

Challenges Facing Islam in Promoting National Cohesion and Integration in Kenya

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Abstract: - National cohesion and integration have become an area of interest at both the government and the civic levels in Kenya. This has been occasioned by high degree of social disintegration witnessed in the country especially around the electioneering periods. Islam as the second largest religion in Kenya has attempted to give its input in promoting a cohesive and integrated society. While undertaking the task, several challenges have stood on the way towards a successful contribution by the religion. The paper aimed at exploring the specific challenges that have complicated the work of Islam in the efforts. Evidence for the paper was collected using questionnaires, interview guides and focus group discussion guides. The study was largely qualitative and hence the data collected was organized into thematic areas for ease of analysis. The study found that political interference, increased radicalization, bad leadership and lack of enough resources were major barriers against the religion's efforts for a cohesive and integrated society in Kenya. Other challenges include negative publicity and stereotypes against Islam and divisions among Muslims while approaching matters of public importance.

Key Words: cohesion and integration; challenges; Islam.

I. INTRODUCTION

National cohesion and integration have become an area of interest at both the government and civic levels in Kenya. The interest was largely rekindled following the events of 2007/2008 Post Election Violence (PEV) which resulted into loss of lives and property. Evidently, the challenge on national cohesion and integration is both a past and a current reality in Kenya. In 2013, a survey undertaken by National Cohesion and Integration Commission found that cohesion and integration index in Kenya is just above average (KIPPRA and NCIC, 2014). The situation has not changed significantly since the study, as it was demonstrated during the electioneering period of 2017.

During the 2017 general elections, ethnic temperatures became unusually high, especially following the annulment of the presidential election by the Supreme Court of Kenya. The voting patterns in the presidential election took the same ethnic patterns as it has been the case in the past. Communities that had produced a presidential candidate or his running mate in the main political parties overwhelmingly voted as a block in favor of that party and to that extent the presidential duo. For instance, the NASA party ticket of Raila Odinga (presidential candidate) and Kalonzo Musyoka (running mate) garnered the following percentages from

Ukambani Counties where Kalonzo comes from: Kitui (79.90%); Machakos (80.90%) and Makueni (90.5%). In his ethnic stronghold counties, Raila Odinga brought the following score to NASA: Siaya (99.11%); Kisumu (97.64%) and Homabay (99.34%) (IEBC, 2017). The Uhuru Kenyatta/William Ruto Jubilee party ticket scored as follows from their ethnic turfs: From the Kalenjin community counties, where Ruto hails from, Jubilee scored as follows: Bomet (87.04%); Kericho (92.78%); Nandi (86.84%); Uasin Gishu (77.79%) and Elgeyo Marakwet (94.63%). In the Kikuyu community dominated counties, the tallies were as follows, courtesy of Uhuru's ethnicity: Nyandarua (98.99%); Nyeri (98.35%); Kirinyaga (98.61%); Murang'a (97.89%) and Kiambu (92.63%) (IEBC, 2017). The lack of more even distributed scores in those counties is a clear indication of a country with a long way to go in attaining a decent level of cohesion and integration.

Beside the most commonly known inter-ethnic conflicts which have occurred mostly around the electioneering periods, some regions have been hit by other nature of conflicts; some of which have assumed inter-clan; inter-ethnic and inter-religious dimensions (Mghanga, 2010). In the years 2011 and 2012, scores of people were brutally killed in Tana River County when the Pokomo and the Orman communities fought (Sentential Project for Genocide Prevention, 2013). Tensions between the two warring communities remained real long after the 2011 and 2012 conflicts. Most probably, eruption of fresh conflicts was deterred by the heavy presence of the government security apparatus mobilized after the killing spree. There has been a series of inter-communal rivalries in the North-Eastern region pitting different clans of the Somali Community against each other (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Religious animosity though not very pronounced in the country have been witnessed at different times in different localities in the country. Kahumbi (1995) asserts that Christian-Muslim relations in Kenya has been characterized by misunderstanding, misrepresentation, prejudice, and what some observers refer to as discrimination by the Christian majority. The media in Kenya reported religious related tensions in Mombasa in 2012 following the killing of Sheikh About Rogo, a controversial Muslim cleric and extremist. Following the murder of the cleric by suspected government security forces, several churches were burnt and vandalized in

the city even as religious leaders from either side called for calm and tolerance (Mwangi, 2014; Akama, 2012).

