

POLITICAL SALAFISM IN KENYA

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My research examines the rise and fall of political activism of Salafi clerics and followers in Kenya. There is considerable debate in the literature about what constitutes political Salafism. I speak of political activism when Salafi clerics a) form a political party whose ideology is derived from Salafi interpretation of the Koran or b) form an institutional entity in order to influence political decision-making in favor of a political party. This definition is based on mainstream definitions by other political scientists working on political Islam. For this project I conducted two lengthy research stays in Nairobi, Mombasa and other places along the Kenyan Coast. I was particularly interested in the emergence and the effect of two political Salafi organizations, namely the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK) and the National Muslim Leaders Forum (NAMLEF). I worked closely with representatives of both organizations and with imams of various mosques along the coast and in the capital. In total I conducted 80 semi-structured interviews with Islamic

clerics, state officials and Kenyan academics about the origins and the trajectory of Kenyan political Salafism. In the following I summarize the major findings from this research, which is forthcoming in an article and which contributes to my ongoing book project on Salafism in Sub-Saharan Africa. The emergence of political Salafism in Kenya is intrinsically linked to the liberalization of Kenya's political sphere in the early 1990s. The organization of Muslim activism along the Kenyan coast was driven by longstanding economic and political grievances targeting the post-colonial state. Many young Salafi activists came together in the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK), which soon became the victim of state repression and state-led violence. In the late 1990s the initiators of the IPK formed new organizations including the CIPK and the NAMLEF. The CIPK and the NAMLEF acted as political lobby groups supporting the Kenyan opposition at the time. The aftermath of the 2007 Kenyan elections saw the formation of a grand coalition, which brought many CIPK and

NAMLEF functionaries into positions of administrative power. At no other point in Kenyan history did political Salafis have the opportunity to influence policy-making. For two reasons this opportunity did not translate into concrete results: First, the unwillingness of (Christian) power brokers in Nairobi to attend to the concerns of the CIPK and NAMLEF. Second, the unwillingness of CIPK and NAMLEF leaders to engage with their followers after they became part of the Kenyan administrative elite. As a result many young Salafis felt betrayed by their previous leaders. Although Islamic terrorism in Kenya has numerous roots, Salafi clerics and local academics agreed that the failure of the CIPK and the NAMLEF to attend to the needs of their supporters was one factor that contributes to the rise of violent Salafism on the coast. These findings show that political organization of Islamic grievances can lead to unintended outcomes.

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