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The Nexus Of Politics, Religion, and Violent Extremism in Malawi

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi. The aim is to interrogate the influence of politics and religion on violent extremism in Malawi from 1891 to 2003. The study employs qualitative research methods, specifically historiography. It argues that the conflation of politics and religion serves as a linchpin and justification for violent extremism, subsequently impacting the security, stability, and peacebuilding efforts in Malawi. Violent religio-political extremism in Malawi condones, and enacts violence with ideological or deliberate intent, based on two main factors: religion and politics. This extremism is characterized by attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that reflect the extreme end of the political, religious, or ideological spectrum, thereby threatening the safety and security of the country. The article draws attention to the urgent need to address violent extremism in African communities by fostering peacebuilding, safety, and security.

Introduction

An interrogation of the nexus of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Africa presupposes the indispensability of religion, which acts as one of the underpinnings of the African holistic worldview, and human nature, which serves as a meeting point of these factors (Chilufya, 2021:165). Chitando (1997:76) argues that religion exerts an all-encompassing influence on most Africans because their existence is based on a religious underpinning. Mbiti (1990:1) states that the all-embracing influence of religion on African society

cannot be ignored because it has the potential to either positively or negatively impact political, socio-economic development, and influence the physical, psychological, spiritual, and health spheres. Chilufya (2021:166) contends that African religiosity and spirituality exert an incredible impact on African political discourses and practices to the extent of prompting violent extremism in various African communities. Chitando (2023:40) argues that African religious beliefs and practices contribute to political tensions and violent extremism on the African continent. Hence, this article launches from the premise that any fruitful discussion on violent extremism in Africa should be grounded in the context of religion and politics.

Religion encompasses a range of socio-cultural systems, behaviors, practices, ceremonies, festivals, morals, beliefs, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, and organizations that demonstrate the relationship between human beings and supernatural, transcendental, or spiritual elements (Mbiti, 1990:11-12). The article adopts the threefold definition of politics by Merriam-Webster (2002:23): (a) the art or science of government, (b) the art or science concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy, and (c) the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over a government. Heywood (2001:3-4) defines politics as "the activity through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live." Politics concerns the art of government, public affairs, compromise, and power. According to Bak, Tarp, and Liang (2019:8), violent extremism is defined as a violent type of mobilization that aims to elevate the status of one group while excluding or dominating its 'others' based on markers such as gender, religion, culture, and ethnicity. In doing so, violent extremist organizations destroy existing political and cultural institutions, supplanting them with alternative governance structures that operate according to the principles of a totalitarian and intolerant ideology.

Finally, radicalization is the process by which individuals are introduced to an overtly ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from moderate, mainstream beliefs towards extreme views, they then espouse or engage in violence or direct action as a means of promoting political, ideological, or religious extremism (Smith, 2009:1). Therefore, the article uses these definitions to engage with the discussion on the nexus of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi.

Annett et al. (2017:2) argue that the vision of religion is to promote the realization of shared well-being, respect for human dignity, and the advancement of the common good for all. However, religion has sometimes been misappropriated and used to generate ideological and political misrepresentations, resulting in violent extremism in Africa. Ellis and Ter Haar (1998:176) demonstrate that some African politicians employ religion to justify their abuse of power through violent extremism, causing harm and death to ordinary people, and jeopardizing the safety, security, peacebuilding, and developmental processes of their respective countries. Babatunde (2018:382) opines that some African religious leaders misread and misinterpret sacred texts, propagating false theologies to their followers to the extent of inciting violent extremism. For example, the leaders of Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and other Islamic jihadist groups have used Quranic texts to radicalize and recruit youth to engage in terrorism in countries such as Nigeria, Chad, Niger, Mali, and Cameroon. Maiangwa and Agbiboa (2014:52) explain that Boko Haram's acts of violent extremism and terrorism have included the abduction of schoolgirls from a boarding school in Chibok, forcing them to become slaves and offer sexual services to the jihadists.