Religious tensions of different magnitudes have been witnessed in the Coastal and Northeastern regions more recently and remains a great concern to the stakeholders (www.cohesion.or.ke accessed on 19th February 2016). Further, the state's intensified war on terrorism has evidently led to religious innuendos which if not well handled may lead to further ethnic and religious polarization in the country. The recent terror attacks at Dusit hotel at 14 Riverside Drive in Nairobi brought back the common religious stereo-type against people of Muslim background. Whenever there is a terror attack in the country, there is a pattern of bracket anger and condemnation against Islam and Muslim faithful.

Being a deeply religious country, religious institutions are naturally expected to play a central role in cohesion and integration agenda in Kenya. Islam is the second largest religion with a national following of 11%. In some regions such as North-Eastern and Coast, the percentage of Muslims is much higher and in majority (GoK, 2014; GoK, 2009). The religion, going by some reports has put effort to build a cohesive and integrative society in Kenya. However, various challenges have stood on the way towards an effective participation of the faith in the work. This paper aimed at exploring the challenges faced by Islam in national cohesion and integration efforts. The next section highlights the methodology employed in the study.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study though with ideas drawn across the country was primarily based in Nairobi and Mombasa counties. These areas were specifically selected for the collection of primary data because they have a high concentration of Muslims and have experienced some form of ethnic and religious conflicts in the past. Furthermore, the two counties have mixed populations with people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds residing in them. Primary data was collected through interviews, FGDs and questionnaires prepared for the purpose. The secondary data was obtained through reviewing relevant literature from the library. The weekly Islam Friday Bulletins were much resourceful to the study. They were readily available at Jamia Mosque Library in Nairobi City.

Adult Muslim population in Mombasa and Nairobi runs into several hundreds of thousands. It was therefore not possible to study the whole Muslim populations in the two counties. Hence a small sample of Muslim population was selected using a formula suggested by Fisher (1981) and supported by Mugenda (2003) among other scholars. The formulae $N = Z^2 pq/d^2$ yielded 372 respondents from Mombasa and 150 from Nairobi. Other classes of respondents such as Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM) and Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK) officials were selected

using the 10%-30% sample population suggested by Mugenda (2003) for smaller populations.

The researcher used interview guides, questionnaires and focus group discussion guides to collect the field data. The interview guides were used to gather data from SUPKEM and CIPK officials. Only a few respondents from these organizations were engaged for the study making it practical to conduct an in-depth oral interview with them. The interviews conducted helped in gathering in-depth data for the study therefore enriching the data gathered through questionnaires.

The questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to gather responses from Muslim faithful attending prayers in the randomly selected mosques with prior arrangements with the Imams. A self-administered questionnaire under the supervision of the researcher and research assistants was the most practical way of gathering the data from Muslim faithful. The data was qualitatively analyzed under thematic areas corresponding to the purpose of this study.

III. OVERVIEW OF ISLAM

There is limited understanding of Islam among many people in Kenya (Kahumbi, 1995). This may be attributed to the fact that Islam only commands a following of around 11% nationwide. Secondly, Islam is not a mandatory subject in primary and secondary schools in the education system. This situation makes a brief overview of the religion important for this work. The word Islam is derived from the Arabic root "SLM" which means among other things peace, purity, submission and obedience. In the religious sense the word Islam means submission to the will of *Allah* and obedience to His law (Abdalati, 1998). The nexus between the original and the religious meaning give rise to the implication that, true peace and joy can only be derived from submission to the will of *Allah* and obeying His Law (Abdalati, 1998).

Islam has been a religion and world power for more than 1300 years (Nehls and Walter, 2009). Yet the West only started focusing on Islam in fairly recent times. As Nehls and Walter (2009) observes, the West hardly gave Islam space and attention in her history and media. Further the two acknowledge that the religion has gone through times of glory and growth as well as moments of decay and recession. However, this scenario of blackout by the West to Islam has changed dramatically in the last few decades. This has been occasioned by global migration, the resurgence of political Islam and the variously interpreted acts of violence associated with Muslims in places like Pakistan, Nigeria and Indonesia and East Africa. The attacks first on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 and then on the World Trade Centre (WTC) and Pentagon in America in September 2001 warned the West that Islam is a force to be reckoned with (Nehls and Walter, 2009).

