NEW MUSLIM ACTIVISM IN KENYA

Sara Normann Thordsen
Studiekort nr. 19990725
Vejleder: Anne Mette Kjær
Antal ord: 39.969
NEW MUSLIM ACTIVISM IN KENYA

1. INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................................... 3

2. STUDYING ISLAM IN KENYA ...................................................................................................... 4
   2.1. DATA AND METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................. 7
   2.2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN KENYA .................................................. 11

3. STUDYING ISLAM AND MUSLIM SOCIO-POLITICAL ENDEAVOURS IN AFRICA ................. 13
   3.1. THE RESURGENCE AND SECURITISATION OF ISLAM IN AFRICA ...................................... 13
   3.2. “ISLAM IN AFRICA” VERSUS “AFRICAN ISLAM” – THE CONVENTIONAL PARADIGM .......... 16

4. MUSLIMS AND POLITICS IN AFRICA – AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK ................................. 18
   4.1. NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ISLAM AND MUSLIM SOCIO-POLITICAL ENDEAVOURS IN AFRICA ......................................................................................................................... 18
   4.2. MUSLIM ACTIVISM AS A REFLECTION OF STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS IN AFRICA .......... 20

5. MUSLIM ACTIVISM IN KENYA FROM A SOCIAL MOVEMENT PERSPECTIVE ........................... 22
   5.1. NEW MOBILISATION OF KENYAN MUSLIMS ........................................................................ 22
   5.2. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT ................................. 25

6. MUSLIM COPING STRATEGIES AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES IN HISTORICAL
   PERSPECTIVE ................................................................................................................................ 28
   6.1. MUSLIMS AND THE BRITISH COLONIAL STATE ....................................................................... 28
       6.1.1. MUSLIM GRIEVANCES IN COLONIAL KENYA – FROM HEGEMONY TO MARGINALISATION .. 28
       6.1.2. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITIES DURING BRITISH COLONIAL RULE .................................. 29
       6.1.3. MUSLIM COPING STRATEGIES DURING COLONIALISM .................................................. 31
   6.2. MUSLIMS AND THE POST-COLONIAL STATE .......................................................................... 34
       6.2.1. THE MUSLIM PREDICAMENT IN POST-COLONIAL KENYA .............................................. 34
       6.2.2. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES UNDER AUTHORITARIAN RULE .................. 35
       6.2.3. MUSLIM COPING STRATEGIES IN POST-COLONIAL KENYA .......................................... 37

7. MUSLIM POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND NEW MUSLIM MOBILISATION PATTERNS .................... 40
   7.1. MULTIPARTYISM AND THE ENLARGEMENT OF POLITICAL SPACE .................................... 40
   7.2. INSERTION OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY ON THE KENYAN POLITICAL STAGE .................. 41
       7.2.1. RISE AND FALL OF THE ISLAMIC PARTY OF KENYA ...................................................... 41
       7.2.2. MUSLIM POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND NEW ORGANISATIONAL PROLIFERATION ............. 43
   7.3. MUSLIMS COMING TOGETHER ................................................................................................. 47
       7.3.1. THE CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW PROCESS AND THE KADHI COURTS DISPUTE ............... 47
       7.3.2. NEW NATIONAL MUSLIM LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES ..................................................... 49
   7.4. NEW MUSLIM ACTIVISM AND CHANGING MUSLIM-STATE RELATIONS IN KENYA ............ 52

8. THE RISE OF A NEW MUSLIM RELIGIO-POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND IDENTITY .......... 55
   8.1. THE CULTURAL-RELIGIOUS SETTING: NEW ISLAMIC CONSCIENTISATION ............................ 55
   8.2. TRIGGERING FACTORS: THE KENYAN WAR AGAINST TERROR .............................................. 57
8.3. Framing Muslim activism and the reconstruction of Muslim identity in Kenya 59
  8.3.1. The framing perspective 59
  8.3.2. The politicisation of Muslim identity and the reconstruction of unity 61
  8.3.3. Reframing Islam and politics 64
  8.4. Understanding Muslim activism – beyond securitisation 66

9. Muslim activism and perspectives for political development in Kenya 69
  9.1. Religion and political development from below 69
  9.2. Civil society and democracy in Africa – prospects and constraints 71
  9.3. Muslim activism and democratic political development in Kenya 74
    9.3.1. A new Muslim voice of opposition 74
    9.3.2. Muslim activist organisation – an alternative popular participatory space 76
    9.3.3. Muslim activist organisations as facilitators of a civic democratic culture 77
    9.3.4. Muslim activism and civic engagement in Kenya 79

10. Conclusion 81

List of organisations 85
Personal Correspondences quoted 85
References 86
New Muslim Activism in Kenya

This thesis deals with changing patterns of interaction between the Muslim community and the state in Kenya, linked to the coming out of a series of new Muslim activist organisations. Especially in the course of the last decade, Muslim leaders have asserted a new collective Muslim identity within the increasingly liberal political space pointing to a new relationship between ‘Islam’ and politics in Kenya. Based on data personally collected from interviews with leading Kenyan Muslims activists it will be argued that this organisational proliferation must be understood as a reflection of general changes in state-society relations in the country. This proposal goes against conventional dealings with ‘political Islam’ as well as the traditional framework for understanding ‘Islam in Africa’. Such dealings tend to explain Muslim political behaviour with reference to the Islamic religious context. Instead, by using central tools borrowed from social movement theory it is possible to show how Muslim activism reflects a strategic exploitation of new political opportunities. A new generation of entrepreneurial Muslim leaders has thus been able to mobilise Kenyan Muslims by tapping into Islamic religious sentiments as well as the heightened dissatisfaction linked to the anti-terror policies of the Kenyan state. Looking at the wider potential repercussions of this new activist movement, it is furthermore argued that there is a need to go beyond the tendency to perceive Muslim political engagement in narrow security terms. Instead, Muslim activism might contribute constructively to the burgeoning civil society in the country.
1. Introduction

This thesis deals with changing patterns of interaction between the Muslim community and the state in Kenya. In the course of the last two decades, beginning with the short-lived but intense political experiment of the Islamic Party of Kenya established in 1991, the Kenyan Muslim community has started organising in new ways, resulting in the proliferation of new Muslim activist organisations. Triggered by what they see as the political and socio-economic marginalisation and discrimination of Muslims in Kenya, Muslim religious actors have increasingly entered into the political field. These claim a new collective role of the Muslim community within the public sphere by calling on Islamic identity for the mobilisation of ordinary Muslim citizens to fight for their social and political rights. This politicisation of Muslim religious identity has been accompanied by a new discourse of opposition and new forms of political engagement. While these events can partly be understood within the context of a larger global resurgence of Islam, it is the central contention here that they must first and foremost be understood in extension of the momentous local socio-political changes which have taken place in Kenya since the early 1990s, not least linked to Kenya’s ongoing democratisation process. Yet, rather than simply a reactionary response to the destabilising processes of social and political change, Muslim activist efforts can be seen as a conscious and creative strategic adaptation to local political realities, reflecting the proactive efforts of Kenyan Muslims to provide social and political change.

Taken together these Muslim activist organisations amount to drawing the contours of what can be called a movement for social and political change. This might yet be somewhat embryonic, but is still distinct in terms of clearly formulated collective goals and increasingly coordinated strategic efforts. At the head of this composite activist movement is a broad group of socially engaged entrepreneurial Islamic religious leaders, such as imams and Islamic religious scholars (ulama). Their religious authority and grassroots contact with ordinary Muslims, especially through the mosques, seem to provide them legitimacy in the eyes of the Muslim constituency on whose behalf they claim to speak. These are supported by a group of dedicated professionals who combine their professional skills and social status in society with a religious devotion to Islam to fight for the social empowerment of the Muslim community. In spite of the undeniable religious character of this movement, its goals are not primarily directed towards Islam as such. Rather, Islam seems to serve as a platform to present political demands and as a common denominator of identity and a mobilising force to serve other ends. In other words, what renders this a socio-political rather than merely a
religious movement is the instrumentalisation of Islamic religious symbols and values for the purpose of social and political gains.

As it will be shown, the proliferation of new Muslim activist organisations and the increasing politicisation of Muslim identity in many ways reflect a qualitatively new tendency in Kenya. The central question which will structure the following discussion is how we can explain these transformations in Muslim mobilisation patterns. In extension of this, it shall furthermore be reflected upon how these new religio-political associational activities might feed back on the development of a democratic public sphere in the country. No up to date study has so far, at least to my knowledge, subjected this Muslim activist movement to systematic or in-depth scrutiny. The answer to these questions relies primarily on fieldwork studies carried out in the spring of 2007 through qualitative interviews with a broad range of mostly high-ranking Muslim activist leaders.

Insofar as the Kenyan Muslim community has been object of recent scholarly attention, this has almost exclusively been from a security perspective, spurred by the fear that such organised Muslim socio-political endeavours reflect a religio-political radicalisation. This tendency to perceive of Muslim political actors in terms of either ‘moderates’ or ‘radicals’ has been a common feature of most conventional dealings with ‘political Islam’ (Esposito 1994), a tendency which has been strengthened especially after 9/11. In the Kenyan context, this fear has not least been nourished by the fact that Kenya twice, in 1998 and 2002, has been the target of terrorist attacks at the hands of radical Islamist groups. Interest in Kenyan Muslim activities has consequently tended to circle around the question of to what degree we are presently witnessing a political or religious radicalisation, possibly transforming the Kenyan Muslim community into a breeding ground for terrorism or other forms of Islamic militancy (c.f. Møller 2006; Carson 2005; Ousman 2004; Haynes 2005).

The present attempt to understand Muslim activist endeavours in Kenya inscribes itself within a broader research agenda about the role of religion in general and Islam in particular as a source of popular socio-political mobilisation. This research agenda has produced countless studies on the spread of “political Islam” or “Islamism” especially in the context of Muslim-dominated Middle Eastern countries. By contrast, fairly little scholarly attention has been devoted to such Islamic movements in sub-Saharan Africa and to African Muslims’ increasing engagement with politics and the state. Basically we still know very little about the dynamics of Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa and especially their interaction with the state or their impact on African political development. Insofar as interest in African Muslims has increased in the past few years, this has not least been a product of the new
international security agenda following 9/11, spurred by the fear that Africa might become a new breeding ground for terrorism. Underneath the monolithic façade of radical Islam however, a broader and much more complex picture of Muslim political engagement emerges. Unfortunately, because the context of Islamic terrorism or radicalism has come to provide the lenses through which the issue is approached, much of the conventional scholarship exhibit a deficient understanding of both the nature and political relevance of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa. This is mainly so because it fails to consider the local historical and political context within which these political activities emerge (c.f. Otayek and Soares 2007: 4ff).

As it will be argued, there are two problems with the conventional paradigm for studying Islam and Muslim societies in Africa. First of all it tends to focus too narrowly on the potentially destabilising effects of such Muslim socio-political endeavours; and secondly it largely provides us with a deficient model of understanding. This deficiency stems from a tendency to focus too unilaterally on the importance of Islamic ideas for Muslim political practice. This has induced observers to look for inherent attributes within Islam which predispose Muslim political behaviour rather engaging in empirical investigation of concrete Muslim practices and reasoning (c.f. Villalón 1995: 3). Within the literature on ‘Islam in Africa’ these presumptions have generally translated into an exaggeration of the role of Islamic religious ideas for explaining new forms of Muslim socio-political mobilisation and engagement. Particularly the introduction of new reformist doctrines, often imported from Middle Eastern countries, is seen to reflect the spread of radial forms of Islamism spurred by a wish to replace Western liberal models of development with Islam as a political model.

As it will be argued however, there is a need to apply alternative perspectives in order to understand the recent mobilisation of Kenyan Muslims. By turning attention away from Islam as the main framework of understanding towards historically and sociologically contextualised analysis we can arrive at a more adequate understanding about African Muslim societies and their interaction with and effects on socio-political context. The central contention which structures the following analysis is that the recent activist mobilisation of Kenyan Muslims instead can be seen as a reflection of and an active response to changing patterns of state-society interactions in the country. As such a perspective reveals, new Muslim activism in Kenya can be seen to reflect the creative adaptation of a specific religiously defined societal group to changing power relations in society in connection with the recent political restructuring of the post-colonial Kenyan state. By using some of the central analytical concepts from social movement theory, notably those of political
opportunity structures and framing processes, it is possible to sort out regularities and explanatory principles to better understand not only the emergence and solidification of such new forms of collective behaviour but also the transformation of Muslim identity which this seems to entail. Whereas the primary part of the study focuses around the question of how to understand the emergence of new Muslim activism, it is interesting from a sociological and politological perspective first and foremost due to the potential wider repercussions this movement might have. In extension of the first question, the final part of the study will seek to understand the potential repercussions which this increasing public assertion of Muslim religious identity might have for the prospects for the development of a democratic, civic public realm in Kenya.

2. Studying Islam in Kenya
2.1. Data and methodology
Any study intending to investigate the religious or socio-political dynamics of African Muslim societies is necessarily heavily encumbered by the general paucity of empirical data available about the subject. This is no less the case for the Kenyan context in which Muslims, being a minority population, only have received minor scholarly attention. Existing literature about Islam in Kenya can broadly be categorised into three parts. One field of research centers on theological developments and local religious and intellectual life as well as the indigenous conflicts surrounding it (e.g. Kresse 2003; 2006; 2007; Seesemann 2006; Loimeier 2003; Salim 1987; Salim 1985; Pouwels 1981, Bakari 1995). A second group of observers deal with a broad range of historical, social, economic and political aspects of Islam. On the one hand, a few valuable studies deal with early pre-colonial and colonial Muslim history (e.g. Pouwells 1987; Salim 1973; Bang 2003; Mwakimako 2004) while another series of studies addresses more contemporary aspects of Muslim organisational patterns and interactions with politics and society (see Oded 2000; O’Brien 2003; Constantin 1993; 1995; Mwakimako 1995; Bakari 1995a). Finally, Islam in Kenya has recently become the target of attention from international observers interested in the prospects of Islamic radicalisation, linked to the fear that Kenya should become a breeding ground for Islamic terrorism (e.g. Carson 2005; McCormack 2005; Haynes 2005; Ousman 2004). While many of these studies provide a useful starting point, they do not, taken together, provide a sufficient foundation for studying contemporary Muslim practice and organisational patterns and how these relate to the broader socio-political factory in Kenya. Especially the period after the rise and fall of IPK, the focus of this thesis, has never has been dealt with in detail.
The present study was initiated by a two-month period of field research from March to April 2007 with the aim of collecting empirical knowledge about new Muslim activism in Kenya. This mainly took place in Mombasa supplied with a shorter period of field work in Nairobi. It is primarily based on personal conversations with leading Muslim activists, comprising 42 qualitative semi-structured interviews of varying duration, ranging from 30 minutes up to three hours. All interviews took place in English and were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Prior to my arrival, I had achieved contact information for a few Muslim activist leaders through personal acquaintances at the Danish and Moroccan Embassies in Kenya. One of my central informants from the outset was Sheikh Muhamad Dor, secretary general of CIPK and one of the most outspoken Muslim activist leaders at the national level. By providing me with contact information to many important respondents, he proved a good help in my further research. Given the widespread dispersion of mobile phones, it was easy to get into contact with people. Most of the people I contacted were willing to meet and all correspondents offered their time and assistance for free.

Throughout my field work, I managed to create a large network of contacts among the higher echelons of the Muslim leadership in Kenya. This comprised leaders within the religious field, including the Chief Kadhi and various high-ranking Islamic scholars, as well as at the political level, including national Muslim politicians such as Najib Balala, presently one of the front figures within ODM. The central horde of correspondents consisted of leading Muslim activists and members of the most important Muslim organisations, including religious leaders’ organisations such as CIPK, KAULI, KCUI and Majlis Ulama; social and civic activist organisations such as MUHURI, MCET and MEWA, as well as the two national umbrella organisations in the country, NAMLEF and SUPKEM. Besides the interviews as well as the observations these allowed me to make, I collected various forms of written material including national newspapers, pamphlets and organisational profiles published by the organisations themselves, as well as the *Friday Bulletin*, a weekly Kenyan Muslim publication which serves as the national mouthpiece for Muslim activists and various formal statements by Muslim leaders published on the webpage of the Nairobi-based Jamia Mosque.¹

Questions generally focused on the nature and scope of Muslim activist organisations, organisational structures and modes of operation as well as the character of inter-organisational and inter-personal networks and relations. This also entailed enquiries about how Muslims relate to and engage with state and society, how they themselves perceived the role of Islam and religious doctrines in this struggle, as well as how the actors involved

¹ See www.islamkenya.com
perceive their predicament and envisage their goals and pursue these strategically. The scarce information available prior to the study did not allow beforehand to form an overview of the nature, scope and implications of current Muslim organisational activities and precise qualitative hypotheses were difficult to formulate. An explorative and open-ended research set-up was therefore required. The expectations which structured the initial investigation were mostly based on the available literature on Islam in Kenya described above as well as about Islam in sub-Saharan Africa in general. Yet, the central expectation to be derived from conventional studies of Islam in Africa, namely that the intensification of Muslim organisational and socio-political practices reflects a religious ‘radicalisation’ linked to the spread of new Islamist ideas, soon proved unfertile as an overall framework of understanding. When explaining the impetus behind their endeavours Muslim leaders never offered theological justifications but almost univocally referred to political and socio-economic problems and grievances. Instead, additional lines of inquiry were opened up along the line, derived from information gathered about how participants themselves perceived and rationalised their struggle.

People who accepted to talk to me were generally friendly and open, though certain people also showed a certain reticence due to my Western and non-Muslim origin. This reluctance must not least be seen in extension of the war against terror where Western and notably American foreign intelligence services have started to show increasing interest in Muslim associational activities in the country, at times with detrimental effects for innocent Muslims. My identity as a political science student from Denmark with no organisational or governmental affiliation was generally accepted. However, some people also let me know that talking to me was a risk since I could in principle be a CIA agent with hostile intentions, even though they accepted to answer my questions because they had “nothing to hide”.

On the other hand, it was clear that certain activists partly considered me a ‘window of opportunity’ to create wider awareness about Muslim suffering and hardship as well as to present their struggle in favourable terms. This also seemed to be spurred by a wish to establish or consolidate funding relations with Western donor agencies, for example the Danish Foreign Ministry which has been funding a range of these Muslim organisations under the programme of “Peace, Security and Development” (see Danida 2006: 40f). Given that the Muslim respondents had various interests in my perceptions and reporting of their activities, it is of course expectable that this will influence their responses to my questions. On the other hand, the interviews provided a valuable source of Kenyan Muslim discourse including the
legitimising strategies and subjective perceptions and expectations of leading Muslim representatives.

The methodological procedure applied was a top-down approach, focusing on the leadership level. Such an approach is advantageous since it is easier to identify leaders than informal networks and unorganised constituencies. It is also at the leadership level you can expect to find the central agenda-setters and opinion-makers that play a central role in mobilising the Muslim populace. A central objective was to understand the subjective perspective of the central actors involved and how leading Muslim activists themselves interpret and perceive their activity. In other words, it is an attempt to understand this movement from within by giving value to the points of view of the leading participants and their interpretations of Muslim problems and goals. Such subjective perceptions hold an important key to understanding the nature of any movement since it the way actors perceive of their situation largely determines how they define their strategies and goals. Furthermore, in order to answer the research question put forward, this participant perspective has been combined with a more objective and contextualising approach linking it to the broader political and historical background.

Because of the limited time and resources available for the collection of data, the scope of the conclusions to be drawn is of course limited by a number of factors. One of these stems from the top-down approach applied which does not allow estimating the actual popular resonance of these activist organisations. A second methodological difficulty arises from the geographical bias of the field work which was mainly done in Mombasa as well as a smaller part in Nairobi. This implies that it is mainly the problems and worldview of the Swahili-dominated coastal Muslim community that are at the center of the analysis which to some extent can be expected to differ from those of other Muslim groups in Kenya, not least due the special historical experience of the Coastal strip. Still, Mombasa is both historically and at present considered the most important Muslim center in Kenya which comprises a vast part of Kenyan Muslims and holds the office of the Chief Kadhi, the highest Islamic-religious authority in Kenya. Mombasa has also traditionally been center for Muslim activities and initiatives in the country. To compensate for this bias, a part of the fieldwork was carried out in Nairobi, in activist organisations connected to the Jamia Mosque, the richest and biggest Islamic center of worship in East Africa. Besides, a certain concurrence between Muslim activist aspirations can be presumed given the increasingly formalised structures of corporation and coordination between Muslims from all over Kenya. In brief, the empirical investigation underlying the present study can of course only aspire to fill in a small part of
the vast gap which exists in our general knowledge about the actual dynamics of Muslim societies in Africa in general and Kenya in particular. Yet, the data available do allow us to point out central tendencies and inclinations, not least when presented within a broader historical framework.

2.2. An overview of the Muslim community in Kenya

The earliest evidence of Islamic presence in the area which constitutes present-day Kenya is silver and copper coins, found in Lamu, dated 830 AD (Pouwels 2000: 266). Islam in Kenya has been closely linked to the coastal region where it developed as the by-product of commercial exchanges between Africans and Arab Muslims. This incorporation of East Africa into the world of the West Indian Ocean through trade reinforced a process of ethnic mixing between Arabs and Persians on the one hand and native Bantus on the other which gave rise to a distinctive urban Muslim community known as Swahili (Pouwels 2000: 251f; Hiskett 1994: 162; Salim 1979: 60). This Swahili civilisation is said to hold one of the most venerable Islamic traditions in sub-Saharan Africa (Pouwels 2000: 252; 254ff; Lodhi 1994: 88).

Islam remained almost exclusively a phenomenon of the seaboard of the Indian Ocean until the 19th century since when it started to spread to the rest of the country (Salim 1979: 61). Today, Islam remains concentrated in distinct geographical areas. On the coastal strip, especially in towns such as Mombasa, Malindi and Lamu, Muslims constitute the majority of the population. Besides, Muslims are concentrated in the North Eastern Province, where most residents are Somalis, all of whom are generally held be Muslims. Muslims are spread over the rest of Kenya, with considerable Muslim populations in large towns such as Nairobi, Kisumu, Nakuru and Eldoret, and in the areas of Mumias and Homa Bay (Oded 2000: 11f). No officially recognised statistics exist about percentage of Muslims in Kenya. Historically, the question has been a matter of heated debates between Christians, who often claim the percentage of Muslims in Kenya to be between 2 and 6 percent, and Muslims who typically claim to constitute around a third of the population (Oded 2000: 12). Academic estimates range between 8-10 percent (O’Brien 2003: 98; Crozon 1998: 169) and 20-25 percent (Oded 2000: 11; Seesemann 2006: 234). Such uncertainties put aside, it can be stated that Muslims constitute a significant minority population in Kenya, whose socio-political importance is especially evident in areas where they are concentrated.

