THE AHMADIYYA MUSLIM COMMUNITY AND PEACEBUILDING IN KISUMU DISTRICT, KENYA

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Introduction

Civic and community-based organisations and religious bodies have often been shelters for targeted communities during times of conflict. In many cases they have been active in peacebuilding processes, in healing the trauma of the victims and in rebuilding communities emerging from the effects of wars. Where the violence has resulted from political conflict, governments often take too long to respond to the effects.

The tensions are often protracted where violent conflict has to be settled through power sharing, as in Kenya, where vote rigging was blamed for the violence that followed the re-election of President Mwai Kibaki in December 2007. In this case a power-sharing agreement had to be brokered by the former United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Anan. In such agreements the parties commonly become more focused on what shares go to either side (Yakinthou 2009; Noel 2009; Bercovitch & Kadayifi 2009; Wolpe & McDonald 2008) than on the peacebuilding processes required to enhance healing within the affected communities (Abdalla 2001: 159-160). The role of community institutions such as religious groups in such cases becomes relevant.

Christian and Islamic groups have in the past played key roles in peacebuilding in different regions (Haynes 2009; Curaming 2002; Kresse 2009; Illman 2007). Abu-Nimer observes that many studies focus on the destructive role of religion, but he points out that in recent years there has been a rising interest in how religion can be used in conflict resolution and the peacebuilding process (2001).

Islamic religion and tradition have a multitude of resources with which certain conflicts can be resolved peacefully. Islamic scripture and religious teachings are rich sources of values, beliefs and strategies that promote the non-violent resolution of conflicts (Abu-Nimer 2000-2001: 219). In addition shariah, the body of doctrines that regulate the lives of believers, covers the political, social, economic, moral and ethical spheres and principles in addition to matters of doctrinal and ritual practices (Na‘im 2006). The word ‘Islam’ means peace with humanity and complete submission to Allah, and almost all the basic virtues revealed in the Qur’an – patience, kindness, forgiveness, truth, generosity and respect for human life and dignity – are guiding principles for modern-day non-violent strategic action (ibid.: 41-44). Forgiveness (afu) is the most valued virtue in Islam because it is strongly upheld in matters of conflict at both a public and personal level (Niazi 2009:74).

This briefing examines the peacebuilding efforts of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community (AMC) in the Kisumu district of Kenya to understand how it has been able to play a meaningful role in peacebuilding and social welfare activities in a region that is dominated by Christian denominations. The AMC’s activities directed towards peacebuilding are highlighted from the contributions of the movement to socio-economic development. The roles that Qur’anic teachings play in peacebuilding activities of the AMC in Kisumu district are also examined.

Kisumu district, where the AMC is located, is a part of the large lowland surrounding the Nyanza gulf in Lake Victoria. Kisumu city lies at the westernmost tip of the lake.
Most of the inhabitants of Kisumu district are Luo, the majority practising Christianity and African indigenous religions. The Luo are the third largest ethnic grouping of the 42 tribes of Kenya. Half of the population in the district is poor because of soil infertility and climate change, the collapse of the industrial sector and the growing incidence of HIV and AIDS. The poverty can also be partly linked to the failure of the government to respond to the development challenges of the district.

Kisumu was one of the districts that were most affected during the violence that followed the 2007/8 presidential election in Kenya because Raila Odinga, who is a Luo and is viewed as by his people as a saviour, was their preferred candidate. His followers believed that election results had been rigged and this contributed greatly to the wave of violence in the area when the Luo targeted ethnic groups that were thought to be sympathisers of Odinga’s opponent, President Mwai Kibaki. In turn the Luo were targeted by Kikuyu gangs mainly in Nakuru and Naivasha, leading to the displacement of hundreds of Luo, who were forcibly transported to Kisumu and its environs (Waki Report 2008: 174). The crisis resulting from the violence further strained the economic resources of the people of Kisumu. It is in the light of this crisis and the economic challenges in the district that the efforts of the AMC to provide for the needs of the community and build peace are discussed.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community

Islam has existed East Africa for centuries. It came to East Africa through Islamic expansion, trade, European colonisation and Islamic proselytising (da’wa) and da’wa organisations (Kfir 2008: 831; Kresse 2009; Lodhi 1994). The Muslims in Kenya are found mainly in Mombasa, Nairobi, Kisumu, Lamu and Nakuru, which are areas of economic and strategic value (Kfir 2008: 833).