Badurdeen and Bromley (2023) present extremism associated with Rev. Paul Nthenge Mackenzie, a Kenyan cult leader of Good News International Ministries. Rev. Paul Mackenzie propagated apocalyptic sermons and, in October 2017, was arrested by the Kenyan police for radicalising the youth Okwenbah (2023:1). Badurdeen and Bromley (2023) Mackenzie's second arrest in 2023 was in connection with the deaths of individuals under unclear circumstances. Before their deaths some members were allegedly held against their will, and physically restrained. The victims of these activities were said to be in the order of hundreds (Badurdeen and Bromley 2023; Kithi 2023)

According to Okoth (2023:1), some religious leaders from the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB), the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), and the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) accused the Kenyan government of political failure in dealing with crime. They observed that the criminal activities connected with Good News International Ministries and Rev. Paul Mackenzie in Shakahola had persisted for many years. During this time, Rev. Mackenzie had been arrested multiple times without sustaining a conviction, only to be released each time to continue his criminal

activities. This case represents possible collusion between the state and organized religious crime.

It is against the background of such cases that the article engages with the nexus of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi. In line with the aim of the study, the article is divided into four parts: (a) John Chilembwe and violent religio-political extremism in Malawi, (b) Ngwazi Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and violent religio-political extremism in Malawi, (c) Jehovah's Witnesses as victims of violent religio-political extremism in Malawi, and (d) Muslims and violent religio-political extremism in Malawi.

John Chilembwe and Religio-Political Violent Extremism in Malawi

McCracken and Ross, in their respective books "Politics and Christianity in Malawi, 1875-1940: The Impact of the Livingstonia Mission in the Northern Province" (2008) and "Blantyre Mission and the Making of Modern Malawi" (2018), demonstrate the intersectionality of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi. For instance, early Scottish Presbyterian missionaries and other Christian missionaries associated with various churches—Anglican, Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Church of Christ, and so on—played a crucial role in the formation of Nyasaland as a state, in close collaboration with the colonial administration. Ross (1996:15) argues that indigenous Malawians were impacted by mission education to the extent that they developed a liberation political theology and praxis in engaging with colonialism. These initiatives eventually led to Malawi's independence in 1964 and the post-colonial state, highlighting the intersectionality of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi.

Ross (1996:15) argues that extremism in Malawi can be historically traced to the influence of the Scottish Presbyterian missionaries who were instrumental in negotiating a deal that culminated in Malawi, formerly Nyasaland, becoming a British protectorate in 1891. Chakanza (1994) argues that, on one hand, the Christian mission stations in Malawi collaborated with the colonial authorities. On the other hand, these mission stations supplied the ideological bedrock that raised various 'African Independent Churches' which challenged both

missionary and colonial administrations. For instance, Rev. John Chilembwe, who was educated by the Blantyre Mission, influenced by Joseph Booth of the Zambezi Industrial Mission, and studied at the Virginia Theological Seminary at Lynchburg, USA, developed an indigenous liberation theology which culminated in violent religio-political extremism in 1915 (Mawerenga 2024:181-189).

Shepperson and Price (2000:267) argue that the 1915 Chilembwe uprising, which constituted an armed revolt against British colonial rule in Nyasaland, serves as an outstanding example of the intersectionality of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi. Ross (2020:188) argues that the 1915 Chilembwe uprising gives some clues as to how Chilembwe drew political conclusions from his Christian faith and developed a remarkably early indigenous liberation theology, which involved an armed struggle against colonial domination in Africa.

Three important questions to grapple with concerning the 1915 Chilembwe uprising are: (1) Was the uprising a result of a theological decision? (2) Was it an outworking of a public theology? (3) How can John Chilembwe's religio-political praxis exemplify the nexus of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi? Ross (2020:247, quoted in Mawerenga 2024:202) considers the basis of the uprising to be a combination of the evangelical faith with a radical social and political standpoint. The Baptist faith that cultivated a deep spirituality among the Providence Industrial Mission (P.I.M.) members also played a socio-political conscientization role regarding the injustice and violence of colonial rule.

According to Shepperson and Price (2000:270), Chilembwe's army attacked the Bruce estates on the Saturday night of 23 January 1915. The army moved from Mbombwe to Magomero, at the heart of A.L. Bruce Estates. Meanwhile, William J. Livingstone, the manager of the Bruce estates, together with his wife, was entertaining dinner guests: Mrs Ranald MacDonald, wife of the director of customs at Chiromo, and Mrs Emily Stanton, who together with her young child had come from Zomba to visit their sister-in-law, Alice Roach, the wife to J.T. Roach, the estate's engineer. Thus, on that fateful night, there were at least eleven Europeans at the Bruce estates.

