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Kenya's Spiritual President and the Making of a Born- Again Republic

William-Ruto, Kenya's Evangelicals and Religious Mobilizations in African Electoral Politics

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Cover: President-Elect William Ruto and other leaders during Church service at P.C.E.A Gathiruini, Githunguri, Kiambu County. September 20th, 2022.
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Executive Summary

Over the last two decades, the growing influence of Evangelicals and their leaders in electoral politics is one of the most significant developments in the East African region and the Horn of Africa. Their numerical and demographic growth seems to go together with their growing influence in these countries' political scenes, especially in the spheres of electoral politics, society, and governance.

This paper examines the impact of Evangelicals in the region's politics and the implications for democracy and public policy making, with a focus on East Africa. The Kenyan case study highlights new developments in the East African region.

Using the Kenyan 2022 general election and an in-depth analysis of the relationship between President William Ruto and Evangelicals, the first section of the paper investigates the multifaceted dynamics between Evangelicals and Kenyan elites and tackles their recent engagements in electoral politics. It engages with emerging trends that shape not just Evangelical leaders' relationships with African politicians but also theological fluctuations and religious factors that shape their political behavior, religious mobilization, strategies of engagements, and their influence on electoral processes and outcomes. The role of the First Lady in religious diplomacy is detailed in section two, and the emerging shifts and tensions from historical, theological, and transnational perspectives are discussed in section three. The demonstration elucidates the complexities inherent in Evangelical political participation before, during and after election campaigns, including the tensions between religious values, civic responsibilities, and political ideologies. By unpacking these dynamics, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between religion and politics in the African continent and offers insights into the evolving landscape of electoral dynamics in the East African region in particular.

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières décennies, un nouveau paradigme est apparu en Afrique de l'Est et dans la Corne de l'Afrique : l'influence croissante des églises évangéliques et de leurs dirigeants dans les dynamiques électorales. La croissance numérique et démographique de ces mouvements religieux semble aller de pair avec leur rôle de plus en plus marqué dans la vie politique de ces deux régions, une présence qui a un impact sur les processus électoraux, mais aussi sur les sociétés et les formes que prend la gouvernance.

Cette étude se propose d'examiner l'impact des évangéliques sur le politique, la démocratie et l'élaboration des politiques publiques en Afrique, avec une focale sur l'Afrique de l'Est. L'étude de cas kenyane illustre particulièrement bien les conséquences de ces nouvelles dynamiques à l'échelle de la région est-africaine.

Construite sur une analyse approfondie des élections générales de 2022 au Kenya et des relations entre le président William Ruto et les évangéliques, la première section met en lumière les multiples formes que prend le rapprochement entre les évangéliques et les élites kenyanes en proposant une analyse fine de leur engagement récent en politique. Cette analyse cherche à saisir comment ces nouvelles tendances façonnent la relation entre dirigeants évangéliques et hommes politiques africains, mais aussi comment les fluctuations théologiques et de multiples facteurs religieux ont une incidence sur le comportement politique des leaders évangéliques, leur mobilisation religieuse et leurs stratégies d'engagement, ainsi que leur influence sur les processus et les résultats électoraux. La seconde section porte plus particulièrement sur le rôle joué par la Première dame, Rachel Ruto, dans la diplomatie religieuse, là où la troisième section s'intéresse aux tensions et bascules liées à l'expansion de la portée politique de la religion évangélique d'un point de vue historique, théologique et transnational. Cette analyse démontre en outre les complexités inhérentes à la participation politique des acteurs évangéliques avant, pendant et après les campagnes électorales, autour desquelles les tensions entre valeurs religieuses, responsabilités civiques et idéologies politiques se cristallisent. En analysant minutieusement ces dynamiques, cet article contribue à une meilleure compréhension de l'intrication de la religion et du politique sur le continent africain, en offrant une lecture approfondie des situations électorales à l'échelle de la région est-africaine.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the growing roles and influence of different kinds of Evangelicals¹ – particularly the Pentecostals, Neo-Pentecostals, and charismatic churches – in African electoral politics is one of the most significant developments in the East African region and the Horn of Africa². Evangelicals and Pentecostal clergy have increasingly gained huge social and political influence in civic and public life. While religion and politics have always played important roles in the region, the emergence of Evangelicals in electoral politics is changing the dynamics of church and state relationships in ways that have not been seen before in the East African region or in the Horn of Africa.

The political roles of Mainline Churches (Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc.) and individual clergy in the struggle for democracy, social justice, and human rights across the continent are well documented, notably by Paul Gifford³. Nevertheless, these roles have substantially reduced and have been overtaken by the newer Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. Consequently, and in just barely three decades, Evangelicals have emerged as the dominant voices in the region. It seems therefore that the roles of Mainline churches, especially in the Eastern African region, have been characterized by a retreat not just from public life but also from their civic and public roles. This void has been filled by the ever-expanding and sprawling religious marketplace now dominated by the Evangelicals, particularly the Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches that now dominate Africa's social, religious, and political landscape. Their steep demographic shifts, as well as shifts towards more political engagement, have implications for the region. Moreover, the roles of Evangelicals in the country's electoral politics appeared to have also shifted towards a broader role⁴.

1. The term Evangelicals is ambiguous and controversial but is often used to refer to a heterogeneous group of largely independent Christian churches from the Protestant traditions. Evangelicals manifest themselves in many different forms. In this paper, evangelical is here used as an umbrella term that includes first and foremost Pentecostals, Neo-Pentecostals, and charismatic movements.

2. E. Obadare and J.K. Olupona, *Pastoral Power, Clerical State: Pentecostalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Nigeria*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022.

3. P. Gifford, *African Christianity, Its Public Role in Uganda and other African Countries*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1999.

4. D.S. Parsitau, "'Keep Holy Distance and Abstain till He Comes': Interrogating a Pentecostal Church Discourses and Engagements with HIV/AIDS and the Youth in Kenya", *Africa Today*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2009, p. 44-64; D.S. Parsitau, "From Voices of the People to Discordant/Stifled Voices: Theological, Ethical and Social-Political Voice and Noiselessness in a Multicultural/Religious Space, Perspectives from Kenya", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae Journal of the Church History Society of Southern Africa*, Vol. 38, 2012, p. 243-268.

Evangelicals manifest themselves in many different forms. Evangelical and Pentecostal/Charismatic churches are characterized by prosperity gospel teachings, divine healing, and miracles that drive church attendance. Prosperity gospel suggests that financial blessings and good health are manifestations of divine will. These churches have both regional and global ties which also makes them appealing to many of their followers⁵. Evangelical churches aim to uplift both citizens and the nation to prosperity through prayers, faith healing, and miracles, which are expected to bring about a moral, social, economic, and political transformation. These churches are pervasive in the public sphere in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi, where their manners and mores pervade public life. They place more emphasis on spiritual gifts, namely speaking in tongues (glossolalia), miracles, prosperity gospel, prophecies and faith-healing. The work of the Holy Spirit is central to their teachings and practices. Their worship services often include loud and exuberant worship characterized by emotional worship, the raising of hands, and the use of loud musical instruments.

Evangelicals hold conservative views on family and vehemently oppose non-traditional lifestyles such as homosexuality, same-sex relationships, abortion, reproductive health technologies, and sexuality education. Equally, they promote purity culture and frown upon sex outside marriage, alcohol consumption, and intoxicating substance use⁶. Evangelicals have also established transnational networks with Evangelicals in Europe and the USA and are strongly influenced by the American Christian Right.

Evangelicals are not only growing numerically in East Africa and the Horn but are also becoming increasingly dominant in the countries' politics. The relationship between Evangelicals and politicians also keeps evolving in both complex and dynamic ways. In the last decade or so, for example, I have witnessed a shift in how Evangelicals in Kenya engage in politics, as they used to view politics as something "dirty" that they did not want to engage in. Consequently, Evangelicals have adopted a more open policy of engagement with politics and elections, as well as seeking to influence key issues in civic and public life. Similar trends have also been witnessed in other countries in the region. Today, Evangelicals are not only actively participating in politics, but they are also seeking to influence electoral politics and democracy in ways that have implications for public policymaking. This has seen them move from the periphery to the center of electoral politics in these countries and has significantly impacted regional politics, public policy, and governance.

5. A. Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

6. D.S. Parsitau and A. van Klinken, "Pentecostal Intimacies! Women and Intimate Citizenship in the Ministry of Repentance and Holiness in Kenya", *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 6, 2018, p. 586-602; A. van Klinken, B. Bompani and D.S. Parsitau, "Religious Leaders as Agents of Lgbtqi Inclusion in East Africa", *African Affairs*, Vol. 122, No. 487, 2023, p. 299-312.

In Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and Ethiopia, for example, Evangelicals have moved to the center of these countries' politics and public policies in ways that have not been seen before. Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in Uganda have experienced phenomenal growth since the 1980s. This growth is not only evident in their demographic expansion but also in their influence on Uganda's public life⁷. Today, Pentecostal churches can be found in every corner of Kampala, the capital city, and since 2000, they have completely altered the geographical landscape of the region and other rural and urban centers. While these churches were initially marginal and mostly far removed from politics, with their influence largely seen in the daily lives of their followers, they have, in recent years, increasingly become important actors in public life in Uganda. Kampala is also home to the largest concentration of both Pentecostal and Evangelical churches and their pastors, many of whom have robust radio and TV ministries. Approximately 80% of these media platforms are affiliated with Pentecostals, giving them significant religious, social, and political influence. This strong media presence allows Pentecostals to shape public policy and provides politicians with a platform to seek endorsements.

Exact figures on the number of Pentecostal Churches Christians in Uganda are difficult to measure. The 2022 US State Department report suggests that about 11% of Ugandans identify as Pentecostal. The political influence of the Pentecostal Church in Uganda has grown substantially in the last two decades. Yet, these churches and their founders have recently witnessed important shifts that have turned them into important actors in Uganda's Politics and society. These churches have also expanded their sphere of influence into faith-based organizations involved in the development and social activities, in particular, the care of orphans and people living with HIV/AIDS. According to Alessandro Gusman, two major factors have helped launch Uganda's Evangelicals into the public sphere: the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which encouraged a significant theological refocus to fight the pandemic, leading to a change in their mode of engagement; and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

The HIV/AIDS pandemic that ravaged Uganda in the early 1990s shaped the role of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the country, leading to their transformation into faith-based organizations. Their response to the pandemic, as well as the massive international flows of money to Uganda to support the campaign to control the pandemic, catalysed their growth and their move to become more socially engaged in the country's social and political issues. The two issues combined to encourage a

7. P. Gifford, *African Christianity, Its Public Role in Uganda and other African Countries*, Kampala: Fountain Publishers, 1999; H. Epstein, *The Invisible Cure: Africa, the West and the Fight Against AIDS*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007; A. Gusman, "HIV/AIDS, Pentecostal Churches, and the 'Joseph Generation' in Uganda", *Africa Today*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2009, p. 66–86; C. Valois, *Public Rebirth: Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, Sexuality, and Nation Building in Uganda's Public Sphere*, Ph.D. thesis, The University of Edinburgh, 2015.

theological refocus not just in Uganda but also in the entire East African region. Since then, Uganda's Evangelicals have been at the center of Uganda's national politics, shaping discourses around sexuality, health, and morality. Ugandan Evangelicals have therefore played significant roles in the fight against HIV/AIDS that ravaged Uganda by employing varied strategies, including preaching prevention, abstinence, and purity messages that were fraught with so much tension. Evangelicals moralized the pandemic, generating significant policies that were found to be unsustainable and ultimately ineffective in the prevention of a pandemic that killed entire communities, not just in Uganda but also in many parts of Africa. In short, Pentecostal churches transformed not just the demographic features of Uganda, historically dominated by Anglican and Catholic churches, but also its moral politics and public health. The newer Pentecostal and charismatic churches brought new optimism to the Ugandan Religious landscape.