The Muslim community, the umma, expresses theoretical unity and equality of believers, beyond cultural, ethnic and geographical settings, and is simultaneously understood
as a religious and a political community since there is in Islam a close nexus between religion and politics (Esposito 2003: 327; Mwakimako 2007a: 16). Yet, while Islam in Kenya has generally served as strong unifying symbol at the socio-religious level which has been able to unite Kenyan Muslims politically in situations where Islam is considered to be under threat, the Muslim community has historically not acted as a single constituency on general political issues. Instead, Muslim religious identity has typically been mingled with other identity factors, including ethnic and socio-economic.

Historically, contact between Muslims in different geographical regions of Kenya has not always been strong. Islam is in Kenya more an urban than a rural phenomenon and also the communication between Muslims in urban and rural areas has historically been weak. Especially at the coast, this urban/rural division has generally been reinforced by an ethnic or racial dividing line between the Arab-Swahili population of the urban centres and the ‘black’ African Mijikenda Muslims, many of whom populate the rural areas (O’Brien 1995: 207f, cf. Sperling 1993). Such ethnic divisions have at times given rise to heated socio-political conflicts, especially among coastal Muslims (see Mwakimako 2007a: 17).

The Muslim community is also characterised by important religious-ideological divisions. The large majority (around 90%) of Kenyan Muslims adhere to Sunni Islam. The dominant school of thought among Kenyan Sunni Muslims is Shafii, originating from the Hadramaut. Historically Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, has been prevalent among traditional Sunni sheikhs, notably the powerful Sharif families (Oded 2002: 11ff). In contrast to Tanzania and Uganda, Sufi inclinations in Kenya have not resulted in strongly organised popular Sufi brotherhoods, the so-called tariqas, and Islam has generally been less well organised in Kenya than in the rest of East Africa. While the popular Qadiriyya tariqa has enjoyed prevalence in some parts of Kenya, the dominant tariqa in Kenya has been the Alawiyya, a loosely organised and generally non-inclusive family network of Hadrami origin (see Bang 2003). Since the 1970s, Saudi-inspired anti-Sufi Wahhabi doctrines have become increasingly widespread, resulting in widespread sectarian conflicts among Sunni Muslims (Bakari 1995).

Besides the Sunni Muslim community with whom this thesis deals, there is also a significant Shi’a Muslim minority, mostly of Asian origin. Even though Sunni scholars who have uttered shi’a religious sympathies have been unwelcomed by the Sunni Muslim establishment (cf. Kresse 2004), relations between Sunnis and Shi’as in Kenya have generally been cordial. Compared to the Sunnis, Shi’as Muslims have generally been better organised, especially the Ismailis whose religious, social and fiscal affairs are highly centralised under

---

2 Unless else is pointed out, references to the Muslim community in the following refer to the Sunni Muslim community.
their spiritual world leader, the Aga Khan. These run a large number of social and charitable activities including well-functioning schools and hospitals. Shi’a Muslims have mostly stayed out of politics and are generally well-integrated into Kenyan society (cf. Mwakimako 2007a: 19; Oded 2000: 16f; Walji 1995).

Comparatively, the Sunni Muslim community has been more internally divided in both ethnic and religious terms and also less well-organised. Historically, socio-political unity among Sunni Muslims has never been strong. Because of the lack of effective Muslim political leadership at the level of parliament and government as well as the co-option of the Supreme national Muslim leadership organisation (SUPKEM) into the clientelistic structures of the state, the Muslim community has never historically served as a significant voice of opposition. The Muslim community at large has therefore never been at the core of the forces for change in the country, neither during the struggle for independence, nor in the popular fight to end authoritarian rule. Yet, recent developments have brought about important changes in patterns of mobilisation among Kenya’s Sunni Muslim community, leading to the reassertion of new Muslim voices within national public political space outside of the established leadership structures such as SUPKEM.

Since the introduction of democratic political reforms in the early 1990s, the character of Muslim leadership and organisational patterns has thus undergone profound transformations. Headed by a composite group of Muslim activist leaders, this has manifested itself through the mushrooming of new Muslim organisations. This has led to attempts to create new national representative structures and to insert the Muslim community as a united socio-political constituency aiming to enhance the socio-economic and political status of Muslims at large. It is this transformation in Muslim patterns of mobilisation and the invention of new strategies to assert Muslim identity within the Kenyan public sphere which is at the center of the attention in the following.

3. Studying Islam and Muslim socio-political endeavours in Africa
3.1. The resurgence and securitisation of Islam in Africa
The proliferation of new forms of organisations and the assertion of Muslim religious identity into the public political sphere in Kenya is not simply a local, endemic phenomenon. Instead it can be seen in extension of a much broader resurgence of Islam and popular Muslim politics during the latter part of the 20th century. To Muslims across the world, Islam has thus increasingly come to serve as a denominator of identity and a leitmotif for social and political change. This has been felt in terms of an enhanced role of religious symbols in the public
political sphere and the mushrooming of new religious associations and organisations. New religiously defined actors have thus inserted themselves at the political stage, engaged with addressing concerns that transcend the mere spiritual or religion needs of their adherents (Esposito 2005: 158; Esposito 2000: 8).

This popular Islamic resurgence has also reached Africa. Particularly in the course of the last three decades, new forms of Muslim socio-political activism and new patterns of organisation have developed on the continent. This ranges from more or less informal community-based groups and grassroots activities (c.f. Mazrui 2001) to formally organised and often officially registered Muslim NGOs (c.f. Salih 2004). These different organisations have engaged into a wide range of strategies ranging from spiritual and moral guidance and attempts to offer socio-economic alleviation through the establishment of hospitals, clinics and schools to more explicit forms of political protest (Westerlund 1997: 322; Loimeier 2003: 241). Today, the presence such Muslim activism seems to have led to a much more pronounced public presence of Islam within many African societies pointing to an increasing recourse to Islam and Muslim religious identity as a means to solve the myriad of social and political problems confronting Muslims (Otayek and Soares 2007: 7c.f. Ousman 2004: 75, 82; Mazrui 2001: 18).

While popular Islamic resurgence has received widespread attention especially in Middle Eastern Muslim countries, sub-Saharan Africa has typically not been regarded as an integrated part of the wider world of Islam. The study of Islam and Muslim societies in Africa has therefore for many years suffered from a general scholarly neglect (c.f. Reese 2004: 1ff). Basically we know relatively little about the internal dynamics of Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa as well as their interactions with their local socio-political surroundings. Insofar as Islam in Africa increasingly has come to the center of global attention, this must not least be understood in extension of the fear that global Islamic militancy or Islamist insurgency might gain ground on the continent. With issues like militant Islamists taking over vast parts of southern Somalia, the implementation of *shari‘a* penal codes in Northern Nigeria and al-Qaeda related terrorist attacks the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam reaching the headlines of the global media, alarmist observers have had ample foundations on which to base their fear. The fact that such violent episodes cannot be seen to epitomise the complex reality of Muslim socio-political engagement has often been overlooked by Western observers due to what Esposito (2003: 3) describes as a “selective headline or crisis-oriented approach to Muslim politics”.

Especially since 9/11, Islam in Africa has started to become object of increasing attention from both academics and international policy-makers based on the widespread fear that Africa might become a breeding ground for Islamic terrorist networks. This concern has been reinforced by the fear that Africa’s many “weak” or “failed” states characterised by highly porous land and sea borders and largely dysfunctional structures of law enforcement potentially might offer a vacuum for terrorists to exploit (Haynes 2005: 1326). This has led to the reinterpretation of Africa’s position within the global security structure, linking the interest in Islamic developments in sub-Saharan Africa with international security concerns. Whereas sub-Saharan Africa had largely been diminished as an inconsequential piece in the global security architecture after the Cold War, the fear of “radical Islam” in the wake of 9/11 has once again made Africa the target of major American foreign policy initiatives.3

On the other hand, the concern about the spread of Muslim politics in Africa cannot least be ascribed to the tendency to subsume all Muslim political endeavours under the notion of Islamism, understood as a political ideology searching to reform state and society in accordance with the tenets of Islamic law (shari’a) and eventually aimed at the installation of an Islamic state (Rubin 2007: 6f; Ousman 2004: 65). Muslim politics is in this version not only seen as a threat to security but also as incompatible with and detrimental to Western notions of democratic political development. The lack of substantial separation between religion and politics in Islam is seen an impediment to the implementation of liberal democracy in which the rule of law is based on the autonomy of the religious and the political sphere (Haynes 1993: 3). Thus, whereas in a liberal democracy all value systems are bound to be reassessed, Islamists maintain that God, revelation and the Prophet are the only source of true knowledge, just law and proper ethical values (Arkoun 2002: 43f).

Though commonly asserted, the claim that Islamism or Islamic terrorism is on the rise throughout sub-Saharan Africa is generally poorly substantiated. With the exceptions of maybe Northern Nigeria, Somalia and Sudan, Islamism remains a relatively marginal phenomenon in Africa (Otayek and Soares 2007: 14f; Ousman 2004: 97). Unfortunately however, because this new era of security concerns has largely come to mould the general approach to the study of Islam in Africa, the question of African Muslims’ active engagement in the state has mainly been limited to the question of its possible radical political manifestations. As Otayek and Soeares (2007: 6) point out, much recent commentary on

---

3 This is manifested for instance through the implementation a number of major U.S. sponsored counterterrorism initiatives, such as the Pan Sahel Initiative (2002-2004), the East African Counterterrorism Initiative (2003-), and the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (2005-).
Islam in Africa has thus been superficial and alarmist, focusing almost exclusively on issues of international security such as looking for links to foreign Muslim radicals.

3.2. “Islam in Africa” versus “African Islam” – the conventional paradigm

In their highly influential edited volume, *African Islam and Islam in Africa*, this has set much of the discourse for the study of African Muslim societies, Rosander and Westerlund (1997) claim that “Islamism”, understood as “a new religious orientation, reformist and radical”, is on the rise in virtually all African Muslim societies (Rosander 1997: 10). In recent decades, Islamist organisations are said to have formed in virtually all parts of Africa, whose impact is felt in the religious, socio-economic and political fields as a force of opposition and resistance (Westerlund 1997: 308). Within this scheme, the emergence of new forms of activism among African Muslims has largely come to be understood as a result of the importation of ‘foreign’ Islamic doctrines as African Muslim societies have increasingly opened up to new global influences. The increasing politicisation of Muslim identity is thus seen as the result of a process of increasing religious radicalisation, resulting from the increasing ideological and doctrinal inspirations from the Middle Eastern countries, reflecting a rupture from the local African tradition.

The radicalisation thesis inherent in this scheme of understanding is based on the presumption that a special kind of “African Islam”, often equated with Sufism, traditionally has predominated the continent: This has largely developed in isolation and differs in its essence from “Arab” or Middle Eastern forms of Islam, not least since Islam in Africa has historically developed by incorporating local African cultural practices. The outcome is typically seen to be the prevalence of culturally and politically accommodating African Muslim communities, allegedly defined by a great religious tolerance. These are said to follow their own orthodoxies characterised by a less rigid or less doctrinally puritan understanding of the pillars of the faith (the Quran and the *Sunna*) compared to the orthodox and more “fundamentalist” versions of Islam, notably found in core Arab-Muslim countries (Ousman 2004: 73f; Haynes 2004: 85; Rosander and Westerlund 1997).

Since the 1970s however, a series of new Islamic religious developments have wiped through the African continent in ways that have fundamentally changed this conventional picture of “African Islam”. This is linked not least to the spread of new reformist doctrinal influences among African Muslims which are often vehemently anti-Sufi in orientation. Especially the increasing prevalence of orthodox Wahhabi-inspired reformist doctrines among African Muslims has been taken as a proof that Islamism is gaining ground.
(Westerlund 1997: 309ff). Even though the Wahhabi school of thought, which is the formal state creed of the present-day Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, should not in itself be mistaken for an Islamist doctrine, it is often believed to be a portal towards Islamism, partly because it trains people to believe in a stricter and less tolerant form of Islam, partly because Saudi Arabia has traditionally been funding radical Islamist groups and institutions around the world (Rubin 2007: 6). Such reformist doctrinal transformations have come to be seen as evidence of an increasing radicalisation of African Muslims, resulting in the corrosion of the traditionally moderate Islamic traditions, eventually posing a challenge to central authority (McCormack 2005: 2; 15; c.f. Marchesin 2003).

The spread of such new reformist trends can largely be seen as the product of a process whereby African Muslim communities have become increasingly integrated into the global Islamic oecumene, largely a result of the rapid increase in the speed and intensity of the interconnections between sub-Saharan Africa and the global Muslim community, notably in the field of education. This has allowed ideas to be exchanged at a previously unprecedented level, exposing African Muslims to ‘new’ ‘global’ religious ideas and structures that are typically seen to be at odds with local African Islamic traditions and practices (Hunwick 1997: 29f; 50). The alleged emergence of “Islamism” on the African continent is thus depicted as a basically foreign ideological import marking “the end of the period of religious tolerance of local Islam” (Chande 2000: 349; c.f. Rosander 1997: 1f; 4f).

At best however, the attempt to understand new Muslim socio-political practices in extension of these recent religious transformations only provides a deficient understanding of the practical realities of concrete Muslim groups and individuals. The problem with this paradigm is not only that it tends to present Islamic dynamics in Africa in too simplistic and dichotomous terms, such as local African Islam (Sufism) versus global Islamism (reformism/Wahhabism), moderates versus radicals, apolitical versus political etc. (see Seesemann 2006). Another important problem stems from its tendency to assume that such Islamic ideas and doctrines constitute the primary determinant for Muslim socio-political behaviour and endeavours. The result has been an excessive focus on (universal) Islamic ideas rather than actual and locally grounded Muslim practice and reasoning.

There is, as Soares (2007: 320) points out, thus “a real urgency to devise new tools and analytical optics for studying Islam and Muslim societies in Africa”. The assumption that ‘Islam’ has a unitary political role which can be uncovered transversely across different Muslim societies is flawed and seems to be based on the notion that there exists a “uniform and consistent set of beliefs which is common to all (or at least most) Muslim societies and
that guides the actions of individuals in these societies” (Villaón 1995: 28). Even if as a transcendental system of belief, Islam must be considered one, Islam must be seen as a “living religion which is constantly being reinterpreted and re-understood by those who adhere to its doctrines” (Brenner 2001: 3). It is then, as Kadioglu (2005: 26) points out, “misleading to portray Islam as an undivided whole and those who choose to be Muslims as adherents of a homogenous worldview”.

Instead, it is arguably necessary to find an approach which allows taking into account the perspective of Muslim participants, their practical reality and pragmatic concerns and how they themselves perceive of and rationalise their activities (cf. Sutton and Vertigans 2005: 89). This entails moving away from theoretical and abstract notions of some kind of universal Islam to the study of concrete Muslim communities and their practices and dynamics in interaction with their local contexts. As it will be argued in the following, in order to understand the nature, goals as well concrete political consequences of any particular Muslim socio-political endeavours it is necessary to move beyond an exceptionalist focus on Islam or Islamic ideas as the primary framework and to engage in contextualised analyses which emphasise the concrete social and political locus of Muslim expressions.

4. Muslims and politics in Africa – an alternative framework

4.1. New perspectives on Islam and Muslim socio-political endeavours in Africa

When seeking to understand the emergence of new forms of activism in Kenya an alternative framework of understanding is needed. As a correction to the prevailing framework for understanding ‘Islam in Africa’ it can be argued that a change of perspective on at least three levels can serve as a useful starting point. First of all there is a need to shift focus away from theological-oriented analyses focusing on Islamic ideas and interpretations to sociologically based studies of concrete Muslim reasoning and practice. Such a perspective needs to take into consideration how the agents involved perceive of their goals and pursue their struggles. Rather than seeing Muslims simply as religiously motivated actors, this implies a notion of Muslims as a sociologically defined group whose actions are guided by a complex mix of normative and pragmatic considerations rather than merely by some core set of universal beliefs and outlooks resulting in some allegedly characteristic Islamic modes of behaviour.

Secondly, rather than focusing primarily on the Islamic context and the global Islamic resurgence, which is far too often reduced to its radical expressions, it can be fruitful to shift attention to the much broader context of the general revival of society which has recently taken place in many Third World Countries. Rather than as an endemic Islamic-religious
phenomenon, Muslim activism can thus be seen as one example of a more widespread associational flourishing. By empowering the poor and vulnerable, the emergence of such forms of ‘popular forms of political action’ (Bayart 1993) are often seen as potential channels for promoting socio-economic and political development (c.f. Haynes 1997: 3ff). In contrast to the Islamism thesis, which tends to see Muslim political engagement as inherently detrimental to democratic political development, any empirical analysis of Muslim socio-political activism must thus necessarily be open-ended and investigative with respect to the potential consequences of such Muslim engagement for the society and state at large.

Finally, it is thus necessary to avoid relying on normative notions about the principal relationship between Islam and politics and instead engage into empirical investigation of the actual patterns of interaction between Muslim social groupings and their concrete social and political contexts, notably the post-colonial African state. There is in other words a need for contextualised sociological analysis which takes into consideration the specific African socio-political context and how this influences organised Muslim strategies for coping with the various challenges facing concrete Muslims communities. This change of perspective implies turning the conventional picture around, and to draw attention away from a focus on how Islamic beliefs and ideas might affect politics, towards a focus on how Muslim societies actively re-organise and re-invent their strategies and self-understanding in response to a given socio-political context.

Scholars and commentators on Islam in Africa have indeed frequently pointed to a link between African Muslims’ increasing recourse to religion and the widespread failure of the African state to provide adequate development. In this optic, the state’s progressive disengagement from some of its central functions, linked to poor governance and resulting from neoliberal reform programmes, has created widespread socio-political dissatisfaction. Within such fragile political environments, private religious actors have been left relatively free to move into those spaces that public authorities have vacated, resorting instead to a domain of religious morality and ethical values as an antithesis to the corrupt and poorly performing state (Otayek and Soares 2007: 10; Salih 2004: 165f; Ousman 2004: 74; Weiss 2002: 99; Loimeier 2003: 253; Haynes 1996: 174). However, besides failing to account for the concrete mechanisms whereby state institutions might stimulate such popular religious activism, there seems to be two major deficits inherent in this simplified scheme of understanding. The first concerns its implicit conception of the nature of Muslim activism as merely a reactionary defence mechanism where growing disillusionment with the performance
of the state has led to detachment or disengagement from the state through the defensive retraction into a communal-religious realm (c.f. Salih 2004: 165).

The second deficit within this failed state approach is that it fails to grasp the complex realities of African states. Truly, the post-colonial African state is recurrently seen to be marked primarily by its failure or weakness, not only in terms of capacity to bring about development but also in terms of legitimacy (Hyden 2000: 8), and the societal counterpart to this has often been taken to be disengagement from the state (Azarya 1998: 6). However, a significant degree of state consolidation has in fact been achieved within many African countries, including Kenya. This leaves the state as the “most prominent landmark of the African institutional landscape” (Bratton 1989: 410), which remains a rarely negligible actor whose “formidable presence” is actively precipitating the realignment of social forces (Migdal 1994: 26). Hence, even though the state might not be equally paramount in all African countries, it remains a powerful institution within society which constraints and facilitates the array of possible societal coping strategies.

There is in other words need for a framework which allows for a more nuanced and substantiated understanding of how the political institutional contexts as well as the grievances inflicted by such ‘state failure’ might lead to such organised Muslim activist responses. Such a framework must allow for the state to play a role as more than merely a repellent instance leading to the detachment of social groupings from the public realm, but as a powerful institution which in more active ways might shape the organisational and collective strategic endeavours of Muslim societies.

4.2. Muslim activism as a reflection of state-society relations in Africa

Following these objections, the proposition is here that there is a need for a more neutral and broader contextualising framework for the understanding of Muslim socio-political endeavours. This must go beyond the specific focus on general Islamic ideas to a more dynamic account of local Muslim societies, taking into consideration the complex ways in which Muslims as a sociologically defined group are integrated within and actively respond to their local socio-political environment. Drawing on prevailing knowledge of African politics and societies it will be proposed to see Muslim activism within a more general framework of state-society relations in Africa. Such perspective implies a much stronger emphasis on the local African political environment compared to the (global) Islamic religious context.

The following analysis of Muslim activism in Kenya can then partly be seen in extension of a broader paradigm shift for analysing politics in Africa which has taken place
since the late 1980s, implying an increasing focus on how states and societies mutually transform and constitute one another (Migdal 1994: 23; Kohli and Shue 1994: 294). As opposed to earlier modernisation studies which saw the state as the major means for bringing about development, the underlying assumption of this paradigm is that not only states but also societies can be driving forces for change (Azarya 1988: 4). This has entailed a renewed interest in the nature of popular associational life in Africa, implying an acknowledgment of the more dynamic influences of society. This implies a new understanding of the ways in which African societies have attempted to deal with the state’s hegemonic drive and recognition of the ability of social forces to exercise power if properly internally organised (Bratton 1989: 426; Chazan 1994: 225; Migdal 1994: 20; Villalón 1995: 23).

Rather than delimiting the importance of Muslim socio-political endeavours to being either a threat to political stability or not, a state-society perspective can open our eyes to the more complex ways in which Muslims might engage and interact with state and politics. In principle such popular mode of political action might range from ‘exit’ to ‘voice’ or from disengagement to active engagement strategies, including confrontation or accommodation (Bratton 1989: 412f; c.f. Azarya 1988: 6ff). Seeing Muslim activism in Kenya as an example of a popular coping strategy opens up new fields of inquiry allowing us to pose questions about how to understand the emergence as well as possible repercussions of Muslim socio-political endeavours more broadly and neutrally. This implies a shift in focus from some special “Islamic political imagination” (Roy 1994: 12) as the point of departure for understanding Muslim socio-political endeavours to a focus on how Muslim reasoning and practice is shaped by and might recursively influence their immediate socio-political environment. As such, a state-society interaction perspective opens up two major fields of inquiry which will structure the following analysis of Muslim activism in Kenya and which link to the two main questions posed by way of introduction: How a specific political context has affected popular Muslim organisation and coping strategies; and how Muslim political endeavours might themselves feed back on the public political realm in the country.

As for the first field of inquiry, which constitutes the primary focus in the following, it implicitly places the state and the local socio-political environment as the central context within which Muslim socio-political endeavours must be understood. As it will be argued, there is a lot to be gained by using social movement theory as a devise for sorting out regularities and explanatory principles. Social movement theory can thus point out a set of common sociological dynamics characteristic for diverse instances of collective socio-political
action, offering answers to the question of why social movements emerge as well as why certain “repertoires” of contention” become prevalent at a given historical juncture.

