RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA – CULTURALLY ROOTED

By Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee

Religiously motivated insurgencies in Mali and Nigeria and Islamic terrorist attacks in the Horn of Africa have captured the world's attention. In an era when terrorism and religious extremism seem to dominate international security and geopolitics, much of the reporting on religion in sub-Saharan Africa focuses on radical Islamic groups such as al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram in Nigeria, and al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia. Conflicts in the Central African Republic and Sudan have also been characterized as religious in nature, although a deeper examination suggests these conflicts have roots in ethnicity and competition for natural resources. Significantly less attention is paid to the prevalence of religious tolerance, which is far more common in Africa than religious

Relatives of people killed in the 2002 Joola ferry disaster attend an interfaith prayer ceremony at a Joola cemetery containing 140 unmarked graves, in Mbao, outside Dakar, Senegal. (Source: AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell.)

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Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee is a Research Staff Member in the Africa Program at the Institute for Defense Analyses.

WHEN THE STATE FAILS TO PROVIDE: INNOVATION IN AFRICA

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

Governments are expected to provide their citizenries with basic public goods such as security, infrastructure, and some level of social development assistance. The particular demands of a populace, however, vary based on context and need. In some sub-Saharan African countries, the governments have failed to provide necessary public goods and services. Government failure of this nature is exemplified by the dearth of navigable roads and inadequate electricity provision; the deteriorating security situations in countries such as Nigeria, Central African Republic, and South Sudan; and the abysmal performance of public education even in better governed states

Customers make money transfers at an M-Pesa counter in Nairobi, Kenya, as others wait outside. (Source: AP Photo/Sayyid Abdul Azim.)

such as South Africa. These failures, despite the burdens placed on citizens, have created the opportunity for nongovernmental entities to address governance shortfalls, resulting in some innovative approaches to security and development. *more...*

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IDA's Africa team focuses on issues related to political, economic, and social stability and security on the continent.

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Significantly less attention is paid to the prevalence of religious tolerance, which is far more common in Africa than religious extremism. If the nature of religion in sub-Saharan Africa were understood better by the continent's international partners, they might find ways to employ it as a tool to promote unity and harmony in a region typified by conflict and discord.

Background

Understanding the role of religion in African societies is complicated by the fact that many Africans practice syncretism, or the combination of multiple belief systems. Although studies typically divide African populations into three religious groups—Christian, Muslim, and indigenous beliefs—the reality is that many Africans embrace aspects of two or more religions. Many experts cite this mixing of religions to explain the prevalence of religious tolerance among Africans. They also view the polytheistic nature of most indigenous religions as conducive to an inclusive approach to other faiths. For example, such religious tolerance has come to distinguish Senegal and Sierra Leone from those African countries affected by religious conflict.

Senegal

The West African country of Senegal is not only free of significant religiously motivated conflict, but it is also widely touted as one of the more stable democracies in Africa. What then, sets Senegal apart from other African countries that are beleaguered by religious militancy? As one of the region's predominantly Muslim countries, Senegal is known for Sufism, a form of tolerant Islam. Some experts attribute Senegal's relative political stability and the absence of religious militancy to the positive influence of Sufism in all aspects of religious, economic, and social life. This is in stark contrast to Nigeria, which since 2009 has experienced an upsurge in religious violence at the hands of Boko Haram. Likewise in Northern Mali, the 2012 insurgency, initially begun by Tuareg separatists, ultimately took on a religious flavor once Ansar Dine and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA/MUJAO) became involved. In contrast, religion in Senegal has facilitated a system of social cohesion that transcends ethnic and regional divisions. Sufi institutions have proven to be effective conduits for mediating state-society relations.

Sierra Leone

In Sierra Leone, religion was not a factor in its civil war, which was motivated by corruption and competition for access to the country's alluvial diamonds. In fact, Sierra Leone, where a significant number of citizens identify themselves as "ChrisMus," or practitioners of both Islam and Christianity, is well known for its religious tolerance. Although there are deep divisions in Sierra Leonean society, these are drawn largely along ethnic and regional lines rather than religious ones. That the current president, Ernest Bai Koroma, a Christian, was elected by a population in which Christians comprise only 10 percent is a testament to Sierra Leone's religious tolerance.

