

Religious Influence on Political Belief and Behavior in Kenya

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As a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Florida, I am a Fulbright-Hays Fellow conducting dissertation research that examines religious influence on political belief and behavior in Kenya. In the last two years, the Center for African Studies provided funding for two trips to Kenya, which facilitated pre-dissertation research and testing of my research design. These experiences provided crucial insight in developing an effective methodological strategy to explore how the highly religious Kenyan society engages with the political process.

The scholarly literature addresses the more public role of the church in Kenya's ongoing democratization struggle, but an understanding is lacking of the internal and more personal influence that religious institutions play in the development of church members' political attitudes and actions. Using nine churches and several para-church organizations as my primary case studies, my dissertation centers on a qualitative investigation of the inner characteristics of church life, pastoral theological training, political messages embedded in sermons, and the syncretism of traditional African spiritualities.

One of the most important political events

in Kenya's history occurred in August 2010. In a nation-wide referendum, Kenya adopted a new constitution (passing 67% to 33%). The referendum was a divisive issue among the churches and provided an excellent case for studying the influence between pulpit and pew. With the help of eight short-term research assistants, I managed to observe what 40 churches were saying before and after the referendum. We also conducted short interviews with 200 members in these churches. With 75% of Kenya being Christian (according to recently released census figures), a good portion voted against the wishes of several prominent religious leaders.

In diving into the political behavior of Kenya, I also discovered that there really isn't the concept of "political belief" here. Kenyans struggle to articulate a well-defined political ideology or view, forcing my research assistant and I to go back to the drawing board to develop a better approach at getting at their political views. We have even had to hash out the definition of "political" and in the process I've learned much about the inner psyche of Kenyans.

While most of my research has been focused in the capital city of Nairobi, I made two visits into Nyanza and Central Provinces to get a sense of the political atmosphere in rural churches. On numerous occasions I have also visited churches in the low-income urban areas surrounding Nairobi. Small churches from various denominational backgrounds dot these vast urban landscapes, providing hope and encouragement to a population characterized by unemployment,

poverty, and unhygienic living conditions. Church members in these settings expressed frustration and cynicism with the current political situation, but unfortunately they often lack the empowerment necessary to challenge the status quo.

My dissertation committee chair commented once that conducting dissertation field research would be one of the most rewarding experiences in my scholarly career. Four months into this adventure, I can only concur and look forward to the remaining six months I have in the field.

Steven Lichty is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science. His research in Kenya is funded with a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad award. He was a FLAS fellow in Kiswahili and Arabic (2006-08).