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# The Pastors, Politics and People of Kenya

by Joseph B. O. Okello

Anyone interested in Kenya's recent politics will notice the unprecedented influx of a significant number of clergypersons into the political arena. Whereas some pastors, in 2007, chose to abandon the ministry altogether and run for political office, a select group ran, quite successfully, for political office while remaining in ministry. Needless to say, this sudden interest in politics on the part of the clergy continues to raise relevant questions, both biblical and ethical, among members of their congregations. Even more important is the fact that the boundary between politics and the prophetic voice gets significantly blurred, at least for the masses depending on their pastors for spiritual leadership. The confused member of the congregation fails to know whether the pastor-turned-politician speaks as a politician in his or her sermons, or as a pastor in his or her political rallies. As I will suggest later in this paper, this ambiguity seems to have at least one hidden and indirect danger that Kenya witnessed in its 2007 and 2008 presidential elections. Let me outline this notion below.

Failure to draw distinctions between the preacher's pulpit and the politician's platform cost Kenya's Evangelical Christianity its prophetic voice - a voice it has, hitherto, not recovered fully. Sections of the disgruntled electorate continue to interpret this loss not only as a compromised and diluted core of the Gospel message, but also as an unfortunate admixture, by the evangelical prelates, of the sacred with the secular. These practices, previously considered anathema by the evangelical church leaders, continuously find their way into various houses of worship. I propose this aforementioned thesis as one of the reasons arsonists demonstrated little respect for some Kenyan churches in 2007, setting them ablaze without restraint and consequently burning beyond recognition individuals who sought refuge in them while fleeing ethnic animosity stemming from the disputed results of the electoral process.

I do not argue, however, that we find a direct link between political violence overall and the admixture of church and politics. Indeed, Kenya's political violence seems to find its roots in a deeper spiritual problem, which, following anthropologists, we might call ethno-centrism, a form of egocentrism. Neither am I contending that devout Christians should not participate in Kenya's political process. I think they should do so for the sake of restoring political sanity in Kenya. My contention has a narrower focus: the potential danger we find in the amalgamation of the evangelical preacher's prophetic role with political ambitions. This amalgamation seems to obscure the purpose of the church as a moral and spiritual guide of the society it tries to oversee. In other words, given the rot in Kenya's political process, a pastor claiming to have a divine call from God to that very office of a pastor should stick within

the boundaries of that call, resisting all temptations to step outside those boundaries.

By Kenyan Evangelical Christianity, I refer to the sort of Christianity in Kenya committed to the authority of Scripture, or for that matter, the Judeo-Christian Bible, as overseeing, instructing and directing all matters of faith and conduct for the Christian believer. The prophetic voice, which I will use interchangeably with the prophetic role, refers to the sort of voice relied upon by the electorate to give spiritual guidance in matters of faith and conduct. I note, also, that Scripture seems to distinguish between two kinds of prophecy: foretelling and forth-telling. Roughly speaking, foretelling suggests a predictive element in which the prophet is understood as making utterances descriptive of events God intends to bring about in the future. Forth-telling suggests a prescriptive element in which the prophet, under God's direction, makes utterances intended for the spiritual and moral direction of the community in their immediate context. Proclaiming the Gospel provides a good example of forth-telling.

From a Christian perspective, the prophetic voice, whether foretelling or forth-telling, is needed in any society, and the loss of that voice could have significant implications for the moral direction of a given society. Seemingly, Rev. David Cho assumes this role for the South Korean Church. The South Africans seem to have Bishop Desmond Tutu as their prophetic voice. The United States has relied for decades on Billy Graham as the national pastor of that country.

However, for the Kenyan scene, no prophetic voice seems available. Potential candidates have died, or become irrelevant in some way either through retirement or compromise. Death, of course, is unavoidable. Irrelevance through retirement from active prophetic ministry is, perhaps, unjustifiable without passing on the mantle to an effective protégé in the Mosaic/Joshua model of the Old Testament, or the Paul/Timothy model in the New Testament. Irrelevance through compromise is neither justifiable nor acceptable. The consequence of this sort of irrelevance is what I wish to address throughout this work.

Let me restate the thesis I intend to defend more fully as follows: the failure of Kenya's Evangelical Christianity to draw demarcations between the sacred and the secular reflects a move on the part of the church to open the door for the secularization of the church. How did Kenya's Evangelical community make this move, and how does this secularization play itself out in the life of the Christian community?

### **The Pastor, The Pulpit and The People**

The process began when several members of the clergy decided to run for political office in Kenya's 2007 general elections. Some candidates got lucky enough to win parliamentary seats. Others were not so lucky. Of course,

running for political office on the part of the Christian minister, in and of itself, is not an unbiblical move, and no Kenyan citizen, including the Christian minister, is barred from running for political positions provided the aspirant follows both legal and moral channels. Humanly speaking any member of the clergy could run for just this kind of office without breaking any legal rules.

