Kenya's Complex and Vibrant Religious Landscape: Features and Prospects

Kenya’s vibrant and diverse religious communities and institutions are omnipresent throughout the country, playing complex roles in daily life. Deep involvement in health, education, and social protection are notable examples. Structured dialogue among religious actors and with other communities about development issues is, however, fragmented. More purposeful engagement, both locally and at a national level, focused on specific topics, could support better harmonized and more effective development programs and help in addressing social and political conflicts. This brief draws on the March 2017 report “Faith and Development in Focus: Kenya” to provide an overview of Kenya’s religious communities, with a focus on their development-related activities.

Religious demography and evolving roles of religious institutions have shaped Kenya’s political and social history and present. Kenya offers inspiring examples of dynamic development and entrepreneurial verve, as a lower-middle income country that is an important hub for the whole Eastern Africa region. Its wide-ranging challenges include human development (notably uneven healthcare and education quality), land tenure tensions, a large youth population facing employment constraints, prominent environment issues, and a host of deep-seated governance problems. Religious institutions are part of Kenya’s successes, but they are also pertinent for each of its significant development challenges. Kenya is a dynamic and changing society; the national population grew from fewer than 9 million in 1963 (at independence) to nearly 49 million in 2016, accentuating wide social and economic changes. Kenya’s location in a region facing substantial violence contributes to tensions and instability; it hosts a substantial refugee population, and significant terrorist incidents have disrupted development. Kenya’s religious landscape has also undergone considerable changes, both in complexity and numbers of institutions, as well as in the social and political roles that religious actors play.

Religious actors are deeply involved in many sectors of Kenyan society, politics, and the economy. Available measures of religiosity underscore religion’s centrality. A 2008 survey among the country’s Muslim and Christian populations found that 95 percent of Muslims and 86 percent of Christians claimed that religion was “very important” in their lives, and 81 percent of those surveyed attended religious services at least once a week. Surveys indicate that religious leaders enjoy relatively high levels of trust, though this feature is less pronounced than in other societies in part because of perceived failures of leadership among religious leaders and the overall national cloud of corruption that religious leaders have not escaped. Religious communities exercise political influence; many provide social services, running many health facilities and playing significant roles in education and social protection—for example, orphan care and support to refugees and internally displaced people. Roles in peacebuilding, including mediation among conflicting communities, promoting tolerance, support for displaced populations, and environmental protection, have growing importance.

**RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY**

Over 80 percent of Kenya’s population is Christian; there is considerable diversity among the Christian population. The 2009 census showed a breakdown of total population as Protestant (48 percent), Catholic (23 percent), and other Christian (11 percent) The Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches are the most established; other influential denominations include the Seventh-day Adventists, African Inland Church, and the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. Data on what Pew Research Center calls “charismatic Christianity” is difficult to come by, but clearly both Pentecostal and evangelical churches in Kenya show continuing and robust growth. A noteworthy phenomenon of church growth in the twentieth century is the emergence of African Independent (or Instituted) Churches, Kenyan-born churches with indigenous worship, theology, and social organization.

Islam has had an established, strong presence in Kenya since the twelfth century (thus long before Christianity). Muslims comprise about 11 percent of the population, Kenya’s largest minority religious group (precise numbers are contested). Most Kenyan Muslims follow Sunni Islam, with significant populations of Shi’a and Ahmadi adherents. Ismaili Kenyans, descended from or influenced by oceanic traders from the Middle East and India, are especially active in development fields. As in other parts of Eastern Africa, there are important divides among Muslim communities, notably between Arab Muslims and African ethnic groups that follow Islam.
Other religious communities include Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Bahá’ís, Jews, and Brahma Kumaris. Numbers of professed atheists are limited. About 10 percent of Kenyans are thought to adhere to traditional or indigenous beliefs, though the 2009 census showed that less than 2 percent of Kenyans self-identify as primarily adhering to traditional religions. Traditional or indigenous beliefs often color how Kenyans understand their relation to the environment and to other people, and they are often blended with mainstream Christianity or Islam. Few formal institutions in Kenya represent indigenous religious traditions.