The history of Islam is closely intertwined with the life of Prophet Muhammad Ibn Abdullah, who was born at Mecca in the Banu Hashim clan of the Qarish tribe in approximately 570 AD (Abdalla and Ondigo, 2008; Balyuzi, 2002; Quraisy, 1998; Rippin, 1996). By the time he died at the age of sixty-two, he had brought into existence a very vibrant movement that would carry Islam through the centuries and across nations in the world. The movement would give birth to empires which would impact the cultural, economic and political aspects of many societies around the globe (Durbin, 2008; Riddell and Cotterell, 2003).

Islam is divided into two main branches, Sunni and Shia'h though a lot more sects have arisen from the two branches over the centuries (Morin, 2007). Sunnis hold that Abu Bakr, Prophet Muhammad's father in law was the Prophet's rightful successor. Further, Sunnis held that the method of choosing leaders endorsed by the Qur'an was the consensus of the Muslim community, also called the *Umma* (Alio, 2014). Shia'h Muslims on the other side hold that Prophet Muhammad had divinely ordained his cousin and son-in-law Ali Talib in accordance with the command of God to be the next caliph, making Ali and his direct descendants Prophet Muhammad successors (Alio, 2014). Sunni Muslims make up most of world's Muslims commanding a following of between 87% and 90%. Significant populations of Shia Muslims are found in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan with minority communities in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Kenya and other parts of East Africa and the rest of the world (Connie and Sandra, 2010).

Over the years, Sunni and Shia'h relations have been characterized by both cooperation and conflict (Rippin, 1990). Outside the Middle East and North Africa, the distinction between the Sunni and Shia'h is more blurred, more so in religious activities (Pew Research Centre, 2012). Sunni Islam dominated East African region for long time because those who came to preach Islam along East Africa's coastal lines were Sunnis from Yemen, Iraq, Oman, Somalia and Southern parts in Arabian Peninsula. In Kenya, just like it is the case in other parts of Africa, the Sunnis form most of the Muslim populace. The Shia'h Muslim sect is an existing minority which is felt through development initiatives such as the Agha Khan Development Network and the Bilal Muslim Mission (Alio, 2014).

IV. CHALLENGES FACED BY ISLAM

There is no much specific work done on Islam in national cohesion and integration. After all, the academic conversation around the role of religion in national cohesion and integration remains a great minefield in Kenya. However, some few things may be deduced in studying the challenges Islam face in doing other work and contextualize it in the task of national cohesion and integration. Abdalla (2012) has documented the challenges facing the aspiration of Islamic *da`wah* in Kenya in his doctorate thesis titled, *Islamic Da`wah*

and Missionary Enterprise in Kenyan Coast (Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu Districts). Islamic *da`wah* is any Islamic work intended to increase the Islamic commitment among Muslims. In this work, peace building and related works such as cohesion and integration would be part of Islamic *da`wah*. This was confirmed by Kheir Abdalla, a Muslim Scholar in a telephone conversation in September 2016.

Lack of sincerity by some Muslim leaders is one of the hindrances in the spread of Islam and its ideals. Just like it is the case with many other civil society groups, dishonesty among Muslim leaders has posed a great challenge in the Islamic *da`wah*. Many Muslim leaders do not take Islamic work as an obligation, but rather as a mean to sustain their lives (Abdalla, 2012). Resources which are collected from the gulf countries for social work ends up in the pockets of few individuals. There is a possibility that Muslim leaders and NGOs have been mobilizing money and other resources for promoting national cohesion and integration agenda or related tasks. This study sought to establish whether embezzlement of funds for this task is one challenge that the religion could be facing.

The other challenge facing the Islam community in doing its diverse work is division among its ranks and files. To many outside observers, Islam either in Kenya or in other parts of Africa is a monolithic religion (Kean et al, 2003; Morin, 2007). The Quran exhorts Muslims to be united in serving Allah:

And hold fast, all together, by the Rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favor on you; for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, you became brethren; and you were on the brink of the Pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus, Allah makes His Signs clear to you that you may be guided (Q. 3:103).

