

Kenyan Muslims

The Muslim minority in Kenya, one of the key countries in African politics, accounts for 25-30% of the population and has a strong, influential position in the country. Partly due to their high numbers, this situation also has to do with the fact that Muslims generally inhabit economically and strategically important coastal regions. Because the majority of Muslims in Kenya have been living in port cities for centuries where commercial activity is concentrated.

Historically one of the oldest communities in the region, Muslims can be said to have been culturally and socially the most influential community in Kenya prior to the beginning of the colonial era in 1895. After all, for a large part of its history, the administration of the coastal area by the Indian Ocean remained completely in the hands of Muslim states. However, the situation has reversed in the postcolonial era.

Maritime trade relations that existed between the coastal regions of Kenya and Arabia before the emergence of Islam made the early arrival of Islam in the area possible. Introduced to Islam in 685 by Muslims from Oman, the first mosque in the region was built in 830. The interaction that developed along economic and religious lines further developed through marriages and gave birth to the mixed Arabo-African culture and language of *Swahili*.

After the 1200s, thanks to maritime trade, cities such as Mombasa, Kilwa, Lamu and Malindi were established with completely Muslim populations. As the inner regions of the continent are heavily forested, the Muslims did not show much interest in these. But Muslim superiority and dominance in Kenya came to a halt in the 16th century. The wars between Portuguese forces and the local Muslim states, on top of political and economic instability, ushered in Portuguese influence in the region. Despite taking control of the region again in the 18th century, the dominance of the Muslim administration was restricted again by different European colonial powers.

The star of the East African coast up until the beginning of the 16th century, the golden age of Kenya's coastline began to wane from the 1500s onward when the Portuguese navy arrived in the area and burned down all coastal towns; most importantly Mombasa. The Ottoman Empire sent a fleet to Mombasa in 1585 and annexed it in order to put an end to this destruction. However, in 1589, the Portuguese recaptured the city and a large massacre ensued. The remains of the Ottoman fortress in the area have survived to this day.

After the fall of Ottoman power in the region, starting in the 17th century, the coast of Kenya came under the rule of the Sultanate of Zanzibar and was then invaded by the British in the early 20th century. The railway built between Mombasa and Uganda to facilitate travel, not only helped the invaders, but also the Muslims, to establish settlements in the inner regions of the continent.

In accordance with their colonial mindset, the British first made efforts to maintain good relations with the Muslims who had for centuries been the ruling elite in the region and held the economic power. However, the transfer of the colonial administration from Mombasa to Nairobi in 1907, which was further into the country, opened up fertile territory for missionary groups and helped the British infiltrate into inner regions hand in hand with the missionaries. The establishment of a new administrative center in the inner country diminished the influence of coastal towns and of the Muslims inhabiting them.

What had begun in 1895 as partial colonial rule over certain areas turned into a direct occupation in 1920. Along with their political rights, the indigenous people were also stripped of their fertile lands, which were handed over to British farmers. Invasion on the one hand, and missionary activity on the other continued in full force and effect. Kenya gained independence in 1963 following its struggle against colonial rule and large uprisings in the 1950s. However, this new period in the country saw political competition between different ethnic groups and numerous military coups. Tensions between the ethnic groups in power and the competing ones still remain, and at times these political tensions evolve into civil wars which claim the lives of thousands of people.

While the majority of the Muslims in Kenya are indigenous peoples, considerable communities of Arab,

Somali and Indian origin contribute to the diverse Islamic identity of the country. Among these, the Somali population becomes a target and faces serious repercussions every time ethnic tensions rise in the country. Perceiving this minority inhabiting the northern regions near the border with Somalia to be a threat, Kenyan administrations have always been suspicious of these groups. There is, in addition, a very small Shiite population in Kenya.

