

# The Use of Religion by Political Elites in Kabwe District, Zambia

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## Abstract:

This article reports a study to investigate the use of religion by the political elites in the Kabwe district of the central province in Zambia. The study used a descriptive survey design of the qualitative strategy where an Interpretivist Research technique served as a foundation for data collection. The target population included four political parties in Kabwe district, church leaders from the Roman Catholic Church, United Church of Zambia, Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostal church, Mosque, officials from Church Mother Bodies, Civic leaders and lay people. The study drew upon a sample of 28 respondents and Semi-structured and Open-ended interview techniques were applied to obtain the required primary data. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed thematically for respondents' perceptions of the use of religion in politics. The key findings revealed that religion was often utilized as a political tool by the political elite, where politicians utilised it to gain political mileage. Religious communities were also viewed by respondents as effective partners in the implementation of political agendas and or policies. Additionally, religious communities were seen as fixed and stable entities which had won the trust of local communities. By and large, the role played by religion in politics (through the identified religious bodies) was considered crucial for the survival of democracy in the two districts. Appropriate recommendations are made such as encouraging religious freedom where everybody will be free to seek the truth without any coercion or inhibition.

**Keywords:** Religion, Religious Communities, Politics, Kabwe, Zambia.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the use of religion by political elites in Kabwe District of Zambia. Much scholarly work has revealed that religion and politics have an ambivalent history of relationships. At times there is a total separation between the two; at other times, the interconnectedness causes the two spheres to seem to be inseparable. In cases of inseparability, the hierarchy of the two is interchangeable. This relationship between religion and politics should however be understood contextually. This is because religious considerations have been part of political decisions ever since humans governed themselves. There are instances when political decisions have been based on consultations and advice received from the Holy via the words of prophets and priests. At times religious leaders would oppose decisions taken by political leaders. The study considers the ambivalent, and yet amiable relationship of religion and politics in the two districts as crucial in the growing democracy of Zambia, a country known for the rich legacy of a multi-faith nation.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

It has been stated by scholars (among them, Moyser 1991)<sup>1</sup> that the relationship between religion and politics can take different forms depending on the way it is nurtured, contextualised and applied by political authorities and those in control of religious institutions. For the Kabwe district in particular, the relationship between the two seemed to have been based on unsubstantiated perceptions in the absence of an empirical basis. This prompted the current study whose aim was to provide an empirical justification for the use of religion by political players, and the knowledge of the relationship between religion and politics in Kabwe, in general.

### 1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

1. To investigate the use of religion by the political elite in Kabwe
2. ii. To determine the existing relationship between political players and religious leaders

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND BRIEF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretically, the study is based on Moyser's theory of the relationship between religion and politics. Moyser (1991) contends that a political system can be portrayed as existing based on sacred selection accompanied by a sovereign reigning, based on divine decree. He observes that in extreme cases, the state can be presented as existing autonomously, sanctioned by a divine power. Religion, he adds, is perceived to present the core values of society governing human actions and decisions. Politics once again becomes relative to religion.

Politics, in Moyser's view, can become the superior institution exercising power even over religion. Political policies can, for example, govern the extent of influence religion can exercise over society. Religion as a social and communal activity causes religion as well as politics to be viewed as possessing a communal character.

Appleby (2000)<sup>2</sup> argues along with Moyser (1991) that politics is the way of running a government in a nation and how it relates to other countries. He says politics also upholds all aspects of social, economic, political, cultural and historical situations people find themselves. Therefore, religion and politics are universal aspects of human life. Religion is manifested in the church and politics is manifested in a state. Man is changing at all levels of his being, at the social level the change is normally from dependence on others to independence to interdependence and God-guided.

Moyser (1991) indicates that the relationship between religion and politics can play out in three different forms: (a) political authorities control religious institutions (b) religious leaders prescribe to political authorities and/or (c) a symbiotic co-existence of politics and religion. Over centuries there have been examples of all three possibilities. The dualistic understanding of human existence might have contributed to the disparity between religion and politics. Humans are in nature created matter. But humans are of dual nature: part matter and part spirit, thus indicating a connection to a spiritual dimension. Humans are not only matter but spirit as well. Plato pointed to this dual human existence: the body is matter and belongs to this earth, but the soul is spirit and belongs to a different dimension (*Ibid*).