Beyond Senegal and Sierra Leone

While Senegal and Sierra Leone stand out as examples of religious tolerance, the pervasiveness of this attitude throughout sub-Saharan Africa is striking. Pew survey data from 2010 show that sub-Saharan Africa is among the most religious regions of the world. In many countries, roughly nine out of 10 people say religion is very important in their lives. Moreover, the data demonstrate that the majority of respondents in over half the countries surveyed trust people with different religious values different from their own. Majorities in all countries in the Pew survey also believe that the freedom to practice one's religion is important. In most countries, majorities say that it would be acceptable for one's political leader to practice a different religion. These data suggest that religious tolerance is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusion

Insurgencies, violence, and human rights violations conducted in the name of religion do not accurately characterize religion in Africa. Even conflicts that have been frequently portrayed as religiously motivated, such as those in Central African Republic and Sudan, have roots in other causes. Large numbers of Africans tolerate, and even embrace, the beliefs and practices of other religions. This feature of African society should be studied further to determine whether, and how, religious tolerance could be leveraged to help address more sensitive cultural issues and divisions.

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Customers make money transfers at an M-Pesa counter in Nairobi, Kenya, as others wait outside. (Source: AP Photo/Sayyid Abdul Azim.)

Security and Information

After the post-election violence in Kenya broke out in late December 2007 and spread across the country, bloggers and technologists came together to create software that would allow individuals throughout the country to report firsthand on instances of violence. These reports were then aggregated onto a physical map. Ushahidi, as the software came to be known, crowdsourced local information collected from cell phones and Internet technology to disseminate information in a timely fashion.

Part of the impetus for the creation of the software was the lack of information being reported by the government and traditional media sources on the nature and extent of the violence. Ushahidi, Swahili for "testimony," created a more comprehensive and more accurate picture of the nature of violence as it was occurring, allowing for a quicker and more targeted response. Use of the platform has spread to other countries and regions. For example, individuals in Haiti were able to use the same technology to provide the location of survivors of the 2010 earthquake to search-and-rescue teams. Countries such as Liberia and Nigeria have also adapted the technology for their own elections, allowing individuals a mechanism for reporting election-related offenses.

In countries such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, local communities have begun to provide for their own security as a response to crime and the perception of partiality by existing security services. These community groups, referred to as self-policing units, self-defense forces, or vigilante groups, are a direct result of government failure to provide the most essential of services: security. In the short term, they may improve security situations, as was the case of the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria. Nevertheless, because they are a reflection of fundamental government failures and generally operate in an environment in which the government is not present, they can end up exacerbating already problematic and tense situations.

Economic Infrastructure

Some African governments also have failed to ensure the provision of infrastructure and institutions that are essential for development. For example, many Kenyans do not have access to formal banks or the necessary minimum capital to open and sustain an account. In response, Safaricom, Kenya's largest telecommunications firm, in 2007 unveiled M-Pesa, a mobile banking service that allows individuals to transfer funds using their cellular phone accounts at authorized retail outlets. M-Pesa fills a gap in infrastructure and essential services by piggybacking on the existing networks of authorized shops for its cell service (approximately 40,000 agents in 2013), providing a viable alternative for those who cannot access banking services. Within the first few months of its launch, M-Pesa had over 1 million registered accounts; by March 2013 Safaricom reported that 17 million Kenyans used its service.

In Ethiopia, local communities frequently come together to form iddirs, or funeral societies in which individuals contribute monthly to a fund that is used to pay for funeral costs to families upon the death of a loved one. Over the past few decades, some iddirs have evolved to take on additional functions such as the provision of loans or funds for health care. These groups did not initially form to provide government services; they were a means for local communities to pool risks. But because the government has been unable to provide basic financial services, these groups have taken advantage of their community networks and emerged as an alternative source of assistance.

Conclusion

When governments are unable or unwilling to provide essential services to their citizens, individuals, local communities, and business may step in to fill the void. In some cases, the solutions formulated by nongovernmental actors are innovative and adaptable. Because these solutions come from local sources to address local problems, they have the additional advantage of being more sensitive to local concerns and needs. Unfortunately, because they also reflect government failure or weakness, they can be subverted by maleficent actors and further contribute to state failure.

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