Shepperson and Price (2000:270) explain some details of the attack, demonstrating the violent extremism that was used by Chilembwe's army. They also narrate how (2000:270) another regiment of Chilembwe's army approached a house where Mrs MacDonald was sleeping. However, her personal servant noticed through a window a large number of armed natives gathering outside. She then called the native servant who quickly came and helped them to escape through the window before the army had attacked them. He then whisked them away into the surrounding bushes and led them to village headman Jumbe, who was a *kapitawo* (foreman) at the Bruce estates. Jumbe then arranged that Mrs MacDonald should be carried on a hammock (*machila*) to a European planter, a Mr Charles Carmichael, based at Nachombo. Thus, Mr Charles Carmichael took Mrs MacDonald to Zomba where the rebellion was first reported to the colonial authorities.

Shepperson and Price (2000:271) narrate that Duncan MacCormick's houseboys had informed him of the attack at the Livingstones' house. He rushed to help but had underestimated the situation; hence, he carried no gun. Probably in his mind he was thinking that he would negotiate with the attackers and attain a peaceful resolution. Unfortunately, while he was on his way to the Livingstones' house, one assailant attacked him with a spear, eventually leading to his death.

Makondesa (2006:134) argues that Chilembwe's violent extremism led to the death of three white people: William Jervis Livingstone, Duncan MacCormick, and Robert Ferguson. John Robertson was wounded and three white women and five children were taken captive because John Chilembwe had instructed his army not to kill the women and children.

Phiri (1999:87) states that the colonial authorities' response in the aftermath of the Chilembwe uprising was characterised by violent extremism. For instance, the British colonial administration responded swiftly to the uprising with force and amassed many troops, policemen, and European settler volunteers to hunt down and kill the suspected rebels. It is estimated that about fifty of Chilembwe's followers were killed in the fighting or were summarily executed. McCracken (2012:143) argues that as a way of suppressing the rebellion, the colonial authorities impelled arbitrary retaliations against the indigenous African people, such as the mass burning of

their grass-thatched houses. This was followed by the sequestration of their weapons and an arbitrary fine of four shillings per person in the districts that were affected by the revolt, without prior determination of whether or not the person in question was involved in the rebellion.

Hynd (2010:547) argues that the colonial authorities convened a series of court hearings which passed death sentences on forty-six men for the offences of murder and treason, while 300 others were given prison sentences. However, the capital punishment which was meted out on Chilembwe's followers fell short of being a penal measure; rather it was used as a political tool for revenge and suppression of the uprising. Thirty-six convicts were executed and, to ensure that the uprising did not occur again, some of the ringleaders were publicly hanged on a main road close to the Bruce estates, in Magomero, where the three Europeans were killed. Shepperson and Price (2000:298) also narrate a story of four prisoners who were executed in Blantyre.

Makondesa (2006:138) contends that John Chilembwe was shot dead by the colonial forces either in Phalombe (Nyasaland) or along the border with Mozambique where he is thought to have been hiding. Nonetheless, it is difficult to determine with accuracy the events surrounding his death. Consequently, his death has been mythologised, spawning an array of different stories. Makondesa (2006:144) wrote that the PIM (Providence Industrial Mission) which served as the strategic hub for the 1915 Chilembwe uprising was shut down by the Nyasaland colonial government. The government further demolished its main church building, the New Jerusalem Baptist Church, by blowing it up with dynamite. The PIM was closed from 1915 until 1926 when Dr Daniel Malekebu reopened it. Thus, the 1915 Chilembwe uprising demonstrates the nexus of politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi.

Ngwazi Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and Violent Religio-Political Extremism in Malawi

Apyewen (2020:65) argues that the commingling of religious and political fanaticism in Africa causes some African politicians to use radical religious/political ideologies in a violent manner to secure power, exploit

national resources, and silence their perceived political enemies. Gentile and Mallett (2000:19) opine that the intersection of religion and politics often leads to the 'sacralization of politics.' They assert that:

The sacralization of politics means the formation of a religious dimension in politics that is distinct from, and autonomous of, traditional religious institutions. The sacralization of politics takes place when politics is conceived, lived, and represented through myths, rituals, and symbols that demand faith in the sacralized secular entity, dedication among the community of believers, enthusiasm for action, a warlike spirit, and sacrifice in order to secure its defence and its triumph. In such cases, it is possible to speak of religions of politics in that politics itself assumes religious characteristics.

Chirambo (2010:4) describes the sacralization of politics in Malawi by giving an example of Ngwazi Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, Malawi's first president, whose regime lasted for thirty years (1964-1994), mainly by using religion to consolidate his political reign. Shawa (2012:46-47) argues that Dr. Kamuzu Banda used religious institutions and religiosity to claim that it was God who enthroned him as Malawi's president, thus having divine approval for his political rule. Within his religio-political propaganda, he accepted titles such as Mpulumutsi (savior), Wamuyaya (the eternal one), and Messiah—titles used to refer to the deity in a Christian context.