A focus on Muslim activism in Kenya as a form of popular coping strategy in response to state actions and structures furthermore leads us to the second field of inquiry, with which the latter section of the analysis is concerned, namely the possible public political consequences of these new forms of popular Muslim activism. This question inscribes itself in extension of the broader discussion of bottom-up approaches to development and of the role of civil society herein according to which the fabric of organisational diversity in civil society is largely seen to condition the success of democratic politics (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 253). Before turning to the question of the possible repercussions of Muslim activism for the prospects on democratic political development in Kenya, the following sections will attempt to account for the emergence of these new Muslim patterns of organisation.

5. Muslim activism in Kenya from a social movement perspective

5.1. New Muslim mobilisation patterns
In the course of the last two decades, a series of new Muslim activist organisations have sprung up across Kenya which operate at the religious, social and political level. Common for these seems to be a wish to alleviate Muslim grievances and empower the Muslim community. Together, these organisations seem to mount to what could be described as a movement for social and political change. To talk of a new Muslim activist movement in Kenya does not mean to designate a unified or formally integrated network of organisations, united by one clearly defined goal under a central leadership. Instead it is a much more multifaceted and networked reality, ranging from small single-purpose associations to larger and more professional organisations engaged in a broader range of activities. What unites these different Muslim activist “social movement organisations” into one structured “social movement field”, to use the vocabulary of McCarthy and Zald (1977), seems to be a shared sense of dissatisfaction with status quo and the existence of a common set of strategic preferences which have translated into increasingly organised endeavours for social and political change.

The proposition is here that the emergence of new forms of Muslim socio-political activism in Kenya can be understood as an expression of changing patterns of state-society interactions reflecting the emergence and solidification of new forms of collective behaviour. Arguably, social movement theory can provide us with a series of useful tools to understand
these new forms of Muslim mobilisation. Social movement theory generally offers answers to the research question of why collective episodes occur where they do, when they do and in the ways they do (Crossley 2002: 9). Since no sufficiently coherent body of social movement theory exists, it does not provide us with a unified and readily applicable framework of understanding. Social movement theory must instead be seen as a complex conglomerate of different theoretical approaches which highlight various aspects or dynamics at stake in collective action (c.f. Tilly 2004: x). It is not here the intention to enter into detailed discussions about the comparative advantages of different theoretical assumptions and approaches. Instead, social movement theory will be used heuristically and as a useful toolbox which allows us to ask relevant questions and sort out observations about this Muslim activist mobilisation in Kenya.

One of the advantages of studying Muslim activism through the lenses of social movement theory is that it allows us to avoid the trap of essentialisation and of treating Muslim socio-political endeavours as the expression of some kind of exceptionalism, rooted in a fixed Islamic mentality or political culture which is unintelligible in comparative terms (Wiktorowicz 2004: 3). Another advantage stems from the presumption inherent in most social movement approaches that movement actors are rational, entrepreneurial and perceptive organisers who are responsive to both opportunities and constraints in their immediate environment (c.f. Meyer and Minkoff 2004: 1464). Even though the rationality principle should never be taken for more than a simplifying heuristic assumption, it provides an important corrective to the presumptions of many observers of Muslim politics who tend to presume that religious actors are driven by extra-rational concerns and interests based on religious fanaticism or fundamentalism. Such a rational actor presumption does not imply that people’s preferences can be determined a priori, but instead spurs us to emphasise the local historical, political and cultural framework within which choices are made.

Social movement studies have occasionally recognised the importance of religion as a chief facilitator for broader social movements since religion might offer a variety of latent resources for mobilisation. Under the right conditions, pre-existing religious networks and institutions can offer a collective vehicle to be mobilised for extra-religious purposes thereby providing a potential political leverage to otherwise marginalised groups. This is so, since religion is seen to be a source of deep-rooted feelings of solidarity, identity and shared meanings, which can easily be tapped for purposes of mobilisation and because religion might

---

*The proposition here to see Muslim activism in a social movement perspective can partly be seen in extension of similar dealings with Islamic activist movements in the Middle Eastern context, c.f. Wiktorowicz 2004; Wickham 2002.*
provide a number of pre-existing organisational resources for an aggrieved group, such as institutional infrastructures, communication facilities, personal networks and legitimate leadership (c.f. Tarrow 1995: 5; Zald 1982: 324; McAdam 1982:43ff).

Common for these new Muslim activist organisations in Kenya is precisely that they operate by actively exploiting various community resources, consciously turning Muslim networks, identity and solidarity into effective leverages for collective action. Nevertheless, this transformation of the Muslim community into a base of joint socio-political action by no means seems to have been predestined when considering the history and internal dynamics of Kenyan Muslims. Instead, most commentators who have focused on the mobilisation potential of the Muslim community in Kenya have tended to highlight the many indigenous constraints and obstacles which have traditionally inhibited the potential of Muslims to mobilise sustained collective action or popular opposition.

Shared religious devotion among Kenyan Muslims has not always translated into a strong socio-political solidarity at the national level. Islam in Kenya has generally lacked the institutional strength it has enjoyed in other African countries where the prevalence of popular Sufi tariqas typically has provided Muslim communities with considerable organisational strength (O’Brien 2003). Furthermore, Islam has been described as a minority religion with no shared solidarity and the Muslim community as a heterogeneous and divided group, whose religious identity is in conflict with other ties; ethnic, racial and social. Especially because of widespread internal struggles over the control of religious-ideological space in Kenya, Islam has not traditionally been able to serve as a universalistic and emancipating discourse able to unite Kenyan Muslims around a common aim. And finally, concerted attempts to create professional and bureaucratised representative structures to defend Muslim interests at the national political level have tendentiously turned into spaces of social control for the authoritarian, neo-patrimonial Kenyan state (see Crozon 1998; O’Brien 2003; Constantin 1993; 1997; Sperling 1998).

As it will be shown, these conclusions, which are largely based on observations of the Muslim situation in Kenya until the early-mid-1990s, do hold a great deal of truth. For a long time since independence such internal divisions combined with the unwillingness of Muslim leaders to tangle with the government have largely inhibited the realisation of common Muslim aspirations at the national political level. Yet, the mushrooming of new activist organisations and new attempts to insert a united Muslim voice into the Kenyan public sphere point to a significant change. As a historical perspective will thus reveal, the
emergence of new forms of Muslim activism seems to indicate a strategic change in ways of coping with long-ingrained grievances and socio-political dissatisfaction.

Insofar as social movement theory can contribute to enlarging our understanding of changing Muslim-state relations in Kenya, it must be able to account for these shifts in Muslim organisation, strategies and orientation. Notably two central social movement concepts will structure the following discussion, that of political opportunity structures and that of framing processes. First of all, a focus on political opportunity structures can account for under which conditions otherwise resource-poor actors are able to create new movements (McAdam 1982: 39) since the opening of political opportunities “produces external resources for people who lack internal ones, openings where there were only walls before” (Tarrow 1994: 99). As it will be shown, the development of new forms of Muslim activism can be seen as a product of a long historical process of adaptation, reaction and interaction between Muslims and the state. How this struggle has been able to unfold across time has largely been framed by the general socio-economic and political context within which Muslims as a social group are bound to orient themselves.

Secondly, whereas a focus on political opportunity structures can explain why social actors are able to engage into collective action at a given point in time, a framing perspective might explain how Muslims seem to be able to overcome their long-ingrained indigenous constraints based on internal divisions, lack of solidarity and inclinations of political compliance which have previously inhibited large-scale mobilisation. As it will be shown, Muslim activist entrepreneurs are not just engaged in pointing out new solutions to alleviate their grievances, but appear to be engaged in collective interpretation process, implying the active reconstruction of a common national Muslim socio-political identity and solidarity in Kenya.

5.2. Political opportunity structures in an African context

The concept of political opportunity structures attracts our attention to the fundamental ways in which institutionalised political systems and processes shape the patterns of state-society relations and thus delimit the menu of tactics, actions and choices that social groups have for engaging with politics and the state (c.f. McAdam et al. 1996: 2f). Political opportunities cannot only explain the timing of social movement formation but also why certain strategies of influence or protest become viable at a given point in time (c.f. Meyer and Minkoff: 1457f; Kriesi 2007: 80ff). Broadly defined, political opportunities refer to institutional avenues that channel social engagement or protest in certain ways rather than others (Goodwin and Jasper
1999: 36f) or to consistent dimensions in the political environment which either encourage or
discourage people to engage in collective action by affecting actors’ expectations for success
or failure or by determining the cost of collective action (Tarrow 1994: 18, 85).

No exhaustive list of variables exists defining exactly which types of political
opportunities are most likely to be most important from case to case. An overall distinction is
often made between more stable, structural aspects of opportunities versus less stable
variables which are more prone to change on a short-term basis. Besides referring to formal
political institutions, such as election systems and access to participation, the more stable,
features aspects of political opportunities also refer to cultural aspects such as the state’s
propensity for repression and facilitation and a political system’s formal or informal
procedures and prevailing strategies with regard to challengers (Tarrow 1994: 89f; Kriesi
2007: 70f; 1996: 160). More variable aspects of political opportunities on the other hand
comprise for example political alignments, the availability of influential élite allies and
cleavages in and among élites (Tarrow 1994 87f; Kriesi 2007: 74). While taking these factors
into account, the concept of political opportunity structures in the following will be used in
its broadest sense, referring to institutionalised patterns of state-society interactions as defined
by the prevailing procedures which structure the relationship be rulers and the ruled at a given
point in time.5

The political process approach has so far mainly been applied to the national political
contexts of Western liberal democracies and is generally based on a particular conception of
power in North America and Western Europe (c.f. Kriesi 2007: 85; Wiktorowicz 2004: 4;
McAdam 1982: 36). However, because the precise effects of any political opportunities are
never invariant but historically and situationally contingent, any search for universally valid
propositions and models for social movements are bound to fail (Goodwin and Jaspers 1999:
38, 51). Since time and place thus make a difference, one cannot properly understand political
opportunity structures in an African setting without taking into consideration the special
African socio-political context and the special institutionalisation and configuration of power
on the continent.

The nature of political authority and its embodiment in political institutions differ in
Africa in several respects from other world regions due to the special political conditions
linked to the historical origin of the state in Africa (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 61). One
of the implications of this has been that politics in Africa has never become entirely
coterminous with the state. Because of the shallow penetration of society by weak state

5 This definition in fact has a lot in common with what Barkan (1992) refers to as governance relms.
institutions there is thus seen to be a relatively larger realm of unoccupied political space in Africa than elsewhere in the world (Bratton 1989: 425). Yet, this should not be tantamount to concluding that political opportunity structures in Africa have traditionally been facilitative for active societal engagement with the state. In the same way should the fact that African politics is characterised especially by its informalisation (Chabal and Daloz 1999) not be mistaken to mean a lack of political institutions as such. The most important institutional hallmark of African politics since independence has thus been widely seen to be its neopatrimonial structures (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 61). One major implication of this predominant institutional feature of African politics has in fact been a weakening of the field of independent societal political action, rendering popular contentious or oppositional strategies impossible or ineffective, thereby effectively delimiting the field of political opportunities (c.f. Chabal and Daloz 1999).

In single-case studies, the tracing of variations in political opportunity structures requires a long-term historical perspective. Many observers of African politics have emphasised how the fundamental rules of the game have remained much the same across time. In particular, emphasis has been on neopatrimonial tendencies as an enduring institutional characteristics of the continent’s politics which is still prevailing, even after the introduction of competitive elections (Hyden 2000: 21). In spite of such enduring features however, it is possible to trace certain important historical variations or changes in political opportunity structures in Africa from colonial times until now which have changed the field for state-society interactions in the course of time. As for Kenya, the trajectory of institutionalised power relations, which is very much linked to the processes of state formation and consolidation, has been framed by varying sets of historical conditions for the exercise of political authority which have been conducive to different types of societal responses.

As it will be done in the following, one can distinguish between the constitutive phase of the colonial period, characterised by structures of indirect rule, the formative and consolidation period of the independent post-colonial state, structured by personal and authoritarian rule, and finally the post-democratisation period characterised by an increasing opening up of participatory political space. Each of these periods has been distinguished by different sets of political opportunities and constraints, regarding for instance the state’s propensity for repression, access to participation and the configuration of political alignments. Such variations in the prevailing set of political rules have also shaped the relations between Muslims and the Kenyan state during time, in ways which have been
conducive to different forms of Muslim activism and coping strategies. This can explain both previous failure of organised Muslim collective action as well as the present change in Muslim coping strategies. Before discussing the recent invention of new forms of Muslim activism, this will be placed in a historical perspective, highlighting how Muslim responses to various forms of grievances have been shaped by the prevailing political reality and opportunity structures from colonial times up till now.

6. Muslim coping strategies and political opportunity structures in historical perspective

6.1. Muslims and the British colonial state

6.1.1. Muslim grievances in colonial Kenya – from hegemony to marginalisation

To Muslims, the colonial experience entailed a steady sidelining from a position of economic, political and cultural hegemony to one of increasing marginalisation. At the time the British established their sphere of influence by the end of the 19th century, the coastal Muslim communities were at the summit of their influence, prestige and prosperity and Islam was flourishing. Under the protection of the Busaidi Sultan Sayyid Said (1779-1856) who had moved his capital from Oman to Zanzibar in 1840, the coastal Muslim community underwent a veritable religious revival in the 19th century, linked to the spread of a new literacy and increasing acquaintance with the written Islamic tradition (Pouwels 1987: 111f, Bang 2003: 128). Socio-economically the period of the sultanate had resulted in a dramatic expansion of coastal agriculture based on slave trade, leading to the rapid growth of the coastal economy (Pouwels 1987: 115). However, increasing dependency on British patronage from the 1880s would soon lead to the rapid political decline of the sultanate, reducing its hegemony to a ten-mile strip on the Kenyan and Tanzanian coast by 1886. By the end of the 19th century, its economy was disrupted, large parts of its mainland possessions lost and political power ceded to British overlordship (Bang 2003: 126; Salim 1973: 32).

The coastal Muslim élite initially enjoyed a privileged position within the colonial administration, not least because of their high levels of literacy. However, between 1895 and 1908 British practice towards Muslims changed considerably, as British focus changed from the coastal area to up-country Kenya. After the completion of the Uganda Railway in 1901, Nairobi soon replaced Mombasa as the administrative capital of the Protectorate, taking away the focus of development from Mombasa and the coast. Besides, Muslim representation within the administration soon lost ground to the new up-country élite of African Christian converts, who had received secular education in the missionary schools and were well-versed
in English language. As a result, coastal Muslims became increasingly marginalised politically and economically (Pouwels 1981: 337f; Carmichael 1997: 298).

While the penetration of the British into the interior gave the spread of Islam to up-country Kenya new impetus (see Nzibo 1995), it also brought large numbers of up-country Africans and Indians to the coast to work as wage labourers who shared neither the language nor the religion or culture of the older residents. This would steadily change the traditional distribution of wealth and prestige to the detriment of the existing Muslim élite (Strobel 1979: 36). Colonial rule thus caused serious setbacks for Muslims in the economic field, not least with the final abolition of slavery in 1907 which eroded the traditional source of wealth of the Arab-Swahili population (Salim 1979: 63). Under these circumstances Muslim townsmen soon found themselves being left behind by development, above all as they were losing in the competition for influential jobs in the new colonial order (Pouwels 1981: 338f).

One of the enduring Muslim grievances haunting Muslims since colonialism is not least that of education. Education was until colonial rule arrived entirely Islamic and did not prepare the Muslim students for any worldly profession. While many up-country Christian converts were taking advantage of education opportunities, mostly offered by the missionary schools, only few Muslims were willing to let their children attend secular education because of the strong Christian connotation attached to it. This reluctance towards attaining secular education would lead to the further marginalisation of the Muslim community with far-reaching consequences also in the post-colonial order. As the British authorities thus started employing clerks among Indians and Africans who had acquired Western education it became clear that without Western education local Muslims could not maintain their position (Pouwels 1987: 173; Salim 1973: 64). The many problems which this created for the Muslim community still remain the source of many of today’s Muslim grievances in the country. Yet, in spite of these many grievances, Muslims never managed to organise into any forms of sustained collective opposition. As it will be shown, the development of Muslim coping strategies during colonialism was largely restricted by the prevailing set of opportunity structures which moulded the relations between the indigenous Muslim population and the colonial state, thus delimiting the repertoire of tactics and choices available.

6.1.2. Political opportunities during British colonial rule

Opportunities for Muslim coping strategies during British colonial rule were largely determined by the special conditions for exercising colonial authority. To compensate for the enormous cost of installing a new apparatus of domination able to assure hegemony and
security over the colonial territory, British rulers came to rely on the recruitment of collaborating intermediaries, thus annexing indigenous social structures to colonial state institutions (Young 1988: 41ff). These practices came to shape the relationship between the colonial authorities and the coastal Muslim subjects, effectively delimiting the space for independent societal action vis-à-vis the state.

Especially in the beginning, the colonial powers needed the Muslims to carry out their administration because they were the only literate indigenous people of the area. For a while, Muslims were thus a privileged group within the British colonial order (Carmichael 1997: 295). This entailed the accommodation of the traditional Muslim administration at the coast into the British administration so that liwalis, kadhis and other officials were turned from being the Sultan’s agents to being responsible to the British authority directly. In this way the existing Muslim religious elites were transferred from court scholars onto a corps of civil servants within the emerging colonial bureaucracy, thus producing new Muslim élites from whom the colonial state demanded dependability, loyalty and support (Mwakimako 2006: 291ff; 262).

Indirect rule also allowed for the continued applicability of Islamic codes of law meaning that all cases of lawsuits between the native population would be decided by present Muslim administrators according to the Shari‘a, although subject to British monitoring (Salim 1973: 73; Carmichael 1997: 296). One important outcome was the formalisation of the position of Chief Kadhi, the highest religious authority and chief consultant in matters of Islamic law, who now was turned into a government official (Carmichael 1997: 297; Pouwels 1987: 175). However, because of this incorporation of the Muslim élite into the cadres of the colonial administration the Muslim population was left without any state-independent leadership to fight for their position within the new burgeoning political system.

Another long-lasting negative effect of British ruling strategies was that they contributed to creating new internal divisions among the Muslim community itself. The ruler-subject nexus created by British colonial practices obtained a special logic due to the racialist ideology which buttressed the legitimisation of European imperial endeavours, leading to the accentuation of the hierarchical distinctiveness between different racial groups within the coastal Protectorate (Strobel 1979: 41). Whereas prior to the colonial period Muslim people did preserve certain boundaries and a consciousness of ethnic affiliations, these categories were traditionally relatively open and constantly redefined. This governmental categorisation however led to the creation of inter-communal conflicts between the Arab, Swahili and Indian town-dwellers and the ‘African’ Mijikenda who inhabited mainly the rural hinterland
This racial categorisation was expressed in almost every crucial aspect of life, and would contribute to exacerbating local antipathies between people of different ethnic backgrounds. The assignment of rights and privileges thus correlated with the categories of ‘natives’ (Swahili, Africans) vs. ‘non-natives’ (Arabs, Indians) with obvious privileges being assigned to those who were reckoned as non-natives. Appointments to religious administrative posts (kadhis, liwalis) were thus exclusively reserved for Arabs (Pouwels 1981: 334), just as race determined rates of pay in government, the provision of social services such as education and health facilities as well as levels of taxation and political representation in the Legislative Council (Strobel 1979: 37ff).

In brief, by incorporating the existing Muslim religious élite into the state bureaucracy and by dividing Muslims internally among themselves along racial lines, the structures of British colonial rule would minimise the opportunities for Muslims to mobilise as a common force of influence within the colonial and later the post-colonial Kenyan state by impeding their organisation into strong solidarity networks. Combined with the general lack of facilitative structures which could channel societal participation into the central political processes, the structures of British indirect rule effectively restricted the field for independent societal political action largely affecting the invention of Muslim coping strategies during colonialism, as it will be described below.

6.1.3. Muslim coping strategies during colonialism

In spite of scattered Muslim reaction and resistance towards the advancing colonial design in the period from 1886 to 1895, Muslims never managed to come together to form a united and organised front of resistance despite obvious common interests. The Mazrui revolt of February 1895 which disrupted the whole coast of Kenya up to Malindi would prove to be the last attempt by coastal Muslims to defend their independence (Salim 1979: 62f; Carmichael 1997: 296). Even though the Muslim situation during colonialism nourished widespread resentment and dissatisfaction, the nature of British indirect rule would largely structure the character and success of Muslim coping strategies, preventing the formation of a united Muslim front to seek political redress for their predicament.

One of the most comprehensive responses to the disruptive effects of colonialism took place at the religious level in terms of a call for Islamic rejuvenation and a renewed quest for theological truth focusing on “the right way” of performing Islam. This took form of a new movement of Islamic reform, inspired by the Egyptian Salafiyya model and headed by sheikh al-Amin Mazrui (1890-1947) who served as Kadhi of Mombasa from 1932 and as
Chief Kadhi from 1937 until his death. As a response to the disturbing effects of modernisation Mazrui not only started propagating new ideas about the need to return to the fundamentals of Islam but also served as a progressive social voice, encouraging Muslims to attain secular education to avoid being left behind by development (see Pouwels 1981; Salim 1985). While this movement of reform would have a great and long-lasting impact on Islamic thinking in the area, these religious leaders never managed to provide political guidance or to pose a challenge to colonial authority. The integration of the Muslim religious elite into the salaried cadres of the state thus seemed to impede the emergence of a strong Muslim religious leadership able express collective political claims or opposition.

This did not entail the lack of organised Muslim responses altogether however. As in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the mid-colonial period in Kenya coincided with the rapid expansion of new forms of organisational life, implying that people joined associations not because they were born into them but also to promote their interests and enhance their standing and cope with new and unfamiliar environments (Chazan 1994: 259). This trend was also visible among Muslims in Kenya who increasingly started to organise into local self-help groups and welfare organisations. The decades preceding independence thus witnessed an increasing number of organised, though still small-scale and scattered, activities consciously aimed at carving out a better position for Muslims within the new order of things. Especially since the 1940s, considerable associational activity, aimed at providing welfare for Muslims, could thus be recorded among the coastal Muslim communities (Constantin 1993: 49). The most notable attempt to unite Muslims was the East African Muslim Welfare Society which did something to uplift the status of the most hard-hit coastal Muslims, the African Mijikenda Muslims (Salim 1979: 65; Bogonko 1992: 16). However, loyalties often seemed to be more guided by racial rather than by religious solidarity, largely an outcome of the racialist differentiation of British colonial practices (Constantin 1993: 49). The special nature of ruler-subject relations during colonialism, where the distribution of economic and political benefits was largely determined by a racial logic, would thus largely curtail the development of a strong socio-political loyalty among Muslims based on common religious identity.