Kenya's complex religious landscape is one facet of the national diversity that is a notable characteristic of its contemporary society and economy; there are over 70 distinct ethnic groups and 30 language and dialect clusters (see Figure 1). Two features have particular significance. Religious adherence often, but not always, follows ethnic identities, and thus religious identities are often linked to ethnicity. This matters because of the key role of ethnicity in politics and persistent ethnic tensions. Second, colonial, and especially missionary, history has long and deep roots, notably because of how it shaped the growth of Christian denominations (for example, geographic and ethnic overlays) and relationships with Muslim communities, but also in reactions against the colonial legacy. The history of independence movements, the Mau Mau rebellion, and post-independence politics have involved religious leaders and institutions in ways that often reflect the overhang of the colonial heritage.

Table 1. Kenyan Population by Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>9,010,684</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>18,307,466</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>4,559,584</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>4,304,798</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>53,393</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionalist</td>
<td>635,352</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religion</td>
<td>557,450</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion</td>
<td>922,128</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>61,233</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>38,412,088</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


RELIGION, STATE, AND POLITICS

Kenya's 2010 constitution reflects and supports Kenya's broad history of religious tolerance. It stipulates that there is no state religion; it prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of religion and belief individually or in community, including the freedom to practice any religion through worship, practice, teaching, or observance. Individuals cannot be compelled to act or engage in any act contrary to their belief or religion.

The state exercises some, albeit fairly limited, regulatory oversight over religious institutions. New churches, other places of worship, and faith-inspired non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are required to register with the Registrar of Societies (though with limited enforcement capacity, this is not always applied). The oversight aims in part to assure proper financial management (there are many scandals involving religious institutions in Kenya). Government action to deregister a large group of institutions has generated some controversy, as have government efforts to tighten requirements that churches and mosques register. Efforts to address issues of extremism are also involved in government oversight mechanisms.

Family law has raised issues in relation to Kenya's secular character and relationships to specific religious communities. The Kadhi Courts Act allows for these courts to adjudicate certain personal and family law civil cases in which “all the parties profess the Muslim religion.” The secular High Court has jurisdiction over civil or criminal proceedings, including those in the Kadhi courts, and accepts appeals of any Kadhi decision.

The ongoing devolution of state authority in Kenya to county governments is likely to have a significant impact on relationships with religious bodies, but specifically how is not yet clear—for example, how local political leaders in their new governance roles will engage with religious institutions.

Religious institutions and religious leaders have played many and complex roles in Kenya's political history and continue to do so today. No specific restrictions apply to religious leader engagement in politics. However, in Kenya's often fractious politics, there is a wide expectation (not always met) that religious leaders will “speak truth to power” with a clear moral voice, notably on the hot issue of corruption, thus bringing positive core values into national debates, including for development issues.
Religious roles have a complex history. Various churches actively supported the independence movement, and others were associated with colonial rule. Churches were part of the struggle for democracy, but also the long period of authoritarian rule. An especially significant period was a common effort by many religious leaders in events preceding the legalization of multi-party politics in December 1991.

The roles that religious leaders can and should play in national politics are prominent topics in debates about contemporary political challenges. Religious bodies were faulted for their weak response to the post-election violence in 2007 and 2008. In the subsequent national debates and referenda on constitutional reforms, religious groups and secular entities took opposing positions on sensitive issues, including family law and abortion. On issues surrounding refugee and displaced populations, land issues, and action on corruption, religious communities rarely speak with a common voice. Nonetheless, important peacebuilding initiatives, often spearheaded by interreligious and ecumenical bodies, aim to address ethnic and partisan divides at national and local levels, and some show significant positive results.

**RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONS: HIGHLIGHTS**

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest single denomination in Kenya (some 23 percent of the population). Membership has grown rapidly and a prominent scholar describes the Church as “probably the most significant institution of Kenya today.” The Church’s various institutions are especially prominent in health and education, for example, with an estimated 7,740 schools. Catholic sisters, little heralded but active across many social issues, represent some 150 orders. The Church works closely with Caritas Internationalis and its members, including Catholic Relief Services (CRS). The Kenyan Catholic Church is perceived as relatively conservative, especially in its cautious approach to social issues such as HIV/AIDS.