However, by making the decision to pursue the occupation of a given parliamentary seat, the aspiring member of the clergy profoundly confuses significant sections of the electorate who strongly feel that the pulpit is sacred ground and must, of necessity, be distinguished from the political podium which, by any Kenyan standards, strikes that very section of the electorate as corrupt. In other words, even if the clergy-turned-politician might not be flouting any Biblical rules by running for political office, that very decision becomes a stumbling block to the believer who wishes to see those two roles separated from each other.

Moreover, this confusion afflicts the secular masses perhaps just as profoundly. Even before the arrival of Christianity in pre-independent Kenya, society demonstrated significant respect for any form of spirituality. For example, the society showed deep reverence, possibly fear for sacred sites, whether those sites were shrines or temples, for those sites marked, in the opinion of the society, specific locations where the spiritual world and the physical world coalesced. Those sites were considered holy and ceremonially clean, and adherents of traditional religion were cautioned against desecrating them. The religious leaders, whether chiefs, *laibons* [a ritual leader or diviner in East Africa], or local medicine-folks, took the lead in exercising this caution.

The arrival of Christianity seemed, by default, to contextualize this very sentiment by regarding the pulpit as sacred. This deep reverence for sacred sites remained undiluted, for the most part, throughout postcolonial Kenya, until 2007, when Kenya found itself imploding with ethnic strife, with the result that some Christian churches were set alight by disgruntled arsonists.

Of course we find ourselves wondering why such lack of respect for holy places and, presumably, holy people, violently expressed itself. This lack of respect seems to come from the masses who are confused by the actions of the leaders of those sacred places - that is, the clergy. How did this confusion arise? Seemingly, the clergy used the holy sites as political platforms. If the masses were led to believe that the worship site was holy or *sacred* and was to be kept separate from *the secular*, the people saw that their religious leaders ignored this. This quite likely suggested to the masses that their religious leaders thought that the ground they proclaimed as sacred either lost its sanctity or had never had it in the first place. Consequently, the sanctuaries lost their privileged position as sanctified grounds, and the leaders lost their moral authority as spiritual guides. Any secular activity could quite easily find a home within the walls of the sanctuaries, including burning alive people seeking refuge from their violent assailants.

### **The Pastor, Political Power and Materialism**

I noted earlier that a majority of Kenya's politicians no longer enjoy a respectable reputation as the custodians of the country's policies. Much to the chagrin of the Kenyan citizen, Kenya's members of parliament have, with unfortunate success, awarded themselves exorbitant sums of money as remunerations for their political duties. Since no one, except the lawmakers themselves, decides the level of the politician's earnings, their salaries are extremely high compared not only to the electorate, but also to their counterparts in other regions of the world. Moreover, the lawmakers keep reviewing their salaries several times, basing their actions on what they contend amounts to the insufficiencies of their previous perks. These revisions immediately follow their hesitance to pay their fair share of income taxes expected of them by the government.

Within this context, if any member of the clergy decides to enter the political scene, the electorate will not be blamed for seeing this move as driven by some form of greed for power and materialism. Unless a clergyperson is a leader of some famous mega-church, thereby earning more than the average Kenyan, not many clergypersons get well paid for their ministries. Until the last decade of the 1900s and the first decade of this century, members of the clergy did not have the reputation of earning the sort of solid income one would find in other fields. The arrival of Kenya's televangelists seems to have changed that notion quite remarkably, considering that some of them proclaim what evangelicals call "The Prosperity Gospel."

However, whether one commands a large income or not, members of the clergy running for political office seem unintentionally to give the suspicious masses an impression similar to the one presented by the rest of Kenya's political population, an insatiable desire for power and materialistic gain, with little attention paid to the plight of the impoverished Kenyan. Political power often comes with a sense of egocentrism characteristic of a superhero. Clergy people running for political office must, for these reasons, wrestle constantly with the double temptation to manipulate the masses to do their bidding on the one hand, and on the other, to appear immune to the materialistic tendencies of the political image. This temptation defines a major issue that a person committed to the Biblical call toward humility and simplicity must overcome.

To be sure, the politically ambitious member of the clergy may be able to remain quite unadulterated by the super-heroic pride and materialism bedeviling Kenya's political scene. In addition, running for office in Kenya inevitably requires raising money to pay for the political campaign, even for candidates who are clergypersons. We see this scenario played out quite often in the American political scene, though some aspects of the United States' political climate have their fair share of questionable maneuvers. Candidates for political office in the US, some of them devout Evangelical Christians, raise millions of dollars to fund their political campaigns, while also

living through the political process without intentionally flouting fundamental Biblical principles.