This lack of internal Muslim unity would soon prove devastating as the political situation in the country started to gather momentum, culminating with the Mau Mau revolt in 1952, the most significant manifestation of African nationalism in Kenya. Yet, its echoes on the coast were distant, and only by the mid 1950s did an increasing awareness of the nationalistic significance of the political trends in the country reach the coastal Muslims (Salim 1973: 214ff). Rather than engaging into the nationalist movement and the fight for
independence, Coastal Muslims responded to the increasing manifestations of nationalism by starting talks about the possibilities for autonomy of the Coastal Strip. Fearing to be left at the mercy of an up-country African government that would be unsympathetic with their ideals, culture and religion, the 1895 Treaty, which distinguished the coastal protectorate legally from the colony, became the lever whereupon Muslims based their demands. By 1958 the Muslim community seriously began to contemplate separation, leading to the formation of the Mwambao United Front, a political movement formed primarily to protect Muslim political and religious interests (Salim 1973: 220ff; Oded 2000: 89f). However, the plans for coastal autonomy were prematurely killed and quickly fell to the ground, not so much due to government opposition as to internal divisions among the coastal Muslims, both within the Arab ranks as well as between the Arabs, the Swahili and the Mijikenda populations. At the round-table conference at Lancaster House on 1 February 1960 where the future of Kenya was to be discussed, the coastal Muslims could claim no unifying factor to save the fear of up-country domination and instead the conference produced victories for the African nationalists and a declaration of Kenya as an ‘African country’ (Salim 1973: 221ff; 226).

At the Kenya Coastal Strip conference on 8 March 1962 the Sultan declared willingness to renounce sovereignty if assured that the institutions and way of life of his subjects were safeguarded, an agreement which was formally signed in London in October 1963 (Salim 1973: 242f). One of the most important concessions offered to Muslims as a result of this agreement was the constitutional safeguarding of the power of the Chief Kadhi. Section 66 of the 1963 Constitution thus outlined the establishment and jurisdiction of the Chief Kadhi and other kadhis over questions of Muslim law relating to personal status, marriage, divorce and inheritance in proceedings in which all the parties profess the Muslim religion (see Hashim 2005b). In post-colonial Kenya, the fight to protect the right to live according to Islamic rules has constituted one of the main unifying factors for Muslims at the political level.

Compared to other non-Muslim African communities, Muslims were relatively slow at adapting to their new socio-political reality. In spite of the existence of common grievances and interests linked to their special colonial experience, the Muslim community never managed to carve out a position of influence within the new socio-political order or to organise any collective political resistance. The character and success of Muslim coping

---

6 Also the Somali community, who felt culturally linked to the newly independent Somali Republic, manifested reservations to become integrated in the new state were and demanded that the Northern Frontier District would be integrated with Somalia, leading to a lengthy and violent campaign that stretched into independent Kenya. However common Islamic identity proved not to be strong enough for the North Eastern Somalis and the Coastal Swahili to join forces and unite causes (Salim 1973: 221ff).
strategies were thus largely moulded by the nature of British colonial rule. With the cooptation of the Muslim religious élite into the administrative cadres of the state and due to the racial logic underlying ruler-subject relations which enhanced inter-communal divisions, a strong socio-political leadership and solidarity was never able to crystallise. While being effectively shaped by the structures of British colonial rule, popular Muslim coping strategies were never generally oriented towards the state. Instead they largely took form of retraction from the state, whether through the turn to Islamic-religious solutions, local self-help initiatives at the communal level or through direct attempts to evade integration into the new political order through secession.

6.2. Muslims and the post-colonial state

6.2.1. The Muslim predicament in post-colonial Kenya

Many Muslim grievances in post-colonial Kenya have largely been a legacy of their colonial experience and Muslims’ belated adaptation to new socio-political realities. Devoid of an influential élite within the nationalist movement, Muslims found themselves increasingly marginalised from the central political processes, enclosed within a new centralised and up-country dominated nation-state which had been created without their taking part in the process. Faced with the new national political reality, many coastal Muslims initially threw their support to the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU) and its vision of Majimboism, entailing the division of the country into several autonomous regions as a way to protect ethnic and religious particularism. However, with the erosion of KADU in 1964, making the Luo-Kikuyu dominated Kenya African National Union (KANU) the only party in the country, the political sidetracking of Muslims became further buttressed (Salim 1973: 231f; Crozon 1998: 177). Some integration of the Muslims into the new political system did take place and a number of Muslims became elected into the Kenyan legislature on a KANU ticket, no one made it to the level of the ruling circles (Bakari 1995a: 242). Yet, even though the authorities generally assured Muslims some representation in the ruling party and public institutions, Muslims have complained that this representation is too small and does not constitute real equity (Oded 2000: 32).

Muslims not only felt politically excluded but also socially marginalised. Especially the belated adaptation to the requirements for secular education implied that Muslims were lacking the means to invest in the high functions of the state and to secure a position within the salaried economy. As a result, Muslims have generally suffered from a lack of power and influence within post-colonial Kenya (Crozon 1998: 179; Bogonko 1992: 14ff; cf. Oded 2000:
Muslims themselves have often perceived this backwardness as the product of a systematic discrimination by Christian ruling élites claiming that government officials have taken it upon themselves to deny Muslims access into government secondary schools on account of their names (Bakari 1995a: 244).

Though formally a secular state, Kenya has been governed, dominated and developed primarily by Christian politicians, institutions and norms (Mutua 2008: 186). Since most commanding positions within the state are generally held by Christians is common to find that Muslims have charged the post-colonial government with being hostile towards Muslims (Mwakimako 2007: 295). Especially during Moi’s tenure, religion increasingly became a factor in Kenyan politics, with Biblical references providing a central symbolic vocabulary in the political process (Bakari 1995a: 243; Oded 2000: 102f). This has led to the practical integration of religion and politics where Christianity is easily used by politicians to enhance their political legitimacy, thus accentuating the marginalisation of the Muslim communities. Islamic references on the other hand have generally stayed outside these legitimation strategies, and Islam has not been able to serve as a discourse of national unity able to cement an extensive political protest (Crozon 1998: 180).

In brief, the socio-political marginalisation of Muslims which started during colonialism was largely cemented due to their minority position within the Christian-dominated post-colonial state. As it will be shown, the post-colonial period witnessed a reinforced consciousness about common Muslim identity and interests. This manifested itself through increasing associational activities and new attempts of creating national representative structures to represent Muslim interests, reflecting an increasing adaptation to the new political reality of the centralised nation state. However, the character and success of these coping strategies were largely curtailed by the special political authority structures which shaped state-society relations in post-colonial Kenya.

### 6.2.2. Political opportunity structures under authoritarian rule

The essential operating codes for post-colonial African politics have typically been captured in the concept of neopatrimonialism. This implies that the foundation of all political institutions is based on personal relations and that relationships of loyalty and dependence pervade all formal political and administrative logics (Bratton and van de Walle 1997: 62). In an authoritarian setting, this entails that independent social networks tend to become incorporated into the state structures. Due to the ruling political élites’ pre-emptive strategies of cooption, challengers are either eliminated or likely to become incorporated into
networks of loyalty and dependency of the ruling élite, often in return for personal benefits (Hyden 1983: 41f).

Post-colonial Kenya has been no exception to this model of governance. Since independence the power strategies of the ruling élites have generally hinged on the incorporation of challengers into the clientelistic structures of the state. This attempt to ensure absolute control over society culminated under Moi with the 1982 constitutional amendment whereby Kenya was made a de-jure one-party state and opposition parties were formally banned. Moi’s systematic attempt to establish direct control over all areas of society would effectively reduce the autonomy of private voluntary associations by steadily bringing these under presidential control. This fragmentation and capturing of all independent bases of authority implied that even associations operating in the voluntary sector were infiltrated by agents of the party and the state and their activities increasingly undermined. As a result of this approach to governance, all structures of dissent and avenues for articulating differing views were systematically destroyed, severely constricting the opportunities for popular political expressions (Barkan 1992; Kanyinga 1998).

Being a minority group, Muslims have suffered relatively hard from this restrictive political environment. While the highest religious authority, the Chief Kadhi, was himself a state official, the new secular Muslim leadership which had emerged in conjunction with the new state mainly consisted of ill-educated politicians, often pushed to the periphery power. Even though Muslims have never had any influential élite in the inner core of the presidential patrimonial networks, political representation still had to work through the clientelistic paths of presidential patronage. Rather than offering social amenities to their Muslim constituencies, Muslim MPs have been criticised for concentrating merely on feathering their own nests. Being themselves enrolled within the clientelistic structures of the state, Muslim political leaders have been reluctant to express political opposition (Bakari 1995a: 239; 245).

The state for its part has often made a point of appeasing the Muslim community by offering certain concessions. The fact that Muslims are concentrated in areas that are economically and strategically important, gives them at least a potential political weight. To pre-empt potential political challenges from Muslims, shifting governments have sought to gain their loyalty by offering certain concessions and by ensuring a minimal integration of Muslims into the formal political structures. Sometimes, the government has made a point of conciliating the Muslims by granting them favours, such as declaring the ‘Id al-Fitr (breaking of the Ramadan fast) a national holiday and by appointing some Muslims to senior administrative positions. The different efforts of the Kenyan state to propitiate Muslims
partially helped to moderate Muslim criticism of the government for a long time (Oded 2000: 33f; 38; 77). In brief, because of this special kind of exercise of political power with Muslim élites being incorporated into the clientelistic structures of the state, the space of independent actions and opportunities for opposition has been effectively curtailed. As it will be shown, while an increasing crystallisation of a common Muslim socio-political identity and solidarity could be discerned in post-colonial Kenya, the organisation of Muslim societal responses have largely been curtailed by this restrictive political environment.

6.2.3. Muslim coping strategies in post-colonial Kenya

Deficient of astute religio-political leadership to voice their interests in the wake of independence, Muslims found themselves confined to the formation of activist socio-religious associations offering various forms of socio-economic and religious alleviations. Such more or less formal Muslim associations had been formed at the local and regional level in Kenya since the 1940s and were mostly created to deal with specialised purposes such as education, welfare and health, as well as various religious needs (Constantin 1995: 24f). The spread of such Muslim loyalty networks and self-help associations was by no means unique to the Muslim community but must be seen within the context of the broader proliferation of local self-help development organisations in Kenya during the 1960s and 1970s, known as Harambee. This offered a way for otherwise marginalised people to carve out a measure of political space from below (Barkan 1992: 175f).

Whereas these organisations functioned at the local-communal level with low levels of coordination, the late 1960s saw the emergence of new attempts among Muslims to create national representative structures. The first of these was the National Union of Kenya Muslims (NUKEM), established in Mombasa in 1968 by a group of Muslim professionals. Its larger goal was to unify all Muslims in Kenya to improve their socio-economic conditions as well as to represent Muslim interests towards the government, to promote education, and to introduce reforms to modernise Muslim society (Oded 2000: 21f; Mwakimako 2007a: 54). Though in practice more of a regional than a national phenomenon, NUKEM’s claim to represent the national Muslim community was significant insofar as it was the first indication of an awakening national Muslim consciousness across geographical and ethnic divisions. This beginning shift in orientation from the local to the national level reflected an increasing adaptation to the new political reality of the Kenyan state.

However, as Muslim aspirations became increasingly national, the state’s interest in Muslim societal activities similarly increased. In the early 1970s, NUKEM’s influence became
superseded by that of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) which came into existence in Nairobi in 1973. Much like NUKEH, SUPKEM was established with the aim of enhancing the capacity of Muslims to articulate their development concerns in a joint forum. Whereas NUKEH sought to incorporate independent organisations into a single integrated structure, SUPKEM was established as a federation of pre-existing voluntary associations that retained their identity and intended to work as an umbrella organisation through which Muslim needs and interests could be coordinated, channelled and defended (Mwakimako 2007a: 54f; Constantin 1995: 27; Seesemann 2007: 159).

SUPKEM's major concerns were social and religious development entailing the coordination of development activities notably within the areas of health and education, as well as active attempts to promote Islam by supporting various Islamic educational activities (PC El-Maawy 17/04/07; Oded 2000: 98). Besides, one of SUPKEM's central aims was to unify the Kenyan Muslims and to advise the government about Muslim aspirations and claims (Crozon 1998: 182). From the outset however, SUPKEM appeared tightly linked to the government and top-level politicians were directly involved in the formative processes. The organisation has generally been headed by people close to the government, including assistant ministers and civil servants. Within the context of an authoritarian and neopatrimonial state, the fact that the council leaders were closely related to the political establishment meant that they were obliged to be in harmony with the national political leadership. Because of this, SUPKEM leaders have often been unable without fear to articulate the needs, aspirations and grievances of Muslims, in fear of jeopardising their own position within the civil and political establishment (Mwakimako 1995: 225; Constantin 1995: 25).

Moi's rise to power was followed by increasingly fierce efforts to control and channel civil society activism in the directions wanted by the state (Barkan 1992: 180). This also affected Muslim socio-religious endeavours. In 1979 the government endowed SUPKEM its official recognition, proclaiming it the only organisation that was entitled to represent all the Muslims in the country (Oded 2000: 24; Constantin 1995: 26). Governmental recognition would prove to be a dubious honour however, and rather than strengthening the legitimacy of SUPKEM in the eyes of Muslims, increasing governmental interference would largely erode the ability of SUPKEM to serve as an independent representative organisation. Instead, Muslim leaders often came to depend more on the political élites than on their socio-religious base (Crozon 1998: 183). One major disadvantage of this bureaucratisation of Muslim leadership into national organisations has been that they easily become media for social and political control instead of providing the Muslim community with a platform to voice their
grievances and socio-political discontent. Political compliance has therefore been the price to be paid for such integration into the clientelistic structures of the state (Constantin 1995).

Instead of working as an organ of opposition, SUPKEM’s leaders have at various occasions emphasised it is an obligation for Muslims to show absolute loyalty towards the president, his government and the KANU party and claimed that Muslim organisations should not engage in political activities (Mwakimako 2007a: 55; Oded 2000: 22f; 77). This has implied, that no substantial Muslim interests that could threaten or seriously challenge governmental interests would be voiced through the official channels of representation (Kresse 2007: 200). Rather than voicing Muslim opposition, SUPKEM came to represent a voice of compliance, whose role became to cultivate good relations with the state by expressing loyalty to the government, keeping away from active engagement in sensitive political issues.

SUPKEM’s legitimacy among the Muslim population generally seems to have been questionable and many of the major organisations such as NUKEM, Islahil Islamiya and the Young Muslim Association, soon broke out of SUPKEM because they felt deprived of influence and were dissatisfied with SUPKEM’s close relation to the government (PC El-Maawy 17/04/07; c.f. Constantin 1995: 27). One of the most persuasive arguments against SUPKEM has been that it is unable to unite Kenyan Muslims and significantly improve their position. Instead, SUPKEM is often seen as an appendix to the political system which fails to fulfil its socio-religious obligations (Oded 2000: 25; Crozon 1998: 183). In the 1980s for example, when the question of creating a unified code of personal law, which would threaten the status of the Kadhi Courts, was high on the political agenda, SUPKEM failed to come out openly against the government, triggering great indignation among the rest of the Muslim élite (Constantin 1995: 26; Crozon 1998: 184; Oded 2000: 90ff).

During the 1980 when Moi’s increasingly illegitimate rule generated unprecedented domestic protest and pressure for change within Kenyan civil society, including the Christian community, SUPKEM still remained silent and unwilling to get into conflict with the government. As a result Muslims never managed to come out as a united force for change. Yet, the 1980s did bring about important changes as new and increasingly critical voices started to rise among the new reformist Muslim élite who increasingly engaged into discussions of socio-political issues affecting Muslims, voicing new social and political critique, against the secular government as well as SUPKEM. However this protest remained scattered and limited to the level of individual imams and in spite of this socio-political
conscientisation no alternative formal leadership structures emerged to challenge its formal hegemonic position until after 1991 (Sperling 1995: 7; Oded 2000: 49ff).

In brief, the post-colonial period witnessed increasing manifestations of a common Muslim solidarity and conscientisation about collective Muslim interests as well as an increasing adjustment of prevailing coping strategies to the institutional realities of the post-colonial order. This led to the increasing bureaucratisation and professionalisation of Muslim leadership and organisation and new attempts to represent Muslim interests at the national level by inserting a common Muslim voice into the national public sphere. However, as it has been shown, Muslims never managed to serve as a societal counter-force to the post-colonial authoritarian state, largely due to the state’s propensity to rule through the incorporation of challengers, thus reflecting how a specific culture of governance effectively shape the field of independent societal actions vis-à-vis the state.

7. Muslim political activism and new Muslim mobilisation patterns

7.1. Multipartyism and enlargement of political space in Kenya

By the turn of the decade, President Moi had to yield to the combination of international pressure and popular domestic protest and embark on the path to democratic reform. With the repeal of section 2A in the constitution in December 1991 which had made Kenya a de jure one-party state since 1982, the stage was set for a successful transformation of the Kenyan political culture for the first time since independence (Thobhani 2000: 5). Following this dramatic institutional change, the field of opportunities for societal political engagement has significantly opened up, thus changing the conditions for state-society interactions in Kenya. The formal introduction of democracy and the legalisation of political competition and freedom to join and form political parties represented a sea change in Kenya’s political culture (Mutua 2008: 78). This increasing access to political participation led to a proliferation of new opposition parties and would effectively and lastingly change the configuration of political actors in Kenya.

However, cultural aspects of political opportunity structures proved less prone to change and no significant amelioration of the political climate immediately followed the introduction of democracy in Kenya. As the flawed 1992 and 1997 multi-party elections and their aftermath showed, the normative and institutional framework for democracy did not yet exist. The re-elected KANU government remained illiberal at its core and never abandoned its dictatorial culture, structure and practices but continued its repressive actions against newly formed opposition parties and forces (Mutua 2008: 83ff; Thobhani 2000: 13f). Not until after
2002 did the opposition finally manage to come together in a united front through the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) to oust the KANU-regime. In spite of its continued corruption, the Kibaki-led government reflected a slight improvement in national political culture. The legislature became increasingly autonomous of the executive and the press more vigilant, signalising that democratic practices and a culture of accountability were increasingly being implemented in spite of continued governmental efforts to thwart reform (Mutua 2008: 4).

Collective action not only hinges on objective changes in political opportunities but also on how these affect actors’ expectations for success and failure (Tarrow 1994: 85). Even though the concession to democracy in Kenya in the early 1990s was initially more formal than substantial, it still significantly altered citizens’ expectations to the outcome of engagement. Kenya’s national political culture thus increasingly became a zone of fierce public contestation. This led to a momentous remobilisation of society as new political opposition forces and previously marginalised communities started to take a more open political stance, rising new popular demands for greater transparency and leadership accountability (Haugerud 1995: 15f). As it will be shown, this increasingly open political environment and also provided fertile ground for a burgeoning Muslim dissatisfaction and political opposition finally to come to the fore. This effectively changed the expectations of Muslims about the viability of certain forms of engagement, leading them to seek new ways of coping with widespread dissatisfaction and long-ingrained grievances. As opposed to the traditional compliance of the established Muslim leadership, this entailed the adoption of an overt anti-establishment position spurring an increasing Muslim conscientisation and politicisation of Muslim religious identity.

7.2. Insertion of the Muslim community on the Kenyan political stage

7.2.1. Rise and fall of the Islamic Party of Kenya

While Muslims never collectively played a significant role in the democratisation processes, they were quick to grasp the moment of change. The legalisation of opposition parties immediately led a group of young, articulate coastal Muslims to form their own Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK) in Mombasa in 1991, allowing a strong Muslim opposition and dissatisfaction which had been lurking under the surface finally to come to the fore. As opposed to SUPKEM’s political compliance this reflected a shift in power within the Muslim community towards a new, more progressive and vocal generation of leaders (cf. O’Brien 2003: 115). However, the retarded adjustment of prevailing political practices and culture to the norms of
democracy would dreadfully condition the success of this Muslim political experiment however. In May, IPK was refused registration by the Kenyan government, the reason given being that a political party based on religion was unconstitutional, though probably because of President Moi’s fear that IPK would erode the support which KANU traditionally had enjoyed in Muslim areas (c.f. Kagwanja 1998: 58). This fear proved justified as IPK in the 1992 elections instead cast its support to FORD-Kenya assuring the party three out of four Mombasa seats (Oded 1996: 410).

Rather than a revival of earlier secessionist ambitions or reflecting a wish to install an Islamic state, the formation of the party signified the engagement into the national political processes based on the wish to empower Muslims to become “equal Kenyan citizens” (PC Awadh 18/04/07). IPK was the first Muslim voice to raise a public Muslim protest discourse and to point to the marginalised position of Muslims in Kenya as a political problem which required political solutions (cf. Mwakimako 1995: 249). IPK won wide support from Muslims both on the coastal strip and in other parts of the country (Sperling 1998: 13; Oded 2000: 136). The party gained a lot of followers especially among the unemployed and alienated coastal Muslim youth after Sheikh Khalid Balala, a radical Muslim preacher and a University of Medina graduate, joined IPK in mid-1992 and “immediately became its uncrowned leader and spokesman, relegating the party’s founders to the sidelines” (Oded 2000: 150). Sheikh Balala was a strong agitator for the need of Muslims to take their destiny into their own hands, eventually through active confrontation with the secular government if needed (Chande 2000: 352f). From 1992 to 1995 Muslim riots and anti-government demonstrations, at times attended by up to tens of thousands of Muslims and often met with heavy-handed response from the state police, were frequent in Muslim coastal cities (Sperling 1998: 12f; Oded 1996: 409ff).

But Muslim support to the party was not unanimous. Especially SUPKEM felt its leadership position threatened, fearing that the popular support which IPK gained would destroy its relationship with the government. At the time when IPK fought for registration and mobilised mass-demonstrations against KANU in 1992, SUPKEM would send a delegation to pledge loyalty to the KANU government, actively dissociating themselves from IPK (O’Brien 1995: 214f; Mwakimako 1995: 227). The real devastating challenge however arose in 1993 when a rival Muslim organisation entered the stage whose explicitly declared goal was to fight IPK. Through their name, United Muslims of Africa (UMA) these leaders wished to stress their identity as “Africans” and presented the struggle as a racial conflict between ‘black’ African Muslims versus ‘brown’ Arab-Swahili Muslims who formed the core
of the traditional religious élite. The founders all supported the government and a hidden governmental hand seems to have been involved in its establishment. The struggle between UMA and IPK led to several violent clashes and street fighting between the two Muslim groups from 2003 to 2004 (Oded 1996: 412). This governmental divide-and-rule strategy was effective since it managed to play on a deep division within the Muslim community based on a long-ingrained feeling among ethnic Africans of Arab-Swahili condescension towards them.