Socrates explored this idea further and suggested that the body is of lesser value. The soul is of superior value and worth engaging with. This anti-material position created an aversion to anything encountered through the senses. All material matter is there only to sustain the human body. There is no intrinsic value in matter. The spirit is of superior value. Religion belongs to the domain of spiritual activities and politics are relegated to earthly and material existence. Since Socrates' division of human existence into spiritual and material spheres, with the spiritual being the superior faculty, a struggle for dominance between religion and politics ensued, causing politics and religion to alternate as the dominant power. Part of the communal identity of a nation is religion. Religion can become a way in which a nation expresses its identity (*Ibid*).

The nature of religion is to connect man to the sacred (Durkheim, 2008<sup>3</sup>; Eliade, 1957<sup>4</sup>). The sacred is elevated qualitatively above the profane. This brings about the understanding that the sacred is the higher authority to be called upon in moments of despair and uncertainty. The sacred is perceived to be of an autonomous and sovereign nature subjecting politics to the domain of the profane.

In Africa in particular, religion as such is an uncommon concept. No separation between the sacred transcendence and profane spheres exists. Holism implies a connection to everything. Everything has to do with what is known as religion. Culture and religion in Africa are intertwined. Moyser's conclusion is that religion and politics in a pre-modern society served the same goal. Political considerations were based on religious considerations (Moyser, 1991). The position of religion in an African context represents that of a pre-modern society. The symbiosis of religion and politics in Zambia has been constantly undergoing changes just like in other countries of the world. These changes have practical meaning for the development of the relationship between religion and politics. The changes have taken place through the phases of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. During the pre-colonial era of Africa, religion and politics were like two sides of social life for the people. Religion and politics were so closely related that Africans did not see any difference between them as the sacred and the secular. The African world was inter-connected such that spirituality and politics were one and people who had religious powers had political powers (*Ibid*).

Mugambi (2004)<sup>5</sup> states that a person who could not embody the national power was unfit for leadership. The separation of spheres of existence as has been the case since the Enlightenment, caused religion to be seen as acting either in a supporting or opposing role to other spheres such as politics, economics, science or law. Religion and politics have had a long history of reciprocal collaboration and/or disagreement. The communal aspect brings about the feeling of group solidarity. This is obvious that religion can contribute to the nationalistic ideals of leaders. Religion is a system of beliefs with leaders maintaining and governing the body of those affiliated with the religion. The domains of religion and politics share this similarity in that they consist of a group of people making decisions based on certain considerations. The decisions are enforced by the leaders of the communities. At times the decisions overlap and at times the decisions may diverge, resulting in conflict. Thus, two domains exist, each with its own agenda, system, decisions and leaders. A struggle for power between politics and religion seems inevitable. It is against such a background that the researcher sought to investigate the use of religion by political elites.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology, the study used a descriptive design of the qualitative strategy. This approach was thought to be suitable since the study was basically descriptive, in the sense that it aimed to discover answers to underlying questions by attempting to describe and define the problem (Blumberg, 2014)<sup>6</sup>. To execute the study in this approach, researchers drew upon a sample of 28 respondents drawn from the categories of church leaders from the Roman Catholic Church, United Church of Zambia, Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Pentecostal church, Traditional church, Mosque, Hindu Temple, official from the Ministry of National guidance and Religious Affairs, officials from church mother bodies, civic leaders and lay people from within Kabwe. An Interpretivist Research design served as the foundation for data collection. Interpretivist researchers seek to understand participants' subjective experiences of the world whereby, the goal of research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' view of their situation. The belief is that reality is socially constructed (Creswell, 2014)<sup>7</sup>. The Structured and Open-ended interview methods were used. Transcripts of the interviews were analysed thematically for respondents' perceptions of the use of religion by political players and the relationship between politicians and the clergy.

### 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

On the research question that sought to find out how often politicians visited religious institutions, most of the respondents said politicians visited Churches and Mosques during election periods for campaign work in order to canvas for their votes and encourage citizens to turn out to vote for them. They further said that once elected into power, politicians rarely pay visits to their places of worship. In the researchers' view, this is because politicians believe and understand that religion has the propensity to shape people's world view, influence their thought patterns, inform state decisions and provide a gauge to measure the legitimacy of government. However the following were the responses from other respondents.

Respondent Mulenga (pseudonym) from a Christian religion of Jehovah's Witness narrated:

*Their church does not allow politicians to visit the church or entertain any political activity within the church (Interview with Mulenga, Kabwe, March 2, 2019).*

The general view of most of the participants from the same congregation was that the leaderships of many Christian church denominations did not allow their members to take part in any political activity, let alone sing the national anthem, as the case was with Jehovah's Witnesses.