Numerous higher bodies represent the country's Muslims. Among these, the *National Union of Kenyan Muslims*, founded in 1968, is the oldest. But, rather than being inclusive, it is an organization that is financially dependent on some Arab countries. Founded in 1973, the *Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims* fulfills representative functions in a way that is similar to the office of the mufti. The state recognized this council in 1979 as the only official authority of the Muslim population of Kenya. Additionally, for legal guidance, the Kenyan state appoints a *chief qadi*. The qadi functions as the Kenyan president's counselor and assistant in his/her relations with Muslims. Muslims also have an officially recognized court which has been active since 1963 and deals with cases relating to family and inheritance law. The authority of such courts in cases of marriage, divorce and inheritance is recognized only when both parties are Muslim.

In the country's government and politics, Muslims lack the representation that truly reflects their numbers within the general population. They make up only 12% of MPs. Having been much worse in the past, this ratio has recently improved. Since 2007, there have been 32 seats reserved for Muslims in a parliament of 222 members. This is regarded as a positive development in comparison to the lower numbers of the past. While there are 20 private universities run by the country's churches, Muslims have only one university.

Islam was the dominant faith in coastal cities for centuries. For this reason, many Islamic institutions are located in coastal cities. The majority of the mosques, schools, madrasahs, and healthcare organizations are concentrated in these areas. Therefore, there is a large educational and social gap between the Muslims who live in coastal regions and those who live in the inner regions of the country.

The settlement of thousands of refugees fleeing the Somali Civil War since 1991 has created tensions between the indigenous Somali minority in these northern regions of Kenya, and the government which fears that armed groups will infiltrate the region. The influx of refugees on top of existing tensions over the disputed border has made Somali-Kenyan relations even tenser. Due to the violence al-Shabaab caused in Somalia in the 2000s, hundreds of thousands of civilians sought refuge in Kenya and this situation triggered problems not only for the refugees but for the Muslim minority of Kenya as well. Even though it is known that acts of violence in Kenya are perpetrated by foreigners and that such groups are not popular among Kenyan Muslims, this does not prevent the community from getting the brunt of it all.

The increasingly discriminatory policies are the most significant source of grievance to the Muslims in the country. Such practices caused intense violence for the first time between 1992-94. Many lost their lives in the conflicts between the government and the supporters of a party founded in 1992 under the name the *Islamic Party of Kenya*. There is a strict official ban on the establishment of religious parties in Kenya. The moderate political discourse adopted by the leaders of the party, who were repatriated in 1998 after the dissolution of the party, brought an end to the tensions between the two sides.

Even though discrimination on religious grounds is prohibited by law, as an important ally of the USA in Africa, the 1998 bombing of the US Embassy in Kenya became a turning point in the attitude toward Muslims, despite it being clear that they were not involved in the event. Although the perpetrators were not from Kenya, some Muslim NGOs in the country were shut down and many people were detained. Official and civil initiatives to marginalize Muslims accelerated after the events of 9/11. Armed attacks targeting Israeli positions in Kenya in 2002 revealed the presence of al-Qaeda in the country and this caused an increase in the number of US intelligence operations. Again, despite having nothing to do with these events, many Kenyan Muslims were detained and a large number were abducted and taken to Somalia, Ethiopia or Guantanamo.

The humanitarian problems suffered by the country at large also cause huge difficulties for Muslims in the region. The poverty, unemployment, corruption and ethnic tensions in the country are among the important elements damaging unity within the Muslim community. Especially the ethnic divisions within the Muslim community itself have brought about other divisions at a local level. The stigmatization between different ideological movements in Kenya is another important problematic area.

In addition to the more general problems, the Muslims inhabiting the rural northeastern regions of the

country also face specific difficulties. Number one of these is the Kenyan government's perception of them as "foreign". Following an ethnically motivated policy in the northern regions in 1980, Kenya deported the majority of Muslims of Somali origin in this area.

These regions inhabited by Muslims are 70% worse off than other parts of Kenya in terms of their human development index score. While there is an average of one doctor per 20,000 people in Kenya, in the regions inhabited by Muslims there is one doctor per 120,000 people. Likewise, the northern and inner regions populated by Muslims also experience discrimination in terms of education as a result of the government's policies.