

**MUSLIM RELATIONS IN THE POLITICS OF NATIONALISM
AND SECESSION IN KENYA**

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Abstract

Within Kenya's political scene, racial and ethnic identities play a crucial role in creating division in Muslims' political engagement. Since independence, the racial and ethnic antagonism among them has weakened a united Muslim' voice whenever political issues concerning the community arose. As Kenya was preparing for independence, a section of Muslims (Arab Muslims) living at the coast agitated to secede from the rest of Kenya. This demand for secession led to a hostile relationship between the Arab Muslims and other non-Arab Muslim leaders in the country. One effect of this political development is the lasting impact it had on post-independence Muslim politics. The events set a pattern for mistrust between the Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims in Kenya. This absence of unity has influenced the way the political elites in Kenya perceive the Muslim community in general. Politicians in Kenya are known to have capitalized on the disunity among Muslims to prevent any united political front from the community. As a result the Muslim community has felt politically marginalized. It is this perceived marginalization which Kenyan Muslims are presently striving to overcome.

Introduction

In this article, I would like to bring forward the argument that within Kenya's political scene, racial and ethnic identities play a crucial role in creating division in Muslims' political engagement. The racial and ethnic antagonism among them has weakened a united Muslim voice whenever political issues concerning the community arose. Despite this there are certain instances when Muslims are united, but this unification does not necessarily translate to a political identity based along confessional lines. This is especially when issues affecting their personal lives appear to be threatened as occurred in the case with the Succession Act (1972), Equality Bill (2002), Anti-Terrorism Bill (2003), the *kadhi* courts debate ongoing since 2003 among others.

My argument, therefore, is that the antagonism caused by an effort by a section of Kenyan Muslims to secede was heightened by the racial antagonism that already existed within the community. I will illustrate how this divided Muslims at a time when the politics of nationalism was spreading across the country and has left a legacy in contemporary politics. Coincidentally, as discussions and preparations for independence were going on, the two predominant regions of Muslims, the Northeastern Frontier District (NFD) and the Ten Miles coastal strip, wanted to secede from the rest of Kenya. As the British administration was preparing to pass leadership of the state to the Kenyan-Christian elites, the Arab Muslims at the coast and the Kenyan Somali Muslims in NFD were agitating for secession. These sections of Muslim population were suspicious and nervous about the power of the Christian elites which led to the emergence of a strong separatist tendency among them. Kenyan Somalis were

advocating to join Somalia.¹ Their political agenda was both ethnic and religious. Although Somalis perceived their struggle in ethnic terms, religious differences with the majority of Kenyans had an indirect impact on them. This explains why they advocated joining the Republic of Somalia because they were regarded to have more in common with the people in Somalia in terms of language, culture and Islamic faith than those in Kenya. On the other hand, the coastal Arab Muslims were agitating to politically be joined with their fellow Muslims in Zanzibar. This political agenda was among other factors guided by religious principles. Historically, the coastal strip had been the dominion of the Busaidi sultanate, a sort of Muslim dominion, and this is why the Arab Muslims from the region wanted to be under the governorship of Zanzibar.²

I will restrict myself to discussing the coastal Muslims' involvement with the politics of nationalism and secessionism before independence. To understand the coastal Muslims' reaction to the politics of that time, I will briefly examine their status during the British occupation period.

The Arab Factor at the Coast and Maintenance of the Status Quo

Although Arabs formed a tiny minority amongst the indigenous African Muslims, they dominated the politics of Kenya's coast in the pre-independence era. During the colonial period, Arabs were the principal Muslim political players. Muslims' political activity in this era took

¹See Joseph Makokha, "The Islamic Factor in Somali Irredentism: Towards Rationalizing the Kenya Government's Stand against Islamic Political Association", in Mohamed Bakari and Saad S. Yahya, eds., *Islam in Kenya* (Nairobi: Signal Press Limited, 1995), 87; Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, "Elections Among the Kenya Somali: A Conservative but Marginalized Vote", in Marcel Rutten et al eds., *Out For the Count: The 1997 General Elections and Prospects for Democracy in Kenya* (Kampala: Fountain Publishers Ltd, 2001), 298; An Africa Watch Report, *Kenya: Taking Liberties*. Human Rights Watch, July 1991: 269-322.

