

A Kenyan lesson in faith, politics, and the Christian future

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 30, 2010 All Things Catholic

Next Wednesday, Kenyans head to the polls to vote on a new national constitution. It's intended to ease the political and tribal tensions which erupted in violence in early 2008, leaving more than 1,000 Kenyans dead and some 300,000 displaced. The referendum is being closely followed all across Africa, since Kenya has long been a beacon of hope -- an African society that's well-educated, economically advanced, and, until recently, stable.

Seen through a religious lens, the interesting point about Wednesday's vote is that the Constitution appears set to pass despite overwhelming opposition from Kenya's Christian leaders. There may be an important lesson to be culled from that about the Christian future, especially the intersection of faith and politics.

From the outside, what most Westerners know about religion in Africa is simply that it's booming. That's certainly true in Kenya, where the population is one-quarter Catholic and almost 80 percent Christian. Mass attendance rates among the nine million Catholics are astronomic by Western standards, and Kenya is a net exporter of priests. In 2005, I asked then-Archbishop Ndingi Mwana a Nzeki of Nairobi to describe his most urgent challenges, and he began with a problem that would be the wildest dream of many a Western bishop: "We have so many vocations!"

Faced with such vibrant religiosity, it's tempting to conclude that Africa today is what the West once was, before the rise of the various "isms" of modernity: secularism, relativism, positivism, etc. Yet you can't step into the same river twice, and Africa in 2010 is not Europe in 1010. In particular, the deep religiosity of Africa doesn't mean the continent is a theocracy, where Christian potentates can snap their fingers and produce political results -- a point which the constitutional referendum in Kenya may well illustrate.

Kenya's pan-Christian coalition in favor of a "No!" vote includes Catholic and Anglican bishops, as well as pastors and preachers from a staggering variety of Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. Today, as this column is posted, the Catholic Basilica of the Holy Family in Nairobi is hosting an ecumenical prayer service -- praying, that is, for the referendum to fail.

While Christian leaders have a laundry list of objections, they boil down to two points:

- **Abortion:** The draft constitution would permit abortion if, in the judgment of a medical professional, "the life or health of the mother" is at risk. Christian leaders complain that language could open the door to Western-style abortion on demand, funded by the national government.
- **Islamic Courts:** Muslims are about 10 percent of the Kenyan population, concentrated in the southern Coast province. Islamic tribunals, known as "Khadi Courts," have been in existence since independence, enjoying power over matters such as marriage and inheritance, but the courts were recently declared unconstitutional in a case brought by Christian churches. The new constitution retains the courts and exempts Muslims from a wide range of personal and property rights, as well as laws on marriage and divorce. The bishops assert that these provisions "elevate one religion over another."

Whatever the merits of those arguments, they apparently haven't persuaded many Kenyans who, while certainly not pro-abortion or eager for an Islamic take-over, also seem broadly approving of provisions in the draft for land reform, greater checks and balances for the presidency, and a stronger role for local governments. A mid-July poll from the market research company Synovate found that almost 60 percent of voters support the new constitution, a level essentially unchanged from two months ago.

Hence the apparent paradox, at least for those who presume that deeply religious cultures are obliged to follow pre-modern European patterns: While three-quarters of Kenyans are Christian (the vast majority active, practicing Christians), two-thirds appear poised to vote against the advice of their clergy. African observers say the explanation is actually fairly simple. The millennium-long European tradition of churches dictating the political allegiances of their members is basically extraneous to Africa, where people are more accustomed to taking their political cues from their tribal leaders, not their pastors.

Now for the truly intriguing question: Is this something for Christians to rue, or to embrace?

On the one hand, if Christian leaders in Kenya are unable to mobilize public opinion -- especially in defense of core values such as the sanctity of human life and religious equality -- that failure could be interpreted to suggest undeveloped social capital in African Christianity, meaning an inability to evangelize culture, which is supposed to be part of the missionary dimension of the church. In theory, a relatively weak political role for Christian churches could leave African societies more exposed to secularizing pressures from Western governments and NGOs, as well as their own cultural elites. It also means, of course, that Christian leaders are unable simply to impose desirable social outcomes to which they are ostensibly committed, such as ending war or curbing corruption.

There is, however, a more positive way of looking at things.

Even the most pious Christian historians in Europe today would concede that the legacy of theocracy is a strong ingredient in popular anti-clericalism, which breeds a kind of 'payback' mentality in many secular circles. (Ask church officials in Belgium or Ireland, for example, what it's like to be on the receiving end of centuries of accumulated resentments.) One could argue that some anti-Christian blowback in Europe today is a Newtonian, equal-and-opposite reaction to centuries of exaggerated power and privilege. If African Christianity is able to develop free of this historical baggage, any eventual process of secularization may not carry the same anti-clerical edge.

In other words, a certain political impotence may be no bad thing.

Of course, that doesn't mean Kenya's Christian bishops, pastors and preachers are wrong in their substantive objections to the new constitution. If they do indeed lose, however, it could at least offer some consolation, and maybe some food for thought.

Editor's Note: Another *NCR* columnist wrote about Africa and Christianity this week. Read Bill Tammeus' column [Reaping what we sow: evangelizing Africa](#) [1].

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