

MANAGING RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN A DEMOCRATIC ENVIRONMENT: THE TANZANIAN EXPERIENCE

Introduction

Let me begin by acknowledging the leadership of this distinguished university – President Robert Brown, Provost David Campbell, and Board Chairman Alan Leventhal.

President Brown, although you are celebrating only your first year at the helm of Boston University; I have felt a real vibrancy since I've been here, which has to reflect the spirit and vitality you bring to this place. Congratulations and my best wishes to you as you respond to the challenges of leading this great institution.

I would also like to thank my host, the African Presidential Archives and Research Center at Boston University, under the leadership of my dear friend Ambassador Charles Stith. Under this initiative, leaders on the African continent, and not simply former Heads of State, look to this Center as a place where cutting edge discussions are taking place to secure Africa's future. I appreciate the opportunity to address a forum convened by this distinguished Center. Please join me in a round of applause for the African Presidential Archives and Research Center and the exemplary leadership of its director.

Mr President,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is wonderful to be here this time of the year. The burst of colors as the trees reflect the change of the seasons has nature's message for humanity—the message that diversity is beautiful, not necessarily threatening. This is why I am so grateful to the leadership of APARC and the University for inviting me to share with this distinguished community some reflections on Tanzania's efforts to manage religious diversity in the hope that it can inform the debate on this subject in the world we, from all faiths, share.

But, first, I plead **for your** understanding in saying a thing or two about my country. I hope my presentation will generate a healthy discussion on religion tolerance and democracy.

Tanzania is best known for its physical beauty and natural habitat, its political stability and the warmth of its people. But, behind this facade, there is the soul of a very complex society. Tanzania is home to some 120 tribes. We are a young and vibrant democracy. Last year we concluded our 5th cycle of democratic elections. But the crucial point here is that we do not vote along racial, ethnic or religious lines. I am a Muslim, elected by 80% of the electorate in a country where it is estimated that there are 40% Muslims and 40% Christians. I contested the elections against a host of prominent Christian politicians. My predecessor, a Christian, was reelected by 72% of the electorate in the 2000 elections despite the fact that his leading opponent was a Muslim. Interfaith marriages are a common occurrence. Islamic and Christian festivals like Christmas, Easter and Eid are equally celebrated by people of all faiths.

The political unity and religious tolerance that we pride ourselves in did not come by accident. It is a product of deliberate action and vision of the successive generation of the leaders of Tanzania from the founding President the late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere to the present.

In explaining this, allow me to venture a bit into to the President history.

First of all, I must admit that Boston is the appropriate and symbolic place for me to talk about managing religious diversity in a democratic environment. Boston is the historic landing place of the *Mayflower* which brought the first group of European immigrants to America—the Pilgrims. They came fleeing from religious intolerance and persecution in Europe to seek safety and freedom. Boston went on to become the birth place of American war of independence with the famous *Boston Tea Party* incident.

The evolution of the nation state and democracy in Europe was a painful process characterized by religious wars and competing nationalisms which eventually necessitated the separation of religion and state. The evolution of the nation state in Europe coincided with the reformation and the birth of Protestantism to challenge Catholic orthodoxy and establishment in religion and politics. Passionate nationalism led to territorial conquest to align emerging nation with a defined territorial space. As nation states consolidated, the political influence of the church and the secular state became the preferred way of managing religious diversity.

The secular state gained ascendancy in both Catholic and Protestant Europe as liberal democracy took root and entrenched the values of freedom, justice and religious tolerance. These values found an early expression in America, but not without a high price through your war of independence, the civil war and the two world wars to make your country the secular and democratic United States of America of today.

In Africa, unlike in Europe and America the territorial boundaries of states were defined by colonial powers before nations were created inside that territorial space. Nationalism and the nation were born out of the struggle for independence, it was after independence that the modern nation state had to be built and consolidated within the predetermined territory.

Present day mainland Tanzania was defined at the Berlin Conference of the Great European powers of the time in 1884. It comprised Tanganyika and the present-day nations of Rwanda and Burundi. The British inherited Tanganyika while Rwanda and Burundi went to the Belgians after the Germans were defeated in the First World War. Within the territory of Tanganyika there were more than 120 tribes the majority of whom followed traditional religions except for some people along the coast who had converted to the Muslim faith before the arrival of the Europeans. European missionaries embarked on active conversion campaign in many parts of the country before formal colonization was established. The coming of Colonialism consolidated Christianity and added a new foreign racial factor to Tanganyika with the arrival of some Europeans and Indians to the already existing Arab population along the coast of mainland Tanzania and some trading outposts in the interior.