Such a state of affairs, I admit, seems *possible* in the Kenyan scene. I doubt, however, that the state of affairs is *likely*, for a variety of reasons. First, the use of funds for political campaigns in the American scene appears quite different than the use of funds for political campaigns in the Kenyan scene. In the American scene, for example, candidates use their money to travel from state to state to sell their ideas. They also advertise their political ideas through mass media in an attempt to most effectively reach their audience. The Kenyan scene is quite different. To be sure, some funds are allocated toward political commercials in the media. The majority of funds, however, seem dedicated to vote buying.<sup>1</sup> The candidate's intention by this action is to present himself or herself, in most cases falsely, as a generous financial donor who will sustain that generosity long after gaining electoral victory. The candidate is really bribing the electorate to secure their votes.

The unfortunate reality is that this practice is found throughout Kenya's secular arena. Each politician wishes to outdo his or her opponent. Hence, if politician *A* buys votes from the electorate, politician *B* will try to outmaneuver *A*'s vote-buying practice by giving more money to roughly the same pool of beneficiaries that received money from *A*. The immoral nature of this maneuver seems obvious.

This reality leads me to the second reason that it is unlikely that religious leaders can campaign as Christians do in the US. In the American scene, each political candidate must give a detailed account of how he or she spent the funds received during the campaigning period. In the Kenyan scene, money used for vote buying remains unaccounted for. Hence, the political candidate finds the freedom to use his funds as he wishes. As noted already, the ethical nature of vote-buying and failure to account for campaign expenditures seems highly questionable. Moreover, the fact that very few individuals in Kenya bother to question the ethical nature of such practices, or call politicians to account for the use of their campaign funds, encourages the perpetuation of those very practices.

Notice, however, that given this background, the chances that a member of the clergy can preserve his or her reputation throughout the political process seems greatly diminished. Members of the public will likely assume that members of the clergy have compromised their message of integrity. For one thing, if the clergy-turned-politician aims to win, he or she might have to play, not by the rules of the game (if they exist), but by succumbing to the pressure of the political climate, namely: Candidate *A* gave money to members of

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<sup>1</sup> Of course one could plausibly argue that the practice of vote-buying presents itself just as realistically in the American scene as in the Kenyan, though in a more sophisticated format.

constituency *X* in order to win that parliamentary seat. If you wish to win that seat, you must, of necessity, give more money to members of *X* than the amount contributed by *A*. The contra-positive of that claim follows, namely: If you fail to give more money to members of *X* than the amount contributed by *A*, you will lose the parliamentary seat for constituency *X*. This state of affairs defines at least one ethical conflict that any member of the clergy aspiring to run for political office could very likely face.

Of course, we could logically envision a possible state of affairs in which the clergy-turned-politician wins a parliamentary seat without stooping to the practice of vote buying. To be sure, this vision is not only possible, but also desirable, as successfully demonstrated in the life of William Wilberforce, the abolitionist. Kenya desperately needs the actualization of such a scenario into some form of tangible reality.

Such a scenario, however, seems a very distant and unlikely possibility, given the nature of political campaigns in Kenya. The more-than-likely possibility amounts to vote-buying. Hence, if the aspiring pastor-cum-politician donates the funds demanded by the electorate, the act in question amounts to vote-buying, a form of bribery and one expressly forbidden by Scripture. If he or she fails to buy the votes, members of the constituency in question could quite likely reject the aspiring member of the clergy, and vote for the opposing candidate who likely would have parted with more money. Assume that the aspiring member of the clergy, in fact, loses his or her bid for the seat in question. This loss will signify a rejection of the religious leader by the electorate, and this rejection could haunt the religious leader in the ecclesiastical arena as well.

I personally know a certain clergyman who confessed to a panel interviewing him for reinstatement into ministry that his decision to join politics remains the most regrettable decision he ever made in his life as a minister, owing to the conflict of loyalties such a decision presented to him and to the compromises that followed. Even after confessing his regret, I noticed that some members of the interviewing panel harbored suspicions about this minister's intentions. When the panel finally reinstated him, a considerable section of the congregation vehemently expressed their disapproval, and demonstrated a lack of confidence in the leadership of the church for reinstating him as a religious leader. This disapproval may or may not have been justified, but it was there nevertheless.