Despite the above call to unity of purpose and deed, Islam has suffered many socio-political blows from the early days which has resulted in division and incompatible factions (Balyuzi, 2002). This fact is exemplified by Ashrof in stating:

It would be unrealistic to neglect the existence of various sects among Muslims. These sections do exist, even if their existence is against the teachings of the Quran and the Sunna of the prophet. But it would be self-deception to assume that they will cease to exist in the near future (P. 35).

Muslims are divided into four major schools of thought which are not always compatible (*Hanafi, Maliki, Shaafi and Hanbali*). Although majority of Kenyan Muslims are followers of *Shaafi* school of thought, sectarianism remains a major challenge to her work and progress. There exists Islam groups with different agenda, some of which are incompatible with the mainline Islam agenda. For example, the *Khilafais* a section of Muslims at the coast that

concentrates on politics and calling for the establishment of an Islamic state (Abdalla, 2012). Such a call is counterproductive to any efforts towards a cohesive and integrated society, at the local and regional levels.

Lack of correct priorities in Muslim NGOs is another challenge facing the Islam religion in Kenya in its general social endeavors. Abdalla (2012) notes that it is very disappointing to see that most of the Muslim NGOs have no correct priority. Priorities in Islam are divided into three categories. There are those which must be done, shall be done and can be done. This study will seek to understand where matters on national cohesion and integration are ranked.

The war against terror seems to be another indirect challenge to Islam in working for national cohesion and integration. There has been a wide array of complains on how the war against terror has been undertaken both by local and international security agencies. Since the US embassy bombing in Nairobi and Dar esalam in 1998, war against terror has intensified in the country and in the region (Kundnani, 2014; Mazrui, 2006). Complains of harassment against Muslims has been frequent and several NGOs meant to undertake social related programs have been banned in the country (Lynch, 2011; Aronson, 2013). The study sought to examine how this turn of events occasioned by war against terrorism has affected the participation of the Islam religion in national cohesion and integration agenda.

V. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to investigate and evaluate the challenges faced by Islam religion in undertaking national cohesion and integration. In the literature review, knowledge gaps were identified on the challenges faced by Islam in the specific tasks relating to cohesion and integration agenda. Most of other studies offered generic challenges faced in doing Islamic *da'wah* and related social tasks. The study sought to specifically pin-point the barriers and challenges encountered by Islam religion in its efforts to promote a peaceful, cohesive and integrated society in Kenya. The objective was addressed through specific items on questionnaires, FGD and interview protocols. The findings on the items from various research tools are presented in this section.

Political rivalry, tribalism and clannism among Muslims were variously cited as key challenges in building a cohesive and integrated societies in Nairobi and Mombasa counties. Negative and biased reporting by the media especially on terrorism has created a negative perception of Islam religion. When the negative reporting is combined with stereotypes on Islam by non-Muslims, the environment becomes even more hostile for Muslims to get engaged in promoting the agenda in their localities and nationally. Islam in Kenya has widely been viewed as a violent and hostile religion especially by non-Muslims. Hence, Islam starts from

a point of self-clarification before preaching convincingly about peace, cohesion and integration.

Lack of education and enough information among Muslims was also cited as a barrier towards performing the task. Low levels of religious and secular knowledge among adherents have a ripple effect on the ability of the religion to effectively undertake cohesion and integration agenda. Some Muslims owing to high illiteracy levels have poor knowledge of their own religion. They have little grasps on the teachings of Quran and Hadith. Such people become easy targets of wrong and manipulated religious teachings at the grassroot levels (CIPK-M3).

Financial limitations were also widely cited as a barrier on Muslims and Muslim organizations in working toward a cohesive and integrated society. This challenge is compounded by lack of well-trained human resource personnel to effectively drive the agenda (CIPK-M1; CIPK-M2; CIPK-M3). Sectarianism coupled by other forms of divisions in Islam was another factor quoted as hindering cohesion and integration efforts. It is not uncommon to see Muslim and Muslim leaders pulling in different directions on important issues based on their religious sects, tribes and clans.