UMA strongly challenged IPK's symbolic claim to speak for Islam and an undivided Muslim community. At the same time, internal divisions within IPK's leadership started to come to the fore, as the increasing radicalisation of Sheikh Balala and his violent confrontational style increasingly alienated him from the founders of the party, leading to his exclusion in mid-1994. After this, IPK more and more disintegrated as a political party. By the end of 1995 it no longer made the headlines of the news. During the period leading up to the 1997 elections, IPK declared an alliance with the National Democratic Party but only seemed to have exerted limited political influence at the national level (Sperling 1998: 13). The idea to unite Kenyan Muslims around a single political party had failed and instead allowed old ethnic, personal and political divisions to come to the fore.

The establishment of IPK represented the first explicit Muslim political experiment in Kenya and the first time that Muslims as a group would engage in active, large-scale confrontation with the government. Even though this Muslim party political experience was derailed, it was significant because it pointed towards a change in Muslim socio-political consciousness and new coping strategies directly confronting the state. This stirring of popular Muslim agitation thus pointed to the potential of Islam or Muslim religious identity to serve as a symbol of political opposition, around which Muslims could be mobilised. As will be shown in the following, this would in fact prove to be a starting signal for a much wider socio-political mobilisation of the Muslim community and new forms of Muslim engagement into the political processes.

7.2.2. Muslim political activism and new organisational proliferation

Starting with IPK, the opening up of new political opportunities seems to have brought about a rather extensive transformation in the character of Kenyan Muslim leadership and patterns of organisation. Headed by a composite group of new Muslim activists, ranging from Islamic religious leaders to professionals and academics, this has lead to a significant upsurge of new forms of Muslim religious, social and political mobilisation since the late 1990s, manifested through a veritable mushrooming of new Muslim activist organisations. Common to these
diverse organisations is not least that they have increasingly inserted themselves within the public political sphere asserting an often manifest anti-establishment position and that none of them has organised within SUPKEM.

This organisational mushrooming covers a broad range of new activist organisations common to which seems to be the wish to ensure greater prominence of Islam and enhance the socio-economic and political status of Muslims. Rather than a clear-cut specialisation, there is a great deal of overlap between the purposes and activities of these different organisations which are tied together through multiple levels of interactions and dense interpersonal network at the leadership level. A certain organisational division of labour seems to exist however. On the one hand one can thus discern a cluster of organisations which are engaged in a broad range of socio-economic activities. This entails for example the provision of welfare, poverty alleviation, drug rehabilitation, education, youth camps, religious education and new forms of civic engagement including the protection of human rights. Examples of such organisations are the Muslim Education and Welfare Association (MEWA), the Ummah Foundation, the Muslim Education and Development Agenda Network (MEDAN), Muslim Civic Education Trust (MCET) as well as Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI) and Muslim Human Rights Foundation (MHRF). These organisations are mostly headed by devoted Muslim professionals and – with the exception of MEWA – have all been formed in the course of the last decade.

On the other hand, one the most remarkable organisational developments among Kenyan Muslims – the focus in the following – has not least been the coming out of a series of new religio-political organisations headed by Islamic religious leaders, such as imams, preachers, madrassa teachers, as well as higher ranking Islamic scholars (ulama). This comprises organisations such as Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), Kenyan Assembly of Ulama and Imams (KAULI), Kenyan Council of Imams and Ulama (KCIU) and Majlis Ulama. Besides engaging into a series of social and religious activities, these organisations notably serve as forums for the formulation of distinct Muslim standpoints on a number of socio-political issues, using existing religious structures, notably the mosque, to propagate not only religious but also political ideas and viewpoints. What seems to distinguish these organisations from earlier Muslim associations is not only their high level of professionalisation, but the fact that they actively use their position as religious leaders to legitimise a claim to speak on behalf Muslims in matters of social and political relevance, thus working to insert new Muslim voices at the public political level.
One of the most vocal and influential of these organisations is CIPK which was established in Mombasa in 1997, allegedly as the first organised attempt in Kenya to bring together and coordinate the activities of individual imams. As the name reflects, membership of CIPK is confined to religious leaders and does not include the individual Muslim believer as such. By today, the organisation has established itself as one of the central and most vocal Muslim activist organisations in Kenya with a comprehensive national organisational set-up (PC Dor 24/03/07).

Many of the founders and active members of CIPK were previously members of IPK and many Muslims in Mombasa see CIPK as an extension of IPK. In spite of this well-known connection, the leaders of the organisation strongly reject to be seen as a continuation of IPK which still exists, though no longer in the form of an active political party. CIPK leaders assert that the council was originally established as a non-political religious organisation whose purpose was to safeguard the socio-economic interests of imams and Islamic preachers. Soon after its inception however, the organisation took on an increasingly political profile as a result of popular pressure from the Muslim community who, given the leadership vacuum which was left after IPK, started to use the council as a forum where they could voice their grievances and bring their complaints about social and political life (PC Dor 17/03/08; Fowzy 28/03/07). CIPK leaders were at first reluctant to assume the assignment: “We thought that this should be done by the politicians […] but when we came to realise that they were not doing this and the followers were still complaining, we decided to enter into social life and politics at large” (PC Dor 24/03/07). CIPK’s reluctance to be associated with IPK does not simply reflect a wish to be dissociated from the image of IPK’s painful failure and to avoid entering into the same intra-communal conflict which had destroyed this Muslim party-political project. It also reflects real differences in terms of strategies and immediate objectives, and in this sense CIPK does not at all attempt assume the structures or of a political party but has instead engaged into the political processes at a much more indirect level. Unlike IPK, CIPK actively uses the advantages of being a religious leadership organisation, seeking their mandate to speak on behalf of the Muslim populace with reference to their special status and authority as religious leaders (PC Yusuf 07/04/07).

While CIPK also pursues a variety of social activities, its strategic strength and possibilities for social influence seem to lie primarily in their capacities for sensitisation and awareness-making. Since its inception, CIPK has thus become increasingly vocal on political matters, rising public criticism of the government for its treatment of the Muslim community,
thus contributing to the creation of a new Muslim political consciousness. Working through their imam networks, CIPK thus actively exploit existing Muslim religious structures, using the mosque as a platform to mobilise Muslim opinion on various political issues (c.f. CIPK 2006). These public out-reach strategies also imply the active uses of the national media as well as attempts of political lobbying. Sheikh Muhammad Dor, CIPK’s National Secretary General and the organisation’s charismatic and frequently cited public spokesman, has been one of the most outspoken Muslim critics of the government’s treatment of the Muslim community and CIPK seems to be one of the current Muslim organisations with the most trenchant voice in the national media.

In spite of its ambition to serve as a national leadership organisation, CIPK has not been able to monopolise Muslim ideological space. Since its formation a number of other similar and partly competing religious organisations have emerged throughout Kenya. KCIU for example, a similar organisation which was established in Nairobi in 2001 also claims to have committees in five of Kenya’s eight provinces (PC Shir 23/04/07). Also in Mombasa, CIPK’s geographical stronghold, KAULI, a competing Islamic religious organisation with largely the same political aims and organisational setup, was established in 2002. KAULI originally emerged as a result of a religious disagreement due to what they describe as the “Wahhabi”-inclination within CIPK’s executive committee (PC El-Maawy 29/03/07; Karama 15/04/07). As the formation of KAULI demonstrates, the religious-sectarian conflict which raged high during the 1980s ad 1990s, between the new generation of Saudi influenced “Wahhabi” reformists, and adherents of the dominant Sunni-Shafi school of thought, many of whom are Sufis, is still operative.

Also Majlis Ulama, which was established at a formative meeting in April 2005 comprising 300 Muslim scholars from all over Kenya, reflects a significant new formation, aimed to institutionalise a superior religious authority at the national level which, in contrast to the Chief Kadhi, enjoys corporate independency from the state (Hashim 2005a). Organising the highest echelon of Islamic religious leaders in the country, the council claims supreme authority to issue fatwas on religious as well as political matters. However, since many of the executive members have studied in countries such as Saudi Arabia and are known to exhibit strong Wahhabi-inclinations, its religious authority has often been contested (PC Kassim 18/04/07). Today, the council therefore abstains from entering into divisive

---

8 Many of the members of CIPK’s executive board are imams of mosques which are known for their “Wahhabi” stance in religious matters. Yet, the Secretary General, Sheikh Dor, who makes the external face of the organisation, is himself a declared Sufi and rejects that CIPK is promoting any particular school of thought.
religious issues about the right way of practicing Islam (PC Khamis 25/04/07), seemingly in an attempt to tone down religious conflicts in favour of socio-political unity.

While significant dividing lines still exist, one implication of this mushrooming of new activist Muslim leaders’ organisations is not least that Kenyan Muslims increasingly have come to position themselves as a distinct interest group across the ethnic, religious and geographical dividing lines which have traditionally inhibited the realisation of common Muslim aspirations. As it will be shown in the following, a new national Muslim consensus thus seems to emerge, reflected through a series of increasingly coordinated and institutionalised efforts to engage into the political processes of the country in order to fight for socio-political change. This development points to a qualitative change in Muslim mobilisation patterns, reflecting a proactive and strategic adaptation to new political opportunity structures, based on an increasing awareness of the need to act collectively in order to gain influence as a minority population in a democratic system.

7.3. Muslims coming together

7.3.1. The constitutional review process and the Kadhi Courts dispute

One of the concrete occasions which has spurred new forms of collective Muslim engagement was the Kenyan constitutional review process which led to a major national mobilisation of the Muslim community. Muslim participation in the process initially came from an unexpected front as SUPKEM alongside the Muslim Consultative Council (MCC) responded to popular calls for constitutional reform by joining the clergy-led Ufungamano initiative (c.f. Andreassen and Tostesen 2006: 1f). This was the first time SUPKEM would actively position itself politically against the reform-reluctant KANU-government – a tendency which proved not to last however. Muslims furthermore came to play a rather prominent role within the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC) where seven out of twenty-five members of were Muslims (PC Lethome 23/04/08).

The CKRC was mandated to collect the views of the people and to finish the initial Draft Constitutional Bill. During their touring around the country, it became clear that Muslims were strong proponents of the devolution of power from the center to the periphery. Especially the Muslim majority areas of the Costal and North Eastern provinces, which had felt strongly marginalised from the central political processes since colonialism, favoured Majimboism, i.e. a federal model of governance (PC Lethome 23/04/07). While Muslims thus from the outset largely participated within the constitutional debate from the same starting point as other groupings in Kenya, they were soon pushed into a position of
defence as the status of Muslim personal law in the constitution became a major issue of
debate. Under CKRC’s popular touring it had become obvious that there was a strong wish
among Muslims to strengthen the position of the Kadhi Courts. This entailed that the power
of the kadhis should be enhanced through the establishment of a separate Muslim court of
appeal and that the jurisdiction of the Kadhi Courts should be broadened to include the
effects of divorce, such as the custody of children, as well as the handling of minor civil and
commercial cases involving Muslims (PC Lethome 23/04/08; c.f. Hassan 2002).

To the detriment of the Christians, these views were reflected in CKRC’s Draft
Constitutional Bill which was to be discussed at the National Constitution Conference (NCC)
held at Bomas from April 2003 to March 2004. The CKRC-recommendations on
strengthening the Kadhi Courts outraged the Christian population and sparked an intense and
prolonged public debate about the role of shari’ah and the Kadhis’ jurisdiction among both
politicians, church leaders and representatives of the Muslim community. Alongside the major
questions of devolution and the structure of the executive, the Kadhi Courts thus became one
of the three major bones of contention which would significantly put the review process to a
halt. Blind to the fact that these Muslim religious courts were a centuries old which included
in the existing 1963 constitution (section 66), some Christian groups began to interpret their
inclusion as a religious offensive by the Muslim community, and as the first step towards the
Islamisation of Kenyan society. Muslims for their part saw the constitutional protection of
Kadhi Courts not as a special privilege but the only way to ensure their historical and religious
rights to profess their faith in accordance with their religion (PC Lethome 23/04/07;

The final Draft Constitution (the Bomas Draft) which was presented on March 25,
2004, at the end of the NCC partly reflected this debate. Rather than conceding to popular
Muslim wishes to expand the jurisdiction of the Kadhi Courts, it retained the courts in almost
the same form as they were given in the official constitution. Most Muslims felt resigned to
this solution (Seesemann 2007: 166; Hashim 2005). However, after the proposed constitution
was put into legal form by the government, a series of major changes emerged compared to
the Bomas Draft. Instead of the Kadhi Courts provision, it introduced a section which
allowed for the general establishment of “religious courts”, including Christian, Hindu and
Muslim courts, whose jurisdiction were to be decided by an act of Parliament (Hashim 2005).
Muslims conceived this solution to be unacceptable and a threat to vital Muslim religious
interests given that a simple act of Parliament could easily be repealed within a Christian-
dominated legislature and ended up voting massively against the proposed constitution in the November 2005 referendum (Mutua 2008: 225; Hashim 2005).

In spite this, the central part of SUPKEM’s leadership finally remained loyal to their old inclination to side with the government during the referendum, adding to its lack of legitimacy in the eyes of many Muslims (PC Dor 17/03/07; Awadh 27/03/07). Instead, the constitutional referendum became the occasion for a massive mobilisation of the Muslim community outside of SUPKEM. For many of these new activist organisations described above the constitutional referendum thus became an occasion to activate new resources and extend their profile as leaders of the Muslim community by entering the field of politics. When Muslims ended up voting overwhelmingly against the constitutional proposal, this was largely the result of the coordinated efforts of many of the new Muslim activist organisations to mobilise Muslim opinion (c.f. Hashim 2005). As it will be shown in the following, the constitutional referendum became the concrete occasion for the institutionalisation of new national Muslim leadership structures outside of SUPKEM leading to what seems to be an increasing Muslim unity.

7.3.2. New national Muslim leadership structures

More than anything else, the struggle over the Kadhi Courts in the new constitution revealed the need for Muslim unity in order to fight for their common interests. By providing Muslims with a central unifying symbol for their struggle, the constitutional review process offered an important impetus for the politicisation of Muslim religious identity in Kenya. As a response to the mushrooming of new activist organisations, all claiming to speak on behalf of Kenyan Muslims and none of which had registered within SUPKEM, a number of these organisations came together by the end of 2003 and founded the National Muslim Leaders Forum (NAMLEF). SUPKEM, which saw the establishment of the Forum as an occasion to re-establish some of the influence it had lost, was part of the initiative to form the Forum (PC Abdulghafur 24/04/07; El-Maawy 29/03/07). The broader aim of NAMLEF was to create a platform where independent Muslim organisations could coordinate their different strategies, both in religious, social and political matters, in order to enable Muslims to speak with one voice in matters of national relevance. Today NAMLEF, whose headquarter is situated in the Jamia Mosque in Nairobi, organises 29 organisations throughout Kenya that hold quarterly

9 The founding members comprised organisations like SUPKEM, CIPK, KAULI, MUHURI, Northern Aid, NUKEM, IPK, Young Muslim Association, MCC, Islamic Dawa Group (IDG), Majlis Ulama, the Jamia Mosque Committee and a number of smaller organisations.
meetings or unite whenever there is a pressing issue affecting Muslims nationwide which requires national Muslim consensus (PC Abdi 25/04/07).

The fact that many of SUPKEM's executive members actively ended up supporting the governmental constitutional proposal significantly drove a wedge between SUPKEM and the other organisations within NAMLEF. In contrast to SUPKEM, NAMLEF was able to use its widespread organisational network to spread a message presenting the constitutional proposal as being in conflict with Muslim religious and political interests and emphasising the need for Muslims to vote as a block. One of the particularly active organisations in this respect was CIPK who mobilised their members to engage into a comprehensive civic education campaign addressing Muslim people across the country:

We are trying to educate our Muslim brothers and sisters that if you want your right as a Kenyan, the best thing to do is to get your voting card. When you get your voting card and you go to vote, then there is a time you will get your rights and you will be respected, because in politics everything is in numbers (PC Dor 24/03/07).

Through seminars and workshops CIPK addressed imams and religious leaders and equipped them with civic education materials to use in their sermons, with the purpose of creating awareness of the importance for Muslims to engage actively in the political processes, allegedly targeting almost one million Muslims in Kenya (PC Dor 24/03/07; CIPK 2006). A central part of these civic education strategies has thus been to make Muslims aware of the need to use their democratic right to vote in order to gain influence and to convince Muslims all over Kenya about the necessity to stand united politically and to vote as a block. Seemingly, the Muslim population listened to their new leaders’ forum during the referendum. In provinces with a Muslim dominated population, Coast and North Eastern Province, 80% and 75% respectively voted against the constitution, thus reiterating “the unified stand of the majority of Muslims against State policy” (Hashim 2005). This defeat of the government in the constitutional referendum was interpreted by Muslim leaders as one of the major Muslim victories and a proof of the potential for Muslims to function as a significant united force within Kenyan politics (PC Dor 24/03/07).

After the referendum, NAMLEF did not loose its raison d'être but instead installed itself as a stark criticiser of the Kibaki-government. Encouraged by the seeming success during the referendum, a wide range of Muslim organisations across the country have thus, under the auspices of NAMLEF, engaged in a comprehensive sensitising and awareness-creating project, emphasising the importance of engaging collectively into the democratic
processes in order to promote collective Muslim interests. The aim of this campaign is to make Muslims in Kenya positioning themselves as a cohesive political force to gain greater influence in the country. Muslim leaders thus recurrently emphasise that it is “only by unity that we will be able to protect our interests and salvage the ummah from the predicament it is undergoing” (Friday Bulletin 2007: no. 217), and

Muslims’ unity during election time will help us as a community to involve ourselves in the affairs of the country and significantly increase the chances of our voice being heard on critical issues we raise. Moreover, when we become politically active, we can seek to better the lives of all Muslims living in the country (Friday Bulletin 2007: No. 223).

An important feature of social movements is that they continuously seize and make opportunities (Tarrow 1994: 81f). NAMLEF’s power to organise and mobilise Muslims in Kenya had not gone by unattended by national politicians, who started to court to the Forum to find a legitimate Muslim partner to support them in the national elections. Muslims were thus able to exploit the new ruling alignments which emerged in the wake of the constitutional review process to gain new influential allies within the established political system, notably the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) which had emerged as the main opposition party after the Kibaki faction broke with the NARC government during the review process. The organisations also had their own trusted Muslim candidate at the level of Parliament, Najib Balala, a previous minister under Kibaki and presently one of the central figures within ODM who was in fact the first Muslim nominee for the presidential candidacy in Kenya prior to the 2007 elections (PC Balala 16/04/07).

Having decided to cast their support to ODM, NAMLEF signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in August 2007 with Raila Odinga, ODM’s final candidate for the December 2007 presidential elections. In accordance with this, activist Muslim leaders undertook to mobilise the support of the national Muslim community to vote for Odinga. In return, Odinga agreed to undertake a number of measures in favour of the Muslim community, such as accepting NAMLEF as his partner in choice for representing the Muslim community, initiating “deliberate policies and programmes to redress historical, current and structural marginalisation and injustices on Muslims in Kenya” and to secure “equitable representation of Muslims in all public appointments” (Odinga and NAMLEF 2007). The Memorandum soon became object of negative attention from the Christian community. Most notably, the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK) published and distributed their own version of this MoU, distorted beyond recognition. According to this Odinga had agreed to
recognise Islam as the only true religion, ensure full autonomy to the Coastal Province, rewrite the constitution to recognise shari’a as the only true law for Muslim declared regions, and to impose an immediate ban on women’s public dressing style (EAK 2007).

The Muslim organisations on their hand proceeded with their mobilisation campaign by using mosques, Muslim media and pamphlets encouraging Muslims to stand up for their rights and become a registered voter. In October 2007 the chairman of the Forum, Abdullahi Abdi, declared in an official statement that: “We can see for the first time in this country Islamic matters being discussed in the public not only by Muslims but also by non-Muslims. For the first time in this country Muslim matters are becoming an election agenda” (Abdi 2007). Muslim activist leaders made an effective mobilising campaign, and election propaganda was blaring from loudspeakers Muslim populated areas. The election campaign came to focus on Muslim grievances to an unusual degree, as both candidates would court the Muslim vote in the nation’s closets election ever in order to pull voters to their side. According to one Kenyan political scientist this was “the first time religious issues have played such a prominent part in national politics” (Karuti Kanyinga; cited in Odula and Muhumed 2007). Muslims dissatisfaction with the election results did not generally materialise in violence in the wake of the elections, albeit unsatisfied Muslims protesters would come out from the mosques in hundreds calling for a new election and were met with fierce reactions by police officers, chasing them away with tear gas (Gettleman 2008). While the Muslim vote did not prove decisive for the outcome of the general elections, one of the most important outcomes seems to have been the organisation of joint Muslim action in pursuit of a common objective.

In brief, the last two decades have witnessed important changes in Kenyan Muslim coping strategies reflecting the proactive adaptation to new political opportunity structures. The introduction of political liberalisations since the early 1990s has thus led to the insertion of new Muslim actors on the public political stage, entailing that Kenyan Muslim organisations increasingly have become actively engaged in the political debates of the country, expressing a new sense of identity in relation to the nation-state as part of the new democratic struggle. This insertion of a new distinct Muslim voice within the public political sphere, often linked to an open discourse of opposition, seems to represent a new development and an important change in orientation reflecting an the crystallisation of new Muslim-state relations in the country.
7.4. New Muslim activism and changing Muslim-state relations in Kenya

The attempt in the above has been to give a comprehensive account of how to understand the emergence of new forms of Muslim political activism and the increasing politicisation of Muslim identity. The point of departure for addressing this question has been that there is a need to turn away attention from the Islamic religious context as the primary determinant for Muslim political behaviour and to focus instead on Muslims as a sociologically defined group whose actions and strategies evolve in close interaction with their socio-political environment.

The recent mobilisation of the Kenyan Muslim community in many ways reflects a significant change in Muslim-state relations in Kenya, reflecting new forms of Muslim political engagement and pointing to the crystallisation of a new Muslim political consciousness. This attempt to unite Muslims around a program of political opposition reflects a qualitatively new development. Yet, as a historical perspective has revealed, this new activism also seems to reflect a great deal of continuity. Even though the Muslim community has not traditionally displayed a strong unity at the political level, Muslims have always sought to redress various grievances along religious community lines, indicating the existence of a distinct Muslim sociality and solidarity beyond merely that of a common religious devotion. Historical variations in Muslim coping strategies can thus be seen to reflect how Muslims continuously have sought to adapt to changing political opportunities and constraints. The success of these strategies across time has largely been framed by the prevailing power structures defining the patterns of state-societies interactions.

