

# MAKING PEACE IN A POWDER KEG

Kenya is home to 70 languages, 42 ethnic groups, and at least one terrorist organization. Young peace activists are bridging these differences, one issue at a time.

BY **JULIENNE GAGE**



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IN DECEMBER 2007, Naomi Mwangi, a Christian, fled her home in Kisumu, Kenya, as men with machetes attacked towns across the region. For five weeks violence raged nationwide. When the bloodshed ended, more than 1,300 Kenyans were dead and another 650,000 had been displaced. Mwangi and her family ended up living in the Maai Mahiu refugee camp, south of Nairobi. She was 12 years old.

Mwangi is coming of age in a society with ethnic violence in the background, extremist violence in the foreground, and massive economic inequality. Africa has the highest concentration of young people in the world and more than half of them are unemployed. Mwangi wanted something different—she wanted to work for peace.

Now 21, Mwangi is a leader in grassroots peacemaking campaigns that seek to end conflicts between the 42 ethnic groups in this majority-Christian country. The 2007 election violence pitted Christian against Christian, as ethnic ties trumped religious affiliation. Even now, during elections, Mwangi told *Sojourners*, “Leaders motivate youth to join in the political crisis ... to fight against another tribe.”



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A major obstacle to social and economic stability among youth in Kenya is unequal distribution of government-issued identification cards. Kenyans need ID cards for everything from voting and university enrollment to obtaining grants for entrepreneurship programs. But historically, the ruling government doled them out as political favors, and they've often been denied to members of minority groups.

"There are plenty of applications at election time," Mwangi said, explaining that the ID process is slowed down or delayed when it seems one ethnic group could tip the chances of a politician who represents a different group.

Mwangi was lucky. Even though her family fled its home in Kisumu, she was able to obtain her identification card through a United Nations-sponsored civic engagement campaign in the refugee camp.

## Muslim youth in Kenya

But Muslim minority youth are not as fortunate. Muslims make up just 10 percent of Kenya's population, which also includes Hindus, Baha'is, and people of Indigenous religions, and they have often borne the brunt of the unequal distribution of power in the country.

Because many in the Muslim community circulate along the Kenya's porous northern borders, the government contends that it doesn't know the difference between a Kenyan Muslim and one from neighboring Somalia, South Sudan, or Ethiopia. Using this excuse, the Kenyan government requires these residents to produce birth certificates all the way back to grandparents. The inequity is compounded by common fears that Muslim youth may be sympathetic to militant extremists groups, such as the al Qaeda-affiliated al Shabaab.

Of course, this is a vicious cycle. Religious leaders acknowledge that Muslim youth who feel powerless to change their situation *have* been known to join in terrorist activities.

In recent years, religious conflict, fomented by al Shabaab, has overshadowed traditional ethnic divisions. The group claimed responsibility for the 2013 attacks on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, which killed 67 people and wounded 175, and for a 2015 attack at Garissa University College, a Christian school, in which 147 people died and 79 were injured. Many experts consider these activities reprisal for Kenya's military intervention in Somalia. In late 2011, the Kenyan and Somali militaries joined forces in Somali conflict zones to attack al Shabaab after its members kidnapped several foreigners in Kenya. Today, Kenya contributes about 4,000 troops to a 22,000-strong African Union military force in Somalia.

"The patterns of [al Shabaab] attacks appear to be aimed at inciting interreligious conflict and stoking the flames of animosity and bitterness," said Francis Kuria Kagemu, a Roman Catholic who serves as executive director of the Inter-Religious Council of Kenya, the country's largest coalition of mainline Christian, Muslim, and Hindu institutions.

"The whole issue of radicalization of youths and extremism has the potential of exacerbating an already-fragile security situation and placing extra burden on a stretched national security apparatus," said Kuria.

Getting better representation of Muslims would likely curb these trends. In 2012, the Kenyan Muslim Youth Alliance (KMYA), an affiliate of the Inter-Religious Council, successfully lobbied the government to start sending out mobile ID centers. Progress has been made, but it is still slow.

## Understanding sacred values

In December, the Inter-Religious Council and the Youth Alliance held an interfaith camp at mosques and churches in the predominately Muslim port city of Mombasa. For many youth, it was the first time they'd ever stepped inside the place of worship of another religion. It became an opportunity to explore their common struggles in a hotly contested region of the country.

Because of land grievances and ethnic favoritism among Kenya's most powerful groups, the Mombasa region's native population—which includes Muslims, Christians, and Hindus—has not always reaped the benefits of its port activity, oil refinery, and multimillion-dollar tourism industry. The camp concluded with a graduation ceremony in which youth vowed to make peace along Kenya's coast.

Much of the council's work comes down to “understanding the sacred values that fuse and motivate devoted militants to extreme actions and reframing or leveraging them to diffuse violence,” said Kuria. “What we're doing is creating counternarratives.”

But peacemakers are also forced to respond reactively in impromptu community forums in the wake of an act of terror.

“When those things happen, there is outrage from the community, so we try to bring the community and government together for this kind of dialogue,” explained KMYA executive director Abdulhamid Sakar, a 38-year-old Muslim from western Kenya.

And when the Youth Alliance is unable to organize forums, the group stays abreast of fundamentalist activity by tracking social media. Islamia TV Kenya broadcasts regular discussions of peaceful understanding of religious texts, and the alliance does the same through its Facebook account. These activists also try to engage fundamentalist sympathizers by posting alternative messaging on websites that promote extremist Muslim ideology.

