The Weekly Review, “Katakwas to Do it Their Way,” 13–15.

⁷¹ The Weekly Review, “Of Clergymen and Tribalism,” 12–13.

⁷² The Weekly Review, “Of Clergymen and Tribalism,” 12.

to vote for Moi “or be prepared for eviction from the district if he loses.”⁷³ Ironically, Rev. Yego had earlier on, in March 1992, condemned the government for “not doing enough to quell the fighting in which the Luo have been the main victims.”⁷⁴

The foregone account shows that the Kenyan Church actively engaged in political and social reforms in the 1990s although it was not completely free of ethnic-based conflict. The next time period (2001–2008) marked the demise of the prophetic voice of the church in Kenya mainly because of ethnocentrism.

Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Church in Kenya: A Divided Voice (2001–2008)

Ethnic divisions and conflict within the church in Kenya intensified from 2002 to 2008. The period began with great hope for the country as it marked the end of President Moi’s twenty-four-year rule. However, his successor, President Mwai Kibaki, though he campaigned on the platform of ethnic unity, failed to unify the country. Kibaki’s government continued to polarize the country along ethnic lines. In the same manner, churches, both mainline, evangelical, and Pentecostals, during this time, were greatly divided.

The first division occurred during the struggle for constitutional review. For many years the opposition, civil societies, and the Church had been pushing for a constitutional review. In 2001, President Moi allowed them some latitude to constitute a forum for constitutional changes. This caused a massive rift between the major church organizations. On one hand, the Forum for Restoration of Democracy (FORD) and NCCK wanted a review process that consulted Kenyans from all sectors, from the civil society to professional bodies to the clergy. On the other hand, evangelicals and a few opposition members such as Raila Odinga wanted a parliamentary-led review process. The NCCK under the leadership of the General Secretary, Rev. Mutava Musyimi, proposed a merger between NCCK and the Parliamentary review team. The group referred to as “Ufungamano Initiative” (after the Ufungamano House, a church-owned premise that was a venue for most of the meetings), would lead the constitutional review process. The evangelicals, under the leadership of Archbishop Samson Gaitho, the Bishop of the African Independent Pentecostal Church, went to court because they wanted to be included in the team.⁷⁵ Archbishop Gaitho bolstered his point by noting that the NCCK represented “few than 40 bodies” while the evangelicals comprised of “more than 800 registered denominations.”⁷⁶

Reverend Musyimi defended the Ufungamano Initiative arguing that they were not being partisan.⁷⁷ Similarly, Archbishop Gitari responded to the evangelicals describing them as “probably confused because their theology is faulty.”⁷⁸ Gitari argued that evangelicals were aloof during the campaign for multiparty democracy in the early 90’s, and when Kenyans were struggling for constitutional review, “they only wanted to support the government, whether it was right or wrong.”⁷⁹ He also added, “They kept away from us and even held rallies against

⁷³ The Weekly Review, “Of Clergymen and Tribalism,” 12.

⁷⁴ The Weekly Review, “Ethnic Strife,” 5.

⁷⁵ Thuku, “Churches in Threat of Merger,” 5.

⁷⁶ Thuku, “Churches in Threat of Merger,” 5.

⁷⁷ Daily Nation, “Musyimi Clears Air Over Team Selection,” 4.

⁷⁸ Gachamba, “Gitari Tells Off Churches Group,” 1.

⁷⁹ Gachamba, “Gitari Tells Off Churches Group,” 3–4.

Ufungamano, now that the war is almost won, it's not sincere of them to appear at the eleventh hour with all manner of conditions."⁸⁰

This rift between churches did not go unnoticed. In an editorial cartoon in the *Daily Nation* of 7 May 2001, the cartoonist drew two goats dressed in the manner likely to suggest that they were prelates, complete with a miter. Chained to each other but pulling in different directions, each endeavoring to reach a pot of water labeled constitutional reforms, albeit the pot being out of reach. This derision of the church highlighted the zero-sum game of each camp's attempts to block each other from working towards constitutional reform. The constitutional reforms did not continue until after the election of December 2002.

After the election, the Kibaki Presidency constituted the Kenya Review Act Chapter 3A, which established the Kenya Review Commission under the chairmanship of Professor Yash Pal Ghai, and mandated it to carry on the constitutional review process. The Commission held their meetings at the Bomas of Kenya in Nairobi from 2002 to 2005 producing the Draft Constitution (Bomas Draft), which was debated at the Kenya Constitutional Conference at Bomas and later organized as the Proposed New Constitution to be voted "Yes" or "No" at a national referendum in 2005.