In this paper, I suggest that one common thread that defines East African heads of state is the centrality of their Evangelical faith and born-again Christian identity, which shapes their relationships with Evangelicals in their respective countries. Even more important is the growing influence of Evangelicals and their founders in these countries' politics. Their influence is also exponentially visible in Africa's social, political, electoral, and public policy landscapes, particularly in the last one and a half decades⁸.

In Uganda, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni identifies as a born-again Christian and maintains close relationships with Evangelicals in Uganda and beyond. He has a good relationship with influential Evangelicals such as Pastor Robert Kayanja of the Robert Kayanja Ministries, one of the most prominent Evangelical clergies in Uganda. He is also friends with Pastor Benny Hinn of the Benny Hinn Ministries in the US. Similarly, his wife, Janet Museveni, who serves as the Minister for Education and Sports who pushed for the controversial Homosexuality Bill 2023, is an influential Evangelical who receives strong support from US Evangelicals. Their second-born daughter, Patience Rwabwogo, is also the lead pastor and founder of the Covenant Nations Church in Kampala. This connection places the first family in a cozy relationship with Evangelicals, which has positioned Evangelicals at the center of Uganda's politics.

In Tanzania, Evangelical Christians are a substantial part of the population and have been involved in the political landscape, especially through their churches and religious leaders. During elections, they have expressed their opinions on political matters, influencing their congregants' views and sometimes endorsing specific candidates or political parties.

In Rwanda, a historically Catholic country, Evangelicals are experiencing significant growth. These churches came onto the scene after

8. E. Obadare and J.K. Olupona, *Pastoral Power, Clerical State: Pentecostalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Nigeria*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022.

the Rwandan Genocide,⁹ and with the alleged role of the Catholic churches in the Rwandese Genocide, Evangelicals are becoming increasingly popular in Rwanda. US-based Evangelicals have exploited these suspicions to court the Rwandese people. Pastor Rick Warren, an influential American Evangelical, is said to be close to President Paul Kagame. Through this relationship, American Evangelicals have become increasingly popular in Rwanda and their churches are booming. Nevertheless, there are stricter state regulations that govern church registrations in Rwanda, unlike their East African counterparts. Equally, their social and political influence is less understood.

In Central Africa, there is also evidence that suggests that the late President of Burundi, Pierre Nkurunziza, openly expressed his born-again Christian beliefs while his wife, the former first lady Denis Bucumi, directed her church. The couple often organized national prayers in the country. Similarly, it is argued that some of his political decisions were often based on fundamentalist Christian values, according to Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (2016).

Ethiopia's Prime Minister Ahmed Abiy is also a professed Evangelical, perhaps a testament to the transformation of religion and politics in this predominantly Orthodox country¹⁰. The history of Evangelicals in Ethiopia is relatively new although Evangelicals have grown substantially in the recent past. When Ahmed Abiy became Ethiopia's Prime Minister in 2018, Evangelicals experienced significant growth, particularly in the Oromia region. Prime Minister Abiy is a convert from Islam and a self-proclaimed "born again" Pentecostal Christian. Pentecostalism has since grown to represent about 20% of the population in a complex tapestry of religion in Ethiopia. In the past, Evangelicals' engagement in Ethiopia's politics was limited. However, they have recently moved into the center of politics since Prime Minister Abiy came to power and began to identify with the "Pente" as they are referred to in Ethiopia. Prime Minister Abiy is a member of the Oneness Pentecostal Church, which is part of the Apostolic Church of Ethiopia. He publicly proclaims his born-again identity and appropriates Pentecostal language, prayers, and prophecies in his political life.

In Kenya, President Daniel Arap Moi was a staunch Christian who weaponized his Christian faith. Yet President William Ruto is the first self-professed born-again President in Kenyan history, alongside his wife Rachel, who recently established an office with a team of intercessors on faith diplomacy at Statehouse, Nairobi. The main role of this intercessory team is to pray for the country. Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua is married to Dorcus Gachagua, a pastor who heads a Neo-Pentecostal church. The Ruto-

9. T. Brouck, "Rwanda's Evangelical church boom", France 24, 2018, available at: www.france24.com.

10. J. Haustein and D. Feyissa, "The Strains of 'Pente' Politics Evangelicals and the Post-Orthodox State in Ethiopia", in: J.-N. Bach, *The Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa*, London: Routledge, 2022, p. 481-494.

Gachagua administration has also put Kenya's leading Evangelicals at the center of the Republic's governance. Evangelicals not only played critical roles in the 2022 electioneering period in favor of William Ruto, but they also played a central role in his transition to president. The 2022 presidential inauguration ceremony, which looked like a Pentecostal church event, characterized by evangelical prayers, rhetoric, idioms, loud worship, and dances, testifies to this dynamic.

Using the theory of religious and political mobilization within religious communities, this paper draws upon extensive fieldwork undertaken in Nairobi, Nakuru, Nyeri, Kiambu, and Kajiado counties from June-August 2022 during the campaign period and July-September 2023, as well as on long-term observation of the Kenyan social, political, and religious scene for nearly two decades now. It seeks to understand the dynamics of religious power and the state in the East African region and the Horn. Using the example of Kenya's 2022 general elections and drawing from examples from across the region, I argue that the convergence of political and religious elites in the regions may seriously affect democracy and human rights. Even more importantly, it attempts to understand President William Ruto's weaponization and politicization of religion and the religionization of the state and the tensions this engenders in a secular democracy. To understand these dynamics, I offer an ethnographic insight into the relationship between William Ruto and Evangelicals to address several questions: What are the implications and the degree of involvement of Evangelicals in the social and political arena? How is the relationship between Evangelicals and politicians structured? How do evangelicals articulate religious and political concerns and interests?

William Ruto and the Evangelicals during the 2022 Campaign

Analysing the 2022 general elections, which were full of religious symbolisms, repertoire, language, idioms, and imagery, I unpack the dynamics of Evangelicals and electoral politics not just in Kenya but also in the general East African region. I argue that while religion has always played important but sometimes ambivalent roles in Kenya's public life, the last general elections brought to the fore new power dynamics concerning Kenyan Evangelicals' relationships with politics, especially in the case of President William Ruto, his deputy, and their spouses, both of whom are "born again" with significant influence in the Kenyan Evangelical landscape. This has generated intensive but also contested national conversations about the growing influence of Evangelicals in government and their influence on national politics, governance, identity politics, and public policies in a secular state. Critics and observers have also argued that there has been an attempt by a populist President Ruto to Christianize the presidency and create, in the words of Ebenezer Obadere (2022), "a Pentecostal Republic" even as leading mega Pentecostal clergy play and continue to play significant roles in his government long after the electioneering period.

William Ruto: The First Born-Again President in the Evangelical Republic

On August 15th, 2022, William Ruto – the United Democratic Alliance (UDA) Presidential candidate – was declared winner of the contested 2022 general elections. He is Kenya's first self-proclaimed "born-again" President, a country he has almost turned into an Evangelical Republic since his election.¹¹ Amidst opposition contestations led by the Hon. Raila Odinga, Ruto attributed his victory to divine intervention, declaring "I have been prayed into victory. We were working against the odds, but I must confess it was God who did it for us."¹²

Attributing personal victory to God in Kenya is common. In that sense, Ruto's relationship with church clergy and his appropriation of

11. A term used to describe a Christian who has experienced a dramatic conversion to faith in Jesus Christ.
12. S. Busari and N. Princewill, "Who is Kenya's new President-elect William Ruto?", CNN, 2022, available at: www.cnn.com.

religion is not new. The late President Daniel Arap Moi also heavily appropriated religion, creating an image of a God-fearing politician who invested in churches and their clergy¹³. God is often seen as an active agent in people's and nations' affairs. Rain, good harvests, personal success, and promotions are often seen as God-given and not the result of nature or hard work, for example. Kenya is a largely Christian-majority country in which Christianity has seemed like the de facto state religion. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census, 85% of its nearly 50 million people identify as Christian, among whom 33.4 % were Protestants, 20.6% were Catholics, 20.4% were Evangelicals, and 7% were from African Instituted Churches. About 11% percent of the population identified as Muslims, while other minority faiths constitute about a percentage of the total population (KPHC 2019). Kenya, known for its rich religious and cultural diversity, predominantly identifies with Christianity as its primary faith due to its majority status.

Since assuming office, William Ruto has encroached on this long-established relationship by elevating Evangelical influence within his administration. This shift has led me to suggest that Kenya could aptly be characterized, echoing the sentiments of Nigerian Pentecostal scholar Ebenezer Obadere, as a "Pentecostal Republic".¹⁴ When William Ruto decided to run for the Presidency, he laid out a well-thought-out strategy to win the support of Evangelicals and their huge constituency, estimated at 20.4% of the population. During the electioneering campaigns, William Ruto also received the support of the Evangelicals movement and most key interlocutors of the Pentecostal and Evangelical churches in the country. It was not surprising, therefore, to listen to Kenya's Chief Justice, the Hon Martha Koome, also cast the Supreme Court's judgment that upheld William Ruto's victory "as the work of God" rather than the deliberations of the highest court in the country.¹⁵ Evangelicals have equally framed Ruto as "God's choice for Kenya," a narrative deeply entrenched in major Evangelical circles.

Some of the key interlocutors and gatekeepers of the Evangelical movement that vehemently supported William Ruto and framed him as God's appointed Ruler include Bishop Mark Kariuki of the expansive Deliverance churches of Kenya, a close ally of William Ruto and former chairperson of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK). Others include Bishop Dr. David Oginde, the current chair of the EAK and the former head of the influential Jesus is the Answer Ministries (CITAM), Evangelist Teresa Wairimu of the Faith Evangelistic Ministries (FEM), another influential female clergy member who is also a pastor to First Lady Rachel

13. P. Gifford, *Christianity and Public Life in Kenya*, London: Hurst, 2009.

14. E. Obadere and J.K. Olupona, *Pastoral Power, Clerical State: Pentecostalism, Gender, and Sexuality in Nigeria*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022.