The rise of Islamic extremism and radicalization activities in Mombasa and Nairobi is yet another barrier on Islam working toward a cohesive and integrated society (CIPK-M1; CIPK-M2; CIPK-M3). This has come in the wake of increased terror activities undertaken in the cover of Islam religion. This has resulted to multi-effects including suspicion from outsiders on the activities of Muslims. Even when Muslims are holding public debates (*mihadhara*) on important issues like preaching peaceful co-existence, people of other religions such as Christians rarely stop to listen. Another effect arising from terror activities is stereotyping of Muslims. Some non-Muslims always perceive Muslims as potential terrorist and even speak out to that effect. This marginalizes the innocent Muslims adherents further and make the atmosphere for working towards cohesion and integration more difficult.

Another challenge cited to stand on the way of Islam promoting cohesive and integrated society concerns leadership at the local levels. Some Muslim leaders are said to be corrupt to the extent of embezzling money meant for such work like peacebuilding. Others are poorly equipped in leadership skills to steer the community in crucial issues like cohesion and integration. The poor leadership skills among Muslims also hinder them from making initiatives outside religious activities for the common good of the society. Some of these leaders continually use language such as *kafir*, a derogatory name used to refer to non-Muslims. Such language and other related utterances to dismiss non-Muslims further contributes to less cohesive and integrated communities.

The respondents cited lack of qualified man power to run the agenda (CIPK-2), difficulties in muscling substantial

co-operation from non-Muslims, and lack of unity among Muslim leaders as great hinderances in efforts to undertake the work related to harmonious co-existence. Scarcity of financial resources was also cited as a barrier to mounting a strong campaign in cohesion and integration at the national levels (SUPKEM-N).

Another factor cited by a good number of respondents in questionnaires was low support from the government. Indeed, there is a feeling that the government does not have much trust on Muslims. Historically, the Muslim community feels marginalized in many ways. Some respondents affirmed this point by suggesting that Muslims are not involved in important national matters such as cohesion and integration agenda (CIPK-M3).

Islam religion is only concentrated in some parts of the country. Compounded by the overall lower percentage of Muslims nationally, the religion's voice on important matters is not strong compared to that of Christian religion. Other barriers to cohesion and integration through Islam includes: Activities of illegal groups such as Al Shabab, negative reporting by the media on Islam and terrorism, scarcity of Muslim NGOs focusing of peace related issues, and lack of support from non-Muslims (CIPK-M2). Greed and pursuit of selfish goals among Muslim leaders was also variously cited as a difficulty in promoting cohesion and integration.

VI. DISCUSSION

A key objective of the study was to evaluate the challenges encountered by Islam in promoting cohesion and integration in Kenya. Such an understanding would help in formulating possible ways of overcoming the barriers. The literature review revealed no specific challenges for Islam in national cohesion and integration efforts. What was found were generic and scattered information on challenges faced by Islam in conducting a wide array of social activities in the country. Occasionally, literature was found on challenges facing Islam in related tasks like peacebuilding and conflict resolution in other geographical areas.

The data collected for this work through questionnaires, focused group discussions and interviews however revealed some specific challenges encountered by Islam in national cohesion and integration. The responses for this item have been consolidated, itemized and discussed in the following section.

6.1 Problem in leadership

Leadership challenge in Islam is multi-faceted in nature. On one part, some leaders in Islam are dishonest and corrupt. As already noted by Abdalla, some Muslim leaders have previously embezzled resources donated from gulf countries for Islamic *da'wah* (Abdalla 2012). In 2015, a trustee member of Riyadh Mosque in Lamu was accused of misappropriation of resources meant to benefit the Muslim Learning Centre (MLC) located in the town. The accused

leader had turned the endowment fund into personal use, a matter that ended up into a court of law (Friday Bulletin, 29 May 2015).

Muslim leaders have failed to speak with one voice regarding national matters. At times, religious division between Muslim leaders has been occasioned by political competition especially while jostling for elective positions. Some leaders have failed to co-operate with their colleagues in addressing national cohesion and integration and other matters of national importance. A respondent who is senior member of CIPK stated as follows during an interview, "We face a challenge of Non-cooperation from some Muslim leaders who are stubborn. They are unwilling to cooperate with others in promoting a cohesive and integrated society" (CIPK M1). A SUPKEM official also lamented of non-cooperation by some Muslim leaders. Lack of a united voice obviously pose some major difficulties on the religion in accomplishing the task. It also potentially portrays Islam badly to the outsiders.