Chirambo (2001:206) explains that Dr. Kamuzu Banda also allowed traditional songs performed at state functions to disseminate his religio-political propaganda. For example, one song sung by the Women's League from Rumph District demonstrates the religio-political indoctrination by purporting that, before the Ngwazi was born, he was chosen by God to be the leader of Malawi. The song goes:

Ba Ngwazi wandababike
Chiuta wakawasola
Kuwa Mulungozi withu muno m'Malawi.
Before the Ngwazi was born

God chose him
To be the leader of Malawi.

Chirambo (2001:206) argues that Dr. Kamuzu Banda was proclaimed "the father and founder of the Malawi nation," who was "God-sent" like Moses and Jesus in the Bible, to deliver Malawians from colonialism, thus becoming the savior (Mpulumutsi) and a political messiah. The songs were also used to give a religio-political vilification to all political dissenters as rebels (Zigawenga). Moreover, the songs justified the harsh punishment meted out to political dissenters. The punishments included the death sentence, life imprisonment, detention without trial, mysterious disappearances, exile, and confiscation of property. In other words, the songs, couched in the religio-political matrix, inflamed political, violent extremism by Dr. Kamuzu Banda against real or perceived enemies of his regime.

Mbewe (2018:5) maintains that religious leaders constantly alluded to the notion that Dr. Banda was a God-given leader for Malawi to entrench his religious consolidation of political power. Ross (1996) states that the Christian churches in Malawi contributed to the creation of Dr. Banda's totalitarian regime because they actively participated in the liberation struggle for independence by rendering support to freedom fighters such as Dr. Banda, Orton Chirwa, Gwanda Chakuamba, Kanyama Chiume, Dunduzu Chisiza, and others. This can be exemplified by a confession from the Blantyre Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP) in January 1993:

If we look at our own history as the CCAP during the time of the struggle for independence, we will see that Blantyre Synod was very much in support of the Nyasaland African Congress (later called the Malawi Congress Party, MCP). Because of our socio-political stance in favour of the MCP, after independence, the CCAP was aligned closely with the government and became so assimilated with the government's activities that the Synod was often invited to pray and participate as a Church at various government functions. However, because of this assimilation and alignment with the MCP, the Church gradually lost its ability to admonish or speak pastorally to the government. We do not

want to make the same mistake at this time to ensure that the Church retains its prophetic voice throughout the coming years of our country's history. (Quoted in Ross 1996:19)

Ross (1996:20) observes that, since most of the MCP freedom fighters were products of various mission schools and remained active church members, it became difficult for the church in Malawi to offer an independent critical stance against the gross human rights violations and lack of good governance prevalent in the country. The church's silence was costly to thousands of Malawians whose right to life and other human rights were greatly compromised. In other words, the church was complicit in Dr. Banda's totalitarian regime by offering unquestioning legitimacy to the one-party system of government and by failing to raise a prophetic voice against the socio-economic injustices prevalent in the country.

The Jehovah's Witnesses as Victims of Violent Religio-Political Extremism in Malawi

Kaiya (2013:37) argues that the nexus between politics, religion, and violent extremism in Malawi can further be elaborated through Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda's persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Malawi. They were persecuted for their refusal to buy the Malawi Congress Party's (MCP) membership card due to their belief that they had pledged their loyalty to Jehovah alone and not to a political party. They were also accused of refusing to vote because of their claim of being apolitical, which necessitated that they denounce the kingdoms of the world in pursuit of God's kingdom. Moreover, their refusal to engage in various political and developmental activities in Malawi frustrated the MCP's developmental vision for the country.

