

Religious Beliefs and Political Behavior in Kenya

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After working in various regions of Africa for three years with two different humanitarian aid organizations, I experienced my first foray into Africa as a researcher in the summer of 2008. During my previous exposure to the continent, I became curious about the underlying issues that have an impact on its economic and political development. Along with this I was fascinated with the different religious dynamics I witnessed, and intrigued by their influence on development processes. It is with these interests that I began a Ph.D. in political science at the University of Florida. In the last two years I have taken courses that have provided a historical context and a sense of the methodological approaches that might be employed to study religion and politics in Africa. Thanks to several Foreign Language and Areas Studies (FLAS) Fellowships, I was able to study both Swahili and Arabic, invaluable tools for understanding the cultural aspects of my region of interest, East Africa and more specifically Kenya.

The highlight of my Ph.D. experience thus far, was the opportunity to conduct pre-dissertation research in the summer of 2008. Generous funding from the Center for African Studies and the Department of Political Science enabled me to spend five weeks in Nairobi, Kenya. During this time I accomplished three major tasks related to my dissertation, which will examine how religious beliefs and practices impact political behaviour in Kenya.

The first was making contact with different academic institutions, including the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, where I have been accepted as a research affiliate when I return for dissertation research. The IDS and other institutions will be vital sources of secondary literature as well as scholarly

feedback, advice and support. Secondly, I was able to get a more nuanced sense of the impact of Kenyan cultural dynamics on the feasibility of my research project. This will be important as I begin to determine the specific scope of my dissertation fieldwork. Finally, I conducted numerous in-depth interviews with both religious and civil society leaders. These men and women were found in churches, seminaries, parachurch and human rights organizations. The outcome of these meetings was a more profound understanding of the underlying issues related to religion and politics in Kenya, thus enabling me to better define important variables that have been unconsidered or marginalized.

I came away from this initial research with two significant



impressions. The first relates to the friendly reception I received among scholars and religious leaders. These men and women expressed enthusiasm and interest for my research topic and agenda. Having their support and cooperation during my future dissertation research will be crucial, and it is reassuring to know that I will be able to build on these good relationships. The second is more personal in nature. The first few years of a Ph.D. program in political science is dominated by coursework, but because my primary focus in comparative politics requires fieldwork, it was immensely encouraging to have this positive preliminary experience. It provides a basis for my research prospectus, and has laid the groundwork for dissertation fieldwork beginning in fall 2009.

Steve Lichty is a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science. He was a Center for African Studies FLAS fellow in 2006-07, 2007-08 and in summer 2007. His summer 2008 research was supported by a CAS pre-dissertation travel award and a Department of Political Science summer travel award.