

In Kenya, religious coexistence feels pressure of stronger Muslim identity

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(The Christian Science Monitor) On a steamy day on the Kenyan coast, a tall student stands at the courtyard water pump at her school filling a wheelbarrow during a class break. Her arms, bare to above her elbow, poke out from beneath her blue hijab.

Her attire speaks to a series of compromises between her Christian-funded school and its Muslim students. The hijab is permitted—but must match her blue skirt. The shirt, on the other hand, is regulation short-sleeve, and tucked into the fitted waist of her skirt.

This is the trade-off for attending Malindi Central Primary School, one of Kenya's many church-sponsored public schools.

Administrators are struggling to figure out how to accommodate a growing and increasingly devout Muslim population in public schools founded and often funded by churches. At another church-sponsored school minutes away, hijabs hang in the classroom windows, left there as girls enter the school gates, beyond which no head coverings are allowed.

From the quiet coastal town of Malindi to the frenetic port city of Mombasa, inland to the booming capital of Nairobi and up to the isolated outpost of Marsabit, the schools are an indication of how the dominant Christian community is struggling to navigate anew its relationship with the newly assertive, increasingly devout Muslim population.

"There is this fear that Muslims are stepping on other people's toes by demanding to practice their faith in places that don't belong to them," said Hassan Ole Naado, head of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, or SUPKEM.

It's a reckoning happening worldwide, with Europe in particular grappling with how to accommodate Muslim immigrants. But in Kenya, the presence of militants in

neighboring Somalia who have vowed to retaliate for Kenya's military intervention there adds immediacy to the problem.

This bolder face is seen across Kenya's disparate Muslim communities: They are forming civil rights advocacy groups, ascending within the Kenyan government, and sponsoring development after decades of dependence on foreign funding.

To Christians, who make up about 80 percent of Kenya's population and have long dominated political and social institutions, the rise comes with a tinge of menace. Even in places like the predominantly Somali northeast, where few turned to Christianity after the late 19th-century arrival of missionaries, Christians ran the schools and dispensaries, drilled boreholes, and raised orphans. For Muslims, the missionaries' efforts improved their standard of living, and they simply shrugged at the crosses over the doors of their children's mission schools.

But the backdrop of Islamic radicalization is testing what has been a longstanding tradition of coexistence, even as Muslims struggle with systematic discrimination. The militant group al-Shabaab, which shocked Kenya and the world with its attack on an upscale Nairobi shopping mall in 2013, is based just next door in Somalia. Some estimates put the number of Kenyans recruited by the group in the thousands, and local Muslims are under constant suspicion of providing a haven for militants.

New radical voices are emerging as well. Extremist sermons of the kind that inspired young Muslim men to temporarily seize control of moderate mosques in the southern coastal city of Mombasa are streaming in cybercafes at the opposite end of the country.

With the government focused on crackdowns, efforts to bridge the gaps have fallen to religious leaders, who act as interlocutors between the government and their communities. "We could look at our brothers and see them as terrorists," said Paul Mutungu, leader of the Malindi chapter of the Coast Interfaith Council of Clerics, formed a decade ago to mediate a violent Christian-Muslim clash in his county. "When we came together, we found they are brothers."

In Malindi, growing religiosity

Malindi, a slow-moving resort town whose Italian expatriate population supports a plethora of pizza and gelato spots, is known as a peaceful place on the coast.

But still, the growing religiosity of his students unnerves Mramba Kellian Mweni, the head teacher at Malindi Central Primary, a public school that is almost 50 percent Muslim. He said he is resisting calls to close school earlier to allow students to attend madrasa (Islamic religious school) and offer breaks during Ramadan.

“This is their culture and we have to respect their culture. . . . [But] the place is owned by the Catholics,” he said. “We’re supposed to go by the culture of the school.”

Some 60 percent of Kenya’s schools today began as mission schools, according to Susie Ibutu, program director for the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK). The Education Act of 1968 took over the costly role of paying teachers but allowed churches to stay on as management.

That remained the practice until the Education Act of 2013, which “gave Muslims more privileges” and helped to remove Christian education from the schools in the eyes of Christian leadership, she said.

Shamsia Ramadhan, who manages a Catholic Relief Services program to promote interreligious community work in Kenya, recalls her experience as the only Muslim girl at a Roman Catholic boarding school. Administrators let her keep her hijab and provided her with a prayer room. Other middle-aged Muslims have similar recollections.

But the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, by Al Qaeda operatives changed the way Kenyan Christians viewed their Muslim neighbors – something that began to manifest itself in challenging Muslim customs such as wearing hijabs in the classroom.

To Ole Naado of SUPKEM, it evokes Islamophobia.

“The Sikhs go to school with turbans. It’s never been an issue,” he said, referring to the South Asian religious group with a substantial following in Kenya.

When the issue was brought up at a recent gathering of Malindi’s CICC—held up as a model for how religious leaders can mitigate local conflict—Christian leaders talked of the need for compromise, while Muslim leaders emphasized that it was non-negotiable.

“It’s not a choice; it’s a must,” said Sheikh Abdul Rahman Ahmed Badawy, the head of the local chapter of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya, said to the room. “It’s a question of getting the [school] administration to understand.”

In Marsabit, hassles over hijabs

The Muslim community in Marsabit, a pastoral county seat on Kenya’s northern flank that is accessible by only a couple of dirt roads, is young but booming. Muslims make up some 46 percent of the county of the same name (pop. 291,000).

