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Clerics vow never to be used by politicians again

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Religious leaders in Tanzania have resolved never to fall again into any traps of temptations of being used by politicians during and after General Elections being the main causative of religious animosity.

This resolution was reached this mid month during a one-day symposium that was held in metropolitan Dar es Salaam City when the clerics met to take a stand on issues of mutual interest.

The meeting was convened by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), in collaboration with the Inter-Religious Council for Peace Tanzania (IRCPT), being yet another attempt for peace building through mutual understanding of people from different faiths.

This time around the workshop had convened religious clerics and representatives from Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) of both denominations Christians and Muslims from Zanzibar.

“You have a great role of ensuring peace in Tanzania if you use well this opportunity because your congregants have much trust in you, this trust should be for the peace building rather than divisive zeal,” remarked Stefan Reith the KAS resident director during his opening remarks.

Mr. Reith reiterated how the two organizing bodies have convened similar meetings from religious and representatives of the FBOs in Mainland much to the satisfaction of many peace lovers and well wishers to Tanzania.

Retired judge Raymond Mwaikasu called for participants to be free to air their grievances as this was a closed session in order to find an amicable and long lasting solution to religious animosity.

From the Islamic faith was Sheikh Haji Mussa from the Wakf and Trust, Zanzibar who was pleased that now calm has been regained in the isles after chaotic and nasty incidents which led to the killing of a Catholic priest one Evarist Mushi in February 2013, and throwing of acidic materials to Fr Joseph Magamba in September this year.

“Violence is not part of the Islamic faith, and whoever is committing such incidents should not be counted as a propagator of this faith” he retorted rather defensively.

The session was also a good reminder of how combined efforts from the inter-religious dialogue groups had eventually came up with an idea of establishing Village Community Banks (VICOBA).

From Zanzibar Interfaith Centre was its coordinator, Daniel Madsen who said that religious animosity needs to be wiped out from early childhood in the minds of children of different religious background.

He reiterated that his centre was established in April 2009 and it went into full swing in 2010, currently this has been a resource centre for people from various walks of life and religious inclinations.

“We have gone a step further, as our centre now is an avenue for religious dialogue and many other educative purposes, ranging from learning English language, computer literacy, to research purposes,” he boasted.

Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Masoud vice secretary of the Committee of Religious Leaders for Harmony, Peace and Tranquillity presenting on the reflections on the current challenges of inter-religious dialogue in the isles, said that the nature of religious conflicts in Zanzibar is complex with so many hidden motives.

“We are witnessing our islands being turned into zones of drug trafficking embankments; we are surprised to see that elephant tusks are excavated in Zanzibar while we do not have a single elephant in the isles; all these wrapped in one tells that something has gone wrong” he warned.

Rev Canon Thomas Godda suggested that there is a need for leniency and mutual agreement between people of different faiths, whether it is through BAKWATA, TEC, CCT, HINDU, BAAHAI or PCT to find solutions to difficult questions of the day, rather than any faith trying to impose any of its claims.

Ms Julian Laurent who is an employee of the Commission for Human Rights and Good Governance (CHRAGG), and a member of the National Committee for the Prevention of Genocide (NCPG), called for religious leaders to maintain peace by educating their congregants the essence of living in harmony.

"The NCPG believes that religious leaders have more positive values of peace to add to the communities through their media outlets, televisions and radios than the divisive campaigns which can just cause an upsurge of refugees as it has been happening in many other countries," she warned.

George Bagomwa from the IRCPT was surprised to see that of recent the Police Force in Tanzania, both in the Mainland and in the Isles have failed to arrest the culprits of nasty attacks including the torching of churches.

Ditrick Rutashobya from the IRCPT as well remarked that many of the nasty incidents to Christians and their properties particularly in the Mainland Tanzania were the aftermaths of negative propaganda against Christians and their institutions during the 2010 General Elections.

"It is politicians who instigated hatred against Christians simply because the Chama cha Demokrasia na Maendeleo (CHADEMA) had fielded a strong candidate Dr Willbrod Slaa who happened to have been a former Catholic priest, "he propounded.