The Ahmadiyya community was founded in 1889 in Qadian, a small village in Punjab, India. Members of the sect believe that the founder, Hadhrat Ghulam Ahmad, was born in fulfilment of a prophecy by the Prophet Muhammad and that he was the promised Messiah (Adamson 1989:1-2).

The Kisumu mission of the AMC was established in the late 1890s at a time when immigrants from India and other parts of Asia settled in the area. The centre was formerly known as Port Florence, established by the British colonialists as a terminus for the Kenya-Uganda railway. Some Indians who had accompanied the British colonial army and the railway engineers settled in Kisumu. While African traditional religions predominated, there were some Christian missionary churches and a Sunni Muslim community. With more missionary work in the years that followed, a few Kenyans were converted to join the AMC.

The socio-economic conditions in East Africa have encouraged various international Muslim humanitarian organisations to focus on providing immediate or emergency humanitarian relief, adopting a medium- and long-term programme of socio-economic development and missionary work or da’wa. The last, in its radical Islamic form, exists at two levels: advocacy of Islamic observance on the grounds that it leads to improved socio-economic conditions and on returning people of the region to true Islamic observance (Kfir 2008: 833). In the same vein, the AMC endeavours to reach out to needy communities and provide for their physical needs and to carry out da’wa, as discussed in the next section.

The AMC Social Welfare and Conversion Activities in Kisumu

The AMC is noted for its active engagement in social welfare and in meeting the educational and medical needs of host communities. The motto for the community is ‘love for all, hatred for none’. These activities are integrated within da’wa. An Ahmadi of Asian origin in Kisumu explained:
The main difference you will notice as a researcher is that we are quite different from other Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. Wherever an AMC mission station is established we seek acceptance from the host community because we realise that we cannot advocate for peace and peaceful co-existence with other religions when we ourselves are the tools of enmity … A stranger who goes into a certain foreign community and pretends to be superior to those who belong will be met with rejection. I will give you an example of the post-election violence of 2007/8 in Kenya. The Asians who were evicted from Kisumu and those whose property was destroyed were only those who looked down upon the natives … The AMC welcomes everyone and that is why we have a large following among the natives.  

These sentiments were echoed by the religious leadership of the mosques that the AMC has established. An imam who was converted from Christianity explained the kind of teaching and training they go through before they are commissioned to become leaders in the community mosques:

We appreciate the fact that we have a sense of ownership of this religion. The AMC leadership in Kisumu has endeavoured to diversify the approaches through which they spread the word and how they relate with us [Luos] for peaceful mission. Through this leadership they have identified the needs within this community and are doing what they can to help our community members to achieve meaningful livelihoods.  

The AMC has used the community’s economic situation to attempt to convert targeted members. Through this opportunistic approach it has sunk boreholes to provide clean water, encouraged the community to attend its medical camps and established schools. However, the AMC cannot claim full acceptance by the communities it works with. The challenge is that the movement remains unknown to many community members. Non-members randomly interviewed about their knowledge of the services of the AMC within their areas said they were not aware of the group’s presence; nor did they benefit from its community projects.

Following Kenya’s post-election violence, interviewees suggested that the burden of caring for people who had been displaced and the traumatised was left in the hands of community institutions. The AMC leadership reported that although the mission did not have the capacity to host the internally displaced, it provided food, clothing and tents and volunteered for charity work in zones of crises, especially in the camps for displaced people. Within the camps, doctors and nurses from the mission hospitals attended to the injured and the traumatised. Deputy missionary Muhammad Zafar said:

We all suffered the crisis of post-election violence … Though I and my family were not hurt, the community around suffered as the fights turned out to be an ethnic cleansing process … We partnered with the government to distribute food, clothes and medical attention to the displaced people. Of course our help was not enough because of the overwhelming numbers, but we did what we could.  