Some Muslim leaders including Imams have been involved in radicalization and extremism. They have used their places of worship and positions to bend the teaching of Islam to the youths for their selfish goals. A case in point is the late Sheikh Aboud Rogo, Sheikh Makaburi and other Imams who recruited and radicalized people in Mombasa. Their leadership influence was negative and gave Islam a very bad image at the time.

6.2 Political Interference

Political competition in Kenya is normally played along ethnic lines. Consequently, politicians seeking for elective seats during the electioneering periods usually invokes ethnic cards for their own political goals (Nyukuri, 1997). In North-Eastern region, mostly dominated by the Somali community, clannism is invoked by politicians to gain advantage over their political competitors (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Alio 2012). In some cases, religion is used as a dividing factor for political survival. Elections therefore leaves people more divided along ethnic and religious lines.

Such politicians may not wish to have people who strongly identify themselves as Kenyan. They would rather have them continue with strong religious and ethnic identities so that they can use them for own political advantages.

6.3 Divisions in Islam

The reality and the effect of sectarianism is something that has bothered even the policy makers within the faith. Oded (2000) exemplify this as he laments, "although there are factors that strengthen Muslim solidarity, religious, political, and personal divisions among the Muslims weaken their overall position" (p. 47). Occasionally, Kenyan Muslims lacks proper coordination since they are represented by many voices, therefore hindering smooth coordination and central point of reference (Lynch, 2011). This challenge was cited by

a bishop from a major denomination in Mombasa. The Bishop exclaimed, “Sometimes we are not able to know which group to engage within Islam. Some groups within Islam are closed minded to partnership in national matters”(CLM-1). As much as some Muslims in Kenya would like to insist that Islam is one united religion, the reality is that there are sects and divisions within the faith community. These sects are not always compatible. This reality of sectarianism is echoed by Oded (2000) in stating, “Although the Muslim community has many divisions, its solidarity comes to the fore whenever they suspect that the sanctity of Islam is threatened” (p. 44). Locally, several events have triggered the coming together of Muslims from different sects whereby a common complaint is fronted. The war against terror has elicited such grievances by Muslims in general out of a feeling of being unfairly targeted by the government security apparatus.

The reality of sectarianism in world religions needs to be appreciated. It is occasioned by the realities of contexts and other dynamics in human existence. The existence of various sections within the same religion should not mean that there are no matters that can be done together for the common good. Whereas the mode of worship may vary between various sects within the same religion, such should not be allowed to deter people from coming together to find solutions for challenges that face humanity at different times. Conflicts and social division is such a challenge that face the Kenyan community. Islam religion have a responsibility of collectively joining other actors in solving the problem.

The author of this work also encountered the challenge of discrimination while collecting the data. A Muslim sect which is pre-dominantly composed of members of certain ethnicity could not allow him to collect data from their members within their premises in Nairobi. He had not identified himself as Muslim or non-Muslim. He therefore assumed that his different looks contributed to the hostility with which he was received in the premises.

The problem of ethnicity within Islam was also cited as a barrier to promoting a cohesive and integrated society. The CIPK official in Mombasa stated thus, “ethnicity within Islam whereby people identify themselves as Arabs; Somalis; Mijikenda’s etc. is a major hinderance to building a cohesive society”. The same was cited by a SUPKEM official in Nairobi though he used the term tribalism to state the challenge of ethnicity within Islam. As Oded (2000) notes, the challenge of ethnic division, and more so the Arab-African divide has been witnessed since the pre-colonial period. The challenge of ethnic identity in Islam over the strive for nationhood was cited by a substantial number of Muslim faithful in Nairobi and Mombasa. Such a mentality is common in the country and even elsewhere in the continent. People have stronger attachment to their ethnic identities and pay little attention to nationhood. Indeed, nationhood is usually sacrificed on the altar of ethnicity.