Through the policy of indirect rule, the British administration accentuated tribal identities by enhancing the powers of tribal chiefs. With the arrival of Christian missionaries most of whom, at the beginning, located themselves mainly in areas with attractive weather to Europeans, Christian converts in those areas had an earlier access to western education and modern economy. The colonial administration also established a few segregated schools in several parts of the

country based on racial lines for Europeans, Asians and Africans respectively. Among the Africans, Muslims had a disadvantage in access to education as missionary activities in predominantly Muslim areas were limited or nonexistent.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The founding father of the Tanganyika nationalist movement Julius Kambarage Nyerere, was a devout Catholic with a vision of a free, united and modern nation state. He created a secular, mass-based nationalist party—The Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) to mobilize the people of Tanganyika against British colonial rule through peaceful agitation. The party had an initial strong urban base with a large Muslim following, but Nyerere went on to mobilize and rally the people across the country to join and support the struggle for independence. His appeal for unity and promise of freedom and independence were well received. He organized his party in a way that transcended tribal identities, religious affiliations, racial and regional divisions.

In the last stages of the independence movement, the British attempt to encourage racial and religious political parties failed. The first general elections organized by the British before their departure from Tanganyika was based on racial lines with voters being forced to cast three ballots for a European, an Asian and an African candidate for the legislature. The plan to entrench racial divisions was defeated because in the polls the electorate voted for TANU's, European, Asia and African candidates who espoused the TANU political philosophy of secularism and racial equality.

On attainment of independence, President Nyerere moved quickly to institutionalize the pillars of a united, secular and non-racial nation. In discussing this, one cannot ignore the important role played by the single party system. The country had emerged to independence on December 9th, 1961 as a de-facto one party state and only became a de-jure one party state in 1965. The Constitution of independent Tanganyika and subsequently of a united Tanzania, after the union with Zanzibar in 1964, entrenched the freedom of worship for citizens and the principles and practices of secularism for the state. The leadership took deliberate efforts to explain to the people that while citizens were free to worship in the faith of their choice, the Party, the Government and the State had no religion of choice.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Retrospectively, the one party state may have been deficient in accommodating pluralist politics, but it did help to contain divisive tendencies such as tribalism, racialism and religious royalties which could have undermined national unity and harmony. I should emphasize also that the early popularization and use of Kiswahili as the national language which has contributed immensely to forging and cementing national unity.

Concurrently, the Government introduced policies to correct the divisions which were entrenched during the colonial period. The political authority of the traditional chiefs was abolished, all private schools were converted to public schools and made inter-denominational while more schools were opened and school fees subsidized. Enrollment in secondary schools was pan-territorial to encourage interaction of students from different parts of the country. The curriculum and syllabi were formulated to promote a national values, character and unity. The

institution of the National Service was introduced for all students who finished high school and institutions of high learning. The idea was to create a social and vocational milieu which encouraged a patriotic and cooperative spirit among the young generations.

By the time Tanzania adopted the multi-party system in 1992, the stage had already been set for managing religious diversity as well as other tribal and racial diversities. Indeed these diversities were mainstreamed into a new democratic dispensation. The focus has been on accommodating religious differences and encouraging a culture of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. All the political parties that have emerged are based on neither religion, tribal or regional identities. They may be diverse in their respective policies and programs but they remain national in outlook. Fringe fundamentalist elements with the foreign influence of various religious persuasions have lately emerged in Tanzania but remain as religious fanatics rather than political activists.

Thanks to the remarkable foresight of our founding President, Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere, specific actions were taken to engender tolerance in matters of faith and manage potential cracks to our unity.

These actions can be classified into four categories: equitable policies, institutional innovations, political messages, and legal-constitutional provisions.

The founding President of Tanzania, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, believed strongly that policies promoting the equity principle among people of different religions races and tribes in the country would be the most effective weapon to address and dampen the politicization of religious and other identities. In this regard he went to great length to take measures that would promote equity among the people of Tanzania particularly in respect to access to basic social services and economic opportunities.

He realized very early on, the advantage that parity in access to education among the Christians and Muslims would bring to national unity and cohesion. Inversely, he recognized the potential danger of religious discord that imbalances in access to education may cause in the future. He concluded that the best way to afford equal opportunity to all in matters of employment and participation in national affairs among Tanzania who belong to the two main religions was to achieve equity in educational opportunities.

President Nyerere, himself a devout Roman Catholic, soon after independence, initiated a legislation which was passed in 1962 to compel missionary schools to admit students of all denominations and faiths. In 1969, all non-state schools (majority of which belonged to Christian missions) were taken over and made state schools. Seminaries were the only ones spared in this exercise.