Here, too, the right to wear a hijab and the allocation of prayer time have been issues. Although Christian institutions dominated Marsabit through the 1970s—converting the indigenous locals and providing virtually all services—religion has always been fluid. Leaders pride themselves on their tolerance. A family gathered around the dinner table will often include Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists, who practice indigenous religions.

“We worship differently, but we have the same blood. You can’t change that,” said Sheikh Jarso Jillo “Jey Jey” Fallana, the former head of SUPKEM for Marsabit.

But the Muslim community’s surge has been jarring for Christians. The three mosques here in the 1970s have mushroomed to 45 today. Madrasas and duqsis (Quranic schools) have proliferated as well. The town also has its first integrated school, a public school with an Islamic foundation but largely secular curriculum, a concept born in the 2010 Constitution not unlike the church-sponsored schools that have been the mainstay of Kenya’s education system.

With the constitutional changes, school boards have been restructured, giving churches less say in decisions and leaving Christian leaders feeling abandoned.

“Most of our church leaders feel Muslims are trying to take over government,” said Robert Martin, an Englishman who leads the Anglican Diocese of Marsabit. “There is the belief that Islam is pursuing the Islamization of Kenya.”

Muslim educators are frustrated that mimicking what Christian organizations have done for decades is cause for suspicion. Teachers at Madrassa Tul Taqwa, a collection of tin-roofed shacks clustered around a treeless courtyard, express frustration.

“The way the Christians are helping, we want to do the same,” said teacher Sheikh Guyo Goso Boro. “We have to compete.”

Boro and other local young men are suspected of being affiliated with al-Shabaab and are being monitored by local police, said Kipchumba Rutto, deputy county commissioner.

Rutto and local leaders still feel the situation is under control.

“We are very vulnerable,” he said. “But with the full support of the community, which often leaks information to the police, we have been able to nip [radicalization] in the bud. . . . Christians and Muslims have gotten on very well unless you bring someone from outside.”

Mombasa is at ground zero

Indeed, al-Shabaab has powerfully shaped how many Kenyans view Muslims. The scale of its Westgate mall attack was one factor, as were reports that the attackers separated Muslims from non-Muslims by forcing them to recite the *Shahada*, the profession of faith. Last fall, al-Shabaab used similar tactics.

For many concerned about radical influences, Mombasa, where 41 percent of the population is Muslim, is ground zero. The dilapidated colonial-era buildings in Kenya’s second largest city house the unofficial headquarters of many key Muslim organizations.

Mombasa has all the hustle—and seediness—of a port city. It is plagued by youth unemployment, a burgeoning heroin problem, and, increasingly, religious violence. Since 2012, it has been rocked by a slew of unsolved murders of radical and moderate Muslim leaders as well as Christian leaders.

All this sows Islamophobia in the Christian community, says Father Willybard Lagho, vicar general of the Catholic Diocese of Mombasa and head of the Mombasa chapter of CICC.

“There is a lot of fear,” he said, speaking on the sidelines of an interfaith workshop in January. “The level of tolerance that has been there since the two religions were founded has, in the last 20 years, been challenged by incidents.”

He cites the foiled formation of an Islamic political party in the 1990s and the embassy bombings. But Christian groups are stoking tensions as well, he said. A more rigid, proselytizing strain of Christianity is growing, isolating Muslims.

The tension is visible. Churches have built higher walls along streets clogged by three-wheeled tuk-tuk vehicles and hired security. Ibutu of NCKK says pastors have asked for permission to carry guns for protection. Mombasa may also be one of the first places where coexistence in schools is supplanted by a preference for equal—but—educational institutions.

Coming from an afternoon madrasa ceremony, Muhdar Khitamy, SUPKEM's provincial chairman for the coast, said that public school arrangements for Muslim students to receive a few hours of Islamic religious instruction weekly while Christian classmates attend Christianity classes is not enough.

"It's time for us to come out and coexist," he said, but in separate schools.

Interfaith efforts help to unify

Christian leaders have become essential moderators between the government and the Muslim community, who are intensely suspicious of each other. Constant surveillance and incidents like police sweeps that result in the arrest of thousands of young Muslim men do not help.

On the coast, some 2,000 religious leaders, mostly Muslim and Christian, have joined CICC. Marsabit, too, has an interfaith body. Leaders such as Sheikh Badawy of Malindi take risks, as radical youths see their participation as collusion with the government. He said he's been warned repeatedly that he's being watched.

But Badawy and Mutungu have earned the nickname "twin brothers" for their seeming inseparability amid crises. Their chapter of CICC in Malindi spurred the creation of the others.

By the time the Westgate attack happened, the trust among CICC members was solid and they were quick to stand up and say, The attackers "are terrorists, not Muslims," Mutungu said. "They are out to divide Muslims and Christians."

That Kenya has not yet slid into tit-for-tat religious violence amid attacks by al-Shabaab that seem intent on turning Christians and Muslims against each other is at

least partially a result of decades of integration brought about by shared classrooms, hospitals, even weddings and funerals, religious community leaders say.

As the Muslim community asserts its right to its own education and political representation, the communities will have to figure out how to preserve that connection.

“When you grow up different, you have radicalization,” said Mahmood Jaffer, a CICC member and local imam. Flanked by Badawy and Mutungu, as well as a local Anglican priest and traditionalist leader, he added contemptuously, “Radicals say Christians and Muslims can’t sit together.”

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