However, Rashid (not his real name) who is a Muslim recounted thus:

*Some politicians do visit their mosques though not given the platform to address the congregation on political matters (Interview with Rashid, Kabwe, March 2, 2019).*

Six (6) of the respondents from the main line churches confirmed that politicians visited them more often during the campaign and appreciated the fact that political elites made some donations to their respective worshipping centres that went towards financing various projects. One informant narrated:

*It is evident that these political elites do frequent different places of worship when they know that elections are near. They do this knowing very well that once they visit*

*these places they will win the confidence of the congregants* (Interview with Kabwe resident, Kabwe, March 2, 2019).

From the findings presented in this study, it was clear that religion is used by the political elites in Kabwe district and Politicians do visit places of worship especially during the election period for campaign work in order to canvas for the votes and encourage citizens to turn out to vote but once elected into power they rarely pay visits to the places of worship. This is because Politicians believe and understand that religion has the propensity to shape people's world view, influence their thought patterns, inform state decisions and provide a gauge to measure the legitimacy of government.

As observed from the findings of this study, the political usage of religion is quite old as man. In most of the countries, religion is used as an effective instrument in the politics. The political elite uses religion for purely political gains. Many states in the world were established on the ideology of religion. The prevalent examples of Religious States are Pakistan, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The other powerful countries put themselves in the basket of so-called secular states, but they actually take advantage of religion to make their governments. India is the biggest example. The question is why religions are so effective for political gains? Religions are effective because they directly touch the emotions, feelings and sentiments of the common people who have nothing except religion. They believe that religions construct their identities and God is their well-wisher (Khan, 2020)<sup>8</sup>.

#### **4.1 The Use of Churches, Temples or Mosques by Politicians to Communicate To their Members**

On the question that sought to find out whether the politicians took advantage of the religious gatherings or used religious infrastructure in reaching out to their members, forty-two per cent (42%) responded in affirmative. In substantiating their responses, informants unanimously government often used their places of worship to communicate with the public, especially during political campaign periods. However, two female Jehovah's Witness worshipers responded in the negative, saying their doctrine did not allow them to get involved in issues of politics and that their church was a no-go area for politicians.

**On whether the Churches, Mosques or Temples receive help from the Government or politicians, Sixty per cent (60%) of the informants responded in affirmation. A lady from the Seventh Day Adventist Church further explained with a recent practical example of how politicians helped their church. He recounted:**

*Recently before the commencement of the 2019 campaign, the Honourable Minister of Tourism and Arts donated 100 pockets of cement to one of the SDA churches and the Republican President also made massive donations to almost all the churches he visited both in monetary and material form* (Interview with an Adventist, Kabwe, April 18, 2019).

Essentially, the study observed that there were some success reports on the positive use of religion as a tool for political mobilisation and has the intriguing nature of serving as a two-edged sword. It has the propensity to unite the country together as well as the capacity to further divide the nation. From the findings, respondents in this study indicated with confidence that Religion is implored by politicians to bridge the ethnic and linguistic divide and chart a path that makes the nation united. Political elites were

extremely important and relevant and should be maintained. It was also established from the interviews that religious capacity was explored extensively in the years of Olusegun Obasanjo as the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Obasanjo came to power in 1999 to interrupt the long epoch of successive military rule in Nigeria by Northern Muslims. Kukah (2012)<sup>9</sup> captures some of the things he did to win the support of both Christians and Muslims which included; the completion of the Ecumenical Centre (a project that was abandoned for over twenty years), the appointment of a Presidential Chaplain for the Villa, the construction of a Presidential Chapel in the same Villa, approval of creation of the Nigeria Inter-religious Council (NIREC), organisation of fundraising for the renovation of the National Mosque, Open participation in Muslim Ramadan and sharing in the breaking of fast, Development of strong relations with the Sultan of Sokoto (the spiritual head of the Muslim faithful in Nigeria), open acceptance of a Traditional Title from the Sultanate, maintained the tempo of support for the Muslim Pilgrimage These actions by Obasanjo made religious leaders to galvanize support for him and his political party from their members both in church and in the mosque. During his tenure, the Muslim/Christian divide was reduced to the barest minimum (*Ibid*).