15. "Chief Justice Martha Koome attributes Supreme Court Ruling as Guided by God", KBC Channel 1, available at: www.youtube.com.

Ruto and a close ally of President Ruto, controversial Bishop cum politician the Hon. Margaret Wanjiru of Jesus Is Alive Ministries (JIAM), Bishop Arthur Kitonga of the Redeemed Gospel Churches of Kenya, Pastor Wilfred Lai of the Jesus Celebration Centres in Mombasa, JB Masinde of Deliverance Church, Umoja Nairobi, the Rev Kathy, and Bishop Allan Kiuna of the Jubilee Christian Centre, Bishop Harrison Ng'ang'a, Archbishop and founder of the Christian Foundation fellowship of Kenya, and Apostle William Kimani of the Kingdom Seekers International, Nakuru, Bishop George Gichana of Deliverance church Eldoret, and so many other megachurches¹⁶ across the country, to name but a few.

These clergies are not only influential in Evangelical circles in Kenya, but many have the backing and the loyalty of their large congregations. Most of these megachurch clergies are also regarded as celebrities, respected televangelists, and opinion shapers, not just in their respective congregations but also in Evangelical circles in Kenya and beyond¹⁷. Some are also social influences with social media followers running into thousands of fans. All have robust branches and networks of churches across the country, both in urban and rural areas. In return for openly backing William Ruto, Evangelicals got unprecedented access to the President, some state appointments, access to state resources, and political influence.

Evangelicals now occupy a central place in William Ruto's administration. They also played important roles in Ruto's election and transition to the presidency and continue to influence how he governs the country. This was especially the case at Ruto's inauguration, which looked more like a megachurch crusade than a solemn state function. During the swearing-in ceremony, he was gifted a Bible by Bishop Mark Kariuki of the Deliverance church, which is telling and full of religious symbolism. Yet what was noteworthy in Ruto's inauguration ceremony was not his subjective religious beliefs but rather the incredible roles Evangelicals played in his election victory, transition, and how he continues to govern.

16. The Term Megachurches generally refers to any Protestant Christian congregation with a sustained average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons or more in its worship, counting all adults and children at all its worship locations.

17. A. Adogame, C.M. Bauman, D.S. Parsitau and J. Yip, *The Handbook of Megachurch Studies*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024.



Illustration: Bishop Mark Kariuki [in robe] hands a bible to Kenyan President William Ruto (C) Kenya Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua (R) at the Moi International Sports Center Kasarani in Nairobi, Kenya, on September 13, 2022, during the inauguration ceremony. Courtesy of The Nation Media Group Photo Library.

Ruto has long identified as an Evangelical. His relationship with Evangelicals could be traced back to his college days as a student at the University of Nairobi in the 1990s. While Ruto was born into a protestant family and a member of the African Inland Church, he later became a born-again Evangelical in his youth.¹⁸ Local media published photos of a young Ruto preaching in his youth during and after the 2022 general elections. He and his wife Rachel have remained devoted Evangelicals who are not shy about publicly displaying their faith. Ruto frequently credits his wife Rachel for prayers and other spiritual and personal support. Rachel is a strong and pious Evangelical woman with significant respect and connections to the larger Evangelical movement in Kenya. His campaign's religious credentials were also bolstered by his Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua's wife Dorcus, a former banker who became a pastor at the House of Grace Church in Nairobi.

While Ruto has always projected a strong Evangelical image, three factors laid the foundation for his close relationship with Evangelicals, one that would lead to his 2022 election victory. These are the 2010 constitutional referendum, the politics around the 2007 post-election violence, and his and former President Uhuru Kenyatta's subsequent indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for their alleged roles in the 2007 post-election violence that led to mass displacements and the death of over 1,000 people in the Rift Valley, Nairobi, and Kisumu.¹⁹

18. E. Musambi, "William Ruto: How Kenya's New President is Influenced by Religion", BBC News, 2022, available at: www.bbc.com.

19. G. Lynch, "Electing the 'Alliance of the Accused': The Success of the Jubilee Alliance in Kenya's Rift Valley", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2014, p. 93-114.

William Ruto's alliance with Evangelicals began with the anti-referendum campaign, in which Evangelicals and other religious organizations allied with an outfit called the Kenya Church to oppose the new constitution. They were brought together by vested interests to oppose the constitutional referendum, which was ratified by nearly 70% of Kenyans.²⁰ Disappointed by the promulgation of the constitution of Kenya 2010, Evangelicals have had a raft of complaints against it because they viewed it as too liberal. Their perception was that it contained clauses that appeared to promote abortion, homosexuality, and the inclusion of Kadhi (Muslim) courts into Kenyan Law, which they argued appeared to elevate Islam over Christianity. Evangelicals have expressed long-standing rejection of Islam shaped by deep-seated suspicions of radicalism, terrorism and political aspirations. Their fears aligned with William Ruto's candidacy and promises, who firmly opposed the implementation of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 because of his political interests around land ownership and concerns regarding devolution, among others. This period sowed the seeds of a new pact and alliance between William Ruto and Evangelicals, who subsequently supported him in his 2022 election.

During his campaign, Ruto also identified with Evangelical fears regarding church regulation. Over the past decade, Kenya has engaged in significant and contested debates over the need to regulate the sprawling but largely unregulated religious marketplace. This has been driven by public complaints and investigative media reports highlighting abuses by Pentecostal clergy, including financial and sexual exploitation, manipulations, harmful teachings, emerging cults, and concerns about the religious radicalization marketplace. In response to these concerns, the government, through the Office of the Attorney General and the National Intelligence Services, began investigating public complaints about some churches. For instance, on November 11, 2014, former Attorney General Prof. Githu Muigai issued a moratorium barring the registration of religious organizations pending new regulations. This move aimed to streamline church operations to curb radicalization and other alleged activities, prescribe qualifications and standards of conduct for religious leaders, and provide a framework for inspecting and overseeing religious organizations. The registration of churches and religious organizations is primarily governed by the Societies Act. This moratorium was vehemently opposed by Evangelicals and Pentecostal churches, who argued that it violated their freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and opinion as embodied in Article 32 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010. Unlike Mainline churches, Evangelicals lack a central body for oversight and regulation and a well-defined mechanism to hold them accountable. Many Kenyan Evangelical clergy also lack theological training and often dismiss the need for such education. Typically, starting a church in Pentecostal churches requires only a Bible, a

20. W. Njoya, "William Ruto and the evangelicals", *Africa Is a Country*, 2023, available at: <https://africasacountry.com>.

loudspeaker, a tent, and a claim of being filled with the Holy Spirit. The country is replete with perhaps hundreds, if not more, of Evangelical clergy who have no theological education or pastoral training to start a church. While the moratorium was eventually lifted, new regulations now govern church registration.

In April 2023, the Shakahola fast-to-death tragedy reignited this debate, providing impetus to regulate the religious sector in Kenya. Evangelicals have again opposed this move, arguing for self-regulation mechanisms. During the campaign periods, these debates became a significant issue and may have been a significant factor in the move by Evangelicals to rally around William Ruto and his Deputy whom they believed would be able to protect them from church regulation. The Hon. Raila Odinga and his running mate, the Hon. Martha Karua, advocated for regulating new churches. Ida Odinga also added her opinion to this debate, generating significant discourse, especially among Evangelicals, who felt that the opposition wanted to impose unwanted regulations. During a thanksgiving prayer rally at William Ruto's Karen residence, Bishop Mark Kariuki revealed that Evangelicals supported William Ruto and his Deputy Rigathi Gachagua because they identified with their concerns and felt safer with them, believing they would protect the church's interests.

From this, it seems to me that Evangelicals believed William Ruto would protect them from church regulations and lift the moratorium imposed on registering new churches by the Jubilee administration of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto. Evangelicals opposed the moratorium, viewing it as an infringement on their freedom of worship. Despite serving as Deputy President when the moratorium was instituted, Ruto positioned himself as a protector of church interests, contrasting himself with competitors who advocated for religious regulation. Consequently, he built up the trust of Evangelical voters, who embraced him as one of their own and a defender of their interests.

Prayer Rallies as Electoral Mobilizations

Throughout his campaign and tenure as Deputy President, William Ruto engaged in religious mobilization by meeting key Evangelical and other religious leaders across Kenya. He patronized their churches and held political rallies framed as national "prayer rallies," especially within Evangelical communities.

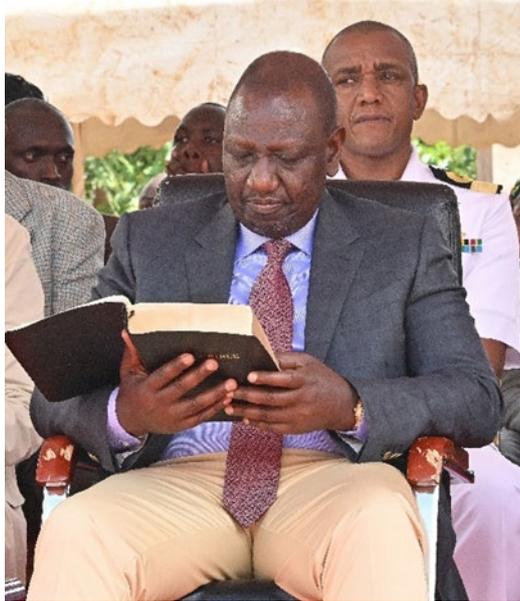


Illustration: President William Ruto reads a Bible during a church service at African Inland Church in Homa Bay town. Dr Ruto said that no region will be discriminated in the process of transforming the nation, April 4th, 2023. Courtesy of The Nation Media Group Photo Library.

In the wake of the 2013 general elections, William Ruto and the presidential candidate Uhuru Kenyatta faced criminal charges at the ICC for their roles in the 2007 post-election violence. To fend off the ICC, they ran under the Jubilee Coalition and employed religious rhetoric, portraying their tribulations as the work of the devil and the opposition, led by Raila Odinga, whom they depicted as wicked and ungodly. During this period, Kenyatta and Ruto held political rallies camouflaged as prayer meetings, accompanied by clergymen who laid hands on them and anointed them with special oil. They prayed fervently, casting away the demons of the ICC, condemning the opposition, and attacking civil society organizations derogatively referred to as the “evil society.”

These ICC prayer rallies were organized by – among many others – the Federation of Evangelical and Indigenous Christian Churches of Kenya.²¹ It seems to me therefore that William Ruto cultivated stronger ties with Evangelicals during the ICC crisis and deepened these relationships after his falling out with Uhuru Kenyatta in 2019. Ruto, sidelined by Kenyatta, began campaigning for the 2022 elections while in office, by positioning himself as a God-fearing man and aligning with influential Evangelical clergy across the country. As Deputy President, Ruto embraced the born-again movement, frequently attending church services, donating money, and aligning himself with influential Evangelical clergy. Evangelicals embraced Ruto as one of their own, mobilizing prayer rallies, issuing prophecies about his electoral victory, and holding civic education sessions to support him. Prophecies favoring

21. “Kenyan Prayer Meetings Spark Criticism, Controversy”, *VOA News*, April 2011, available at: www.voanews.com.