6.4 Negative publicity and stereotypes

Negative publicity on Islam through the Kenyan media outlets was one of the highly quoted challenge by respondents across the board. Kapoor (2010) laments, “By means of the media, a sinister image is presented to the eye of the public, this notorious image is mainly due to the ignorance and misunderstanding of the media and public combined” (P.41). The name of Islam religion has been negatively and in many occasions wrongly mentioned by the Kenyan media especially in the wake of radicalization and terror activities in the country. The Vice Chairman of Jamia Mosque Committee, Farouk Adam, was recorded lamenting, “the media is increasingly helping in fueling a hostile climate against Muslims by its persistent association of Islam and Muslims with terrorism” (Friday Bulletin, 15th May, 2015 page 2). Previously, the Media Council of Kenya (MCK) had released a report that accused the media of contributing the propagation of narrative to the effect that all Muslims are potential terrorists and Islam is in support of extremism and radicalization (Friday Bulletin, 15th May 2015 page 2). Thus, Muslims starts from a point of self-defense when talking about cohesion, integration or any matter related to peaceful co-existence. There is a general negative perception towards Islam in Kenya, partly due to the negative publicity by the local and international media outlets.

Negative reporting on Islam by the media is not only a problem unique to the situation in Kenya; neither is it a recent phenomenon. Such a trend has been very common in the western world for several decades (Kundnani, 2014). Said (1997) writing on the role the media has played in tarnishing the name of Islam in the Western world laments how the media has frequently depicted a factitious relationship between Arabs, Muslims and terrorism. A respondent from Nairobi stated, “Muslims in Kenya are stigmatized since the notion portrayed about Islam by the Kenyan Media is largely negative” (QRN 25). Such a feeling was widely shared by other respondents though put it in different language. Perhaps, this state of affair could be explained in part by the fact that, Kenyan media is dominated by Christians. Most of the journalists happens to be Christians and hence most likely write with their religious bias (Mwangi, 2014). Subjectivity while reporting on the activities happening among the Muslim communities in the western context has been a historical reality. The same is happening in Kenya because Western journalists play a central role in informing local journalists on the events in the western world (Kadhi 1995).

In Kenya, the relationship is much the same only that the Arab ethnicity is not common in the matrix. The Arab ethnicity could locally be seen to be replaced by people of Somali descent. The Somali-Islam stereotype is perhaps reinforced by the history of Somali irredentism in 1960s and 1970s. Beside the ethnic background, other Muslim identifiers such as the veil and the robe are easily used to brand individuals as Muslims and hence potential terrorists. It is a tag that has been hard to shed off in the country and local

Muslims have always had to bear the burden of suspicion in their own country. Such a situation is likely to create resentment in the minds and the will of Muslim adherents. Under such kind of environment, Muslims are unlikely to passionately promote a cohesive and an integrated society. Their morale is already jeopardized by the negative publicity their religion has received in a society where they are in minority.

6.5 Illiteracy among Muslim communities

Low education levels among Muslim populations was yet another challenge cited to stand on the way for the religion to fruitfully engage in promoting a cohesive and integrated society. This was especially evident in Mombasa during the data collection as sizable number of respondents could not fill the English questionnaire. The research assistants preferred more questionnaires in Swahili language, citing high levels of illiteracy among the residents. The illiteracy levels of Muslims seem to be a global challenge as depicted by Ashrof (2017) in the Muslim World League Journal:

Muslims in different parts of the World lag in education. They lack rational and scientific culture. Their centers of learning are imparting sectarian and non-productive and worthless education. The enlightened Muslim thinkers have no place in most Muslim societies, they are often branded as infidels (p. 35).

The above assertion by Ashrof could be viewed as a hyperbolic presentation of the state of education among Muslims in the world. However, it can be fairly taken to mean that the levels of education among the Muslim communities is generally low across the globe. The researcher hereby agrees with him in the suggestions made to correct the anomalies of the low levels of education among the Muslim communities. He states, "the traditional and conventional methods of imparting Islamic teaching should be converted into modern methods in which Islam should be presented as a rational, democratic, scientific, progressive and peaceful code of life" (p. 35).

Knowledge in its variety is surely a great resource in enhancing the quality of life as well as helping in solving the myriad technical and social challenges of life. The Muslim community in Kenya should also embrace formal education instead of relying on religious education as it has been in some Muslim dominated areas. This would help in broadening the perspectives and horizons of individuals and help address real issues in life such as national cohesion, integration, production, industrialization, globalization and many more.

Majority of the adherents of Islam resides or originate from the arid and semi-arid North-Eastern and Coastal regions in Kenya. The two regions are historically known to have been marginalized in development and to some

extent formal education. During the colonial and post-colonial periods, education was rejected by Muslim populations since it was perceived as an instrument of propagating the Christian ideals (Kahumbi, 1995). In national examinations in Kenya, counties in the two regions usually post very poor results (Mazrui, 1994). Indeed, the North-Eastern region has been of late been a beneficiary of lowered University entry points as an attempt to correct the historical anomaly. This is a positive move by the government, but the accumulated consequences cannot be rectified in few years.