“You find that some of them won't continue to comment because of their lack of knowledge about the ideology,” noted Sakar. Some of those commentators, Sakar said, have migrated over to reading and commenting on KMYA's Facebook site. These types of efforts are also supported by Muslim mothers who alert community leaders to early warning signs of fundamentalist thinking in their children by keeping watch on their smart phone activity to see who they're communicating with on social media.

“A lot of the [extremist] recruitment is done by what we call grievance politics,” said Kuria. “At the grassroots level, people see that they have been neglected, they have not been engaged, and that they are not likely to change the scenarios and their livelihoods using normal socio-political processes. Reports have described how radical clerics and small circles of dedicated followers lure local youths of poor marginalized communities by offering a sense of belonging, a compelling worldview, and a small stipend, with the promise of more, to join al Shabaab's cause by taking up arms in Somalia and Kenya.”

But most violence in Kenya, whether ethnic or religious, stems from decades of anger over limited resources and power imbalances, leaving underrepresented peoples more vulnerable to criminal and fundamentalist behavior. But there have been some recent promising developments. Following the 2007 election violence, the two presidential candidates agreed to a power-sharing deal arrangement that provides more balanced ethnic representation at the federal level. In 2012, the country's various factions agreed to reform the constitution to give more power to local governments. Peace activists working to end conflict in Kenya say these changes give Kenya's diverse ethnic and religious groups a chance to view themselves and each other differently.

## Rites of passage

Kenya's population—now 44 million and projected to reach 76 million by 2045—is among the fastest-growing in the world, which creates a heavy burden on its land use. Additionally, almost three-quarters of the Kenyan population is under age 30, and 70 percent of them are unemployed. For young people, that's a deadly combination: In many ethnic groups, a young person's ability to stabilize socially and economically is rooted in coming-of-age rituals that lead to marriage or some accumulation of wealth. When land becomes less fertile and water runs short, rural youth find themselves taking rites of passage to an extreme.

In the past, boys showed their bravado and gained power or dowry material by participating in livestock raids. These days, however, with

organized crime and an influx of weapons, this sometimes translates into illicit activity such as robberies and drug and arms trafficking. Many girls are “married” as children and subjected to female genital mutilation before they’re considered eligible for marriage. Plus, many of these youth are migrating to slums to fend for themselves, leaving them vulnerable to gangs, rape, and prostitution.

“They no longer have the structure like aunts and uncles to assist with the maturity of a child,” noted Crystal Corman, an organizer for World Faiths Development Dialogue. The group hosted an event in August that brought together 60 Kenya-based peace practitioners and 43 religious leaders and organizations to anonymously discuss faith-inspired options for resolving social, political, and religious conflicts as a nation and within their own religious communities.

During last summer’s forum, Corman learned about Kenyan Christians promoting safer rituals and more progressive rites of passage in a program called “Rites of Passage Experiences” (ROPES). The program was introduced to Kenyan youth in 1997 as the flagship of the Christian organization Tanari Trust. Rather than sing songs about brave cattle rustlers, as boys might have done in the past, boys learn to sing about becoming successful entrepreneurs. Instead of girls having their genitals cut, they might be asked to engage in a sacrificial fast. And both genders might participate in agribusiness workshops. They might pledge to delay marriage until finishing high school or college.

“Through the ROPES program, the church becomes this extended community to make sure that the child has a variety of role models and information sources,” Corman said.

But she too believes that more needs to be done with interfaith dialogue in Kenya. She said many Christians complained they don’t have access to the Quran in languages such as Swahili and English, which they believe would help them study the Muslim faith and build tolerance through theological understanding. At the same, Corman encouraged Christians to consider their own fundamentalist notions and the ways they might have privileged access to power.

“Both groups said they wanted to better understand what was worrying the youth, what made them think about joining a violent extremist group,” said Corman, adding that they wanted to do more listening.

Listening is important, but too often peacemakers are afraid to speak. Leaders such as Sakar said that youth often don’t feel safe speaking with international reporters, which makes it difficult to hear their experience first-hand. Mwangi is an exception; she was comfortable speaking freely because of her experience with internationals in the U.N.-connected refugee camp.

Mwangi’s career aspirations are tied to the peacemaking she promotes through essays, speeches, and participation at home and in international forums. In 2010, she joined Rafiki Link, a local program sponsored by Ubuntu, a technology organization based in Austin, Texas, that helps Kenyan youth gain computer skills by writing essays and producing videos about peace building. After earning a peace essay award in her school, she was invited to Austin to attend the 2012 peace summit of the international youth leadership organization Amala Foundation.

Mwangi is studying for a college degree in tourism and hopes to continue promoting travel to her own country. Tourism is one of many industries in Kenya that depends on peace in the country. She hopes to help build a foundation of peace there by one day creating her own organization to help youth become effective liaisons between their communities and the government.

That’s just the kind of activism Kuria is hoping for. “Youth leaders in institutions of higher learning could play a major role for peace in Kenya,” Kuria said. “They represent a huge yet untapped potential as they have a large influence on their peers.”



**Julienne Gage**

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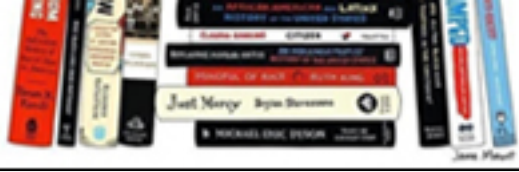
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