Drastic as they may seem, these steps went a long way towards promoting and projecting the larger cause of national unity and social harmony.

The second measure taken was related to the reorganization of the institutions for the discharge of justice. The tripartite court system inherited from colonialism was merged into a single-tier judicial system. This was done to provide uniform justice to people of different religious and tribal or customary legal norms and procedures.

Despite being a secular state, Tanzania recognizes religious laws in personal status matters such as marriage, divorce, waqf (Muslim trust) and inheritance. As mentioned earlier, the court system on mainland Tanzania was merged into a single tier system in 1963 to replace the tripartite

system inherited from colonialism which was based on ethnic, racial and religious considerations. The Government has made considerable effort to try to accommodate, whenever possible, religious laws (especially Christian, Muslim and Hindu laws), and customary laws into state laws, without infringing other people's rights.

The third measure was the use of political messages in different venues and media to hammer home the need to promote national unity and de-emphasize people's differences for the sake of national unity.

Tanzanians of different generations were constantly exposed to political messages – in the media, at the workplace and in schools – that emphasized national unity and played down racial, tribal and religious differences.

The fourth measure was legal and constitutional in nature. On the one hand, it involved the forbidding of organizations or practices that foment and amplify divisions in the country. In this regard, the Political Parties law of 1992 forbids political parties to be formed on religious, racial, sect, tribal or regional basis. A Political Party that espouses such divisive policies will not be registered. And a registered party preaching such policies risks being deregistered. I know, some of you may find that strange but in our particular that is the most expedient thing to do.

Secondly there is the issue of **accommodation** and **protection** of the sub-national identities in a manner that does not infringe on personal or group democratic and other rights. After pronouncing that Tanzania is a secular state, our Constitution goes on to underscore the right of all citizens to exercise the freedom to worship or join and leave any religion of their choice. At the same time religious tolerance is emphasized.

The Penal Code also exhibits zero tolerance to religious intolerance. Behavior that is injurious to religious liberty is not permissible and is punishable. For instance, it is punishable by law to destroy, damage or defile any place of worship or any object held sacred by any class of person. Among many other things, it is punishable to utter words or make sounds or gestures or place objects with the deliberate intention to wound religious feelings of others. Propagation of religion is allowed but insulting other religions and violent proselytizing is not.

Freedom of worship and protection of religion is an integral part of guaranteed human rights in Tanzania. In 1984 when the Bill of Rights and Duties was incorporated into the country's constitution for the first time, this has been enshrined.

Mr. President;

In Tanzania, the issue of separating religion from the state is taken very seriously. To avoid dragging religion into politics or politics into religion, Separation of religion from politics and state is underscored and emphasized. As mentioned earlier, it is prohibited for any political party to be registered whose constitution or policy aims at promoting or furthering the interests of any religious faith or group. In the same vein maintaining the secular status has been overly emphasized. The state must not act or behave in a manner that favours some religions or people of certain religious groups. Security officers should not use their offices to promote or favour some religions against others.

Mr. President;

You will discern from what I have been saying that there are tough challenges and dilemmas to promoting religious tolerance in democratic environment. Democracy is about freedom of association and freedom of expression. However, the freedom to form political parties along religious, racial or tribal lines tears the nation to pieces. Likewise, the rights to speak down upon or insult other religions is recipe for religious conflict which in turn tears the nation apart. It is with the realization of such dangers and in the spirit of promoting and safeguarding national unity peace and concord that Tanzania has structured and organized party politics and the state in the way it has done. I am glad and proud to say that it has contributed immensely to the political stability, peace and harmony in the country.

Besides these measures which are legal and constitutional in nature, there are other measures as well that we have been taking, which have contributed in their own way to promote religious tolerance. I would like to mention three significant ones.

The first one has been the building of the culture of peace and unity. This work, which seeks to build consensus on major principles and objectives of our nation, has been going on since independence. This has been done through many avenues as we have seen: the media, school curricula, national services, political speeches, national symbols and heroes, and conferences.

The second thing has been to encourage and assist religious organizations, where requested, to develop a capacity for dialogue among themselves. To a large extent, there has been encouraging success in these endeavours. Many religious leaders in the country realize the importance of and subscribe to the idea of the primacy of national unity and cohesion. There is evidence of increased contact among religious leaders across the divides. For instance, in the year 2000 Muslim and Christian leaders in Tanzania took the initiative to form a joint Commission on Peace, Development and Reconciliation (CPDR/TUWWAMUTA) as a forum.