Overall speaking, one can distinguish between two significant transformations in the historical development of Muslim organisational patterns and collective coping strategies from colonial times up till now. It should be noted that these transformations merely reflect different tendencies which are today co-existing and overlapping rather than simply superseding one another. At the organisational level one can observe a shift in Muslim associational patterns from small-scale, local, informal and loosely organised single-purpose organisations to increasingly large-scale, national, formal and professional bureaucratic organisations with more generalised objectives, attempting to mediate between the Muslim community and the state.

At the strategic level, one can observe a movement from the predominance of ‘exit strategies’ during colonialism – whether through the recourse to increasing religiosity, the withdrawal into religious loyalty networks or actual attempts of secession – towards increasing forms of engagement and orientation towards the public political arena in the post-
colonial order. In pace with the affirmation of the post-colonial Kenyan state as an enduring institutional reality, Muslim coping strategies have thus become increasingly oriented towards the state as an arena for seeking alleviation and influence. While Muslim attempts to insert themselves as a united interest group in the post-colonial neo-patrimonial order thus resulted in widespread compliance due to the cooptation into the clientelistic networks of the state, the introduction of democratic reforms have – however stalled the democratisation processes has otherwise been – increasingly allowed Muslims to insert themselves as a new collective force of opposition.

To a certain extent, historical variations in popular Muslim coping strategies in Kenya can be compared to the transformations in the main “repertoires of contention” which developed in Europe as a response to large-scale social and political change (c.f. Tilly 1995). As such, new forms of Muslim activism can be seen to reflect a strategic and organisational modernisation, reflecting the gradual adaptation to the reconfigured political space by a specific socio-religious group. The story of Muslim coping strategies in Kenya can thus be seen as an example of how the reconstructed colonial state has continuously restructured communities and their consciousness as these have adjusted to, opposed or sought accommodation within the state (c.f. Mutua 2008: 18).

While the recent changes in Muslim mobilisation patterns can largely be understood as a response to changes in the political opportunity structures as it has been shown above, such objective transformations in the political context only define the necessary conditions for political mobilisation to take place, but do not in themselves explain how favourable opportunities actually translate into collective action, (c.f. Meyer and Minkoff 2004: 1463f). What is interesting is not least why specific social or cultural identities become so salient at a given moment that they can be used as leverage for organised socio-political claims. A distinctive feature of Muslim political activism is thus not only the fact that Muslims are mobilising politically but that they are mobilising as Muslims, indicating the crystallisation of a new Muslim socio-political consciousness.

To understand the processes whereby Muslim religious identity in Kenya has come to serve as leverage for collective socio-political action there is thus a need to go beyond a focus on the political context alone. In the following it will be shown how the crystallisation of a new Muslim religio-political consciousness in Kenya can be understood as the consequences of other exogenous factors, notably a series of cultural-religious transformations as well as a heightened sense of Muslim dissatisfaction linked to the war against terror. Finally, by applying valuable insights from the framing perspective, it can furthermore be established
how the crystallisation of a new Muslim religio-political consciousness is not only the product of objective and structural factors which is a precondition for mobilisation to take place but also the result of social constructivist processes engaged in by Muslim activist leaders through the very processes of mobilisation.

8. The rise of a new Muslim religio-political consciousness and identity
8.1. The cultural-religious setting: new Islamic conscientisation

Similar to the importance of the political context, one can argue for the need to acknowledge how the “cultural environment” might constrain or enable collective action (see Williams 2007). As it can be shown, the recent conscientisation of Kenyan Muslims can partly be understood against a background of a series of cultural and religious transformations which have wiped through Kenya in ways which have significantly transformed the self-understanding and religious consciousness of Kenyan Muslims in the course of the last four decades.

These developments have largely been precipitated by the coming out of a new reform-oriented Muslim religious élite since the 1970s. This has not least to be the result of been the increasing opening up of East African Islam to influences from the wider Muslim world, linked not least to the generous offering of scholarships by a series of Muslim Middle Eastern countries Chande 2000: 351; Kresse 2007: 94). During their studies abroad, these young Muslims became acquainted with new reformist Islamic influences, in particular the Saudi brand of Salafiyya reformism known as Wahhabism, which in many respects is at odds with local Sufi-oriented traditions and practices (see Bakari 1995: 172; Kresse 2006: 218; Seeseman 2006: 235). Upon their return to Kenya these young Muslims soon took over leading positions within Kenyan Islam, threatening the strongholds of the traditional Sharif families, the conventional protectors of Sufi traditions. Often, they started disseminating the Islamic doctrines of their host institutions, by calling for a return to more orthodox forms of Islam in line with the scriptures and the Prophetic model, where the Quran and the Sunna came to be seen as the only acceptable sources of Islamic reasoning and conduct (Chande 2000: 351). During the 1980s and 1990s this led to a fight for control of the religious-ideological space between “Wahhabis” and “Sufis” which would sometimes turn into violent clashes creating deep and still existing religious divisions within the Sunni Muslim community (Seesemann 2006: 235).

At the local level, the integration these young Muslims into such transnational educational networks became a channel for upward mobility for the individual believer. This
effect seemed to spread to the wider Muslim society, especially as this new reformist élite became strongly committed to transforming the structures of Islamic education at home, emphasising the need for the individual believer to be able to understand the sources of the faith for himself rather than relying on mediation from the local sheikh or Sharif. Against a situation where Islamic religious knowledge had typically been the exclusive tenure of specific clans or families, this has led to a veritable popularisation of Islamic religious knowledge. One effect of this seems to have been that Islamic theological problems and questions of the right Islamic practices which were previously taken for granted increasingly have started to become matters of discussion for a much broader part of the Muslim population (see Bakari 1995).

One of the most important contributions of this new élite has thus been to spur a far-reaching reorientation and conscientisation among Kenyan Muslims, by calling on Muslims to think for themselves and questioning established authorities and taken-for-granted truths. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, given the otherwise orthodox inclinations inherent in this reformist movement, one of the effects of this in fact seems to have been the crystallisation of a more modern Muslim outlook. This is so, insofar as modernity, as Goankar (2001: 13) points out, is to be understood as an attitude of questioning the past, not necessarily confined to Western secularised societies.

Even though the spread of new Islamic reformism in Kenya never translated into an organised socio-political movement, such critical and self-reflective attitudes seem to have spilled over into the secular socio-political outlooks of Muslims. In the course of the 1980s this new élite started to raise critical voices at the socio-political level, increasingly engaging in discussions of socio-political issues affecting Muslims, often in direct opposition to the government as well as to SUPKEM which they largely saw as a government lackey (Bakari 1995: 183; Oded 2000: 49ff; cf. Chande 2000: 349). Besides, many members of this new reformist élite, popularly known as “Wahhabis”, were strong and outspoken supporters of IPK (see Bakari 1995a) and also today, members of them seem to be strongly represented within many of the new Muslim activist organisations, not least in the new religious councils such as CIPK, KCUI and Majlis Ulama (PC Kassim 18/04/07).

To point out the prominent role of this “Wahhabi” reformist élite within this new activist movement in Kenya, should not, as some observers have suggested (e.g. Loimeier 2003: 252) lead to conclude that Muslim political activism in Kenya reflects a religious project rooted in special reformist ideological interpretations of Islam. Such an interpretation would replicate the “Islam in Africa” paradigm as described above, which understands the politicisation of African Muslims as an outcome of the spread of reformist or Islamist
influences imported from abroad, disturbing the moderate tendencies of local “African Islam” (c.f. Rosander and Westerlund 1997; Chande 2000). Even though this new Wahhabi-oriented élite does seem to play a central role in this new activist movement it has not gained ideological hegemony and no evidence suggests that Muslim activism reflects an attempt to implement an Islamic-ideological programme. Rather, the importance of this Islamic reformist reorientation among Kenyan Muslims seems not least to lie in the general Muslim religious awareness which this has brought about, combined with the spread of new critical attitudes towards established authorities within the religious as well as the political field.

8.2. Triggering factors: the Kenyan war against terror
In order to understand the conditions under which such religious sentiments can become mobilised for extra-religious political purposes there is arguably a need to go beyond the religious context. While this can partly be understood against the background of favourable political conditions as argued above, it also seems to have been triggered by a heightened sense of collective Muslim dissatisfaction. As it can be shown, the Kenyan war against terror seems to have been strengthened new experiences of discrimination and aroused a widespread Muslim anger in Kenya. By creating a feeling that Islam has come under attack from the wider society, this seems to have spurred an increasing collective Muslim consciousness in Kenya.

Since the first al-Qaeda related terrorist attack on Kenyan ground in 1998, Muslims have felt victims of a hostile political campaign, starting with the political decision to close down a number of Muslim NGOs in the wake of the 1998 attacks (see Haynes 2005: 1324f). Also the media were harping on especially the religious angle in the wake of the attacks, leading Muslims to feel that they had become part of a hostile campaign, equating Islam with violence. Especially President Moi’s untimely remark that the perpetrators of the bomb would not have done the deed if they were Christians outraged the Muslim community; causing strong condemnation form national Muslim leaders (see Ngunjiri 1998; Oded 2000: 83f; Mwakimako 2007: 296).

This feeling of harassment was worsened as international Islamic terrorism became the main issue on the international security agenda. After 9/11 President Moi thus used the opportunity to improve Kenya’s strained relations with the U.S. and Great Britain by offering full cooperation in the “war on terror”, followed by a wave of arbitrary arrests in Mombasa and other coastal towns (Seesemann 2007: 168). After the 2002 bombings, a new dimension was added as the newly elected President Kibaki decided to take new legal steps in the fight
against terrorism. The new anti-terror legislation which was drafted was a direct response to the U.S. administration’s campaign to convince African governments to take new legislative steps in the fight against terrorism (Seesemann 2007: 169). The resulting law proposal, the Suppression of Terrorism Bill, which the government made a bid to rush in Parliament in 2003, was based on a vague and broad definition of terrorism and would have given wide-ranging powers to the authorities to search and detain people who were suspects in connection with terrorist activities. Under the proposed legislation, police would have had the power to arrest people and conduct searches without a warrant and made provision for suspects to be held incommunicado for some time after their arrest (Amnesty International 2004). The proposed Bill, which was strongly criticised by the Muslim community as well as by human rights groups inside and outside Kenya, was never passed in Parliament though the proposal has never really been shelved. Muslims today frequently complain that the Bill in practice has been implemented to the detriment Kenyan Muslims.

Especially the harassment of the Muslim community in the guise of fighting terrorism by the so-called Terror Police, which has been responsible for a wave of arbitrary arrests and illegal detentions of terror suspects, has aroused the condemnation of Muslim organisations and leaders. In 2007 close to one hundred Muslim terror suspects, among them many Kenyan citizens, had been deported out of Kenya to neighbouring Somalia and Ethiopia where they were detained incommunicado and refused legal representation, based on allegations of their relation to the Union of Islamic Courts in Somalia. Such instances have aroused massive protest and have several times led Muslims to take to the streets on request from Muslim activist leaders (see Friday Bulletin 2007: no. 199-204)

The war against terror has not only created a wedge between Muslim and Christian groupings in Kenya (see Mwakimako 2007), it also seems to have supported a notion of a global confrontation between Islam and “the West” as Kenyan Muslims have come to see their suffering in extension of “the injustices being done to Muslims around the world” (PC Abdi 25/04/07). This has not least triggered strong anti-American sentiments since the Kenyan government has positioned itself as a loyal U.S. ally in the war against terror. A hidden American hand is seen to have been involved in the designing the proposed anti-terror bill for example and Kenyan Muslims have allegedly foreign intelligence services such as CIA and FBI have been engaged in a systematic harassment and even torturing of Kenyan Muslims (PC Ngao 11/04/07; Khalid 13/04/07). This also seems to have created an increasing global Islamic awareness and sense of belonging to a worldwide umma, where
Muslim suffering at the hands of Western powers in places such as Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan often make the headlines in the Friday Bulletin and spur Muslim protest.

Against a situation where Muslims for long have felt marginalised compared to Christian ethnic groups, the war against terror has worked to fuel increasing dissatisfaction and an increasing awareness about the socio-political importance of Muslim identity. One of the most important outcomes seems to have been a significant strengthening of Muslim consciousness coupled with a heightened sense of unity and awareness of common political interests qua Muslims. The war against terror has thus seemingly served to unite Muslims: “Because of all this suppression, Muslims have become quite resistant in terms of fighting for their rights. […] Because Muslims feel threatened they feel they have a collective responsibility to take their position” (PC Abdi 25/04/07). Also at the religious level the harassment of Muslims seems to have made them wake up, asking the question why Muslims in particular are being harassed and one side-effect of this seems to be that it has inclined Muslims to go out and learn about Islam and to reflect more intensively upon their Muslim religious identity (PC Khamis 25/04/07).

In brief, the war against terror has contributed to fuelling new religio-political tensions and awareness in Kenya. Even though this is not in itself the root cause of the politicisation of Muslim identity in Kenya, it seems to have strengthened a process whereby Muslim religious identity increasingly has become linked to a set of distinct socio-political interests. However, as it will be shown in the following, the crystallisation of a new collective Muslim solidarity and the transformation of Muslim identity into a leverage for new forms of organised political engagement cannot simply be understood as the outcome of objective circumstances. Instead, the crystallisation of a new Muslim consciousness not only seems to be a precondition for Muslim activist mobilisation but must also be seen as a product of the very processes of mobilisation. By offering new ‘frames’ and cognitive tools for interpreting and understanding experiences and events, Muslim activist leaders are thus actively engaged in the reconstruction of a new national Muslim identity, effectively transforming the notion of what it means to be Muslim in modern Kenya.

8.3. Framing Muslim activism and the reconstruction of Muslim identity in Kenya

8.3.1. The framing perspective

By focusing on the socio-psychological underpinnings of social movements, a frame analysis perspective can offer a valuable corrective to the contextual and structural approach presented above because it transfers attention from objective environmental factors to the
inter-subjective meanings which the actors involved attach to their situation. In other words, if we want to understand the actions of movement participants, it is necessary to consider the meaning the situation has for them. What the framing perspective can add to our understanding of social movement formation is not least the recognition that social movements are not merely carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically from a given political or cultural-religious context. Instead, movement actors must be seen as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning (Benford and Snow 2000: 613f). Such meanings are of course not constructed out of nothing but in interaction with the political and cultural context and the framing perspective must therefore be seen as a corrective rather than an alternative perspective to for example political process approaches (Tarrow 1994: 119; c.f. Diani 1996).

Collective action frames are accentuating devises which underscore the seriousness and injustice of a social condition and which redefine as unjust and immoral what was previously seen as unfortunate or perhaps tolerable (Tarrow 1994: 122). Framing thus draws attention to the ways in which social movement actors and entrepreneurs define and interpret grievances and construct social reality to motivate collective action, by punctuating the seriousness and injustice and by attributing blame to concrete actors and specifying the appropriate strategies and tactics needed to generate change (Morris and Staggenborg 2007: 183). The collective processes of attribution whereby often long-ingrained grievances become interpreted as intolerable and unacceptable can thus be seen as central to our understanding of movement formation. From such a perspective, the current Muslim mobilisation can thus be seen as a reflection of collective re-interpretations of the Muslim situation in Kenya, engaged in by new activist leaders. What is interesting from this perspective is the mobilising and constructivist role of such interpretative processes, whereby Muslim leaders have been able to express creative dissatisfaction and expound long-existing social grievances as unjust and up for change through concerted socio-political activist engagement.

Framing processes simultaneously work to proffer, buttress and embellish identities (Benford and Snow 2000: 631f). An understanding of the processes whereby collective identities are created seems fundamental to our understanding of social movements. Rather than simply tapping into existing preferences and activating a set of pre-existing values and identities, Muslim activist leaders seem to be engaged into an actual construction or re-intervention of Muslim identity in ways which change the preference structures and the notion of what it means to be a Muslim in modern Kenya. Muslim activism in other words cannot simply be understood as a response to pre-existing group claims, but are at the same
time a product of an active and creative process whereby Muslim leaders and central movement entrepreneurs have been articulating new interpretations and evaluations of the situation thus generating a new shared sense of obligation to act collectively (c.f. Barker et al. 2001: 3f; Benford and Snow 2000: 614).

Muslim activists are thus not merely exploiting political opportunities by offering solutions to externally generated demands by responding to objective grievances and dissatisfaction. Nor are they simply engaged into mobilising a set of fixed and pre-given identities. As it will be shown, a framing perspective can thus help to illuminate on the one hand the collective processes of attribution whereby Muslim suffering comes to be interpreted as a result of politically inflicted injustices, and on the other hand the active attempts to create a new sense of obligation to act collectively by linking together political interests with religious duty.

8.3.2. The politicisation of Muslim identity and the reconstruction of Muslim unity

One of the core framing tasks in which social movement agents engage is to diagnose and identify problems which need to be solved as well as to define the root cause of and attribute blame for these problems (Benford and Snow 2000: 615). An important aspect of the framing of new Muslim socio-political activism in Kenya has been the active attempt by activist entrepreneurs to create an understanding that the various grievances facing Muslims across Kenya are not simply due to individual misfortune but represent a common political problem which reflects a historically and politically inflicted Muslim experience of injustice.

The framing of Muslim activism seems to revolve around the articulation of a number of specific ‘narratives’ or often repeated core examples which accentuate a set of collective Muslim grievances, and which link an account of these problems to a comprehensive critique of the secular political establishment. Many of the grievances facing the Muslim community today are in fact not new but go back as far as the early colonial times. What is interesting however is the process whereby long-ingrained grievances come to be seen as intolerable and in need of change through collective action. Muslim activists are thus not only engaged in the naming and accentuation of grievances but also offer new schemes of interpretation which reassert Muslim history in Kenya in opposition to the government. Muslim activism is thus being framed as a response to the historically and politically inflicted injustice facing Kenyan Muslims:
We Muslims in Kenya are marginalised. If you go to meet any Muslim organisation in Kenya, the first thing they will tell you is that we are marginalised by the first government, the second government and this current one. That is one thing on which we all agree (PC Dor 24/03/07).

The present Muslim predicament is thus being interpreted as a consequence of the discriminatory policies of successive Christian-dominated governments and thus the outcome of a long-term process of marginalisation and accumulated politically inflicted injustices which has been felt as a systematic governmental neglect of Muslim-dominated areas throughout history (PC Balala 16/04/07; Dor 24/03/07).

Thus, when Muslim activists explain the impetus for their struggle they not only highlight a long list of grievances which they characterise as specific to the Muslim community but also offer a scheme of interpretation which attribute these to systematic government neglect or even discrimination of Muslims within a Christian-dominated state. Besides general complaints about poverty, unequal land distribution, poor health facilities, lack of job opportunities and unequal political representation, some specific grievances are frequently highlighted as core examples of outward government discrimination against Muslims. One of those is the poor educational situation among Muslims which is often described as the result of the deliberate attempt by succeeding Christian-dominated governments to keep Muslims behind by denying them access to institutions of higher learning on account of their names and by delaying the construction of proper educational facilities in Muslim-dominated areas (PC Hyder 15/03/07). Another complaint is that Muslims are being systematically denied their citizens right due to a widespread practice within the Christian-dominated administration whereby people carrying Muslim names are required to provide additional proof in order to attest their Kenyan citizenship when applying for a passport or identity card (PC Dor 12/04/07; Balala 16/04/07).

This activist reconstruction of the Muslim community into a distinct socio-political constituency in Kenya has been given further impetus in the wake of 9/11 and the Kenyan version of the war against terror. The widespread feeling that Muslims in Kenya have become targets of an often arbitrary harassment in connection to the Kenyan war against terror has thus served to buttress a widespread perception that Muslims are being discriminated because they are Muslims, independent of other factors of identity. The war against terror is being codified as a war against Islam and Muslims as such and Muslim activist leaders often express the feeling that the Kenyan government is in fact exercising a “silent policy to suppress Muslims and Islam” (PC Awadh 17/03/07).
One central feature of these ‘narratives’ is that they present Muslims not only as a religiously defined community but also a distinct socio-political group who shares a set of common socio-political preferences owing to their shared experience of relative deprivation. In their public calls to make Muslims unite around their programme for change, Muslim activist organisations are actively using such discourse of political injustice, relative deprivation and discrimination as a mobilising devise. In a publicly distributed pamphlet authorised by NAMLEF aimed to make Muslim register as voters and unite for the December 2007 presidential elections, Muslims are called upon to “stand up for their rights” based on a representation of Muslims as a discriminated group in Kenya:

For a long time Muslims in this country have been exposed to abuses, marginalisation and have been pushed to the periphery as an insignificant lot. (…) A casual comparison between Muslim majority areas and others in the field of education, health or infrastructure will establish the massive disparity in development and services (NAMLEF 2007).

Many of the grievances facing Muslims are arguably not exclusive to the Muslim population as such but can be seen to reflect a general experience shared by many non-Muslim Kenyans as well. By calling attention to problems which are recognisable to most Muslims in Kenya they contribute to consolidating a new national Muslim solidarity thereby invalidating the dividing potentials of other factors of identity, such a ethnic, tribal, sectarian or geographical affiliation, which have traditionally split up the Muslim community. As one activist correspondent thus points out,

[…] what affects Muslims somewhere in Mandera will also affect Muslims in the Coast Province, in Luo Nyanza, in any other parts of the country. […] We have specific issues to the Muslims: when it comes to sharing the national cake, when it comes to job distribution and representation in institutions we find that it is not proportionate to the population of Muslims in this country (PC Lethome 23/04/07).

By recurrently pointing to and raising complaints about the Muslim predicament in Kenya, Muslim activists have thus been actively engaged in the construction of a new national religio-political awareness among Kenyan Muslims which principally transcends the prevailing socio-political dividing line based on racial or tribal belonging.

In brief, Muslim activist leaders are offering an extensive discourse of unity, common circumstance and common victimhood aiming to cement a new collective Muslim identity and socio-political consciousness. Such diagnostic framing, whereby often long-existing
grievances become interpreted as intolerable and subject to change through the mobilisation of concerted efforts, serve to change perceptions about a given problem as well as what is to be done about it. By addressing the experiences of everyday hardship shared by most ordinary people and by offering a framework of understanding which links these to a common destiny *qua* Muslims and attributing responsibility to the political leadership of the country, such repeatedly highlighted examples seem to intensify a new socio-political awareness among Muslims. By diagnosing Muslim problems as a political problem and by inscribing Muslim grievances in an overall frame of injustice which links these to the discriminatory policies of the state, Muslim activist leaders are actively contributing to the politicisation of Muslim identity in Kenya. To emphasise the social constructivist nature of Muslim grievances however should neither induce us to think of these as illusory nor as simply the deliberate product of the interpretations and narratives of movement entrepreneurs. Instead, the concept of framing draws our attention to how the strategic efforts of Muslim activists to fashion a shared understanding by offering new narratives of the situation might actually play a constitutive role in constructing the very attitudes, identities and interests of the people they seek to mobilise.