During the campaigns for the referendum, the Church divided along ethnic, denominational, and party lines. For instance, a group of Catholic bishops from the Central Province under the leadership of Cardinal John Njue, also from the Central province (Embu), defended President Kibaki's presidency arguably because he was Catholic and from the Central province.⁸¹ Their support came at a time when Kibaki was facing resistance from the opposition because of his rejection of *majimbo* (regionalism). Thus Cardinal Njue's rejection of *majimbo*, though he claimed to be informed by national cohesion, was interpreted as support for Kibaki.⁸² Accordingly, Njue was accused of being a "central Kenya mouthpiece" and a "Kibaki sympathizer."⁸³ Another Catholic Bishop, Archbishop Zacchaeus Okoth of Kisumu, distanced himself from Cardinal Njue's position by openly supporting the opposition. Here too, Kenyans saw ethnicity as informing Okoth's view because he was from Nyanza, and him being a Luo, the community of the opposition leader, Raila Odinga.

As to the matter of the Bomas Draft constitution, Cardinal Njue encouraged Kenyan Catholics to vote "with their conscience."⁸⁴ The other denominations, except ACK who also encouraged their members to "vote with their conscience," were openly campaigning against it because it permitted abortion under certain circumstances and it favored Islam by recognizing the formation of Kadhi courts operated through tax payer's money. Njue's word had great authority not only because he was the one in charge of the Catholic Church at the time but also because he was a Constitution of Kenya Review Commission national delegate at the Bomas of Kenya representing the Catholic

⁸⁰ Gachamba, "Gitari Tells Off Churches Group," 5.

⁸¹ Gifford, *Christianity and Public Life*, 40; Gekara, "Religious Leaders Regain their Voice," 19; Gekara, "Cardinal Njue's Leadership," 15.

⁸² Njue is reported to have said: "I have no apologies to make on the *majimbo* stand. I stood for what I thought was right at the time and what was important for national unity." See, Gekara, "Cardinal Njue's Leadership," 15.

⁸³ Gekara, "Cardinal Njue's Leadership," 15.

⁸⁴ Parsitau, "From Prophetic Voices," 256; Gifford, *Christianity and Public Life*, 59..

Church. Kenyans voted to reject the Bomas Draft constitution on 21 November 2005.⁸⁵ It can be argued that Njue's recommendations to the Catholics played a part in this defeat. On this note, Chacha avows, "the defeat of the new constitution was overwhelmingly not only along ethnic lines but religious too, undoubtedly on the side of Kibaki, who was continually viewed by the Catholics as a prominent member."⁸⁶

Similarly, the government and the opposition coopted some clergy to their sides. President Kibaki appointed Rev. Mutava Musyimi, the NCKC undersecretary and hitherto a tough critic of the Moi regime, as the head of the Steering Committee on Anticorruption (he went on to contest a parliamentary seat on the president's party soon after resigning from NCKC and he won). Gifford observes that "the NCKC under Musyimi changed its stance from 'principled opposition' during the Moi administration to 'principled cooperation' towards Kibaki's."⁸⁷ Raila Odinga of the newly formed Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), brought in Bishop Margaret Wanjiru, a prominent televangelist with a larger followership, to most of his political rallies. Wanjiru later vied for a parliamentary seat on the ODM party and won. Several clergies also sought elective positions in government but the majority of them lost. Thus the church failed because of the co-option and the compromise of the clergy by the government and the opposition.⁸⁸

The year 2006 and 2007 also intensified partisanship in the Church to a point where "Caesar and God spoon-fed each other" as Chacha observes.⁸⁹ The Church divided along tribal and party lines. The Church's lack of voice and clear ethnic division disappointed the Kenyan people. Frequent newspaper columns and letters to the editor written during this time clearly show the disappointment. Editorials appeared with titles such as, "The church is not our voice anymore;"⁹⁰ "No longer the beacon of morality;"⁹¹ "Heal yourself first, dear clerics;"⁹² "Kenya badly in need of new leaders;"⁹³ "House of God divided;"⁹⁴ "When the shepherds led their flock astray;"⁹⁵ "How clergy took battle to Grim Reaper;"⁹⁶ "Church embedded long before elections;"⁹⁷ "Ethnicity in the church comes of age;"⁹⁸ "Church's worrying slide to silence;"⁹⁹ "political bishops betraying the people;"¹⁰⁰ "Kenyan 'prophets' who won no respect;"¹⁰¹ "Did church leaders fail Kenyans?"¹⁰²

⁸⁵ A banana was the symbol for "Yes" and an orange, a symbol for "No." When Kenyans voted NO against the Draft Constitution, their decision inspired the formation of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) under the leadership of Raila Odinga. Later on, the ODM campaigned vigorously against the Party of National Unity (PNU), leading to a much-contested election in 2007 and the subsequent violence.