Ruto were common, often tied to his donations and alignment with their values, while negative predictions targeted his rivals. During the 2022 election period, about 97 congregations were mobilized to support Ruto. This significant Evangelical constituency therefore played a crucial role in shaping the outcome of the August 2022 general election and continues to influence his government.

In Kenya, the relationship between church and state is longstanding. Former President Daniel Arap Moi, a mentor to Ruto, identified with Evangelicals and frequently attended church, using the Christian faith to cleanse his autocratic regime. Kenya's mainline churches have a history of engaging in politics, fighting for multi-party democracy, human rights, and social justice. Ruto's efforts to align with Evangelical clergy must be understood within the context of seeking Christian legitimacy and social respectability. He leveraged his Evangelical faith to gain legitimacy, approval, and acceptance, especially when faced with accusations of corruption. His association with the church aimed to portray him as a humble servant of God, countering perceptions of corruption. This bore fruit when the prosecution dropped charges against Uhuru Kenyatta in 2014 and William Ruto in 2016. The symbiotic relationship between politicians and religious leaders involves mutual benefits. Religious leaders use politicians like Ruto to access state resources and political power, while politicians gain personal appeal, social power, and legitimacy. Evangelical clergy often seek power, prestige, money, and state recognition, and their alliance with politicians helps push conservative agendas on issues like reproductive health and sexual politics, expecting William Ruto to add these precepts to his political agenda once elected.

Aligning with Evangelical Conservative Values and Interests

During the campaign, William Ruto and his Deputy further aligned themselves with Evangelical conservative values, teachings, and beliefs to secure their support.

As part of both religious and political mobilization in May 2022, President Ruto signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between his administration and the Association of Pentecostal Evangelicals Clergy in Kenya (APECK) in May 2022.²² In the MoU, William Ruto, through his handlers, signed a raft of promises to Evangelicals in exchange for their support. It included 16 proposals designed to “promote the interest of the church and the kingdom of God in our nation,” according to Bishop Mark Kariuki. Among some issues of concern for Evangelicals has been unease

22. N. Hochet-Bodin, “In Kenya, Evangelical Churches have a Growing Influence in Government”, *Le Monde*, December 2022, available at: www.lemonde.fr.

with proposals to regulate their activities given the many financial and sexual scandals within its ranks²³. Other demands included in the MoU are the allocation of land for congregations, the appointment of Evangelicals to government positions, and tax exemptions. Others include promises to nominate and appoint some of them to commissions, state corporations, foreign missions, cabinet positions, and boards, as well as committees of national and county governments²⁴. Except for a few notable appointments, including that of Bishop David Oginde, formally the head of CITAM, to head the Ethics and Anti-corruption Commission²⁵ and a few others, the President does not seem keen to follow up on his part of the deal.

The appointment of religious leaders into government positions however could be understood in several ways: first, the need for Evangelicals to influence public policy, especially concerning issues they hold to be in tension with their values, teachings, and beliefs such as LGBTQ rights and abortion, among others. Evangelicals have long been opposing policy issues around education, sexual politics, and reproductive health issues, including abortion. Ruto himself publicly said that he does not want religious leaders distanced from public policy.

William Ruto also pledged to recognize clergy as key stakeholders and essential service providers. Similarly, his deputy further pledged to guarantee the independence of the church by lifting the moratorium on the registration of religious organizations, including churches and ministries, and supporting self-regulation of churches as opposed to state regulation. At the same time, Evangelicals wanted the formation of a docket for religious affairs, facilitation for the formation of a registrar of religious organizations, and the establishment of a Christian legal office to support the drafting of bills for consideration by Parliament and budgetary funds for accredited church mediators and centers.²⁶ Ruto also pledged to scrap the levies charged by churches as marriage fees by the registrar of societies. It is clear that the reduction or exemption of taxes in favor of Evangelical churches and the donations he made during the campaign played a central role in winning the support of Evangelical leaders and followers.

23. D.S. Parsitau, "Taming Rogue Clergy and Churches: God, Scandals and Government and Religious Regulations in Kenya", in: M.C. Green, R.I.J. Hackett, L. Hansen and F. Venter (eds.), *Religious Pluralism, Heritage and Social Development in Africa*, Stellenbosch: Sun MeDIA, 2017, p. 241-257.

24. S. Apollo, "Are Evangelicals Capturing State?", *Nation*, September 2022, available at: <https://nation.africa>.

25. The Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) is a public body established under Section 3 (1) of the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission Act, 2011.

26. S. Apollo, "Are Evangelicals Capturing State?", *Nation*, September 2022, available at: <https://nation.africa>.

"God Loves a Generous Giver" Evangelicals and the Money Factor in Ruto's Election

A highlight of William Ruto's relationship with Evangelicals is the money factor and the role it played in his election. Throughout the campaign period, William Ruto became a constant presence in church circles, particularly Evangelical church circles such as the Deliverances Churches of Kenya headed by Bishop Mark Kariuki, Faith Evangelistic Ministries headed by Evangelist Teresia Wairimu, and many others. While William Ruto and his Deputy patronized other church denominations as well as Muslim organizations during the campaign period, he chose to align himself with Pentecostals and Evangelicals. His nationwide tours, accompanied by his close associates, went from one church to another, campaigning and donating hefty amounts of money and other goods both to churches and individual clergy. Furthermore, William Ruto not only donated substantial amounts of money and other goods to Evangelical churches, clergy, and ministries, but also promised to appoint them to public offices.

This drew significant protests from cross sections of the public, civil society, and the main opposition party, who all questioned the sources of this money²⁷. His political opponents, such as Raila Odinga and his running mate, Martha Karua, claimed that the money donated could be a form of money laundering and that churches were part of this scheme. Others argued that the substantial monetary donations came from the proceeds of corruption, given his disproportionately low salary.²⁸

William Ruto pushed back and defended his hefty donations, arguing that "we will continue to worship Jehovah with our hearts and substance. We are unashamed of our God and unapologetic of our faith. We are Christians first, other titles after."²⁹

Critics did not stop him from donating money to churches. Noe Hochet-Bodin suggests that, between January and June 2018, William Ruto donated 600,000 dollars, or 578,000 euros, to churches both in cash and in-kind including cars. This sum represents 12 times his salary as Vice President (the previous name of the current DP position) over the period. This paid off with 2,000 pastors from the Rift Valley endorsing him as the preferred presidential candidate. This trend was also visible in 2013 and 2017, when William Ruto began to seriously align himself with Evangelicals from 2013 onwards. Even after his election alongside Uhuru Kenyatta in 2013 and 2017, he has continued to donate large sums of money to churches.

27. "DP Ruto Defends his Involvement in Church Donations, Again", NTV Kenya, available at: www.youtube.com.

28. N. Hochet-Bodin, "In Kenya, Evangelical Churches have a Growing Influence in Government", *Le Monde*, December 2022.

29. P. Mburu, "DP 'Unashamed' of Church Harambees as Preachers now Avoid Politicians' Money", *Nairobi News*, April 2019, available at: <https://nairobinews.nation.africa>.

There is substantial disagreement among Christian leaders in Kenya concerning the acceptance of donations by the church from individuals, particularly those who have been implicated in corruption allegations. The Anglican Archbishop Jackson Ole Sapit declared in 2019 that the Anglican Church in Kenya would not allow donations to be used as a subtle way to sanitize corrupt leaders. He argued that people should give quietly as an act of worship and gratitude to God, as well as to support God's work. The Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops also issued a directive stating that the Church will not accept cash donations from political leaders. Furthermore, politicians offering substantial financial contributions to religious leaders is not only troubling but can also be interpreted as a form of co-optation, compromising the integrity of these religious figures. Clergy members who accept such financial support may find themselves unable to effectively hold politicians accountable.

Ruto's "Hustler Narratives" and The Evangelical Gospel of "Grass to Grace Theology"

Whether through co-option or instrumentalization of religion, Evangelicals were key to President Ruto's election almost as the "Hustler Versus Dynasties" ideology was. Besides crafting the Hustler Versus Dynasties ideologies, William Ruto also seemed to identify with another ideology that resonated with many Evangelicals. This is what I call the "grass-to-riches" ideology, popular among many Evangelicals. In church platforms, media interviews, and other campaign venues, William Ruto frequently spoke about his humble beginnings. His humble "hustler narrative" strikes similarities with the "Prosperity Gospel" espoused by many of his Evangelical clergy friends, such as Bishop Mark Kariuki. The prosperity gospel is imaged as providing pastors with a lift from the bottom to the echelon of society or their famous dictum "Grass to Grace". Here, Evangelicals narrate how "dirt poor" they were before they encountered Jesus Christ, who completely transformed their lives and made them fabulously wealthy, just like Ruto, who was from a poor background but rose to become the President of Kenya through God's favor. Evangelicals like Bishop Mark Kariuki of the Deliverances churches, Teresia Wairimu of FEM, Margaret Wanjiru of JIAM, Arthur Kitonga of Redeemed Gospel church and many other Megachurch televangelists have transformed their lives completely from poor men and women to fabulously rich individuals thanks to the prosperity gospel they espouse. Many of these clergy started their megachurches from semi-permanent tents or corrugated roofs in garages or other empty or abandoned spaces to move on to opulent mega-churches. Thus, William Ruto's Hustler narrative strikes a familiar chord for many Kenyan Evangelical clergy. Consider this sermon from Bishop Mark Kariuki preached during Ruto's inauguration ceremony: "Lord, we cried out to you, and you heard our

prayers. And today you have proved to the world that you are the God who can change a Chicken Seller to a President!”

William Ruto's Chicken Seller Narrative resonates with Pentecostal prosperity-promoting pastors who had begun their mega-churches from abandoned buildings and warehouses before they built opulent mega-churches, making many of them very wealthy. Hustler's Grass to Grace narrative was designed to make him look ordinary, one who understands the sufferings of the poor masses and one who struggled in the past to meet his needs. Like his Evangelical counterparts, he credits his wealth and his political success to God. In short, Ruto used the church to advance his overarching political ambitions. I argue that, while the Hustler ideology was crafted to focus on ordinary poor Kenyans who form the majority of the Kenyan electorate, the Grass-to-Grace ideology was crafted for Evangelicals who believe that their lives could miraculously be transformed by God just like that of William Ruto, a chicken seller who became president, and their pastors who started preaching on the streets before they became opulent megachurch pastors and founders.