Illiteracy have a ripple effect of making the population especially among the young people vulnerable to wrong teachings. Lack of formal education also means that many Muslims cannot effectively comprehend Islamic teachings by themselves from Quran or Hadith. Most of them cannot effectively read the Quran for themselves. Such individuals become an easy target of brainwashing and wrong teachings from people of ulterior motives. The number of Muslims who receives extremist teachings increases with time. Such people continues to identify themselves as Muslims even as they exhibit the acts occasioned by teaching which are not compliant with true Islam.

6.6 Limitation of resources

Lack of financial and man power resources was also cited as a challenge for Islam in working towards a cohesive and integrated society. Owing to general incidences of illiteracy among Muslims, it is possible that only few Muslims have been trained on conflict resolutions and related matters. This would mean that those who are in leadership are not able to educate the Muslim faithful. The challenge of resources is not limited to Islam religion. Limitation of monetary resources is a major barrier to both governmental and non-governmental agencies in undertaking important social tasks like conflict management. The existence of only a few Muslim organizations dealing with cohesion, integration and other related tasks can partly be explained by scarcity of international donors to fund the initiatives.

The fight against terror in Kenya has led to crackdown on Muslim NGOs working either locally or from abroad in humanitarian activities. Following the 1998 US embassy bombing in Nairobi and Dare Salam, several Muslim partner NGOs in the United States, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom were closed. More local and transnational Muslim NGOs have been affected by the crackdown in the aftermath of the September 11 World Trade Centre and Pentagon terror attacks and the persistence of local terror activities. Recently, such crackdown by the local NGO coordinating board has tended to sweep wide, affecting the activities of Muslim NGOs undertaking a wide range of humanitarian work. The transnational security discourses and domestic politics have a way in which they have negatively impacted on Islamic peacebuilding and development (Lynch, 2011).

These developments have disadvantaged Islam in Kenya in programs involving promotion of cohesive and integrated society. There was no mention of partnership of Islam with international organizations such as USAID, UKAID and United Nations from respondents through questionnaires. However, respondents from CIPK indicated some partnership with USAID and Danish Embassy in some other programs but not peacebuilding. Most humanitarian programs in the developing world highly depends on funding from developed countries. With diminishing funding, activities such as peacebuilding by Islam NGOs becomes less vibrant and effective.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The paper mainly identified and evaluated the challenges facing Islam in national cohesion and integration efforts in Kenya. The information used was largely the qualitative data gathered using questionnaires, interview guides and focus group discussions. The major challenges identified were outlined and discussed in depth. The challenges include political interference, illiteracy among Muslim populations, negative stereotypes against Islam and Muslims, scarcity of monetary and human resources and internal divisions in Islam. Other challenges which were widely stated by the respondents are poor leadership, rise of Islamic extremism and radicalization. The different understanding of the term jihad and its application in Islam religion was noted to be a special problem. This is more so in the times of increased terror activities and the consequent war against the vice by the state.

In conclusion, Islam religion is faced by myriad of challenges while working for a peaceful, cohesive and integrative nation. Some challenges are internal while others are external in nature. The major external challenges facing Islam in working for a cohesive and integrated Kenya are stereo-types, negative publicity and the ambiguous high handedness of the state security agencies in the war against terrorism. The name of Islam has really been tarnished and Muslims are viewed as people who do not love peace by majority of non-Muslims in Kenya. A Muslim or Muslim organization therefore starts from a position of self-defense while talking on matters to do with peaceful co-existence. This happens at all levels of the society. In addition to this, the security forces in Kenya have tended to adopt a sweeping strategy in the fight against violent extremism and terrorism. Many innocent Muslim faithful and leaders have become victims of this generalization. As a result, a large section of Muslims is apprehensive towards making sacrifices to promote a harmonious Kenyan society. It would therefore call for efforts, from both internal and external players to tap the resourcefulness if Islam in national cohesion and integration in Kenya. Knowledge dissemination to various stakeholders seems to be one of the things that need to be done to enable Islam to participate effectively in the task.

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