The findings established that in Zambia, former president Edgar Chagwa Lungu used religion to unite people by building the National House of Prayer, introducing the Day of Prayer and Fasting, reintroducing the Ministry of National Guidance And Religious Affairs and declaring Zambia as a Christian Nation. Others are suggesting it is a good and right thing to do and the president should be supported on that. They suggest that Zambia as a Christian nation is on the right path to building the Lord's house in line with the command of God to build him a house as King Solomon was commanded in the past (Magasu *et al.* 2021)<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the findings revealed that in Egypt religion has been used to shape certain political struggles that are not religious in their base. The establishment of the State of Israel is the perfect example of religion being utilized to achieve political goals. Zionism, the political movement that supports the establishment of a homeland for the Jewish people, is not a religious movement. In my opinion, it is the political movement that was spurred in Europe by a mainly secular group of people (Hammad, 2007).<sup>11</sup>

Despite the majority of respondents perceiving the donations made by politicians to worshipping centres with positivity, there were some dissident informants with reserved views. One respondent from the Jehovah's Witness, for instance, narrated thus:

*From time immemorial their Church has never received any kind of help from politicians" He went on to say, that Jehovah's Witnesses are generally apolitical, and have on occasion flouted the ruling party by refusing to buy party membership cards and by abstaining from voting. In the late 1960s, this led to sporadic conflicts with the ruling party. For example, in a period of six months (July 1968 to January 1969), forty-five church buildings of the Society and 469 homes of the Witnesses were destroyed (Interview with a JW Christian, Kabwe, April 18, 2019).*

Other dissident responses are those that suggested respondents' negative perception of the tendency of politicians to go to religious places, especially during campaign periods, with selfish motives of seeking

votes in the pretext of worshipping. Such responses and perceptions echo some of the scholars' works that have reported political elites' tendency to use religion as a tool to exploit, suppress and control common people. It is clearly noted that man has used religion for power and supremacy. The most understandable reason for the political elites is to make an appeal to religion to use religious gatherings as exceptional platforms for political meetings. In such meetings, politicians try to create an impression that they are religious people and they also have the tendency to create the image of morality, trust, decency, honesty and graciousness. However, the findings also revealed that countries using religion as an instrument for political gains become security states. The countries where religion has no use for political gains become prosperous (Khan, 2020).

Political elites also use religion by utilizing religious jargon within the political discourse a subtle claim to divine approval of political decisions is made. Opposing political ideas are discredited by indicating the opposite through religious traditions. Divine wrath or evil upon the political opposition is invoked. Moyser (1991:15) indicates how some politicians still legitimize their rule in religious terms, even in a pluralistic society by giving preference to one religion. Politicians can also utilise religion in order to combat political threats and opposition. Zuma illustrates this concept by enforcing the idea that to vote for the ANC is to vote against Satan and his followers (*Ibid*).

In the wake of the above-obtaining interactions in the religious and political network interface, the Government of Zambia has always challenged the competence and mandate of religion to comment on political issues. Therefore, we can argue from the findings that religion has become a tool of exploitation to targeted groups. This is not a positive use of religious ideologies. As Khan (2020) observes, religion should be part of politics but in a constructive, not destructive way.

This study has also established that Politicians use religion in order to try and create an impression that they are religious people and they also have the tendency to create the image of morality, trust, decency, honesty and graciousness. A case can be cited for Egypt, for instance. Hammad (2007) further observes that when President Mubarak wanted to appeal to religious Muslims, he utilized Islamic metaphors and images. When he wanted to appeal to secular citizens and Coptic residents, he emphasized his regime's secularism and stance against religious parties. Mosques, churches, and a few synagogues were looked at through different points of view and the role of religion as a legitimate tool utilised by both the Muslim Brotherhood on one side and Mubarak on the other. Instead of religion being distinct and separate from the state apparatus, it is used as a function of that apparatus in Egypt (*Ibid*).

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

Religion has a significant role in our nation in strengthening governance. Understanding the role of religion is therefore central to effective development and humanitarian response and to building mutually beneficial partnerships across a wide range of issues and actors, through training and supporting citizens to engage with their governments, speaking out against abuse of power, and providing oversight for free and fair elections and democratic transitions. It has been able to do this due to its presence and reach into communities, the level of trust it enjoys and its impartiality in working for the common good, enabling it to cut through political debates. Religion mobilises citizens to engage in

democratic processes so that government policies support human flourishing. This has involved holding the government to account for their actions and seeking greater transparency and participation.

### 5.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers made the following recommendations:

1. In the wake of some division among religious leaders when it comes to involvement in political matters, as implied in the findings of this study, every religious group should help to encourage religious freedom where everybody will be free to seek the truth without any coercion or inhibition.
2. The government should, as a matter of necessity, handle religious matters with caution in order to prevent the misunderstanding and further allow religion to voice out when it feels the government is going out of track, without taking offence.

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