Rutashobya who represents the youth wing at the IRCPT challenged that although what was done was merely to facilitate the victory of the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM's) candidate Jakaya Kikwete but the repercussions of such dirty campaigns lingers on up to now.

The projects coordinator from the Tanzania Muslim Professionals Association (TAMPRO), Said Ngolola said that poverty and ignorance amongst Muslims is the major source of dissatisfaction. He challenged that there is a massive financial support by the government to institutions of Christian origin including universities.

He as well challenged the system of loans provisions by the Higher Education Students' Loans Board (HESLB) that it is segregating Muslim students because the Islamic faith does not allow bonus in the form of interest in any financial investment.

But these assertions by Ngolola were squarely smashed by Rev. Father Damas Mtoi from the Roman Catholic Church in Zanzibar who said at times people should not be misled by mere perceptions. He claimed that the government has been supporting institutions that are serving the public at large and not simply because they belong to Christians.

But to the defense of Ngolola was Ms Hindu Lilla who is currently the board member of the IRCPT who claimed that there has been a trend to neglect the claims by Muslims for quite some time.

She narrated how in 1999 Muslims had convened at the Diamond Jubilee at the request of the Third Phase President Benjamin Mkapa who promised to heed to their 19 claims but all these remained elusive up to now.

But probably in an attempt to calm the multitude, was former Morogoro MP and once deputy minister Ms Shamim Khan who said that during her tenure in active politics she never noticed any religious differences since she was sharing the little she had with people of all religious faiths, Christians and Muslims alike.

It was Madsen again from Zanzibar who spoke using his triangular diagram saying that there is interrelatedness between the context, attitudes and behaviors, implicitly he wanted to say that certain eruptive actions are compounded in negative perceptions.

A senior editor and media consultant Lawrence Kilimwiko did not want to hide his feelings when he called a spade a spade by saying that failed politicians are searching for a psychological relief by seeking support through religious inclinations.

But another senior editor Mboneko Munyanga warned that those who attempts to break peace through religious incitement cannot succeed now because many families are mixed with people belonging to Christianity and to the Islamic faith as well.

Dr Paul Shemshanga from the Pentecostal Churches of Tanzania (PCT) warned that of recent there has been a wave of preachers some of them with very little knowledge in religious matters and yet with the big oratory power, these he claimed must be groomed so that they cannot cause chaos.

His views were supported by Dr William Kopwe from the Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), who warned of unwarranted religious commotions from people who are not well versed with the religious duties professionally.

Conducting a way forward was the session's moderator Salim Zagar, who summed up the main points that were adduced from the discussions. Those religious leaders should approach the head of state, President Jakaya Kikwete in order to prevent any religious debacles in the future.

It was also suggested that no public property should be used to favour any religious faith unfairly at the expense of other denominations. Religious classes should be given more impetus in schools in order to recapture the fast eroding national ethos.

There was a suggestion that from now onwards politicians should never utter any statements which can instigate religious hatred. Also all forms of propaganda which can fuel hatred should be stopped forthwith in all places including houses of worship.

It was suggested that the government should give an official recognition to the IRCPT whenever dealing with sensitive religious matters due to the fact that it is an embodiment of all religious faiths.

The government should re-address itself to the issues of dispensation of justice, poverty reduction, and social differentiations which are central to causing frustrations amongst believers of certain faiths in Tanzania.

Moreover, it was suggested that religious leaders conduct a public rally in order to talk about peace in Tanzania well in advance before the forthcoming civic and general Elections in 2014 and 2015 respectively.

It was suggested that religious clerics should lead an inter-religious peaceful demonstration which will involve other stakeholders including the CSOs, academicians, media and the public at large in order to find preventive ways of religious incitement.

It was resolved that from now onwards no one should be allowed to preach while holding a Holy Book of a different faith, nor should the audio and video cassettes of hatred and defaming utterances be allowed in any place including houses of worship.

During the closing remarks Richard Shaba the team leader at the KAS advanced that peace is a prerogative of every Tanzanian regardless of faith affiliations, hence prudence should always rein high in any religious encounters than mere perceptions.

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