The Politics of The National Altar in a Public House

In August 2019, as deputy president, William Ruto and his wife Rachel built a National Prayer Altar at their official residence in Karen, a state-owned house in Nairobi, usually occupied by deputy/vice presidents. The opening of the National Prayer Altar was announced by his wife, Rachel Ruto, through a tweet on her Twitter account: “Today my husband, the deputy president, and I were blessed to have been joined by Fathers of Faith and key leaders in various mountains of influence during the opening ceremony of our national altar at the official residence of the Deputy President” @MamaRachelRuto.

The tweet was accompanied by a Bible verse 1 Samuel 24:25 which read: “David built an altar for the Lord and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Thus, the Lord was moved by prayers for the Land and the plague was held back.”³⁰

The use of Bible verses to justify the opening of the National Prayer Altar raises issues about the separation of religion and politics. Yet, this national altar also served as a space for William Ruto and Evangelicals to hold frequent meetings to mobilize the Evangelical constituency to support William Ruto's election in 2022. It also became the space for mobilizing, co-option, buying of loyalty, and strategic planning and political alignments.

Politicians allied with William Ruto, businessmen/women, and other interest groups frequently gathered in his official residence, which was

30. S. Njambi, “Ruto Builds ‘National Prayer Altar’ at Karen Home”, *The Star*, August 2019, available at: www.the-star.co.ke.

popularly called “the Hustler’s Mansion”. This residence served as a nerve center for all his political operations and campaign planning and strategizing away from the public and journalists. The opposition and civil society complained that William Ruto was misusing state resources and taxpayers’ money to run his political campaigns.³¹ This created significant controversies, so he had to move his campaign headquarters elsewhere. Yet this space was a haven for his political operations. Religious leaders, politicians, businessmen, and defectors swarmed into the Hustler’s Mansion, where the DP would pitch his presidential candidacy to them. The Opening of the National Prayer Altar added to another layer of complexities and pointed to his use of and manipulation of religion and religious symbols for political purposes. The official opening of the National Prayer Altar was graced by influential Evangelical clergy, led by his close ally, Bishop Mark Kariuki, the General overseer of the Deliverance Churches of Kenya, the Rev Teresa Wairimu of Faith Evangelistic Ministries, Bishop JB Masinde of the Deliverance Umoja, Bishop Harrison Ng’anga of the Christian Foundation Church among so many Evangelical gatekeepers. Almost all of these Evangelical clergy vehemently either campaigned, mobilized their supporters to support William Ruto, or endorsed him publicly. These clergy were also prominent in his transition and inauguration.

William Ruto and his wife Rachel’s decision to build a church altar in his official residence created significant national controversies. Yet, the National Prayers Altar allowed him a safe and private space to continue to deepen not just his relationship with Evangelicals but also to continue to image himself as a God-fearing and prayerful man. The National Altar also served as the center for both political and religious mobilization and other activities disguised as prayer services throughout the campaign and presidential transition. The role of Rachel Ruto in managing the tight relationship between Evangelicals and the Kenyan President is one of the most recent and interesting developments in the entanglement of religion and politics in the East African Region.

31. B. Otieno and A. Kareithi, “William Ruto’s Karen Home: From Official Residence to a Hustler’s Mansion”, *The Standard*, 2023, available at: www.standardmedia.co.ke.

The role of Kenya's First Lady Rachel Ruto during and after the Campaign

Throughout his political career, William Ruto leveraged the connections of his wife, Rachel Cheron Ruto, to win the support of Evangelicals. This section further engages with Kenya's first lady's role in shaping the relationship between her husband and the Evangelical leaders before, during and after the 2022 election campaign. Indeed, the Kenyan case study highlights particularly well the role of the First Lady in religious diplomacy. Rachel Ruto's strong Evangelical faith and social capital helped in persuading Evangelicals to support her husband's presidential bid.³² Evangelicals also seemed to think they could leverage the power of the first lady to ensure that William Ruto would keep his word to Evangelicals given during the signing of the MoU discussed above.

Here, I argue that Evangelicals believe that the role of the first lady would be to ensure that her husband channels Evangelicals' demands, needs, and interests through the office of the first lady, instrumentalizing her roles for their benefit. I think the launching of the faith diplomacy docket that I discuss below is an instrument that Evangelical clergy would use to entrench their influence in William Ruto's administration. Rachael Ruto's public expression of her Evangelical faith also likely contributed to the couple's appeal to religious voters. Her testimonies, prayers and involvement in charitable initiatives may have helped humanize the Ruto campaign, fostering a connection with voters who prioritize faith and moral values in their political choices.

Appropriating the Power of the First Lady in Mobilizing the Evangelicals

The role of First Ladies in Africa has undergone significant transformation.³³ They have become socially and politically engaged, leveraging their unique positions to influence public life. The First Lady's position has opened doors for women previously marginalized in public affairs, allowing them to assert themselves and make an impact. Examples include Janet Museveni of

32. "Miracle: I Prayed and Dirty Water became Clean – Rachel Ruto", *The Star*, 2022, available at: www.the-star.co.ke.

33. D.S. Parsitau and A. Adelokun, "Pentecostal First Ladies between Power and Patriarchy in African Megachurches", in: A. Adogame, C. Bauman, D.S. Parsitau and J. Yip (eds.), *The Handbook of Megachurch Studies*, Routledge, 2024, p. 334-346.

Uganda, who serves as a minister in her husband's cabinet; Jeannette Kagame of Rwanda; and Margaret Kenyatta of Kenya. These women use their positions to project soft power and spearhead issues they care about. Former First Lady Margaret Kenyatta championed several social concerns, including her popular Beyond Zero campaign that focused on advocating women's maternal health care to ensure that no mother dies giving birth in Kenya. This program rallied international partners to rally around women's reproductive health and shine a light on a critical aspect of women's lives. While Rachel Ruto is best known for her work around women's economic empowerment, her Faith Diplomacy docket has attracted controversy because it appears to be a tool that Evangelicals, through the First Lady, exploit to ensure that their values and practices are central to William Ruto's Presidency and by extension entrench these values in how the country is governed.

Rachel Cheron Ruto, Kenya's first lady and wife to President William Ruto, was born on November 20th, 1968. She married William Ruto, whom she met at college in the 1990s, and, together, they have six children.³⁴ Rachel Ruto projects the image of a pious and prayerful woman. Prayer plays an important role in her life and work. Ever since her husband was elected, she has hosted hundreds of Evangelical clergy in Statehouse Nairobi and organized church services there. She has also hosted many Thanksgiving prayer services with both local and international evangelical clergy. At the same time, she has appointed a prayer team called the National Altar Team, whose role is to pray for the country every day. She frequently posts prayer items to the team so they can engage in national prayers for the country.

Evangelical clergy such as Bishop Mark Kariuki have variously compared Rachel Ruto to Queen Esther of Biblical times. Queen Esther is said to have influenced King Ahab to save her people from destruction. Evangelicals hoped that Rachel Ruto would be able to influence her husband to give Evangelicals a central role in his governance and policies. Mark Kariuki, who labeled Ruto's wife as "Queen Esther," confided closely with William Ruto at a Prayer Meeting in Ruto's Karen Residence.³⁵ Similarly, just over a week before the general elections, at Ruto's Karen residence, Bishop Kariuki continued to compare Rachel with Queen Esther in the Bible. Bishop Mark Kariuki was suggesting that Rachel would be a good, Godly influence on her leader husband just as Esther from the Bible was. He also referred to the Second Lady Dorcus Gachagua, a pastor and wife to Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua, who would similarly persuade/influence her husband to prioritize Evangelical interests in how they govern the country.

34. P. Wangui, "How I Met my Wife Rachel - President-Elect Ruto", *The Star*, August 19, 2022, available at: www.the-star.co.ke.

35. <https://twitter.com>; video recording 02/08/2022 prayer meeting at Ruto's home <https://youtu.be>.



Illustration: President William Ruto's mother Sarah Samoei (from right), First Lady Rachel Ruto, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua's wife Dorcas Rigathi, Uasin Gishu County Governor Jonathan Bii Chelilim, and Chelilim's wife Selina during a thanksgiving service. February 12th, 2023. Courtesy of The Nation Media Group Photo Library.

Rachel Ruto and the Establishment of the Faith Diplomacy Docket

Upon her husband's inauguration as the President of Kenya, Rachel Ruto launched the Faith Diplomacy office, aimed at promoting faith in both local and international spheres. Announcing the launch during the General Assembly of the Organization of African First Ladies for Development, Rachel Ruto emphasized that her leadership would drive social transformation in Kenya through three key pillars: women's economic empowerment, fighting climate change, and faith diplomacy.³⁶ Mrs. Ruto has a long history of working with women through her organization Joyful Women, which was among the first to popularize table banking for rural and urban women without bank access in Kenya. This organization has brought significant social and economic transformation to these women and spurred many other table banking models. She has also been vocal about tree-planting initiatives to combat climate change.

However, it is her Faith Diplomacy docket that has garnered significant attention and controversy within the country. Through faith diplomacy, Rachel seeks to promote family values by encouraging prayers for families and investing in faith-based activities in schools and colleges. She has argued that the Faith Diplomacy office will help foster a culture of prayer across the nation, particularly within educational institutions.

36. M. Kinyanjui, "Rachel Ruto: How I will Transform Kenya through Faith Diplomacy, Women Empowerment and Climate Action", *Citizen Digital*, February 2023, available at: www.citizen.digital.

An interesting example of how these prayers can be used to build diplomatic ties is the role First Lady Rachel Ruto played in supporting the Kenyan security mission in Haiti. Early in April this year, *Christianity Today* reported that Rachel Ruto hosted many Kenyan Evangelical pastors, as well as Haitian and American religious leaders, at their Western Hotel to pray for Haiti and the security personnel who will be sent on a peacekeeping mission. After a two-day prayer meeting, Rachel Ruto formed a prayer committee for Haiti in charge of a national 40-day prayer guide. The First Lady and her staff then traveled³⁷ to the US to meet with selected pastors, church and business leaders, Haitian officials, and representatives from law enforcement agencies.

There are also notable overlaps between Rachel Ruto's faith diplomacy and her belief in prayer as a solution to Kenyan problems, which aligns with Evangelical approaches to social and political issues. Evangelicals often view prayer as a remedy for the many challenges facing the nation. This perspective has raised concerns among some citizens who argue that it can detract from holding the government accountable for addressing national challenges through concrete actions. Similarly, Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua's wife, Dorcus Gachagua, who heads a Neo-Pentecostal church, invests considerable time, money, and resources in organizing prayer activities across the country. This emphasis on prayer suggests a belief that it is a solution to Kenya's social, political, and economic issues rather than attributing them to a failure of governance and leadership. During this week's youth-led occupy parliament and church activities, the youth carried placards that seemed to throw jabs at William Ruto, and his wife Rachel and Evangelicals read, "Kenya is an example that prayers cannot fix bad governance" and they demanded concrete measures to address glaring governance issues affecting the country.