### 8.3.3. Reframing Islam and politics

By framing Muslim grievances as a politically inflicted problem *qua* Muslims, as pointed out above, Muslim activist leaders seem to be engaged with reconstructing the meaning of Muslim identity from being a religious category to also defining a common socio-political identity and a distinct relationship to the state. At the same time, Muslim activist leaders are actively and innovatively using an Islamic religious discourse as a vocabulary of motive and legitimation in order to win the support of the popular Muslim constituency and define a rationale to engage. As it can be shown, this attempt to mobilise a new Muslim political engagement entails the redefinition of Islamic religious devotion, by extending the meaning and significance of Muslim religious identity and commitment to encompass a responsibility to political participation.

Within a Muslim community, those who choose to become morally or politically engaged need to voice their concern within a religious framework where the reference to Islam represents a claim to authority, truth and relevance which can be used to underpin and endorse one’s extra-religious agendas (Kresse 2007: 224). The motivational rhetoric aimed to persuade the Muslim populace to support the activist call for change is thus buttressed by ample references to Islam. When explaining the need for Muslim socio-political engagement,
Muslim activists recurrently refer to the fact that Islam is “a whole way of life” and that “there is no way you could talk Islam without talking politics” (PC Awadh 27/03/07).

However, Muslim activist leaders do not only tap into existing religious meanings or simply mobilise a strongly anchored religious solidarity but are actively engaged in redefining Islamic-religious devotion to encompass an obligation for socio-political engagement. For example, the activist attempt to create support for the attempt to make Muslims decisive voter’s block in Kenyan politics is being presented as a “duty to the Umma” since “as Muslims you are duty-bound to participate as an appointer of the type of government you desire” (NAMLEF 2007). Similarly, the challenge of enhancing a “comprehensive national profile” for the community by articulating a distinct Muslim position on particular issues is described as “the Jihad of Kenyan Muslims” (see Friday Bulletin 2006: no. 181). Being a good Muslim in other words not only entails exhibiting proper religious devotion but also to be active in the political processes of the country.

This need to legitimise Muslim democratic political participation must not least be understood against the background of the widespread conception among leading Islamic religious scholars that democracy and the rule of God are incompatible and that participation in the political processes of a secular state is un-Islamic. To “clear the misconception that voting is prohibited in Islam” Muslim leaders have for examples made public reference to a Fatwa issued in Saudi Arabia in 2002 by reputable Islamic scholars which allow Muslim minorities to participate in electoral processes, thus legitimising religiously the participation of Kenyan Muslims within the secular democratic system (Friday Bulletin 2007: no. 217). This need to offer Islamic religious legitimation of Muslim activism is furthermore reflected through the central role played by Majlis Ulama which organises some of the highest-ranking Islamic scholars in Kenya. Majlis Ulama is recognised by the organisations within NAMLEF as their spiritual guide offering an Islamic point of view of political issues and how Muslims should position themselves not only in relation to religious issues but also to various secular political questions (PC Khamis 25/04/07; Abdi 25/04/07).

As the role of Majlis Ulama as well as the ample references to Islam and the reliance on Islamic religious authorities show, Muslim activists are actively seeking legitimacy for their struggle within Islam in order to gain popular Muslim support. This does not entail however that the Muslim socio-political struggle should necessarily be seen as an attempt to implement some kind of Islamic-ideological agenda, for example based on specific readings of Islam, such as the Islamism paradigm would predict. Instead, Muslim religious leaders refer to Islam as a universal category but rarely take recourse to Islamic theology or refer to specific
doctrines when seeking to legitimise Muslim engagement. This would too easily bring to the
fore the still existing divergences between adherents of different schools of thought. Rather,
Muslim religious leaders increasingly seem to tone down religious differences in favour of
creating a new national socio-political unity and identity.

As it has been show, the attempt to mobilise popular support for Muslim activism in
Kenya has not only entailed the construction of Muslims as a united constituency through the
highlighting of a set of common socio-political interests qua Muslims. It also entails redefining
the notion of what it means to be a good Muslim from simply a question of the right
religious-moral observances to encompassing an obligation to political participation. Through
their framing activities, Muslim activists seem to be engaged in the production of new Muslim
subjects, entailing the promotion of new notions of Islamic identity which are compatible
with the requirements of a modern liberal democratic system. Through this process, Muslim
activists simultaneously seem to contribute to the strengthening of a general political
awareness among Muslims and at the same time a religious conscientisation by confirming the
role of Islam as a marker of identity in people’s lives.

8.4. Understanding Muslim activism – beyond securitisation

While the emergence of new Muslim political activism partly can be understood as a rational
strategic adaptation to new political opportunities, it also points to an increasing
conscientisation and awareness about Muslim religious identity. As this chapter has shown,
this awakening of a new Muslim consciousness must be understood as the product of
multiple factors and processes. Two factors have this been highlighted as particularly
important; the revival of a new religious consciousness linked to the spread of new reformist
ideas and an increasing disgruntlement resulting anti-terror policies of the Kenyan
government. Under the right political conditions such religious sentiments coupled with a
heightened dissatisfaction might easily become mobilised for broader movement purposes.

In order to understand how this Muslim religious consciousness has translated into an
actual platform for a wider socio-political mobilisation it has been argued that there is a need
to change focus from objective factors and circumstances to the inter-subjective processes
whereby such mobilisation comes about. As a frame analysis perspective can reveal, Muslim
activists are not merely mobilising pre-existing identities or simply responding to an externally
generated popular demand. More fundamentally, they seem to be actively engaged in
formulating and changing people’s perceptions and preferences by offering new meanings of
what it implies to be Muslim in modern Kenya, politically as well as religiously. Muslim
activists thus seem to be engaged in changing the role of Islam in Muslim people’s lives from merely an individual “routine religious identity” to a designator of a national socio-political identity. This has been done by offering new schemes of attribution which reformulate the variety of sufferings facing Muslims as a common political problem *qua* Muslims, and on the other hand by redefining the very meaning of Islamic religious devotion to encompass an obligation to collective Muslim action.

Taken together, these different factors and processes can explain how the Kenyan Muslim community today seems to be able to overcome what François Constantin in 1997 has described as “*les embûches du passage au politique*”. These obstacles which have inhibited the organisation of Kenyan Muslims into a united front of opposition comprise the prevailing culture of submission and conformism in relation to political power holders, combined with a notorious lack of Muslim consciousness about potential collective interests (Constantin 1997: 323). This might still have been an adequate description by the mid-1990s. The last decade however, seems to have brought about a series of important qualitative changes, transforming the Kenyan Muslim community into a platform that seems increasingly ripe for collective political action. Changes in objective circumstances have thus combined with the coming out of an increasingly critical-minded generation of Muslim religious leaders who have been able to exploit new political opportunities and to tap into existing communal-religious sentiments and widespread discontents to reconstruct Muslim self-understanding and identity. This politicisation of Muslim identity entails the attempt to insert the Muslim community as a national constituency at the level of public politics in ways which transcend both the traditional recourse to local Muslim loyalty networks, often along tribal, racial or religious-sectarian lines, as well as the habitual inclination of political compliance.

Within the prevailing “Islam in Africa” paradigm such politicisation of Muslim communities in Africa tends to be depicted as a reflection that Islamism is gaining ground (c.f. Rosander and Westerlund 1997, Quinn and Quinn 2003). Alarmist observers who subscribe to this scheme of interpretation have thus depicted this spread of new Muslim associational initiatives with concern and as a proof that

Islamist influences have begun to push Kenyan society and politics in a disturbing direction. [...] By portraying themselves as a counterweights to a government that is secular, pro-Western and hence hostile to Kenyan Muslims, these groups are beginning to seize control of Islam in Kenya (McCormack 2005: 12f).
Other observers have seen the Kadhi Courts debate during the constitutional review process as proof of the intention of Kenyan Muslims to “separate the Muslim community politically from the rest of the Kenyan population” aiming to “create a Muslim region run under Shari’a law in the heart of the Kenyan Republic” (Bergevin 2006: 78).

These analyses however seem to be based on very meagre empirical evidence and poor insight into local Muslim realities. Based on the analysis presented above, it can be argued that the notion of Islamism falls short of encapsulating the nature of Muslim activism in Kenya for at least two important reasons. First of all, the invocation of Islamic religious symbols and references by Muslim activists does not seem to entail an ideological interpretation of Islam as a blueprint for the organisation of state and society. Rather than a religious project rooted in specific doctrinal and political interpretations of Islam, Muslim activism is a multifaceted movement with many voices and intermingled agendas which reflect a pragmatic response to local political challenges and opportunities. In this struggle, Islam is more a platform of mobilisation for other purposes than a goal in itself. Secondly, Muslim activism deviates from the depiction of the relationship between Muslims and the secular state inherent in most notions of Islamism. Within this scheme of understanding, the spread of new Muslim associational life in Africa has typically not been seen as a reflection of new forms of societal engagement within the state. Instead, the ultimate goal of these organisations is either to Islamise state and society at large or to “undertake the theoretical role of the state insofar as the solution of an Islamic state is not within reach” (Salih 2004: 152; c.f. Haynes 1997: 143; Ousman 2004: 71f).

In contrast to these depictions of Islamism, Muslim activism in Kenya seems to reflect a pragmatic political rather than religious-ideological project, which expresses an increasing political engagement rather than a detachment from the public political sphere. Rather than necessarily posing a challenge to the prevailing political order, Muslim activism can be seen as an innovative attempt to link Muslims to the state in response to new political opportunities, thereby indirectly confirming the pivotal role of the state in society. Seen within the framework of changing patterns of state-society interactions, Muslim activism can thus be seen as an example of how a religiously defined societal group attempts to carve out a space of political influence from below and to insert themselves as a new voice of opposition at the level of civil society.

The second question which arises in extension of this, and which shall be addressed in the following, is then how this assertion of new collective claims on the basis of Muslim identity might themselves feed back on state-society relations, notably the development of a
democratic system of governance. While recent studies showing interest in the question of Muslim political engagement in Kenya have largely addressed the question from a limited security perspective focusing on the potential for the spread of Islamic militancy, it is the argument here, that the question might in fact have a much broader relevance for discussions about political development.

9. Muslim activism and perspectives for political development in Kenya

9.1. Religion and political development from below

The unease about granting religious groups a positive role in political development not only characterises conventional debates about ‘Islamism’ or ‘political Islam’. The same reluctance seems to be an ingrained feature of conventional development discourse, in spite of the fact that religion can be seen as a highly significant aspect of politics in a large number of Third World states (Haynes 1993: 3f). This reluctance stems not least from the fact that the imagination of mainstream development studies for a long time has been confined within the modernisation paradigm, which conventionally has depicted religion as a remnant of tradition whose public relevance is bound to fade as societies develop along the path from tradition to modernity (see Riesebrodt 2003: 107f).

Furthermore, insofar as there is a tendency to ignore or explain away the role of religion within conventional development discourse this is not only based on an interpretation of religion as anachronistic but more fundamentally as being inherently dysfunctional to development. This is not least based on a widespread perception of religion as being essentially chauvinist and divisive in nature. Hence, when “people define their identity in ethnic and religious terms, they are likely to see an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ relation existing between themselves and people of different ethnicity and religion” (Huntington 1993: 29). Seen from such perspective, the cultivation of religious loyalties and identities as the basis for representation of public political claims is likely to create conflicts. Besides, religious factionalism and the absolute character of religious symbols and values are likely to constitute a stumbling block in the democratic processes. Finally, given that religious communities are often depicted as primordial communities whose parochial and particularistic orientations and goals tend to be manifestly in conflict with civic national interests (Oommen 2004: 216), there is a tendency to see the recourse to religious identity as a reflection of a defensive regression into a sub-national primordial sphere which works counter to the development of a civic public realm.

Against these conclusions however, it seems that a more open and positive understanding has gained footing according to which the increasing resurgence of popular religious groups within politics in African and other Third World settings should be approached within the broader framework of bottom-up approaches to development which has become prevalent within mainstream development discourse since the early 1990s. Going back to the early 1990s, an increasing number of studies have thus openly considered the possible developmental or even democratic potential of such new religious movements.\textsuperscript{11} The mere vitality of these new forms of popular religious movements, as Constantin and Coulon (1997: 18ff) point out, forces us to see them as social institutions strongly implicated in the ongoing modern histories of African societies. Commenting on the current religious mobilisation in Africa, Bayart also emphasises the dynamic nature of such supposedly “primordial” religious identities and practices which he asserts to be one of the principal vehicles of change in sub-Saharan Africa that is in this way re-inventing its own modernity in dialogue with God (Bayart 1993: 11f).

The context for this interest has not least been the vital role played by various religious leaders and congregations in the transition to democracy in countries such as Kenya, Benin, South Africa and Ghana. By serving as a voice of opposition delegitimising authoritarian rule and as a driving force in the quest for democratic political reforms, such religious organisations have served as influential societal actors in the widespread popular calls for democratisation.\textsuperscript{12} Following such observations, some observers have thus started to acknowledge that religion might as well serve as an integrative and developing force (Herbert 2003: 30) and that popular religious movements could be possible vehicles of modernisation and expressions of real elements of popular political power (O’Brien 2003: 17) or work to mobilise “previously powerless people to organise resistance against those seeking to attack their communities” (Haynes 1993: 39). In particular, such religious mobilisation can be seen to work constructively to civil society insofar “as new waves of ‘believers’ embrace ‘the revival of religion’ as a platform of resistance to ‘materialist’, secularised, corrupt regimes” (Arkoun 2002: 42; ).

The proposition here, to approach the question of Muslim activism in Kenya within a broader framework of new bottom-up approaches to development, can thus partly be understood in extension of this research agenda. Rather than to be perceived of as an “inward-looking group activity” reflecting the retraction into a sphere of spirituality which


\textsuperscript{12}See Mutua 2008: 25; Bratton 1989: 426; Bratton and de Walle 1992: 49; Haynes 2004: 75
should consequently be excluded from the definition of civil society (see Diamond 1994: 5), Muslim activism seems to reflect the active engagement into the public sphere in Kenya arguably pointing to a new relationship Muslims and the state. The question which necessarily arises from such a perspective is how Muslim activism might contribute to the consolidation and enhancement of a democratic civil society in Kenya. Before answering this question, a brief review of the literature about the possible role of civil society groups for democratic political development is needed.

9.2. Civil society and democracy in Africa – prospects and constraints

Within current development discourse it has become commonplace to conceptualise the dependent variable in terms of the restoration of democracy and good governance, based on the recognition that the source of Africa’s crisis is as much political as anything else. The roots of this problem lie in the dual weakness of both state and society in Africa implying that the public realm, which describes the arena in which civil society organisations compete for influence, lacks the civic qualities that typically help to generate a sense of responsibility and accountability among government officials. The solution to Africa’s development problem is then by no means an easy one, but hinges on the restoration of a civic public realm, in which such basic principles as the rule of law, justice and respect for others are being embraced and enforced (Hyden 1992: 23; 2000: 6f, 13).

Within this scheme of understanding, the development of a vigorous civil society – which broadly defined refer to an intermediating entity standing between the private sphere and the state which is concerned with public rather than private ends and which relates to the state without aiming to win formal power or office (Diamond 1994: 5f) – has come to be seen as the critical instrument to make African states more democratic, transparent ad accountable (c.f. Kasfir 1998: 1). This is based on the presumption that there is a “link between the vibrancy of associational life, good governance and democracy” (Lehning 1998: 236; c.f. Chazan 1994: 285).

The claim that civil society might be a significant milestone on the way to democratic consolidation and that a vibrant associational life might actively contribute to the restructuring of African political life seems to hinge on at least three crucial perceived democratic features inherent in the functioning of civil society. First of all, civil society is often portrayed as a potential counter-hegemonic force able to counteract the stultifying weight of the oppressive state (c.f. Chabal and Daloz 1999: 19). Through their role as a force of resistance and opposition, civil society organisations might thus not only contribute to
undermining the legitimacy of undemocratic regimes during transitional periods but also play
a role in democratic consolidation. By subjecting the state to public scrutiny, civil society
organisations might expose abuses and injustices at the hand of the government, thereby
forcing the exercise of power to become more accountable (see Rudbeck 2005: 65; Young

Secondly, civil society is seen to provide an alternative space of political participation
and representation of the citizens outside the formal structures of the state, serving as a
benign broker between state interests and local concerns. By enabling the emergence of a
public sphere in which differentiated social sectors express their experience and formulate
their opinions, civil society might help to protect the interests of different segments of the
population. Such self-organisation of society into affinity groupings might help to empower
marginalised groups to participate into the public political processes (see Bratton and van de
civil society activities distinguish themselves from the particularism which characterises
pursuits within the private sphere by displaying a particular integrative and collaborative mode
of action based on a concern for the common good (Lehning 1998: 223; Boussard 2002: 159).

Finally, the third democratic quality which civil society is seen to possess is that of
facilitating a civic democratic culture. This is so, since civil society is seen to be a forum in
which habits of the heart and mind are nurtured and developed which allows it to serve as a
crucial arena for the development of democratic attributes such as tolerance, moderation,
willingness to compromise, and respect for opposing viewpoints (Hyden 1997: 4; Diamond
associational life is likely to equip citizens with vital social capital such as mutual trust and
solidarity which is likely to have a spill-over effect for the development of democratic
institutions and culture by creating civic attitudes and behaviour (Hyden 1997: 12; Boussard

Against this widespread optimism, some observers have fundamentally questioned the
prospects for the development of strong independent civil societies in Africa which might
enhance the chances of democratic governance (c.f. Chabal and Daloz 1999). The
expectations to the democratising potential of civil society imply that not all popular
associations which occupy the space between the state and the private sphere qualify to be
seen as part of civil society. Hence, civil society organisations do not necessarily display such
proper civic qualities but might instead be places for egoistical and exploitative pursuit or
even nurture authoritarianism or expose racial, ethnic or religious exclusivity. Any
consideration of the democratising potential of civil society organisations must therefore
consider the levels of civiencness and democracy which such organisations display themselves

African civil society organisations do not always display such civic democratic features
however. One fundamental reason for this seems to be that they are captured within a distinct
logic of social solidarity emanating from the differentiation of African societies along
primordial lines such as ethnicity, kinship or religion. Rather than being truly aggregative and
inclusive, popular associations in Africa often reflect the cultivation of affective ties along
factional lines (c.f. Hyden and Williams 1994). One can therefore pose the question whether it
is legitimate to consider the defence of such particularistic ethic or religious interest as
legitimate political action for a country’s civil society (c.f. Chabal and Daloz 1999: 19). This
communitarian orientation, which permeates not only African societies but is also
determining for the logic of African politics in general, is often seen to obstruct the road to a
democratic civil for several reasons.

First of all, it seems to erode the civiencness of African civil societies by confining them
to realms of collective solidarities which rather than embodying coherent social projects or a
peaceful harmony of associational pluralism tend to mount to a disorganised plurality of
mutually exclusive projects that are not necessarily democratic (Fatton 1998: 24). Secondly,
because public morality tends to be derived from the particularistic values of the economy of
affection rather than the universalistic values embodied in the rule of law, political actors
often regard access to the state as an opportunity for personal and community advancement
(Hyden 1983: 38). Thirdly, rather than reflecting a true consideration for the common civic
good, civil society organisations in Africa tends to be imbued with the same neo-
patrimonialist values as permeate the political realm, prompting to treat the state as an
extractive mechanism rather than an area to be invested in (c.f. Chabal and Daloz 1999: 22f;
c.f. Ekeh 1975). This limits the potential of civil society to serve as an effective counterweight
to the neopatrimonial state, which constitutes one of the major impediments for democratic
and legitimate governance in Africa (c.f. Hyden 1997: 26f).

Finally, civil society organisations face the risk of turning into channels for
detachment rather than a reflection of proper engagement into the state which could work
constructively for political development. One important stumbling block for African civil
society organisations to serve as a genuine democratic pressure from below is thus that such
popular associational formations along primordial communal lines easily come to serve as an
exit site, reflecting a withdrawal into sub-national loyalty networks constructed along
primordial ties, since associations that belong to the primordial public “do not complement the civic public, they subtract from it” (Ekeh 1975: 110; c.f. Hyden 1983: 17). One consequence of the prevalence of such primordial orientations is that the individual never has become morally bound to the civic public realm, which ideally defines the collective interests of the citizenry and in practice is identified with popular politics, and therefore does not invest in civic public interests (Ekeh 1975).

As it has been shown, the new Muslim activist organisations which have been spreading around the country can be seen as important organisational settings for state-society exchanges, reflecting new forms of societal engagement with the state. The question which arises seen from this perspective is of course how this crystallisation of a Muslim civil society in Kenya might affect the possibilities to improve the development of a civic public sphere in Kenya. Rather than engaging into principal reflections about the possible inherent relationships between religion and development or Islam and democracy, this question should be answered by looking at the actual reasoning and practices of Muslim activists and how these relate to the general prospects and constraints discussed above for such popular political action at the level of civil society to enhance the prospects for democratic governance in an African context.

9.3. Muslim activism and democratic political development in Kenya

9.3.1. A new Muslim voice of opposition

Historically, attempts to insert a distinct Muslim voice within the public political sphere have mainly resulted in cooptation by the authoritarian and neopatrimonial state. However, the opening up of new political space has allowed the emergence of new forms of Muslim engagement and the assertion of new Muslim voices of opposition. Since the emergence of IPK and particularly as a result of the proliferation of new activist organisations, Muslim leaders have still more frequently raised criticism of the government in public. This oppositional and anti-establishment position has not least found its institutional expression within NAMLEF. This new forum was established largely as an alternative to SUPKEM, reflecting a wish by these organisations to detach themselves from government interference.

Under the auspices of NAMLEF, Muslim activist organisations have thus inserted themselves as a counterweight to the government at various occasions, most notably during the constitutional review process during which Muslim organisations convincingly proved their willingness to go into clinch with the national political establishment. Through their civic education activities, combined with an often outspoken criticism of the government for
its failure to protect what was seen as vital Muslim interests, these organisations have been able to enhance a new national Muslim position of opposition. The constitutional review process thus seemed to be a catalyst for the crystallisation of new Muslim critical political awareness about the need for Muslims to participate into the political processes in order to obtain their rights.