² Ahmed Idha Salim, *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast, 1895-1945* (Nairobi: East Africa Publishing House, 1973).

place within the framework of Arab politics.³ Despite the fact that there were other Muslim groups in Kenya, the Arabs were the ones given recognition by the British authority when it came to dealing with issues affecting the community. This biased treatment affected the relationship between Arab Muslims and other non-Arab Muslim groups. Most non-Arab Muslim groups viewed the special treatment accorded to Arab Muslims as a form of discrimination.

The roots of British policy towards coastal Arab Muslims can be traced to 1895, when the Imperial British East African Company (IBEACo) surrendered its management of the sultan's dominions, paving way for the British government to take over. With the collapse of IBEACo in December 1895, Sultan Hamid bin Thuwain (1893-1896) was prevailed upon to accept an agreement that formally entrusted the coast of Kenya to the protection of the British authority.⁴ This agreement ushered in the era of colonialism over the sultan's subjects on the Kenyan coast. Under British rule the sultan became only a symbol of Muslim political sovereignty without any authority to make decisions.

As the colonial government was establishing its rule in Kenya, it had assumed that the Arabs were the overlords of the coastal region. This is illustrated clearly in the following extract from a report by the Chief Native Commissioner on coast administration:

It is an axiom that the best way to govern any race is through its own acknowledged leaders and the organizations to which it is accustomed. The Arabs were masters of the Coast for centuries and are still its aristocracy....⁵

³This view is also shared by Hyder Kinyo in his book, *Life and Politics in Mombasa*. (East African Publishing House, 1972).

⁴ Randall Lee Pouwels, *Islam and Islamic Leadership in the Coastal Communities of Eastern Africa, 1700 to 1914*. (London: University Microfilms International, 1979), 518.

⁵See 'Administrative Relations between Arab Officials and Headmen', PC/COAST/1/22/22 Kenya National Archives (hereafter KNA).

As a result of this biased perception the British administrators felt it was necessary to create good working relations with local Arab Muslim leaders. Therefore, the process to train Arab Muslim cadets embarked in earnest in the 1920's as they were viewed to be an asset to the protectorate.⁶ This emerging cooperation between the British authority and some Arab families was based on the British assumption that Arab Muslims at that time were the only group at the coast who had any comprehension of politics and government. This is confirmed by Sir Arthur H. Hardinge, who as the British High Commissioner of British East Africa observed:

The Arabs....are the only natives....who can read, or have any comprehension of politics, justice or government. Community of religion, language and intermarriage gives them an influence over negro coast populations, which the European stranger cannot as a rule possess in the same degree, and even in the interior they are as Africans more at home than he can be. Once they have thoroughly learnt the lesson that he is the predominant partner, and must be obeyed as such, their influence applied under his control may be....very useful; and it is, I think, very important for the future of East Africa that a native administrative element should, if possible, be formed and trained up out of the Arabs....⁷

Although, no longer rulers of the coast, Arab Muslims were able to retain some of their previous privileges under the colonial authorities whose notion of racial hierarchies served Arab interests. In the colonial order of ranking, Europeans were ranked at the top, followed by Indians, then Arabs and lastly Africans.

As the British established their administration at the coast, they found that there already existed the *liwali* and the *Kadhi* system of administration. These Arab-Muslim officials represented the sultan in Zanzibar in various capacities in different parts of the dominion. During the pre-colonial period the *Kadhis* were expected to interpret the Islamic law as judges, whereas

⁶See 'Administrative Relations between Arab Officials and Headmen', PC/COAST/1/22/22 KNA.

⁷As quoted by Pouwels, *Islam and Islamic Leadership*, 537.

the *liwalis* acted as governors who <<performed mostly administrative duties, on behalf of the sultan. Consequently when the new political dispensation was ushered these officials acted as intermediaries between British authorities and the Muslim population at the coast. The British officials depended on them as they were the ones who were more familiar with the laws and customs of their people. Gradually some Muslim 'royal' families and state officials began identifying themselves with the British administration in the hope of preserving their privileged position.⁸ There was no doubt that the British solution to governing the protectorate lay in the application of indirect rule, where they maintained the Arab Muslim officials by co-opting them into the nascent colonial bureaucracy although in subordinate positions. Therefore, when the period of African nationalism came in 1950s, Arab Muslims reacted in opposition to it. They refused to support the cause of African nationalism because it threatened their special privileges and position in society.