Alongside her husband, the Deputy President of Kenya Rigathi Gachagua and his wife, Dorcus, played a key role in spearheading the fight against illicit alcohol and other forms of substance abuse in Kenya. In early 2024, the Deputy President has been advocating for stringent measures to curb the proliferation of alcohol and drugs in the country, especially in the Central region, which appears to be in the lead for the consumption of harmful and illicit spirits at about 4.1%, followed by the Coastal region at 3.2% and the Rift Valley region at 3.1%.³⁸ He has emphasized the need for comprehensive policies that not only regulate the sale and distribution of illicit substances but also promote education and rehabilitation. His efforts are supported by his wife, Dorcus, and key religious leaders allied to the Association of Pentecostal of Pentecostal and Evangelical clergy of Kenya (APECK). APECK is associated with Second Lady Dorcus Rigathi, who also

37. www.aljazeera.com.

38. "Alcohol Use in Central Province of Kenya. A Baseline Survey on Magnitude, Causes and Effects from the Perspective of Community Members and Individual Users", *Policy Brief*, Nacada Authority, 2011, available at: www.nacada.go.ke.

serves as its patron. It is registered as an organization that brings Evangelicals together to actualize the church Agenda in Kenya, which includes preaching, evangelism, and initiating programs toward enabling a dignified future for the vulnerable. Through Dorcus Rigathi's efforts, the war against illicit brews and other harmful substances has taken on both a religious and political angle. Yet, while her faith-based approach focused on rehabilitation and recovery, religious leaders' approaches to alcohol and drug consumption have tended to moralize and demonize alcoholism and substance abuse. The involvement of the Evangelicals in this issue is working against the framing of addiction as a public health issue that requires more robust structural and legal solutions, such as concerted efforts between policymakers, healthcare professionals and therapists.

To sum up, the Ruto-Gachagua administration and their wives have positioned leading Evangelicals at the center of Kenya's governance, incorporating prayer as a Christian response to national challenges both within and outside the country. This influence was particularly evident at their inauguration ceremony, which resembled a church service, as well as during the controversial Benny Hinn Healing the Nation Crusade organized by Evangelicals and the First Lady.

“Healing the Nation” Crusade: Rachel Ruto and the Pastor Benny Hinn Controversy

On February 24th and 26th, 2024, Kenya hosted a mega-crusade led by the controversial American Pastor Benny Hinn of Benny Hinn Ministries at the invitation of First Lady Rachel Ruto and prominent Evangelical clergy. This significant event, dubbed the “Healing the Nation Crusade”, was attended by the first and second families, numerous Evangelical leaders, thousands of followers, government officials, and international guests, including Ugandan Evangelicals led by Bishop Robert Kayanja of Robert Kayanja Ministries. Notably, many government officials, including the first and second families, knelt before the massive crowds to receive prayers from Pastor Benny Hinn.

While national prayers and crusades are not new to Kenya, this event marked a pivotal shift in the relationship between the first family and Evangelicals, highlighting the central role Evangelicals played in the Ruto administration. The participation of high-ranking officials and the apparent government endorsement of the crusade suggested a redefinition of the relationship between religion and politics in Kenya. The crusade also raised questions about the use of taxpayer money to support such religious events.

Evangelicals, who took pride in organizing the crusade, perceived their involvement as a testament to their growing influence in the Ruto administration, contrasting with the roles traditionally played by mainline churches in national affairs. This shift hints at a retreat of mainline churches

from Kenya's public life, making way for Evangelicals as key players in civil society. The crusade also highlighted an understanding between William Ruto and Evangelicals to align governance with Evangelical norms, practices, and beliefs.

The "Healing the Nation Crusade" sparked significant debate on social and traditional media over the necessity and cost of such an event amidst Kenya's economic challenges. The exclusion of other faith traditions in the political culture and protocols of Kenya's culturally diverse Republic was another point of contention. Many Kenyans questioned President Ruto's close ties with Evangelicals, expressing concerns that these entanglements might lead to the transformation of Kenya, a secular nation, into a Pentecostal republic or a theocracy.

Evangelicals and Space Sacralization after the 2022 Election

After William Ruto's victory at the contested polls was upheld by the Kenyan Supreme Court, there was wild celebration in his political strongholds as well as in Evangelical churches throughout the country. A frenzy of national thanksgiving ceremonies was held in many churches across Kenya and attended by the first family and politicians aligned with him. This was followed by an inauguration celebration that looked like an Evangelical church crusade. The religious and political display of power that came with Ruto's Victory testify to the Evangelicals' space sacralization tactics that started to amplify right after the 2022 election.

A Pentecostal Presidential Inauguration

Ruto's inauguration ceremony started with a prayer to cleanse the statehouse of the demons of Uhuru Kenyatta's regime. Statehouse invited about 40 Evangelical pastors led by popular televangelist Bishop Mark Kariuki to "purify" the presidential residence in Nairobi until "all the evil forces were driven out".³⁹

In his first tweet as President, Ruto praised the church for the prayers and vowed to work with them: "This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it", quoting Psalms 118: 24. Evangelicals played a key role in the transition process, notably Bishop Mark and Reverend Teresia Wairimu of the Faith Evangelistic Ministry led prayers during the inauguration. Bishop Mark, Ruto, Gachagua, and their spouses then proceeded to take a photograph together with beautiful smiles.

The inauguration ceremony was just like his campaign rallies: full of religious symbolism, idioms, prayers, singing, dancing, and jubilation. Evangelical clergy seemed to enjoy unprecedented authority and access in President Ruto's government and turned up in large numbers for the inauguration ceremony. Some of these clergy wield tremendous social and spiritual power in Kenya.

39. N. Hochet-Bodin, "In Kenya, Evangelical Churches have a Growing Influence in Government", *Le Monde*, December 2022.

In contrast to other past state inauguration ceremonies, religion, and Evangelical clergy specifically, played important roles. Bishop Mark Kariuki gave William Ruto a Bible as a gift during the inauguration. The significance of the Bible is immense and could be interpreted as an attempt by Evangelicals to ensure the country is governed by Bible principles alongside the Kenyan constitution. At his swearing-in ceremony, he knelt again in front of a frenzy of Bible-wielding Evangelical clergy led by Bishop Mark Kariuki of the Deliverance Church of Kenya and Evangelist Teresia Wairimu of Faith Evangelistic Ministries. Evangelical rituals, such as loud prayers, loud celebrations, singing, and raising of hands, took center stage. What was noteworthy in this solemn ceremony was not his subjective religious beliefs but rather the significance of Evangelical rituals and the roles these clergy played not just in his swearing-in but also in how he would govern thereafter.

The Over-Spiritualization of Public Affairs

Since taking office in September 2022, William Ruto has continued to actively participate in church services, prayer rallies and crusades, church fundraising, and tens of church events held across the country. One notable event occurred on February 14, 2023, at the Nyayo National Stadium in Nairobi. During this gathering, President Ruto highlighted the importance of the Church in governance, stating:

“I was worried that Church leaders had been cowed after being told that the Church does not matter and when the word of God was mocked by those trusting in the deep state, but today I am happy that the Church has come back to the center of politics.”⁴⁰

President Ruto concluded the event by leading the closing prayer, showing his commitment to faith. Prayers of thanksgiving marked the first year of his presidency and caused public controversy even as Kenyans wondered if Evangelicals were capturing the state.

This has attracted significant and conflictual debates regarding the over-spiritualization of public affairs. Despite the criticism, Ruto's seems unperturbed. When addressing members of the clergy and other Christians at the service, Rachel Ruto said they will be holding prayer ceremonies month after month to give thanks to God for answering their prayers.

“The Bible says, ‘People will go up to Jerusalem, year after year, to celebrate the feast of the tabernacles [...]’. And I think that this is a place where people will come year after year for Thanksgiving. I want to tell the

40. E. Nyandoro, “President Ruto: Church to be at Centre of Governance”, *Nation*, February 2023, available at: <https://nation.africa>.

church that this is not the last service we are having. You will be coming here month after month to give thanks to the Lord for doing us good. [...] When the Lord answers your prayer, you go to give thanks, and we will not do it just once; we will keep coming to this altar that the Fathers have laid here today in the State House”.⁴¹

Prayers appear to become a central practice not just in Statehouse Nairobi but also in national events and celebrations. It seems that William Ruto and his wife are ushering in and reconfiguring a new relationship between Evangelicals and politics in Kenya, in which prayers will be central to governance.

Based on our discussion, it appears that William Ruto's election as Kenya's inaugural Evangelical President has sparked noteworthy transformations in both religion and electoral dynamics across Kenya and the broader East African region. The relationship between the Kenyan President and Evangelicals must be understood through the lenses of religious and political mobilization. According to Ebenezer Obadere, Evangelical and Pentecostal clergy appropriate religious language, idioms, and doctrines and manipulate their alliances with national power brokers to consolidate their influence and authority. Similarly, political leaders equally manipulate religious symbols and affiliations to their advantage. Both negotiate state-class dynamics to achieve their ends. The increasing involvement of Evangelical and Pentecostal groups in electoral matters may or may not result in religious activism. However, the alignment of political elites with Evangelical leaders is not unprecedented. When leaders of megachurches, who are also affluent business figures, venture into politics, the fusion of religious influence completes a triad of power, undermining the decentralization of power necessary for a democratic system.

Evangelicals lack a well-developed policy of social action which is important in political engagements of any kind. They seem driven more by personal than national interests. Although they lack sophisticated social doctrines and justice, they shape social and religious norms in the country have sought to put forward moral agendas, and are willing to join forces with conservative groups, including the American Christian Right, to agitate over moral and family issues. Yet, fostering inclusive social and political dialogues involving diverse church groups could integrate them into public discourse, enhancing social accountability.

41. T. Osanjo, “Kenyan President William Ruto Criticized For Favoring Pentecostal Christians”, *Religion Unplugged*, October 10, 2022, available at: <https://religionunplugged.com>.

The Shakahola Scandal and its Consequences

A couple of months after William Ruto's win, rumblings and tensions arose not just among Evangelicals but also throughout the country. The unprecedentedly high cost of living, the near collapse of the Kenyan shilling against the dollar, and the high taxation system he introduced earned him the nickname Zakayo⁴², after the Biblical tax collector.

The cost of living skyrocketed while the Kenyan shilling lost value against the US dollar, leading to a high cost of living that affected the majority of people and businesses.⁴³ This led to significant public complaints about the high cost of living as well as the highhanded way in which he implemented punitive tax regimes. Religious leaders across the varied denominations accused him of not listening to the needs of the public. Yet, the biggest two embarrassments for William Ruto that tested his relationship with Evangelicals are the June 2024 youth-led anti-Finance Bill 2024 dubbed the #occupyparliament and #occupychurches nationwide riots, and the Shakahola tragedy.