Mr. President;

As a Government, we have supported such initiatives from the religious organizations themselves. We will continue to be supportive and cooperative. It serves our national interests well. We have also decided to give structure to the government support and cooperation. i.e. providing facilitation on request and holding consultations and dialogue with religious leaders. I have appointed a Minister in my office who is responsible for Social and Political Affairs. His primary responsibility is to promote political and social understanding and harmony among the political parties, religious groups and people of Tanzania. He is charged with the task of holding consultations and promoting dialogue with stakeholders among religious groups, political and other civil society groups with the view of promoting good relations among themselves and between them and the state. This is a new innovation that we hope will further entrench our culture of religious harmony and community dialogue.

On balance, religion has not been a major threat to Tanzania's effort to build an integrated, democratic, and united nation. Certainly, religious differences have not been an obstruction to our development efforts. On the contrary, religious organizations in Tanzania have continued to work side by side with the government in combating what we have since independence called three enemies, namely poverty, disease and ignorance.

Mr. President;

Now, what do I think are lessons to be learned from our experience?

Firstly, that, a country that is substantially Muslim can maintain a system of governance that is truly democratic. There is no fundamental contradiction between the religion of Islam and principles of democratic governance.

Secondly, that it is possible for the United States to advance and maintain a relationship with a country that has a substantial Muslim population. Our friendship and good relations with the United States testifies to that. Fairness and mutual respect in bilateral relations can go a long way in bridging the so called gulf between the West and the Muslim world. and;

Thirdly, that in a country with both a large number of Muslims and Christians there need not necessarily be a religious divide or conflict. The so-called "clash of civilizations" that many contend dominates global politics is not something that is inevitable. Religious diversity is not inevitably a source of conflict or destabilization and whenever it happens it is a sign that something has gone wrong. In most cases it has to do with the way people relate to each other in the name of their religions.

I would like to discount the notion that a religious, ethnic, or cultural make-up of a society has a bearing on the propensity of that society to be democratic or otherwise. There are nations that are pre-dominantly Muslim or non-Christian which are vibrant democracies. There are nations that are pre-dominantly Christian which are not democratic. We have a Jewish democracy. And we have a lot of multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural democracies, such as Tanzania.

Mr. President;

I would like to conclude by cautioning that managing religious diversity is perhaps one of the greatest challenges we face now, nationally and internationally. We have no choice but to work harder to promote inter and intra-religious tolerance and understanding as we deal with religious-motivated terrorism and political violence. In so doing may I suggest a few things that I consider important to bear in mind.

Matters of faith have the tendency to divide believers between us and them; and worse between "believers" and "infidels". If not understood and managed properly the lines can be too sharp and could get sharper. The world has much to learn from Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Italian theologian and philosopher who said "We must love them both - those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have labored in the search for truth, and both have helped us in the finding of it."

Religious intolerance is fuelled by ignorance of what other faiths stand for. We must promote inter-faith dialogue and cooperation. For, as the Dalai Lama said, "Where ignorance is our master, there is no possibility of real peace."

We must avoid at all costs debasing, ridiculing, belittling, speaking down upon or looking down upon the faiths of others. We should even try to avoid to be perceived to do that. People have emotional attachment to their religions and as a result, they tend to react emotionally or even irrationally, when they perceive their religions as being demeaned.

For country like Tanzania we must avoid at all costs mixing politics and religion. Politics is essentially about power; about its pursuit and its use. If religion lends itself to power politics,

whether as a vehicle to acquisition or retention of power, we are in grave danger of creating an explosive mixture.

Another aspect is faith and religion being the vehicle of choice, or perhaps the only vehicle available, for aggrieved people to seek comfort, solace, succour or relief from real or perceived injustice. And we all know we live in an unjust, unequal world—nationally and globally. You can only imagine the minefield where all felt incidences of injustice and inequality were to find religious expression. For in today's world, people are increasingly impatient to wait for the promised good afterlife in heaven; they want the good life and the justice here and now. We must commit ourselves to addressing national and global injustices to deny extremists the excuse to exploit them for their heinous ends .

Mr President,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The experience of Tanzania shows that this can be done, if we work hard for it; if we make serious effort to understand each other across the faith divides, if we do not rush in our ignorance to condemn others, to pass judgement on others and, worse, to be indifferent even to the genuinely perceived needs and injustices. Lets heed the wise counsel of Buddha: "You should respect each other and refrain from disputes; you should not, like water and oil, repel each other, but should, like milk and water, mingle together."

I thank you for your kind attention.