The Anglican Church has about 4.5 million members (10 percent of Kenya’s population). This church was a leading institution during the colonial era, and many among Kenya’s contemporary elite are Anglicans. Other large Protestant communities include the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, the Methodist Church of Kenya, the African Inland Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Quakers (Kenyan Quakers make up about half of the world’s Quakers). African Instituted Churches, which grew often in reaction to missionary churches, represent about 700 separate church groups in Kenya, or 25 percent of Christians. They are particularly present in poorer areas. The most dynamic and fastest-growing churches in Kenya fall under a broad heading of evangelical and Pentecostal; an estimated 38,000 churches fall in this somewhat rough category. Many among them promote a prosperity gospel, and there are important ties to individual churches elsewhere, notably in Nigeria and the United States. These churches tend to be decentralized and vary quite widely in organization and practice.

Kenyan Muslim communities overall tend to have a decentralized organization; the Ismaili community is a notable exception, with well-elaborated institutions that include a leading national hospital and university. Activities of the extremist group Al-Shabaab and terrorist incidents in Kenya and the region have heightened attention to the roles of Kenyan Muslims and accentuated tensions between Christians and Muslims.

Religious media are active in Kenya, and religious topics are regularly reported in mainstream media. Pentecostal churches are most closely linked to the media and to the revolution it is undergoing. Kenya has many religious radio stations and a Christian television station. Some programs are broadcast from the United States.

**Figure 1. Kenya’s Ethnic Map**

Source: Kenyan embassy to the UN, Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
Kenya has a robust set of interreligious and intrareligious umbrella organizations, some with long histories. Kenyan religious leaders are prominent in a number of global inter- and intra-faith organizations. Intrafaith organizations include the National Council of Churches of Kenya, which traces its origins to 1913, the Muslims, and the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya. These organizations vary in strength and functions. A noteworthy organization is the African Council for Accreditation and Accountability, which aims to support primarily evangelical churches in raising standards of financial management. The Interreligious Council of Kenya is the leading interreligious organization in Kenya. It includes representation of all of Kenya’s major religious institutions and is linked to the African Council of Religious Leaders and Religions for Peace. Many of these organizations are involved in efforts to address the issue of rising extremism and violence linked to it. A wide range of programs focuses especially on youth engagement, including prevention and deradicalization.

**RELIGIOUSLY-INSPIRED DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTIONS**

Kenya’s large and wide-ranging civil society includes an estimated 30,000 faith-inspired organizations (FIOs). They range from large and highly regarded international organizations (like World Vision, World Relief, Compassion International, Catholic Relief Services, and Islamic Relief) to very small, grassroots groups. These organizations often (but not always) work closely with government and international development partners. FIOs are active in every region of Kenya and they have significant roles and impact. Throughout Kenya, signs along roads point to religiously named hospitals and schools. Many Kenyans, at some point in their lives, have been directly involved in FIO activities, whether through schools, scholarships, food distribution, maternal or child healthcare, skills training, micro-loan programs, or peacebuilding campaigns. Local Kenyan FIOs engage in development and capacity building within their own communities, as well as on interfaith peace and dialogue efforts. Religious actors play especially significant roles in several sectors, most prominently education and health. They also aspire to exercise their considerable moral authority in Kenyan society in wide-ranging areas, for example, promoting good governance (including fighting corruption) and addressing inequality.

With so many widely diverse FIOs operating in Kenya, a single narrative about faith-inspired efforts is not easily crafted nor would one be particularly useful. Roles and

**RELIGION AND DISPLACED POPULATIONS**

Kenya faces one of the world’s largest and longest refugee situations, with over 600,000 asylum seekers, refugees, and stateless persons living within its borders. A third generation of refugees is growing up in Kenya’s refugee camps, with uncertain prospects for a return to their home countries (the largest numbers of refugees come from Somalia and South Sudan). The burden on Kenya is large, and there are significant tensions. Large refugee camps are located in some of Kenya’s most challenging regions, where resources and services are limited and difficult to provide, and where erratic weather patterns exacerbate food and water insecurity. Perceptions and realities of recruitment by Somali-based Al-Shabaab in camps and among Somalis and Somali ethnic communities are the source of special concern and account for deterioration in Christian-Muslim relations. Al-Shabaab’s involvement in terrorist attacks in Kenya (600 fatalities caused by over 90 attacks in 2014 alone) colors government and community response to Muslim communities overall.