In March 2023, Kenyan media, citing local witnesses, reported on the Shakahola fast-to-death cult in Malindi, in the coastal region of Kenya⁴⁴. The "Shakahola scandal" refers to a religious cult in the Shakahola forest led by Paul Mathenge Mackenzie, head of the Good News International Church, who instructed his followers to fast to death so they could meet Jesus. While Kenya has been affected by violent extremism in the past couple of decades in the shape of the Somali-based Al-Shabaab group, the Shakahola tragedy numbed the soul of the country because of its huge numbers of casualties: over 429 Kenyans lost their lives to the cult, including children. According to a report released in 2023 by the Senate Sub-committee appointed by the Kenyan Parliament to investigate this tragedy, about 613 people are still missing or unaccounted for.

This tragedy deeply shocked the country and embarrassed President William Ruto, as this cult derives from the wider Evangelical movement. Subsequently, Ruto publicly described Paul Mackenzie as "a terrible criminal" and someone who "did not belong to any religion."⁴⁵ He argued that terrorists like Mackenzie use religion to advance their heinous acts. His description of Mackenzie captures something of the incredulity that many Kenyans and observers of the church scene in Kenya feel,

42. B. Rukanga, "William Ruto: The 'Tax Collector' President Sparking Kenyan Anger", BBC, 2023, available at: www.bbc.com.

43. O. Otieno, "Disappointments, High Living Cost Cloud Ruto's 1 Year in Office", *The East African*, September 2023, available at: www.theeastafrican.co.ke.

44. E. Obadare et D. Parsitau, "End Times in Malindi: The Shakahola Forest Tragedy", *The Elephant*, 2023, available at: www.theelephant.info.

45. B. Oruta, "It's Terrorism - Ruto Breaks Silence on Pastor Mackenzie Cult", *The Star*, April 2023, available at: www.the-star.co.ke.

particularly following reports that many of the victims most probably starved themselves to death, while others, including children, may have been “strangled, beaten, or suffocated to death”.

Born in 1976, a taxi driver before he proclaimed himself a pastor, Paul Mackenzie had been charged on various charges of religious extremism but was usually released by the police. In 2017 for example, he was acquitted of charges of religious radicalization. Mackenzie rejected traditional educational systems, which he argued were not in conformity with the Bible. Mackenzie had been repeatedly arrested and charged with radicalizing his followers, encouraging adults to leave their jobs to join his church, and holding people hostage. However, due to blunders by the legal authorities and the police, he was released multiple times by the Kilifi County Security team. He is part of a group of Evangelical pastors and prophets who wield significant power and influence, making them appear untouchable.⁴⁶ They manipulate spiritual power and authority, control various sources of social and spiritual capital, and are protected by political elites and corrupt police. These self-proclaimed prophets seem beyond the reach of the law.

According to the report submitted by the Senate sub-committee, Paul Mackenzie was influenced by Dave and Sherry Mackay from Australia, who are founders of a cult movement known as the Voice in the Desert.⁴⁷ This couple, who have been longtime friends of guests of Mackenzie, are said to have preached a sermon during one of their visits to Kenya that appeared anti-government, specifically criticizing the Jubilee government's Huduma Number initiative – a unique and permanent personal identification number assigned to Kenyan citizens and residents –, which they claimed to be the mark of the beast, a notion popular among end-time Evangelicals. The relationship between Paul Mackenzie and the Australian couple highlights the transnational nature of Pentecostals, the spread of relationships, and the circulation of Christian literature.

According to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, as cited by the Senate sub-committee that was tasked with investigating this religious tragedy, Mackenzie engaged in intense recruitment of members in 2020, during the Covid-19 period. He repeatedly advised his followers to fast often. This was followed by a call from him directing his followers to fast in readiness to meet Jesus Christ. He also urged his followers to abandon their earthly possessions and follow him to the promised land in the Shakahola forest. He used threats and intimidation to turn members of the church against those who questioned him.

46. J. Taru, “The Rise of African Prophets: The Unchecked Power of the Leaders of Pentecostal Churches”, *The Conversation*, 2024, available at: <https://theconversation.com>.

47. Report of the Ad Hoc Committee to investigate the Proliferation of Religious Organizations and Circumstances leading to more than 95 Deaths in Shakahola, Kilifi County, October 19, 2023.

Based on witness accounts submitted to the senate, Paul Mackenzie had recruited a group of armed militias, both men and women, known as enforcers, who supervised and enforced the forced starvation of masses. The enforcers dug shallow graves where they buried those who succumbed to starvation. Some people, including children, managed to escape to safety. However, those who tried to escape but were caught in the act were either strangled or clubbed to death by the enforcers.

While many are puzzled as to why Pastor Mackenzie's parishioners would agree to starve themselves to death to "meet Jesus in heaven," others are at a loss as to the depth of the hold that a poorly educated 50-year-old pastor exercises on the minds of his followers. As Kenyans search for answers to these questions, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that, beyond Pastor Mackenzie and the specific relationship between him and his congregants, these conundrums point to broader issues around civic distrust, deepening social precarity, and state-society disarticulation that transcend Kenya as a country.

Following the Shakahola discovery, the Kenyan government has promised to crack down on "fringe religious outfits" in the country. President Ruto has vowed to "get to the root cause and to the bottom of the activities of people who want to use religion to advance weird, unacceptable ideology." Many church leaders agree with the government. For example, the Coast Christian Clergy, comprising clerics under the auspices of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK), thinks it should be mandatory for preachers and churches to "identify with" umbrella bodies with "guides or codes of conduct." Other religious leaders have urged the government to clamp down on "fake pastors" who "use religion as a cover to carry out their illegal activities that harm society".⁴⁸

Yet, the Paul Mackenzie's are strikingly common across the continent, where Pentecostal and Evangelical churches have witnessed tremendous growth over the last couple of decades now. These churches are rarely regulated or even registered. Yet, their founders are extremely powerful and exercise tremendous control over their followers even as they form alliances with the political classes. The Shakahola tragedy has not only rekindled two streams of conversations in Kenya, namely Christian radicalization and the clergy's abuse of their followers, and a debate concerning the need for religious regulation, as Evangelicals have deeply and vehemently opposed government regulation of religious organizations in Kenya. President Ruto launched conversations regarding church regulation. Evangelicals have given a proposal for self-regulation but there is doubt that Evangelicals, who lack a central oversight body,

48. E. Obadare and D. Parsitau, "End Times in Malindi: The Shakahola Forest Tragedy", *The Elephant*, 2023.

could self-regulate⁴⁹. Interestingly, Uganda and Rwanda have managed to regulate religious organizations as well as draw up strict guidelines and requirements for anyone to open a church. William Ruto's closeness to Evangelicals casts doubt on the likelihood of a similar framework in Kenya. Nevertheless, law enforcement agencies must ensure the security and protection of citizens, including protection from religious radicalization and manipulation.

49. S. Olale, "Church Leaders Roll out Code of Conduct to Put Rogue Preachers in Check", *Citizen Digital*, August 30, 2023, available at: www.citizen.digital.

Tensions and Murmurs: Evangelicals and Religious Radicalization in East Africa

Among other religious scandals, the Shakahola tragedy is a testament to the emergence of religious radicalization in the Christian religious sphere, that does not only affect Kenya but also the broader East African Region and beyond.

Charismatic Leadership: African Untouchable Pentecostal and Evangelical Clergy

Over the last nearly three decades now, the African continent has witnessed an unprecedented number of Pentecostal and Charismatic prophets, also popularly known as the “Men of God”. These big men of God have proliferated across major cities from Lagos to Harare, Kampala to Nairobi, and beyond. Pentecostal prophets lead megachurches, running into thousands of followers in their respective countries and beyond. They have also established media empires that broadcast their sermons and teachings across the globe.⁵⁰ Examples include the Late Nigerian TB, Joshua, Kenya’s Prophet David Owour and Ezekiel Odero, and Robert Kayanja of Uganda. These Prophets have tremendous power, authority, and social capital. They have also formed significant alliances with the political class because of the sheer number of their followers. They claim to possess the power to heal the sick, raise the dead, and cause earthquakes and pandemics. In most cases, their powers are unchecked and operate as a law unto themselves.

The Ministry of Repentance and Holiness, a highly puritanical, apocalyptic church founded by David Owuor in the early 2000s, has been radicalizing its followers for years. David Owuor has created a cult of personality around himself and claims supernatural connections and grandiose self-ascribed titles. The church is estimated to have membership in the hundreds of thousands, according to rough estimates. Emphasis on end-time teachings, repentance, healing, miracles, and sexual and moral purity are the hallmarks of this ministry. There is also a strong indication of

50. A. Adogame, C.M. Bauman, D.S. Parsitau and J. Yip, *The Handbook of Megachurch Studies*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2024.

threats to health risks for members who are often encouraged to seek miracles and faith healings and stop taking lifelong medications.

Their claims of instantaneous miracles, false hopes, staged healings, extortion of its members, calls for the abandonment of medication, and the use of security personnel to project a picture of larger-than-life legitimacy is a worrying trend that requires appropriate measures to be put in place to curb it without infringing on their fundamental rights and freedom of expression, association, and conscience. Whether within these new religious movements or religiously motivated violent extremist groups, one theme that cuts across all of them is that of the role of the leadership in shaping the worldviews of their adherents, their appropriation of religious texts, their interpretation of social realities for their members, their ability to use persuasive coercion or outright manipulation or through reforms to use these adherents for their social, economic and political ends.

Charismatic leaders shape the imaginations of their followers and are central in the recruitment, radicalization, and commission of violent acts on behalf of the movement. Exploring the relationship between radicalization and charismatic individuals in fuelling violent extremism is crucial in the wake of the emergence of radical but charismatic religious leaders with cult-like followings and the resulting fanaticism that has contributed to the expansion and spread of extremist ideologies and activities. Evidence of the presence of such phenomena is abundant at both national and regional levels and may have significance not just for national security but also for social cohesion and national stability and health. This must be done in the context of the prevailing socio-cultural and economic realities that often inform and shape the form and substance of these groups, their affiliates, and the composition of their followers.

Recent cases of cult-like movements, both religious and socio-cultural, have emerged in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Congo, and Somalia with serious social, economic, and security repercussions beyond their respective geographical areas of origin; whereas in many cases their origins tend to have roots in peaceful social dynamics, they tend to expropriate existing societal vulnerabilities to grow their ranks, mobilize resources, and promote their extremist agenda. In certain instances, their influence and activities have not only caused societal dislocation, but they are also increasingly becoming a threat to regional peace and stability, especially in Eastern Africa, the Horn, and the Great Lakes. The radicalization of church followers must be seen within the context of the growing power of evangelical clergy and authoritarianism, where they are not questioned and appear to be impervious to the law.

