

RELIGIOUS LEADERS CAN HELP TO UNITE KENYANS

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I listened intently to Bishop Joseph Moffat Kilioba of PEFA as he broached a rather sensitive subject in one of the Nairobi churches. He implored us to rise above ethnic contexts in our lives. He urged congregants to embrace their neighbours and members of other communities unreservedly. And he beseeched politicians to “leave us alone to do so in unity and love for one another as brothers and sisters of one nation”. Politicians mustn’t incite ethnic hatred for political gain. The message was spot on.

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Houses of worship mark our urban and rural landscape. To appreciate their influence, houses of worship in Kenya far outnumber schools. And come worship day, Kenyans submit to their respective spiritual leaders for nourishment. This is done with reverence and the submission that we all accord matters spiritual. On average, most worship houses will hold not fewer than 200 members. Some today hold thousands in a sitting. Taken together, religious leaders therefore impact on millions of Kenyans weekly. They accordingly have a major influence on public opinion and the direction or re-direction of national values and trends.

I sometimes sympathise with this heavy responsibility though. See, a religious leader must minister to all. The poor and the rich; the weak and the strong! They must nourish the politician, the senior civil servant and the jobless without discrimination. Robbers and murderers go to them for “spiritual food” too. And they must be ministered. It could be their moment of repentance. The public usually asks tough questions why religious leaders provide sanctuary and care to even politicians perceived corrupt. But much as teachings are replete with situations where holy men interceded for the poor, this doesn’t in any way stop them from receiving and ministering to those perceived rich, corrupt or sheer social miscreants. Religious leaders must also mind local and national needs and concerns. Can’t be easy.

This responsibility is humbling and must neither be taken for granted nor abused. Religious leaders must individually and collectively reflect upon how they handle matters national. They must self-interrogate their commissions or omissions when Kenya faces momentous decisions. Do places that experience cyclic ethnic clashes in this country during general elections have places of worship? How are the flocks managed during such trying moments? What perspectives do religious leaders in such areas promote? In the 2007/08 post election violence and ethnic hate, how did individuals and groups quit the mantra of “loving their neighbours like themselves” with such casual abandon? What did each religious leader share with their flocks then? What messages came from religious houses and from small prayer groups? These are hard questions, best left to individual consciences.

One feels compelled to confront the irony of a highly religious nation like ours caught in routine electoral violence. Committed and sincere religious leadership should get very concerned and do a lot more to confront and pre-empt such violence. And time to begin doing so is now. As the country goes through chequered moments following the confirmation of hearings for the ICC four, we need objective and patriotic religious leadership to navigate the emerging challenges. I am sure each religious leader knows what is best for national unity in our circumstances.

As the country faces hostilities on account of land inequities at the Kenya Coast, religious leaders have a role to play to ensure peaceful resolution. And shades of these challenges are beginning to rear their head once again....in Northern Kenya and at the border between the Rift Valley and Nyanza. But religious leaders can help a great deal in containing the pertinent issues. County Governments will also soon be. And many inward looking political operatives will begin to speak exclusion. Oh no. County governments shouldn’t imply exclusion but rather provide local platforms for accessible governance and service delivery. The Counties will remain part and parcel of Kenya and there must be proactive efforts to constantly remind everyone so.

Religious leaders must be at the forefront in this regard. They mustn't allow their respective flocks to discriminate or exclude communities outside their Counties. Dominant ethnic groups within Counties must be constantly reminded about the need to accommodate all.....even those from elsewhere living among them. Religious leaders must champion such messages of inclusion and love. Before speaking out, any religious leader talking to a local or regional congregation must pose to seek revelation on what they'd tell a cosmopolitan flock. They must ask themselves what they'd preach if transferred to minister beyond their ethnic groups or regions. The need to therefore remain nationalistic and preach cohesion and unity even where local pressure groups demand otherwise must prevail.

It's time for all religious leaders countrywide to embrace this holistic approach, like Bishop Kilioba implored above. It is something they can do with effort. They must all vow not to allow the political heat of the moment, regional and ethnic biases in their respective areas of ministry compromise the need for peace, national cohesion and unity before, during and after the next general election. Their efforts and ours can collectively help to progressively banish cyclic electoral violence from our nation.

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