### **The Pastor, Multiple Parties and Ethnicity**

A third reason for the defense of my thesis is that Kenya subscribes to a multiparty system of politics and strong ethnic loyalties. Inevitably many congregations in Kenya, especially those in cities, will have members of different parties worshiping under one roof. Kenya's multiparty system of politics seems divided along ethnic and tribal lines, and although each political

party subscribes to a manifesto that shuns tribalism, the members of those parties struggle to transcend ethnic and tribal biases. Suppose the pastor of a given congregation chooses to run for political office. He or she will have to run under the umbrella of some particular party. Upon announcing his or her intentions, members of rival parties who are also members of his congregation will find themselves at political odds with their own pastor. The oddity could easily trickle down to create ethnic animosity and hatred. Needless to say, congregational unity may be deeply compromised, and the question of confusion among the congregants will inevitably arise.

Political rivalries among the electorate run deep in Kenya for one major reason - most political parties find their identities along ethnic lines. Hence, political rivalries run almost as deep as, if not exactly as deep as, ethnic rivalries. Many ordinary Kenyan citizens still struggle to rise above their ethnic biases. Any pastor declaring his or her intention to run for political office will be forced to demonstrate extreme caution in order to avoid appearing to members of his congregation as an ethno-centric individual. This goal, though possible, still remains extremely difficult to attain on a national level. Moreover, the pastor would find it just as difficult to attain unity within the political microcosm of his or her multiethnic congregation, once the decision to run for political office is made. To maintain the unity of the pastor's congregation, a unity quite fundamental for the effectiveness of prayer and worship, reason seems to demand that the pastor be a neutral voice among the rival political views that come to the house of worship for moral and political guidance, of which he or she, as the pastor, is the leader.

### **The Pastor and The Ideal Political Atmosphere**

Quite possibly the best of all ecclesiastical, moral, and political worlds would be that a member of the clergy was able to run for political office without losing his or her prophetic voice as a minister. In such a scenario, the entire electorate (including the parishioners) would demonstrate the sort of spiritual, moral and political maturity that places confidence in the religious leader's ability to lead people with remarkable success. In such a world, the electorate understands that politics need not be conducted in an immoral and illegitimate manner, and that the pastor can still play a political role while retaining his pastoral integrity. In such a world the politicians see themselves as servants of the people in which the needs of the country find themselves selflessly prioritized over the selfish wants of the politician in a manner significantly distanced from all forms of corruption; and the politicians also express their concern for the moral, spiritual and social wellbeing of their constituents in a manner consistent with the pastor's concern. The electorate therefore expresses little to no hesitation in allowing the pastor to be its moral guide, on the one hand, and political servant on the other.

The Biblical example of King David comes to mind, wherein we find some stages of David's life spiritually in tune with God and also in touch with the

needs of his people. At those times, David's people seemed to have little or no qualms about seeing David as their spiritual example as well as their political leader, though the prophetic voice remained confined to the individuals specifically designated for the task. David could just as easily walk to the house of worship and lead the nation of Israel in prayer, as he could sit on his kingly throne and execute his kingly responsibilities. In spite of David's apparent successes, he still failed in certain respects, such as in his adultery with Bathsheba. Just the same, David's leadership came fairly close to the ideal I am trying to adumbrate here.

Unfortunately, the political landscape in Kenya lags far and woefully behind this ideal, assuming the Davidic model is an ideal. I doubt that any country this side of heaven demonstrates the ideal in question. On the contrary, a majority of Kenya's politicians view each other with considerable degrees of suspicion, as evidenced by the many instances of mudslinging, vitriolic language and hate speech coming from their campaigns. Moreover, we find the electorate as guilty as the politicians on this very issue of suspicion. Even more sadly, various sections of Kenya's clergy participated in the ethnic hatred that morphed into ethnic cleansing in that dark period of Kenya's history. This sort of participation invited deadly violence into the church in which, as already noted, certain sections of the electorate were not afraid to burn their political opponents alive inside a house of worship.

### **Conclusion**

The upshot of this discussion is that the pulpit should be kept separate from the political platform. Moreover, in order to avoid confusing members of the congregation about the pastoral call, the pastor does his members a very big favor by refusing to jump onto any political bandwagon, and by staying focused on and remaining committed to the ministerial call God placed upon him. A regular worship service should not be turned into a political meeting, and a pastor would be well advised to abstain from running for political office. Dragging political bias into a worship service shifts the focus from God to human personalities. Running after political office in the Kenyan political environment dilutes the purity of the pastor's prophetic call.

This does not imply that the pastor ought not to applaud wise political moves or criticize immoral political decisions. The pastor seems divinely mandated to execute the responsibilities of his call in this regard. Political leaders that seem bent on bringing down a nation and its people must be boldly confronted and cautioned in love, gentleness, respect and humility. In other words, the pastor should provide constructive criticism of the political process without employing the political gimmicks characteristic of the Kenyan situation. In this way, he or she will not only represent a neutral position as far as the politics of Kenya is concerned, but also a position that rises above the political situation, one that reclaims the lost prophetic voice of the nation.