There is also a growing militarization and securitization of religion that poses a risk to not just citizens but also national security. Religious cults (typically driven by charismatic individuals) are highly cohesive, secretive, collectivist, and authoritarian. They exhibit an excessive

dedication/obsession to personality cults and charismatic individuals, ideas, texts, or things and employ unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control designed to advance the goals of the group leaders and ideology, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.

Evangelicals and Christian Nationalism

The East Africa region, specifically Kenya and Uganda, are good examples in the region where issues of sexual and gender diversity have become deeply politicized in recent years, often with the active support of conservative religious actors who exist in parallel with networks of well-organized LGBTIQ activists and groups campaigning for social, political, and legal changes.⁵¹ Another key political development in the last decade and a half is the growing salience of morality and identity politics in general, Lesbian, Gay, bi-sexual, and Transgender politics. In the section below, I argue that this salience is related to two key developments in Africa, namely 1) the rapid growth of Evangelicals in Africa and 2) the emergence of Christian nationalism in many countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, Christian nationalism is driven by the need for policies to establish Christian nations and to shape these countries' morals and sexual citizenship to establish God's Kingdom on earth and to grow their influence in the continent. According to Haynes, Christian nationalism promotes a fusion of their preferred form of Christianity and a country's civic and political life⁵².

Recent legal and political struggles regarding LGBTIQ rights often feature religious leaders as key actors in the marginalization of the LGBTIQ communities or in promoting anti-LGBTIQ legislation and policies.⁵³ In March 2023, Ugandan parliamentarians passed a new Anti-Homosexuality Bill under pressure from – and with the enthusiastic support of – religious leaders. In Kenya, religious clergy are becoming increasingly influential and vocal on a wide range of social, political, spiritual, and policy issues, including gender rights and justice, women's bodies, and sexual citizenship. These clergy are not only increasingly using this power to assert religiously conservative positions over public policy and political issues; they are also increasingly shaping and perpetuating gender norms and inequality, including the policing of women's bodies, intimate lives, rights, and sexual citizenship. In so doing, I argue that these leaders are also increasingly employing a wide range of resources and platforms – including powerful

51. S. Nyanzi, "Queer Pride and Protest: A Reading of the Bodies at Uganda's First Gay Beach Pride", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2014, p. 36-40, D.S. Parsitau, "Law, Religion, and the Politicization of Sexual Citizenship in Kenya", *Journal of Law and Religion*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2021, p. 105-129.

52. J. Haynes, "Christian Nationalism Poses a Threat to Human Rights in Ghana", *The Conversation*, October 24, 2023, available at: <https://theconversation.com>.

53. A. van Klinken, B. Bompani and D.S. Parsitau, "Religious Leaders as Agents of Lgbtiq Inclusion in East Africa", *African Affairs*, Vol. 122, No. 487, 2023, p. 299-312.

lobbies and external funding – to reinforce gender inequality, conservative positions, and religious ideologies that aim to discipline women's intimate lives and reproductive health rights including the policing of women bodies and dictating how they dress and comport themselves.

There have also been religious mobilizations and contestations over sexual and reproductive health rights and choices in the region. The influence of the American evangelical far right is also evident in Kenya's conservative churches, especially in the area of sexuality and reproductive health rights. In Kenya, for example, two important events lucidly demonstrate this ideological position: the CoK 2010 and the UN Conference on Population and Development (ICPD+25). During these two important landmarks, religious leaders employed a wide range of mobilizations and platforms to oppose the passage of the CoK 2010 as well as the UN ICPD+25 conference held in Nairobi in 2019. Their conservative activism engendered significant tensions and contestations around women's reproductive health rights, sexual citizenship, and gender justice. Since then, these leaders have continued to vehemently oppose laws and policies that touch on women's reproductive health rights and sexual citizenship, arguing that they allow for abortion and promote LGBTQI issues.

It seems to me therefore that Evangelical and Pentecostal pastors across the East African region, as well as the Horn of Africa, enjoy unprecedented authority. In Uganda and Ethiopia, for example, they exert significant influence on politics, public policy, popular culture, women's bodies, and sexuality.⁵⁴ In Kenya, Evangelicals have a significant influence on public policy and it seems quite certain that they will continue to do so, given the roles they played in shaping William Ruto's presidency. William Ruto has chosen to align with these Evangelical concerns. In March 2023, The Supreme Court of Kenya ruled to allow an activist to register an LGBTQ organization. This ruling caused tremendous anger in the country, especially in church circles. Evangelicals were particularly infuriated by the Court's decision and this generated significant conversations in the country. William Ruto issued terse statements, saying:

“While we respect the Supreme Court ruling, our culture and religion does not allow same-sex relationships. It is not possible for our country Kenya to allow same-sex marriages. It will happen in other countries but not in Kenya”.⁵⁵

William Ruto has had a long legacy of homophobia, which is partly attributed to his Evangelical faith but also can be understood, as demonstrated in the previous section of this article, as a way to align himself with the Evangelical clergy during his campaigns. William Ruto has often

54. C. Valois, *Public Rebirth: Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity, Sexuality, and Nation Building in Uganda's Public Sphere*, Ph.D. thesis, The University of Edinburgh, 2015.

55. E. Musambi, “Kenya's President Criticizes Court Ruling on LGBTQ Group”, AP News, 2023, available at: <https://apnews.com>.

attacked same-sex relationships in public forums and church platforms. In 2015, for example, as the then deputy president, he attacked the LGBTQ community in anticipation of the visit to the country of US Secretary of State John Kerry. His radical position was also one of the reasons why Barack Obama, whose father was a Kenyan citizen who urged the end of LGBT discrimination on the continent, did not visit the country for many years. Ruto told a church congregation in Nairobi: “The Republic of Kenya is a republic that worships God. There is no room for homosexuality in Kenya”.⁵⁶

His position is also shaped by his conservative Evangelical leaders such as Bishop Mark Kariuki and Teresia Wairimu, who firmly believe Kenya is a springboard for revival in Africa and have often framed Kenya, a constitutionally secular country, as a leading Christian nation. According to Jeff Haynes, Christian nationalists promote the fusion of their preferred form of Christianity and a country's civic and political life.⁵⁷ Ruto's position and utterances appear to be influenced by the American Christian right that has inspired tremendous homophobia in East Africa and other parts of the continent. His relationship with Kenyan-leading Evangelicals sought to promote a sort of Christian morality. According to Haynes, Christian nationalism is not simply Christians seeking to make their collective voices heard on issues of national interest. Rather, they actively pursue a religious and political project to remake these countries according to their values and beliefs. Both African and American Evangelicals desire to see Christianity play a big role in the governance of African nations. Similarly, they desire to see Evangelical mores and manners, worldviews, and values prevail in civic and public life.

56. M. Makena, “What Lies behind Kenyan President-Elect William Ruto's Homophobia”, *Open Democracy*, 2022, available at: www.opendemocracy.net.

57. J. Haynes, “Christian Nationalism and Politics in Ghana”, *Religions*, Vol. 14, No. 9, 2023.

Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on the relationship between President William Ruto and Kenyan Evangelicals to analyze the broader dynamics of Evangelicals' encroaching politics in the wider East African region as well as the Horn of Africa. Evangelicals are increasingly mobilizing and seeking greater access to the political arena in a bid to represent their institutional and individual interests and advance their conservative religious values. Moral and family values, such as opposition to abortion, homosexuality and the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education, and the increased roles of their key interlocutors in governance are key.

Evangelicals are also increasingly mobilizing in the larger Eastern African region to have more direct access to the political arena, and many are supporting populist politicians who vie for electoral positions. Furthermore, they are also increasingly influencing and shaping citizens' social and political preferences in a bid to bring their conservative values into the center of governance. They justify this by advancing a need to moralize politics and establish the kingdom of God on earth. Evangelicals in Africa have generally been shaped by the American religious right, and many are convinced that there is a worldwide conspiracy that threatens not just Christianity but Christian family values. They are therefore exhibiting a strong desire to influence electoral outcomes across the region by aligning themselves with populist politicians, such as President William Ruto, who they believe would advance their interests.

While the majority of Evangelicals in Africa lack a well-developed and sophisticated social and political theology of public life, they have a broad constituency of followers who largely vote according to the proposals of their megachurch pastors. As the case of Kenya shows, the sacralization of the political space and, to a certain extent, of central roles of rituals in the republic testify to their growing agency in politics and societal matters. Nevertheless, the Evangelical landscape is fragmented and cannot have recourse to a central authority like the Catholics or the Anglicans, but they compensate for this with the vast mobilizing powers they possess, backed by their religious media and networks. Due to their transnational networks within and outside Africa, and especially their close ties with the North American churches, Evangelicals are influenced by the American Christian right, whose presence and financial interests are felt in East Africa and often influence broader African evangelical values.

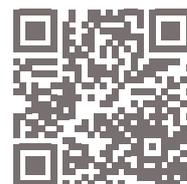
In the last two weeks of June 2024, Kenya has witnessed unprecedented nationwide protests led by Kenyan youth – popularly known as Gen Z – against the passage by the Kenyan Parliament of an unpopular finance bill

2024 crafted by President Ruto.⁵⁸ The youth who mobilized through social media came out in their thousands to protest the bill, and William Ruto used excessive force to quell the protests that were largely peaceful. But perhaps one of the outcomes of the protests is the anger and frustrations of the Kenyan youth against Christian churches that not only supported William Ruto – who has continued to publicize his donations of hefty amounts of money to church clergy while Kenyans are struggling with the cost of living –, but also continued to allow politicians to use church platforms to promote the finance bill. In this context, it seems to me that the #occupychurches protest has shown a focus on politicians' mobilization and weaponization of religion by African politicians. Through the hashtag #occupychurches, the youth sent shockwaves through Christian churches nationwide.

The significance of the “occupy churches” conversations was unprecedented and significant for many reasons. Firstly, it reflects the public and the youth's loss of respect and legitimacy for religious leaders and calls to question their roles in civic and public life. Secondly, it questioned the Kenyan churches' morality and lack of voice concerning governance and politics, as well as their relationships with politicians. More importantly, I think it sought to reorient or redirect the church's trajectory toward governance, accountability, and social justice instead of supporting bad policies that hurt citizens and called on them to stand with the public. While it's too early to grasp the magnitude of this development, it has sent shockwaves across the religious and political landscape and forced them to rethink their relationship with the political class. It has also deeply embarrassed the President, weakened his statute nationally and globally, and called into question his relationship with Evangelicals.

To conclude, the growth of Evangelicals in African countries increasingly challenges the idea of secularism in the continent. Development partners such as the French government must continue to pay greater attention to the roles of Evangelicals and their impact on governance, public policy, and human rights. There is also a need to pay attention to Christian-related religious radicalizations that could potentially have an impact on national security and peacebuilding, as well as on national protest.

58. B. Rukanga and M. Juma, “Police Battle Anti-Tax Demonstrator as Kenya Protests Spread”, BBC News, June 20, 2024, available at: www.bbc.com.



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