⁸⁶ Chacha, "Pastors or Bastards?" 114.

⁸⁷ Gifford, *Christianity and Public Life*, 43.

⁸⁸ Parsitau, "From Prophetic Voices," 251-52.

⁸⁹ Chacha, "Pastors or Bastards?" 114.

⁹⁰ Oloo, "The Church is Not Our Voice Anymore."

⁹¹ Ogola, "No Longer the Beacon of Morality."

⁹² Daily Nation, "Heal Yourself first, Dear Clerics."

⁹³ Opanga, "Kenya Badly in Need of New Leaders," 14.

⁹⁴ Ngesa, "House of God Divided," 13.

⁹⁵ Daily Nation, "When the Shepherds Led their Flocks Astray," 10.

⁹⁶ Osanjo, "How Clergy Took Battle to Grim Reaper," 22.

⁹⁷ The East African Standard, "Church Embedded Long Before Elections."

⁹⁸ Wamanji, "Ethnicity and the Church Comes of Age."

⁹⁹ Onyango, "Church's Worrying Slide to Silence."

¹⁰⁰ Nyatete, "Political Bishops Betraying the People."

¹⁰¹ Ogutu, "Kenyan 'Prophets' Who Won No Respect."

¹⁰² Daily Nation, "Did Church Leaders Fail Kenyans?"

One author commented that church leaders used their pulpits “to beat drums of ethnic hatred, which fueled the post-election chaos.”¹⁰³ And another writer said, “They preached poison from the pulpits, these men and women of God! They asked their communities to arm themselves and attack their fellow Kenyans. Yes, the clergy set community against community and brother against brother.”¹⁰⁴

In the wake of 2007/2008 post-election chaos, the clergy tried to urge people to embrace peace, but they were ignored. In fact, more than ten churches nationwide were burnt down.¹⁰⁵ The burning of thirty-five women and children who had sought shelter in an Assemblies of God church in Eldoret embodied the force of this national acrimony against the Church. By being partisan, the Church had lost its prophetic voice and could not be trusted to provide moral and spiritual direction.

Ethnopolitical Conflict and the Church in Kenya: On the Road to Recovery? (2008–2013)

Soon after the 2007 General Election, the Church discovered that it had lost its prophetic stand and had no authority to offer moral and spiritual guidance to the people of Kenya. The recovery of their prophetic place began with a formal apology from the NCKK entitled, “Hope for Kenya” on 15 February 2008. The NCKK apology is hereby quoted in part:

We regret that we as church leaders were unable to effectively confront these issues because we were partisan. Our efforts to forestall the current crisis were not effective because we as the membership of NCKK did not speak with one voice. We were divided in the way we saw the management of the elections; we identified with our people based on ethnicity; and after the elections, we are divided on how to deal with the crisis. As a result, we together with other church leaders have displayed partisan values in situations that called for national interests. The church has remained disunited and its voice swallowed in the cacophony of those of other vested interests. We call on church leaders to recapture their strategic position as the moral authority of the nation. We have put in place measures to enable us overcome the divisive forces, and set off on a new beginning. As the church, we will do our best in helping achieve the rebirth of a new Kenya.¹⁰⁶

Another apology from the NCKK came in August 2008 at the NCKK General Assembly at Kabarak University, a meeting where more than 1,300 clergies attended. Reverend Canon Peter Karanja convened the meeting to give the clerics “a chance to reflect, repent, pray together and be transformed in the power of the Holy Spirit to become agents of healing and reconciliation to the nation.”¹⁰⁷ During the meeting, the “Clergymen admitted to blessing warriors to engage in violence and inviting politicians to disseminate hate messages that incited people against members of various communities.”¹⁰⁸ The confession was in line with the theme of the meeting, which was “the truth shall set you free.”

¹⁰³ Gekara, “Cardinal Njue’s Leadership,” 15.

¹⁰⁴ Opanga, “Kenya Badly in Need of New Leaders,” 14.

¹⁰⁵ Chacha, “Pastors or Bastards?” 126.

¹⁰⁶ NCKK Executive Press, “Hope for Kenya.”

¹⁰⁷ Daily Nation, “Clergymen Own Up,” Online Edition.

¹⁰⁸ Daily Nation, “Clergymen Own Up,” Online Edition.