Religious faith and institutions are a source of strength and solidarity for many refugees (both in and outside camps) and other displaced people. FIOs directly support Kenya’s refugee camps and work with vulnerable populations elsewhere in Kenya. They provide a wide range of services and serve advocacy roles, nationally and internationally, in efforts to navigate the many complexities of the humanitarian crises facing Kenya. Kenya’s Christian FIOs dominate the FIO landscape, though Muslim FIOs, such as Islamic Relief Worldwide, are increasingly active in refugee relief. FIO programs include orphan sponsorship, education, microcredit, emergency relief, medical service programs, counseling, mental healthcare, child protection, and building technical expertise and livelihood-generating skills. There are important cases where religious organizations provide leadership both as actors and advocates for programs to support children and women who have been subjected to violence.
specific activities vary widely, by place, sector, and institution. The “faith dimension” or “religious character” of activities is often not front and center, with much FIO work shaped above all by pragmatic, operational demands. Financing and scale likewise vary significantly. It is useful to focus on how religious institutions approach their work in specific sectors (for example, health, education, vulnerable children, water and sanitation, agriculture). However, a feature of many religious narratives about development work is their insistence on the sustainable and holistic character of their approach. Some religious institutions, including FIOs, do nonetheless focus sharply (through action or advocacy) on specific issues, for example, street children or female genital cutting (FGC).

Government efforts to engage religious actors on development have been particularly significant in the health sector. The National AIDS Control Council is an example. At least three of its 17 members must be from a faith institution. A Memorandum of Understanding governs closely intertwined relationships among the Christian Health Association of Kenya (CHAK), the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB), and the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims.

ISSUES OF DISCUSSION
Four cross-cutting issues facing Kenyan religious and policy leaders illustrate specific ways in which religious factors are prominent in development debates:

Interreligious Tensions and Peacebuilding
Kenya’s well-known ethnic divides (more than religious tensions per se) have dominated social tensions and conflicts in the past. This means that religious leaders have been cast more often as peacemakers than inciters of conflict. However, the overlay of ethnic and religious identities has quite often stymied their peacebuilding work. Tensions between Christians and Muslims have increased in recent years, primarily because of terrorist events and fears of violent extremism, though Christian-Muslim tensions do have quite long historical roots; colonial preferences for Christian missions and relative neglect of Muslim-majority areas on the coast and in the northeast carried over after independence. Political leaders often highlight their Christian identity, accentuating the perception that political power supports Christian interests. Muslims face closer scrutiny in public places and in the media, as well as discrimination when applying for government posts, secondary school, identification cards, and passports. After the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in 1998, the government shut down five Muslim NGOs for suspected links with terrorist networks, and similar efforts followed the 2014 attacks on Garissa University. An overall result is that suspicion and distrust affect how many Christians, as the majority, view Muslims as Kenyan citizens. The fact that most Somali refugees share Al-Shabaab’s nationality and religion tends to inflame fears and tension between Christians and Muslims. There are significant divides among Christian communities in how to approach the tensions and how national strategies to address various radical and extremist groups should be focused. Intra-Christian, intra-Muslim, and Christian-Muslim tensions are part of Kenya’s complex sociopolitical divides and tensions. They are thus a prominent focus of attention and action by religious, as well as political, authorities.

Proselytism
This can be a source of division among religious traditions and applies both to Christian missionary activity and to Islamic institutions and communities. Some concerns center on funding of such activities, which, for both Christian and Muslim groups, is murky (sources and destinations are not well known). Christian evangelizing approaches vary widely and have changed over time, but can have a significant impact on the role of churches as development and human rights players, both in how they approach their work and how they are perceived. Groups such as the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Church of Scientology evangelize actively in Kenya, generally quite freely. Tensions center on Christian groups that evangelize directly in Muslim communities. Concerns about financial and political support for extremist groups focus on Muslim communities.

Gender Issues
In Kenya’s relatively patriarchal society, religious institutions, with notable exceptions, tend to be relatively passive on gender

BRAVE (BUILDING RESILIENCE AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM)
This Muslim-led intrafaith movement is a practical, courageous, and broad-based youth-focused approach to addressing interreligious tensions. Initially formed as a local Kenyan institution, the group has developed special insights into effective ways to counter the temptations that recruiters to extremist groups offer. Formed in 2015, it focuses on pull factors of extremism: ideology, narratives, and counter-narratives. BRAVE programs include community-based programs that work with young people in vulnerable communities, as well as a variety of media programs that include both social media and more traditional media sources.
discrimination and issues such as gender-based violence. The exceptions include bold women religious leaders and some notable denominations, including among African Instituted Churches. Deliberate attention to the issues is warranted.