This increasing willingness of Muslim activist leaders to enter confrontations with the government has also been felt in relation to the war against terror. The government’s treatment of its Muslim subjects has aroused massive condemnation among Muslim leaders; not only by religious leadership organisations such as CIPK and Majlis Ulama but also by new Muslim human rights groups such as MUHURI and MHRF working under the Kenyan Human Rights Commission (KHRC). As the emergence of these organisations shows, the emergence of new forms of Muslim activism has also entailed a broader civic engagement as such organisations have installed themselves as a ‘watchdog’ subjecting the government to various forms of public scrutiny by calling on the government to respect general human and civil rights (PC Khalid 13/04/07; Farid 13/04/07). By exposing injustices and abuses at the hand of the government, especially as pertaining to the Muslim community, this might work to enhance the accountability of the government towards a group of its citizens. As such, Muslim activist organisations might have an, albeit perhaps globally limited, potential to serve as a counterweight to the despotic propensities of the state by putting checks and balances to the excesses of the government vis-à-vis a specific part of the population.

As it has been shown, this Muslim position of opposition has not just been limited to issue-specific cases but has been combined with a much more general political engagement and attempts to hold the state accountable by using both extra-institutional channels, such as demonstrations, as well as by exploiting the pathways for influence offered through the new democratic institutions. When Muslim activist organisations thus again attempted to mobilise Muslim voting power against the government during the 1997 presidential elections this was framed as a retribution for illegitimate governance linked to state harassment and discrimination of Muslims at the hands of the Kibaki-government (c.f. Friday Bulletin 1997: no. 196). However, as Muslim interest in the state has grown, so have the state’s interests in Muslims. Muslim opposition to the government thus led to the establishment of new alliances with the main opposition party at the time reflected by the signing of the MoU between NAMLEF and Odinga in 2007. This entailed the mobilisation of Muslim voter support in return for concessions to Muslim demands, implying not only general promises of political recognition but also more concrete benefits such as promises of economic redistribution and
the appointment of Muslim leaders to national political posts. The perennial question which arises is thus whether this form of Muslim civil society engagement is able to maintain its corporate independence from political power-holders within the state, or whether they are in fact in risk of becoming absorbed by the same extractive logic which has permeated Kenyan politics since independence, thus eroding their possibilities for real social control from below.

9.3.2. Muslim activist organisations as state-society mediators

By encouraging the Muslim population to play an active role in national politics, Muslim activism might be seen as an attempt to mobilise genuine popular participation whether by persuading people to vote or to attend popular demonstrations to voice their dissatisfaction. Yet, Muslim activist organisations are not generally mass-membership organisations but leadership-driven organisations which give direction and advice and seek to represent Muslims indirectly. Rather than relying on popular recruitment, Muslim activist leaders see themselves as legitimate Muslim with reference to their status as religious leaders (PC Yusuf 07/04/07). The question is therefore whether these organisations can be seen to reflect a genuine collective representation able to aggregate and channel Muslim interests into the political system.

The methodological approach of the present study, focusing on the leadership level, does not allow drawing conclusion about how strongly rooted in society these organisations actually are. Some of the findings in Mwakimako’s (2007a) survey on Kenyan Muslim attitudes about a number of religious and political issues might provide some useful indications however. According to these, Muslim activist leadership organisations such as CIPK seem to have a somewhat significant resonance among the Muslim population. For example do the efforts of Muslim leaders to convince Muslims to engage into politics by framing such participation as a religious obligation seem to have had a positive effect, since more than half of the Muslim population strongly agrees that it is a duty for Muslims to take active roles in national politics. The organisation also appears to have had a significant impact on Muslim voting behaviour, for example during the constitutional referendum, especially by virtue of its civic education campaigns in the mosques (Mwakimako 2007a: 46f).

Furthermore, it seems that popular knowledge about and trust in these organisations vary between different organisations in different provinces. CIPK for example enjoys the strongest support in the Coastal and North Eastern Provinces which constitute its regional stronghold. Yet, while the popular support of these new Muslim activist organisations might not be unanimous, it still seems to contrast sharply with the general lack of popular trust.
enjoyed by traditional leadership organisations such as SUPKEM (Mwakimkao 2007a: 39f; 55ff). In general, such support is crucial since mobilising people and getting them out of the trap of passivity cannot succeed without the active support of the constituent population.

It is, as Hyden (2005: 5) points out, “one thing to speak on behalf of the poor, another to emancipate them so they can become actors capable of taking charge of their own destiny”. To a large extent, Muslim political only seems to mobilise the Muslim populace rather intermittently. Yet, the success of these activist strategies is still dependent upon an active popular support and it seems that to a large extent these new leadership organisations do enjoy an important resonance. On the positive side, Muslim activist organisations might thus work to give voice to and possibly empower a marginalised and largely depoliticised section of the population by facilitating dealings between the Muslim minority population and the state and by encouraging Muslims to take part in the political processes. By doing this, they might not only contribute to strengthening a much-needed interest in public affairs but also might work as mediating instances for state-society interactions which can channel Muslim interests into the political system.

9.3.3. Muslim activist organisations as facilitators of a civic democratic culture

Since Muslim activist organisations are based on rather loosely-organised constituencies that are mobilised and consulted only sporadically, their actual function as socialising entities, able to cultivate civic democratic attitudes by encouraging direct participation in associational activities, might be doubtful. The lack of internal democratic organisation which seems to characterise most of these activist organisations therefore necessarily makes their role as effective socialising entities questionable. By contrast and on the more positive side, one could expect that the widespread call for Muslims to use their democratic right to vote would generate of a stronger democratic commitment and enhance a participatory philosophy among the Muslim population, thus curbing widespread tendencies to apathy and indifference. This might also change people’s expectations to the state and lead to greater popular demands for government accountability and less willingness to accept unjust behaviour at the hands of the government.

Given that religion is an important source of basic value orientations, one can expect it to have a powerful impact on a political culture and the prospects for democratic commitment (Diamond 1993: 24). As it has been shown, Muslim activists do not merely tap into but have also been actively engaged in the provision of new Muslim orientations and values which can be seen to have an influence on the political outlook and attitudes of
Kenyan Muslims. The framing of Muslim political participation as an Islamic religious duty might thus have a positive influence on Muslim attitudes to democratic values, possibly enhancing Muslim commitment to the rules of democratic government.

One requirement for such organisational activities to lead to the enforcement of a democratic political culture is furthermore that this participatory philosophy is based on an underlying “civic” vision. This entails a more fundamental commitment to the rules of the democratic game as opposed to a mere opportunistic exploitation aimed at advancing purely particularistic community-based interest (c.f. Diamond 1993: 7). A characteristic feature of the legitimising rhetoric of Muslim activist organisations is not least their self-conscious emphasising of a broader civic commitment entailing a vision for change to the benefit of all Kenyans rather than Muslims only. In its organisational profile, CIPK thus describes its commitment as one of “encouraging respect or the diversity of religion, culture and tribal backgrounds in Kenya and beyond” and its vision to promote “a society that enjoys fulfilled lives and harmoniously coexists by upholding respect for Human Dignity and the Diversity of Culture and Religion”. One outstanding point about the legitimation strategies of these activist organisations is furthermore their employment of central catchphrases borrowed from the development discourse of Western donors such as the intention to work for “the promotion of social justice, human and basic rights, good governance and equitable socio-economic growth and development for all Kenyans”.

Only long-term empirical analyses embedded in history can, as Tarrow (1992: 198) points to, deal with the essential problem of how social movements struggle as well as the new frames they produce can be related to changes in political culture and social mentalities. One could of course raise the question whether this rhetorical commitment to democracy as well as the support for civic values including tolerance and good governance is merely a strategic way of exploiting new opportunities to gain concrete benefits or reflect a wish to please Western donor agencies which offer financial support to some of these organisations, including CIPK. This fear that the democratic commitment of Muslim socio-political actors is in fact just another way to Islamise state and society through the backdoor is a common objection raised by many Western observers of political Islam. On the one hand, it is not uncommon that Muslim activists who are strongly engaged into democratic politics at the same time express the view that Islam and democracy are in fact fundamentally incompatible and that an Islamic government would be the ideal solution to Muslim problems (PC Awadh 18/04/07). On the other hand, given the lack of an underlying coherent ideological

programme and given the variety of subjective motivations – religious, personal, political, economic – which might drive individual activist engagement, it does not make sense to search for some underlying truth beyond actual practice which can reveal the true democratic or undemocratic ‘nature’ of Muslim activism. Much more important at the practical level seems to be the actual endorsement of democratic rules and the repeated calls for Muslims to engage actively into the democratic political system in order to make their voice heard. In the long run such practices might enhance a democratic culture among Muslims.

9.3.4. Muslim activism and civic engagement in Kenya

As it has been shown, Muslim activists have actively exploited the opening up of new political opportunities to assert a new politicised Muslim identity in relation to the state by raising new claims and voicing popular dissatisfaction. By serving as mediating entities between the Muslim population and the state, these activist organisations can in effect be seen as active constituent of Kenyan civil society. As pointed out above, the spread of new Muslim activist organisations seems to contribute constructively to the strengthening of a democratic civil society in at least three important ways: By providing new critical voices of opposition, by facilitating an intermediary space between the Muslim community and the state and by encouraging new norms of participatory citizenship and adherence to democratic rules. Muslim activism can thus be seen as a mechanism for the empowerment of society which might contribute to altering the rules of interaction between state and society by raising popular expectations to legitimate governance, thereby compelling the state to display greater accountability.

Much in contrast with the views which tend to regard the mobilisation of society on the basis of such ‘primordial’ identities either as channels of detachment from the repressive state (Chazan 1994: 273; c.f. Ekeh 1975) or as a defensive retraction into affection economies based on networks of mutual obligation (Hyden 1983), the spread of new Muslim activist organisations seems express an active engagement and investment in the public political sphere. Rather than working as an exit site or a “state within the state” Muslim activism reflects society in its active relationship with the state.

One of the common objections against seeing religious groups as legitimate forms of civil social expression is not least that the assertion of such communal identities into the public space seems to conflict with the idea that civil society must entail the defence of general or collective interests (c.f. Chabal and Daloz 1999: 19). This idea that the structuration of civil society must be based on qualities such as civility, homogeneity and national cohesiveness thus allegedly excludes particularistic associations and movements
based on ethnic or religious loyalties (Osaghae 2006: 242). From this perspective, political engagement on the basis of religious affiliation is therefore likely to confirm the tendencies of factionalism and the recourse to communally defined solidarities which have traditionally reduced civil society in Africa to a disorganised plurality of mutually exclusive projects rather than a reflection of a genuine commitment to defence of the collective public good (Fatton 1998: 24). The main question which arises is thus whether popular modes of political action which are based on such ‘exclusive’, ‘primordial’ identities can possibly contribute to the strengthening of a civic public sphere. The capability of such religiously defined social actors to nourish a democratic experience largely depends on whether these groups are susceptible to engage in a constructive relationship with the state as well as the wider society.

As the debates about the Kadhi Courts in relation to the constitution were an example of, the assertion of Muslim religious symbols within the popular political sphere has at times proven its divisive potential as a stumbling block national political progress. Mutually exclusive claims from Christian and Muslim groupings alike thus sparked off fierce conflicts and the discussion of the Kadhi Courts became of the major bones of contention which significantly put the constitutional review process to a halt (Mutua 2008: 186; 225f). On the other hand, even though Muslim activism to a large extent has centered on the defence of particularistic religious interests, nothing in the immediate agenda of Muslims seems to be in conflict with or threaten to undermine the rights of other groups. In this sense, the assertion of religious identities and values can be seen as an acceptable form of social expression and a legitimate partisan voice within the public political debate. There is thus a need to recognise that civil society is not a homogenous unity which is necessarily able to serve as a united counterbalance to the state but is in itself fundamentally an arena of internal contradictions and contestation (c.f. Osaghae 2006: 234). Since no such thing as one civic voice exists, a precondition for pluralist politics could thus be seen to be to represent the interests that are there.

Insofar as there is a potential danger in this politicisation of Muslim identity this seems not least to reside in the heated post-9/11 context which has created increasing religio-political tensions and mutual suspicion between equally politicised religious groups. Whereas Christians for their part tend to see any Muslim religio-political claim as an act of religious offensive, Muslims perceive the often sweeping accusations against Islam in combination with the seemingly targeted harassment of Muslims and the infringement of human rights in name of the ‘war against terror’ as a reflection of outward discrimination by the Christian-
dominated state. This has created growing mistrust and antagonisms between increasingly assertive and self-conscious religious groups (see Mwakimako 2007).

By contrast, while Muslim activism seems to reflect the strengthening of communal religious loyalties among Muslims it has not led to a simple withdrawal into networks of mutual affection. Instead, the political assertion of Muslim religious identity seems to have become an occasion for a more general Muslim political interest and engagement. In important ways this seems to have led to an increasing Muslim investment into the civic public sphere based on the recognition that it is not only pragmatically advantageous to exploit democratic opportunities as a means to obtain concrete concessions but also that Muslims, being a minority population, have strong vested interests in the defence of general civic values such as citizens and human rights and good governance. In this sense, the use of religious identity as a basis for political mobilisation can in fact be a trigger for wider civic and political participation, which can potentially lead to the accommodation of the Kenyan Muslims into the body politic.

10. Conclusion
The recent mobilisation of new forms of Muslim activism in Kenya in many ways reflects a qualitatively new development compared to traditional Muslim patterns of mobilisation. As it has been shown, the conventional picture of the Muslim community in Kenya has been one of internal divisions, low levels of organisation as well as a widespread culture of submission and conformism in relation to political power holders. Combined with a largely repressive and authoritarian political environment, these factors have traditionally prevented the Muslim community from inserting themselves as a united force of opposition or change. However, since the early 1990s and especially in the course of the last decade, this picture seems to have been replaced by one of an increasing and conscious cultivation of unity and the crystallisation of a new national Muslim identity and consciousness which have been used to assert a new Muslim position of opposition within the public political sphere. The central question which has structured the analysis above has thus been that of how we can understand and explain this change in Muslim mobilisation patterns in Kenya.

What is interesting about this question is not least the attempt to understand the processes whereby Muslim religious identity has come to be so salient that it can be used as leverage for organised socio-political claims. Conventional dealings with ‘political Islam’ and ‘Islam in Africa’ tend to focus on the religious context, based on the assumption that Islamic religious ideas provide a central symbolic arsenal of inspiration which predispose Muslim political behaviour. To some extent, the increasing recourse to Islam as a central unifying
symbol for various Muslim socio-political endeavours can be seen as a reflection of an increasing Islamic religious revival and conscientisation among Kenyan Muslims. However, Islam is not a monolithic entity whose role in Muslim people’s lives can be uncovered transversely across different contexts. Rather than a religious radicalisation based on a special ideological reading of Islam, Muslim activism in Kenya is the story about how a religiously defined societal group pragmatically and strategically has reorganised and reinvented itself to cope with changing challenges and opportunities within their concrete socio-political environment. As the history of Muslim coping strategies has shown, the Kenyan Muslim community has thus continuously accommodated itself to the prevailing political reality of the modern nation state in ‘conformist’ rather than ‘radical’ ways.

As it has been proposed, a more viable explanation for the emergence of Muslim activism and the politicisation of Muslim identity can be found by turning attention away from ‘Islam’ as the primary context of understanding to focus on concrete patterns of interactions between particular Muslim societies and their concrete socio-political context. From such perspective, the transformation of Muslim mobilisation patterns in Kenya can be explained by the combination of a variety of factors and processes. As it has been shown, Muslims in Kenya have always – though in different ways – attempted to deal with various forms of grievances within the framework of their religion. However, the success of various Muslim coping strategies across time has largely been conditioned by the historically prevailing political institutional reality which has structured the relations between the rulers and the ruled. This has traditionally resulted either in various forms of ‘exit’ strategies and withdrawal from the state or in the cooptation into the clientelistic networks of the state insofar as Muslims have attempted to engage. By contrast, the emergence of new forms of Muslim political activism and the attempt to assert Muslims as a united front of opposition within public political space reflect an important new development. The recent changes in Muslim patterns of mobilisation can thus largely be seen as a result of new and more favourable political opportunity structures.

This re-assertion of Muslim religious identity within the public political realm has taken place at a point in time when Kenya, like many other African countries, is undergoing a comprehensive re-evaluation of the prevailing rule of the political game. What is interesting is thus not least the fact that the process of political liberalisation and the opening up of opportunities for greater freedoms of expression and association following the end of one-party rule also has allowed religion to play a much more prominent political role. To understand the politicisation of Muslim religious identity and the fact that Kenyan Muslims
are consciously injecting themselves into the political arena as Muslims, it is not enough to look only at the political institutional context however. Instead, notably two other factors can be emphasised which seem to have converged to spur a heightened Muslim religio-political consciousness in Kenya. On the one hand, the spread of new reformist ideas since the 1970s seems to have created a heightened debate and consciousness about Islamic religious questions, leading to what could be described as an Islamic religious revival. On the other hand, and perhaps most importantly, the war against terror, which has had its own special trajectory in Kenya, has contributed to a heightened sense of Muslim discontent linked to the feeling that Muslims have come under attack as a result of their religious identity.

This seems to have offered alimentation to entrepreneurial activist leaders who have been able to exploit new political opportunities to assert a new collective Muslim identity in relation to the nation state. As it has been shown, the politicisation of the Muslim community and the transformation of Islam into a symbolic idiom of protest can thus at the same time largely be seen as an outcome of the very processes of mobilisation. Through various ‘framing’ activities Muslim activist leaders have thus been able to disseminate new interpretative schemata about common Muslim plight. This has not least entailed the attempt to reinvent a new national identity which transcends traditional dividing lines by offering new schemes of interpretation which highlight the common experience of Muslims as marginalised members of the same state thus linking Muslim identity with a common set of broader socio-political interests. At the same time this strategy has been combined with a reframing of Islamic religious devotion to encompass an imperative to engage, thus in effect making democratic participation a religious imperative. This not only seems to change conventional notions of what it means to be a Muslims for the individual believer but also more fundamentally points to a new relationship between ‘Islam’ and ‘politics’ in Kenya or between the Muslim community and the state.

In order to understand the wider repercussions which this assertion of Muslim religious identity into Kenyan public space might have for the development of a civic and democratic public culture it is arguably necessary to move beyond conventional discussions attempting to detect some kind of inherent relationship between ‘Islam’ and ‘politics’. Rather than engaging into principal discussions about whether Islam and democracy are incompatible or incompatible it is necessary to look at actual patterns of interaction between Muslims and the state. By inserting themselves as mediators between the Muslim community and the state, Muslim activism in Kenya in fact inscribes itself within the context of a reinvigorated civil society in the country. As it has been shown, rather than being antithetical
to the processes of modernisation and democratic governance in Kenya, Muslim political engagement can in several ways be seen to work constructively to the development of a civic public sphere and a viable civil society. Rather than simply reflecting the defensive withdrawal into a primordial sphere (Ekeh 1975) or reflecting the ‘opting out of state institutions’ in an attempt to implement an alternative Islamist order ‘en miniature’ where the vision of an Islamic state is beyond reach (Salih 2004), Muslim activism in Kenya seems to reflect a new proactive engagement into the civic public sphere. By exerting new forms of opposition and by giving voice to a largely marginalised part of society Muslim activist organisations might fill out a positive role in the working of Kenyan civil society. Furthermore by urging Muslims to participate within the new democratic system Muslim activist might contribute to creating a practical democratic commitment thus strengthening a popular democratic culture.

This largely positive depiction of the possible repercussions of Muslim activism should of course not seduce us to conclude that Muslim activism is in itself the solution to Africa’s political development problem as described above. First of all, given that Muslims must in fact be seen as an integrative part of African society, they are also subject to the same structural deficiencies inherent in such communal political orientation. Given long-ingrained inclinations of clientelism, Muslim activist organisations are therefore in a perennial danger of becoming enrolled anew within the clientelistic network of national politicians. Secondly, while Muslim activism might be seen as an example of the invention of a new Muslim modernity in terms of both organisational patterns and an increasingly critical orientation of questioning status quo, Kenyan Muslims are also in many ways inherently conservative when it comes to certain questions such as gender issues and reproductive rights (c.f. Mutua 2008: 25f).

And finally, given the increasing mutual alienation between Muslims and Christians in Kenya which has taken place in relation to the war against terror, there is an inherent danger that such increasing assertion of religious symbolic claims into the public political sphere might create new social tensions and conflicts. However, insofar as Muslim activism might constitute any danger to security in Kenya, such as certain alarmist observers tend to suggest, this risk seems to lie primarily in the danger of further marginalisation and alienation from the wider society, which could, in the future, lead to the taking over of this activist movement by more radical and less compliant forces in Muslim society. In this situation however it seems that the integration of the Muslim community into the national body politic and the acceptance of Muslims as a legitimate partisan voice in the political debate in fact – insofar of
course as this does not infringe on the rights of other groups in society—might be the most viable solution.
List of organisations

CIPK – Council of Imams and Preachers
IPK – Islamic Party of Kenya
KAULI – Kenya Assembly of Ulama and Imams
KCIU – Kenyan Council of Imams and Ulama
MCET – Muslim Civic Education Trust
MUHURI – Muslims for Human Rights
MEDAN – Muslim Education and Development Agenda Network
MEWA – Muslim Education and Welfare Association
NAMLEF – National Muslim Leaders Forum
SUPKEM – Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims

Personal correspondences quoted

Sheikh Abdilahi Abdi, Chairman NAMLEF
Professor Abdulghafur El-Busaidy, National Chairman, SUPKEM
Sheikh Abubakar Awadhi, Organising Secretary, IPK
Hon. Najib Balala, Member of Parliament, Currently Minister of Tourism, ODM
Sheikh Muhamad Dor, Secretary General, CIPK
Sheikh Ali A. El-Maawy, National chairman KAULI
Ahmed M. Farid, Assistant Programme Officer, MUHURI
Sheikh Twaha Fowzy, National Coordinator, CIPK
Professor Mohamed Hyder; Chariman MCET
Sheikh Hassan Mohamed Karama, Assistant Secretary, KAULI
Sheikh Hamad Muhammad Kassim, Chief Kadhi
Hussein Khalid, Programmes Coordinator, MUHURI
Sheikh Khalfan Khamis, Chairman Majlis Ulama, imam of the Jamia Mosque
Ibrahim Lethome, Lawyer, previous member of the CKRC
Sheikh Juma Ngao, Senior chairman SUPKEM
Sheikh Abdullatif Shir, Program Co-ordinator, KCIU
Ms. AshaYusuf, Project Coordinator, CIPK
References


Friday Bulletin: *The Friday Bulletin – the Weekly Muslim News Update*, Jamia Mosque, Nairobi, all issues used available online at www.islamkenya.com


Salim, Swalha (1985): A Modern Reformist Movement Among the Sunni Ulama in East Africa, Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, McGill Institute of Islamic Studies, Montreal.