The Coastal Muslims Reaction to Secession Agenda and the Politics of Kenya Nationalism

The period from the 1950s to 1963 saw the rise of Kenyan African nationalism to challenge the colonial regime and to advocate African majority rule. In response to the African nationalism agenda, some of the sultan's coastal subjects contemplated the idea of secession. According to most Arab Muslims, it was an historical error that had led the coast to be amalgamated to the colony. To them the coastal region should have been allowed to be administered with Zanzibar because the later had more in common with the coast culturally,

⁸Pouwels, *Islam and Islamic Leadership*, 536.

religiously and even ethnically.⁹ They viewed their culture to be similar to that of the Arab aristocrats in Zanzibar, which was further reinforced by sharing the Islamic faith. Before the annexation of the Kenyan coast by the British authority, the region was under the sultan's dominion which was a form of an Islamic state. Therefore, as the prospects of independence became real, the Arab-Muslims feared the possibility of being denied their basic rights by the Christian administration in the impending post-colonial Kenya.

African non-Muslim politicians from the region such as Ronald Ngala and Francis Khamis, however, had different ideas about the status of the coast. They perceived themselves to have a greater cultural affinity with the other Africans in the colony than with Zanzibar. In the emotional debate that was engendered by racial politics, the Arab Muslims sought refuge in separation.¹⁰ This view was not shared by African non-Muslim coastal politicians. To them Arabs at the coast were imperialists comparable to the European colonialists. This is why the two non-Muslim politicians advocated for the African cause against that of Arab Muslims whose special privileges over the years had acted as an obstacle to Africans advancing to majority rule. The confrontation between the two sides gradually manifested itself at one level as a competition between Africans and Arabs, and at another level implicitly as a struggle between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Since Arab-Muslims were accorded a privileged position over Africans, the later were reluctant to support them in their cause to secede. They feared that unification with Zanzibar would imply being under Arab rule, and continued subjection. Their preference was union with the other parts of Kenya. On the other hand, the advocates of coastal autonomy viewed the

⁹Salim, *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast*, 266.

¹⁰See DC/MSA/2/1/93 KNA, and Salim, *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast*, 266.

upcountry-Christian nationalist politicians as ‘foreigners’. Consequently, the secessionists vowed never again to be under the leadership of ‘outsiders’.¹¹ According to the Arab-Muslims, the first foreign rule was the British-Christian government that was preparing to leave, and pass governance of the protectorate to another ‘foreigner’ in the form of upcountry-Christian leaders. Therefore, this desire by the Arab Muslims to secede could be interpreted to have been influenced by a sense of social pride and the Islamic identity. One reason why the secessionists were agitating for union with Zanzibar was their expectation that their traditional Arab privileges and status would be protected. Moreover, as Muslims they were unwilling to be ruled by non-Muslims.

From 1950s to 1963, coastal politics was actively engaged in the debate of politics of secession. However, as a result of racial and ethnic polemics among Muslims, this cause was characterized by lack of unity and coordination. The absence of coordination within the Arab camp, and sharp differences between the Arab leaders and the African coastal politicians (both Muslims and non-Muslims) led to the rise of several parties at the coast each claiming to fight for the interest of *mwambao* (the coastal strip).¹²

For instance in late 1958, the Afro-Asian Association (AAA was mostly a Swahili party) sent a memorandum to the British authority refuting the claim that they were supporting the Arab Muslims in the secession agenda.¹³ The AAA leaders argued that it was erroneous for the British

¹¹See DC/MSA/2/1/93, KNA.

¹²Some of the Muslims political associations that were formed are: Coast Arab Association (established in 1921 to defend the welfare of Arab Muslims); Afro-Asian Association (formed in 1927 with the desire to represent Swahili and other African communities); Mombasa Muslim Political Union (founded in 1958 with the goal of advocating the political interests of Muslims of Indian origin); Kenya Protectorate Nationalist Party (founded in 1960 was also seen to be championing the Arab cause); Kenya African Muslim Political Union (registered in 1962 with the aim of promoting the political consciousness of African Muslims); the Digo Mwambao Party (formed around early 1960s to articulate the political position of the Digo); the Bajuni Federal Front (founded in 1963 to work for the political advancement of the Bajuni) among others.