According to Vera Chirwa (2007:23), in one of Dr. Banda's speeches, he vented his anger against the Jehovah's Witnesses by describing them in the following way:

I am disappointed with the revival of fanatical sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. The truth is that they are not Jehovah's Witnesses but the Devil's Witnesses or Satan's Witnesses. I

will tell you why. Wherever they are, they cause trouble. They say they don't believe in government, they don't want to pay tax, and they don't want to engage in any political activity because they believe in God above in heaven. But, the moment they are in trouble, they run to the police, to the District Commissioner (D.C.), or the chief who are all part of the government. If the Young Pioneer or the Youth League just pinch them, they run to the police. If they were true Jehovah's Witnesses, then they should run to their church to pray to God and not run to the government. If you do not want to respect the government and only believe in God above, when you're in trouble go to the church and pray to God. Don't go to public school, hospital, or police. These people are stupid; don't let them trouble you. They are foolish, stupid. (Chirwa, 2007:23)

Banda (2024:6) writes that the MCP's annual convention, held on 10-18 September 1967 in Mzuzu, resolved to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses. They declared that:

We the delegates and representatives of all the people of Malawi in congress assembled, recommend strongly that the Jehovah's Witnesses denomination be declared illegal in this country as the attitude of its adherents is not only inimical to the progress of this country but also so negative in every way that it endangers the stability of peace and calm which is essential for the smooth running of our state. (Banda 2024:6)

The Jehovah's Witnesses yearbook of 1999 (Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses 1999:179) stated that:

The Jehovah's Witnesses religious organization has been declared 'dangerous to the good government of Malawi' and is therefore now an unlawful society. This announcement is made in a special Government Gazette Supplement published at the weekend. The notice No. 235 is signed personally by President Dr. Banda and declares that the action is taken under Section 70 (2) (ii) of the Malawi Penal Code. The effect

of the announcement is that the Jehovah's Witnesses may no longer hold meetings, sell or distribute literature, or collect money [...] The law affecting unlawful societies states that anyone who manages or assists in the management of an unlawful society is guilty of an offense and is liable to imprisonment for 14 years. Other sections of the law state that no member may allow a meeting of the society or of members of the society to be held in 'any house, building or place' belonging to him or occupied by him. The penalty here is a jail term of seven years. The Penal Code also provides for the search by police of any premises belonging to or occupied by the society or its members. No member may display signs, 'shout or utter any slogan,' or make any sign associated with the society. The law also provides for the appointment of an officer to wind up the affairs of an unlawful society.

Kaiya (2013:37) explains that an unprecedented wave of violence was unleashed against the Jehovah's Witnesses, including detention, torture, confiscation of their property, burning of their homes, and destruction of their crops in the fields. According to the *Awake!* magazine, the violent extremism against the Jehovah's Witnesses continued unabated. Since this is the way the Witnesses of Jehovah conduct themselves, why, then, all this violent persecution of them in Malawi? One of the main reasons is that the Witnesses refuse to buy membership cards for Malawi's Congress Party and refuse to buy and wear badges with the picture of President Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda. Other religious organizations, including Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim groups, have all yielded to pressure in these respects, but Jehovah's Witnesses have not. Why? Because of their strict adherence to the Word of God (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society 1968:71, 72).

Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to buy the Malawi Congress Party card, which declares the holder to be a member of the ruling political party of Malawi. For Jehovah's Witnesses, to buy a political card and thus join a political party would be an open denial of what they believe and stand for (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society 1976:5). Banda (2014:30) states that, as of January 1976, there were reportedly 5,000 Jehovah's Witnesses in detention centers at Dzaleka and Kanjedza prisons. Carver (1990:65) notes that the persecution was both

economic and physical, and it intensified after a September 1972 Malawi Congress Party meeting in Zomba, which stated that "all Jehovah's Witnesses should be dismissed from their employment; any firm which failed to comply would have its license cancelled."

Tengatenga (2006:113) writes that by November 1973, approximately 21,000 Jehovah's Witnesses had fled into exile in Zambia, with most housed at the Sinda Misale refugee camp. Other reports indicate that about 12,500 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses sought refuge in Mozambique. Banda (2024:7) observes that chiefs were empowered to expel Jehovah's Witnesses who resided in their jurisdictions. For instance, Chief Mabulabo of Mzimba reportedly expelled twenty-two Jehovah's Witnesses in October 1972 for hampering Malawi's developmental initiatives.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses yearbook (Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses 1999:188), the violent extremism also entailed discrimination at the community level:

Another one of the resolutions adopted at the convention stated that 'all Jehovah's Witnesses who live in the villages should be chased away from there.' This effectively called for Jehovah's Witnesses to be cast out of human society! Thousands of their homes were burned or pulled down. Their crops and animals destroyed. They were forbidden to draw water from the village wells. They lost everything they owned in looting sprees all over the country.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses yearbook (Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses 1999:172), the violent extremism against Jehovah's Witnesses in Malawi was horrific, as exemplified by the following narrative:

During this period, reports were received at the branch office showing that more than 100 Kingdom Halls and well over 1,000 homes of our brothers had been burned or torn down. Hundreds of fields and food stores were torched. Sadly, as a result, many families of Jehovah's Witnesses now found themselves without food or shelter. Some fled for their lives into neighbouring Mozambique. Many suffered severe beatings. Among these was Kenneth Chimbaza, a traveling

overseer. Not many years after experiencing such mistreatment, he died, evidently as a result of injuries that he had sustained.