**Fighting Corruption**

This is widely understood as a “make or break” issue for Kenya's future, and religious leaders and communities should be strong natural allies. Identifying more clearly the patterns of corruption, contributing to values formation starting at elementary school levels, and daring to speak truth to power offer promise. Building on efforts to assure transparency within religious organizations themselves is a necessary prerequisite.

**LOOKING AHEAD: PRIORITY AREAS FOR FAITH-DEVELOPMENT ENGAGEMENT**

With faith institutions (particularly Christian ones) deeply engaged in providing health services, building on experience and working toward more purposeful collaboration (for example, in reducing maternal mortality and on vaccination campaigns) offer promise. Addressing HIV/AIDS has helped to give prominence to faith roles, both in delivering services and in behavior change. Relationships between CHAK and KCCB and the government are well established, but with devolution to counties, they need review. Engaging religious leaders on issues around family health and family planning, while sensitive, offers important promise.

**Interfaith initiatives**, ranging from local to international, are especially prominent in Kenya, to the point that there are reports of some fatigue and cynicism. However, with rising intra-Christian and Christian–Muslim tensions, interfaith platforms are needed. They offer an important way to address deep-seated and sensitive conflicts, including some, for example, around land. Because ethnic and religious identities are often intertwined, interfaith approaches can help overcome divides and open up ways to bring in new approaches and ideas. Kenya's rich history of inter- and intrafaith work, well-respected leaders, and fragile intercommunal relations suggest that further action deserves a high priority.

With Kenya's large youth population, the effectiveness of faith youth programs deserves a sharp focus. This can build on a common faith community concern with outreach to youth. This means both building on the many youth programs that are run by churches and mosques and including religious voices in national efforts to address youth issues.

**Vulnerable children** are historically and currently an important focus of many religious communities and FIOs, but programs are often poorly integrated with overall government programs and policy approaches. Policies toward orphanages and care of vulnerable children are an example.

**Education** is a top priority for the Kenyan government and its development partners, with particular concerns about quality of education and the dimension of public education that address the shaping of values in explicit ways. Religious institutions are deeply engaged on education, with a long history (most schools were established by religious institutions, though most are now government run) and sharp current focus. Kenya has made significant strides toward achieving universal primary education, notably through the Free Primary Education program. Remaining challenges include acting on the consensus that secondary and tertiary schooling does not provide students with the necessary skills they need for the workforce. Current religious roles are quite complex, with varying forms of religious sponsorship of schools. Currently, 65 percent of school sponsors are religious organizations. Churches can often influence the appointment of members of school committees and ensure that school infrastructure and equipment are maintained; they also provide chaplains to schools, but sponsorship arrangements are often ambiguous. The Catholic Church operates approximately 30 percent of all of Kenya's educational facilities and is thus a vital actor in the sector.

Muslim education presents distinct issues. Historically, Muslims communities were marginalized as Christian missionary approaches to education came to dominate the colonial era. Issues include limited curriculum and weaknesses in teacher training in the Islamic schools. It is difficult for Muslims educated in madrasas to move into the mainstream secular system. Muslim parents can hesitate to send children to schools they perceive as secular or Christian. This further exacerbates the gaps and discrepancies between Christians and Muslims.

There is growing interest in preventing violence and peacebuilding because of insecurity (terrorist threats,
ethnic tensions, and crime) and specific concerns centered on youth. Numerous and often innovative religious initiatives offer both experience and potential for expansion and development. Some seek to address specific religiously-linked tensions, notably those that involve Christians and Muslims. These tend to focus on the spillover violent extremism from neighboring Somalia and to trans-regional trafficking of illegal drugs through Kenya, but terrorist incidents and long-standing, if masked, resentments also contribute. The large and growing youth population, coupled with high unemployment, poses significant challenges. Religious groups, including those that offer the legitimacy of an overarching interreligious mandate, can play healing roles, both in direct mediation at the community level and in efforts to understand and act on broad drivers of conflict and underlying grievances.

ENDNOTES