¹³Salim *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast*, 230.

authority to insinuate that the coast belonged to the Arabs only. According to the AAA, there were other communities like the Baluchi, the Digo, the Giriama, the Swahili among others who also had a stake in the affairs of the region. In their view it would be necessary to involve the other sections of the population in any discussion regarding the future of the coast. This action of the AAA was seen by Arab Muslims as sabotaging the presentation of a united front in the secession cause.¹⁴

At the same time the Shungwaya Freedom Party emerged under the leadership of Ahmed Jeneby that was believed to be a Bajuni party representing the views of that community. The main objective of the party was to champion the improvement of the social welfare and the political rights of the Bajuni people.¹⁵ The party was disillusioned with the Arab leadership, which they criticized for having neglected issues affecting the Bajuni. It was out of this feeling of resentment that the Bajuni dissociated themselves from the secession cause. They resolved in May 1961 to support the advocates of a unitary system based on the conviction that the Bajuni land formed part of Kenya.¹⁶

The other party was the Kenya Protectorate National Party (KPNP), which emerged among Arab Muslims in Malindi. Although it was an Arab organization, the party was dissatisfied with the established Arab leadership in Mombasa, which it was accused to remember Malindi during election period. On paper the party intended to eradicate all forms of racialism and oppression, but in practice the party was formed to champion the cause of the Arab Muslims, particularly those of Malindi. Its main objective was to constitutionally fight for the secession of

¹⁴Ibid , 231.

¹⁵ DC/MSA/2/1/105, Kenya National Archives (KNA)

¹⁶Ibid, 233; The unitary sentiments were being echoed by the Kenya African National Union (KANU) of Jomo Kenyatta, and Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) of Ronald Ngala.

mwambao which it strongly believed was part of Zanzibar and not Kenya. This explains why in March 1963, the KPNP requested the District Officer of Malindi to allow them to raise a red flag at an scheduled public rally as a symbol that the decision about the coastal strip was with the sultan. However, the request was rejected by the official on two grounds: (i) according to section 10 of the Public Order Ordinance Cap 56 laws of Kenya it was illegal to fly a flag at a public meeting; (ii) the red flag being the sultan's flag, could not be permitted to be hoisted where the British were in authority.¹⁷ That would be tantamount to suggesting that it was the sultan who was in authority at the coast and not the British. The colonialists would not encourage such a notion to be nurtured in the minds of the sultan's subjects.

Alongside these groups were other Arab Muslims who wanted to see the continuation of the British protection over the coastal strip. This cause was being advanced by the Coast League which was viewed to be inconsistent in its secession agenda. It was alleged that this party advocated for the establishment of a British base at the coast in return for either autonomy or continued protection of the strip until the 'coastal people' were prepared to take over. In addition to this view the party was also pro-sultan. The Coast League agenda did not resonate with most coastal inhabitants and thereby contributed to the failure of this party to make a significant impact on coast politics.

However, among all the other parties that appeared in *mwamabo*, the Coast Peoples Party (CPP) emerged as the most articulate proponent of coastal autonomy in the 1960s. The main objective of the CPP was "to strive peacefully and constitutionally for the ultimate independence of the Kenya Protectorate and its eventual federation with Kenya or other East African territories."¹⁸ The CPP critically questioned the allegiance given to a sultanate that seemed

¹⁷See CG/2/60 KNA.

¹⁸ DC/MSA/2/1/93, Kenya National Archives (KNA).

unconcerned with the welfare of its mainland subjects. The CPP was disillusioned by the leadership in Zanzibar that was not coming forth to espouse the cause of its subjects. It was against this background that the CPP advocated the autonomy of *mwambao*.

In its effort to have a non-sectarian, non-ethnic, non-racial and non-religious outlook, the CPP party attempted to gain support outside non-Arab communities. This is why its leadership selected *maalim* Rashid Bakuli (Digo Muslim) as its Vice President. *Maalim* Bakuli's position was perceived as strategic with the hope that being a Digo Muslim, his allegiance would sway his tribesmen to join CPP.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the efforts by Bakuli to gain support from fellow Digo Muslims failed to dislodge the Kenya African National Union (KANU) and the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) which had already established themselves along the southern region of the coast.