Banda (2024) writes that Jehovah's Witnesses who fled Malawi also experienced persecution in their countries of refuge. For instance, in Zambia, they were harassed by members of the then-ruling United National Independence Party (UNIP) because of their refusal to salute the Zambian flag and stand when the national anthem was played. In Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Mozambique, Jehovah's Witnesses were also persecuted for their refusal to serve in the military and pledge allegiance to the government. In Tanzania, the then-president, Julius Nyerere, banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1968 because they had challenged his political and socio-economic ideologies anchored under the so-called Ujamaa (Cross 1978:307).

Fiedler (1996:150) states that the government's ban on Jehovah's Witnesses in Malawi was lifted in August 1993 during the country's political transition from a one-party state to a multi-party system of government. Banda (2024:7) states that the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania was legally registered in Malawi on 15 November 1993, granting Jehovah's Witnesses legal recognition to practice their religion in the country, in conformity with the freedom of worship.

The 2003 Muslim Violent Religio-Political Extremism in Malawi

According to CBS News (2003), the Muslim violent religio-political extremism in Malawi was precipitated by the arrest of five suspected Al Qaeda members. They were all foreign nationals but resident in Malawi and were suspected of running charities that laundered money to finance Al Qaeda terrorist activities. The suspects were arrested sparking protests. Mchombo (2005:1-2) reports how the resultant Muslim violent religio-political extremism in Malawi was witnessed in Blantyre, Kasungu, and Mangochi after Friday prayers (Salatul-Jumu'ah) on 27 June 2003. In Blantyre, the Muslims went on the rampage in the city streets interrupting traffic, vandalising the offices of the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM).

In Mangochi, the predominantly Muslim district in Malawi, the situation was completely out of control. The Muslims strategically attacked institutions with Christian links. For instance, they burned down churches of the following denominations: Assemblies of God, Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. They assailed a Roman Catholic priest, Father Gilevulo, and went on to overturn and burn his vehicle. They also went to attack the residence of Bishop Alessandro Assolari of the Mangochi Diocese; nonetheless, the police rushed swiftly to ensure safety and security. Save the Children offices as well as staff were attacked while the offices of the United Democratic Front (UDF), then the ruling party, were burnt. Some Muslim protesters were heard shouting that 'Mangochi is a Muslim district and has no place for Christianity and its American sponsorship' (Mchombo 2005:2).

Mchombo (2005:4) argues that the Muslims in Malawi interpreted the arrest of the five foreign nationals as an attack against their fellow Muslim brothers and Islam in general. They further alleged that this was a manifestation of the Islamophobia found in Western nations. Therefore, they engaged in violent religio-political extremism targeting Christian and American institutions in order to send a warning that they were prepared for a holy war (*jihad*) in defence of Islam.

Mchombo (2005:14) intimates that the protesting Muslims vandalised the offices of the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM) because of its perceived failure to influence the then president of Malawi, Bakili Muluzi, who is also a Muslim, to act against the arrest of the five suspected Al Qaeda operatives. Meanwhile, the United Democratic Front (UDF) offices were attacked as an expression of anger at the UDF government and President Bakili Muluzi's failure to protect the five suspected Al Qaeda operatives. Thus, the Muslim unrest in Malawi was against the backdrop of global geo-political developments exemplifying the nexus of politics, religion, and violent extremism.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that religion in Malawi plays a crucial role in shaping and influencing political discourses and violent extremism. The complex intersectionality between religion, politics, and violent extremism in Malawi has the potential to either positively promote socio-economic development or negatively impede it. The article argues that the nexus of politics and religion serves as a linchpin and justification for violent extremism in Malawi. Furthermore, political fanaticism and religious fundamentalism exacerbate, legitimize, and inflame various forms of violent extremism, essentially characterizing the beliefs and actions of people who use violence to achieve their goals. The article draws attention to the urgent need to disengage from violent religio-political extremism in Malawi by fostering reconciliation, peacebuilding, safety and security, mutual tolerance, coexistence, development, and overall well-being of the people.

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