The Catholic bishops became the second religious group to confess. Their public confession came in March 2008. Cardinal Njue offered a formal apology at the Holy Family Basilica in Nairobi at a thanksgiving service offered for the establishment of a grand coalition government. Cardinal Njue said, “We (the Catholic Church) did not listen to the voice of the shepherd, who is Jesus Christ. We failed to love one another. We sinned by failing to love one another.”¹⁰⁹ Similarly, at a meeting to welcome the Pope’s representative in Kenya, Archbishop Alain Paul Lebeaupin, Cardinal Njue confessed, “We may have taken sides, we may have gone wrong, but we have to turn around now. Let us embrace the idea of a coalition government because it is through it that we can ensure the government does not serve the interests of a single individual or community.”¹¹⁰

Several other churches and organizations joined the NCKK and the Catholic bishops in apologizing to the country and calling for national healing. For instance, during a prayer meeting for the Sachang’wan fire tragedy victims in which more than 111 people lost their lives, religious leaders sought forgiveness for “leaving the people of Kenya dispersed like lost sheep without a shepherd” during the 2007 General Election.¹¹¹ Similarly, the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya was instrumental in the formation of a lobby group to mediate national cohesion and healing following the post-election chaos. The group met three times with the former U. N. Secretary General Kofi Anan in their attempt to broker a national accord.¹¹²

After the post-election chaos, the new Grand Coalition government appointed a commission of experts to draft a new constitution. When the Members of Parliament could not get the required signatures to amend the 150 contentious clauses, the proposed constitution was passed as it was. The Attorney General presented it to be voted either YES or NO at a referendum on 4 August 2010. The Church at this time united with ODM party to campaign against it. The issue of Kadhi courts and abortion triggered the Church’s rejection of the proposed constitution. All the church bodies (NCKK, EAK, and KCEC) urged their member churches to reject it. On 30 July 2010 the Christian leaders issued a joint statement urging their members “to exercise their democratic right to vote, and to display their patriotism for our country and convincingly vote NO to this flawed proposed constitution.”¹¹³ Again, on 31 July 2010, the Kenya Episcopal conference issued a statement signed by all the twenty-five Roman Catholic bishops to reject the proposed constitution because it permitted abortion.¹¹⁴

However, not all leaders supported the “NO” campaign. Retired Archbishop Gitari urged the Anglican Christians to vote “Yes” because the proposed constitution was by far better than the Lancaster House constitution that Kenya had used since independence.¹¹⁵ Gitari gained the support of Bishop Peter Njoka, the Anglican Bishop of Nairobi and Bishop Lawi Imathiu of the Methodist church. At the end of the campaign, the “Yes” camp won. Kenya promulgated a new constitution on 27 August 2010. Even though the “No” team was defeated, the unity of the Church was clearly manifest during this time. For the first time in several years, the Church rose above ethnic divides. Indeed, the Church could be said to be “on the road to recovery.” Even the Kenyan bishops who

¹⁰⁹ As quoted in Chacha, “Pastors or Bastards?” 129.

¹¹⁰ Mathenge, “Clerics Push for Faster Healing,” 6.

¹¹¹ Gekara, “Religious Leaders Regain their Voice,” 19.

¹¹² Chacha, “Pastors or Bastards?” 129.

¹¹³ Gitari, *Troubled*, 284–285.

¹¹⁴ Gitari, *Troubled*, 285.

¹¹⁵ Gitari, *Troubled*, 287–89.

had no moral ground to talk to Kenyans regained respect in national issues. For instance, the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter urging Kenyans to “to embrace peace and co-existence.”¹¹⁶ Maseno West Anglican bishop urged Kenyans to “stand up and say no to the culture of negative ethnicity, land grabbing, hate speech, and impunity because the country cannot continue to live in the past.”¹¹⁷

Conclusion

This chapter argued that the Church in Kenya commanded great influence in the 90s but lost its prophetic voice in the years 2002 to 2008 mainly because of ethnocentrism and the co-option and compromise of the clergy by the government and the opposition. Mainline Protestant churches, especially the CPK and PCEA, under the auspices of the NCKC, called for justice, democracy, and ethnopolitical cohesion. Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church actively engaged in the socio-political transformation of Kenya. However, evangelical churches under the umbrella organization the EFK (now EAK), steered away from social-political engagement. After the post-election skirmishes, which followed this period and the church’s subsequent apologies to the Kenyan people, the church may be said to be on the road to recovery.

¹¹⁶ Vatican Radio, “Kenya Bishops Call for Unity.”

¹¹⁷ Juma, “Crack Whip on Hate Mongers,” 9.

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