It was among the Digo Muslims that the nationalistic parties such as Kenya KANU and KADU had received significant support over the secession cause. By joining these earliest nationalistic political organizations, the Digo Muslims hoped to be able to contribute to policies aimed at redressing imbalances in society. This reaction can be explained by the injustices they had witnessed in the colonial period. All Africans irrespective of their religion condemned oppression, yet the only Muslim group that was accorded privileges was the Arabs. It was this injustice that influenced the relationship between African Muslims and Arab Muslims vis-à-vis African nationalism.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that it was lack of unity among Muslims (non-Arab Muslims Vs Arab Muslims), which weakened the Arab Muslims agitation for secession. More so, division in the Arab Muslim camp also undermined their cause to secede. Given that the

¹⁹Salim, *Swahili Speaking Peoples of Kenya's Coast*, 234.

coastal region is heterogeneous, it increasingly became difficult for Arab Muslims to continue advocating separatism on their own. Consequently, they came to realize that they no longer had any special political status of their own given that the majority of the people living at the coast felt that the region should be part of Kenya. As they were now considering integration into the Kenyan colony, Ali Abdallah of the CPP had earlier in October 1957 addressed a meeting attended by members of the various political parties at the coast advising them:

The time has come when we should be thinking of each other not as enemies, because we belonged to different political groups, but as friends, willing to settle difference and deeply interested in the welfare, progress and prosperity of our communities.²⁰

At this meeting they agreed to bury their differences and forge a united front as coast politicians irrespective of race, ethnicity and religion. To illustrate their willingness to be part of Kenya, in the London conference of 1963, the Arab Muslims agreed to abandon their secession agenda. During the conference it was agreed that the sultan's government would surrender its sovereignty over the strip to Kenya and that Britain agreed to make the necessary compensation to the sultan.²¹ The agreement implied that the issue concerning the status of the coast had been resolved and it was legally part of Kenya.

The major factor that influenced the decision of the Arab Muslims to forego their earlier political aspiration and opt for full integration with Kenya was the adoption of a regional system of government (*majimbo*). This was the idea propagated by Ngala's KADU. The Arab Muslims hope for self autonomy was in the federal system of government (*majimbo*) that had been incorporated in the earliest independent constitution. With the *majimbo* system of government, the Arab Muslims were granted some degree of autonomy, escaping domination by non-Muslim

²⁰Ibid, 242.

²¹Ibid, 244.

politicians from upcountry Kenya. According to this system of government agreed upon in the London conference there would be six regional governments and a central one.²² However, this system of government was not realized when the first African government of Jomo Kenyatta took over the leadership of the country.

Conclusion

Throughout the period of British rule over the Kenya's coast, Arab Muslims and the colonial administration maintained a working relationship that took the form of incorporating Arab Muslims into the British Administration. As a result Arab-Muslims were accorded certain privileges during colonial period. This explains why when the politics of Kenyan African nationalism accelerated the Arab Muslims at the coast were preoccupied with the idea of secession, or autonomy as a way of safe guarding their privileges. The Arab Muslims from the coast did not want to be under a government dominated by upcountry Christians. The Arab Muslims used the 1895 treaty as a lever to strengthen their case. This explains why the numerous political organizations initiated by the Arab Muslims were advocating the possibility of autonomy for the coast. The fact that more than one party emerged to fight for *mwambao* was symptomatic of basic divergences in approach and inter-party rivalries. The wrangling and lack of coordination among the *mwambao* parties affected their cohesion which would have been significant in championing their cause.

It is important to observe that this demand for secession subsequently led to an ambivalent relationship between the Arab Muslims and other non-Arab Muslim leaders in the country. It took several negotiations before the Arab Muslims agreed to be part of Kenya. What

²²Ibid, 243.

could be deduced from this episode in secession politics is that the Arab Muslims initially isolated themselves from Kenyan politics. As the rest of Kenya was struggling to attain independence from the British, Arab Muslim politics was preoccupied with the idea of secession. This has been a major factor in the marginalization of the Arab Muslims in post-independent Kenya.

I would also like to add that the effect of this political development is the lasting impact it has on post-independence Muslim politics. The events of the early 1960s set the pattern for mistrust between the Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims in Kenya. The absence of unity has also influenced the way the political elites in Kenya perceive the Muslim community in general. Politicians in Kenya are known to have capitalized on the disunity among Muslims to prevent any united political front from the community. As a result the Muslim community has felt politically marginalized. It is this perceived marginalization which Kenyan Muslims are presently striving to overcome.

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