For Zafar, the role of the AMC in socio-economic and peacebuilding activities is compatible with its mission to convert non-Ahmadis to Islam. If both goals are achieved, namely helping people with their physical and spiritual challenges, the better for the movement. Those who agree to be converted in order to benefit from the socio-economic services are targeted because they do not reject Islam. Their help is open to all community members in line with their motto of ‘love for all, hatred for none’. Only after they have established the projects do they start to proselytise among the wider
community, approaching prospective converts through contact persons. That the AMC is using its welfare projects as a disguised form of *da’wa* to woo converts is attested by some interviewees, but for Muhammad Zafar the end result is the same – meeting people’s needs spiritually, materially and socially as the Qur’an commands, as discussed in the next section.

The AMC’s Role in Peacebuilding

There are two types of commandments in the Holy Quran: *haquq-illa*, which means to believe in the oneness of Allah in all aspects as the one and only god and worship him according to his commandments; and *haquq-ul-ibaad*, which means to have good relations with others and to treat them with love and honour and to serve them by any means. The AMC has been teaching forgiveness and reconciliation and encouraging people to participate in dealing with the past justly and comprehensively in order to move towards reconstruction. However, Muhammad Zafar expressed doubts about its ability to foster sustainable peacebuilding because of the long history of inter-ethnic rivalries in the region. In particular the Luo and their neighbours, the Luhya and Kalenjins, often disagree on political issues and the choice of leaders. These needy communities are often at the mercy of political leaders who use money to promote conflicts between communities.

Interfaith dialogue has been a useful tool in peacebuilding. The leaders of the AMC have on several occasions hosted leaders from the Roman Catholic Church and some of the Pentecostal denominations in Kisumu to dialogue on matters of peaceful co-existence. Muhammad Zafar stated that they have also held youth rallies to which youth in the AMC invite their peers from Christian groups to discuss matters relating to peaceful co-existence. For Muhammad Zafar, peace among the religious groups means peace in the community because they are important community institutions. In these dialogues, he noted, issues that might have been overlooked in the post-election violence of 2007/8 are raised in order to forestall renewed conflict. Chief among these issues, he believed, are ethnicity and limited economic opportunities. The AMC is trying to deal with the latter issue by establishing development projects in parts of the district.

The AMC continues to face challenges from other religious groups in Kenya in its efforts initiate interfaith dialogue. Christian-Muslim relations in Kenya have a complex history extending into the post-colonial period, marked by rivalry and polemics that have obstructed frank and honest exchanges (Mwakimako 2007: 295). However, there is generally a high level of tolerance among these religious groups that extends to interfaith dialogue. In interviews with the AMC leaders it became apparent that even the most contentious interfaith relationships can provide the context for meaningful and productive exchanges. Immediately in the wake of the post-election violence an inter-religious forum consisting of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, the Episcopal movement, the Hindu society, and National Christian Council of Kenya remained outspoken about the ills of the political leaders in the country. This demonstrated the solidarity with which religious groups support peace initiatives at a national level, especially as some of the groups had involved themselves in partisan politics and felt the need to restore their credibility.

Conclusion

The interventions of the AMC as a step towards peacebuilding and development are important, despite the challenges. This briefing has explained how the AMC has contributed to peacebuilding by addressing a source of conflict among needy communities in the Kisumu district through its socio-economic development initiatives, in accordance with its goal of winning new converts to Islam. Such an approach would seem to suggest how religious institutions can become viable
mobilising agents in reducing conflict and promoting development. The AMC and other religious organisations may not have the sophisticated diplomatic skills to train and negotiate with communities to work towards peacebuilding, but its efforts in enhancing socio-economic and spiritual welfare should be appreciated for the purposes that they serve.

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Endnotes

1 Nyanza Province, of which Kisumu is the capital, leads in HIV cases with a prevalence of 15.5% as compared to the national prevalence of 7.4% (PRSP 2008, GoK 2007).

2 The presence of Muslims in East Africa is thought to have dated from 830 AD. Islam was widely practised in the region by the 14th century and was well established when violent Portuguese intrusions occurred in the 16th century (Lodhi 1994).

3 Interview with Muhammad Afzal Zafar, deputy chief missionary of the East Africa Ahmadiyya Mission, Kisumu, 8 May 2010.


5 Interview with a Luo Ahmadi leader at Ahmadiyya Mosque, Kisumu, 10 May 2010

6 Interview with Muhammad Zafar, 5 May 2010.

7 Interview with Muhammad Zafar, 8 May 2010.

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