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Abstract

Kenya's battle against violent extremism, primarily focused on Islamist terrorism since the 1998 Nairobi bombing, has seen significant counterterrorism progress over the past two decades. However, extremism remains a pervasive social and security issue, necessitating systematic, research-based policy action. This became starkly evident after the 2023 Shakahola cult tragedy, where over 400 lives were lost. This study examines religious sectarian extremism in Kenya, with a focus on Kilifi County from 2010 to 2024, a region marked by heightened extremism, including terrorism, mob killings of the elderly, and the Shakahola tragedy. It evaluates the impact of regulatory frameworks on the relationship between religious sectarian extremism and community security and analyzes strategies to mitigate the threats posed by religious sectarian extremism. The study applies the theory of violent extremist religious sects (VERSSs) to contextualize the issue. A descriptive research design was used, collecting data from 384 respondents through structured questionnaires for quantitative analysis (using means and standard deviations) and semi-structured interviews with sixteen key informants for thematic qualitative analysis. Findings reveal that religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County and Kenya manifests through religious divisions, conflicts driven by differing theological worldviews among leaders, destruction of worship sites, and discrimination based on religious differences. It also appears as emerging cults and extreme acts like mass suicides, killings, verbal and physical attacks, and hatred. To address this, the study recommends a government-led religious literacy campaign and a robust legal framework to regulate religious institutions.

Keywords: Religious sectarian extremism, terrorism, cultism, Shakahola tragedy, Kilifi County, Kenya.

Introduction

The designation “sectarianism” is perceived as integrally ambiguous and elastic, where it is archetypally employed to signify pervasive forms of historic solidarities, prejudice, identifying with an ethnic or religious community as if it were a political party or the systems through which social, economic, and political claims are made in multiethnic and multi-religious societies (Makdisi, 2017). Similarly, Khan et al. (2021) elucidated that in the broader global arena, the term religious sectarianism is employed to denote hostility, discrimination, and prejudice towards groups or individuals of different religions or faiths. Complementarily, Al-Hindawi and Kadhim (2021) described religious sectarianism as the act of discrimination stemming from ideological dissimilarities in relation to religious texts’ interpretation. In addition, the study specified that this type of conflict results in intolerance and then culminates with either violence or peaceful coexistence.

In further explicating the connotation of religious sectarianism, three schools of thought have emerged. They entail constructivism, instrumentalism, and primordialism (Hashemi, 2016). The instrumentalist school proposes that ethnicity/religion is malleable and denoted as a constituent of a political procedure. According to this school of thought, ethno-religious leaders stress out-group differences and in-group similarities, as well as conjure the fear of annihilation, domination, or assimilation to evoke identity mobilization. Contrarily, the primordialist school perceives ethnicity/religion as a shared sense of group identity that is deeply engrained and natural in human psychology and social relations. They also consider ethnicity/religion as grounded in an assortment of intangible elements ingrained in tradition, history, and biology that tie a person to a broader collectivism. Ethnic mobilization, in this context, is entwined with emotional and habitually irrational group support and notions of solidarity (Hashemi, 2016). However, while this school is effective in pinpointing where ethnic ties are rife, it does not explain how ethnic ties can be an element in mobilizing identity in periods of conflict. Lastly, the constructivist school espouses a middle ground between instrumentalism and primordialism, where ethnicity is deemed not fixed but instead, a political construct grounded on a compact web of relationships (Hashemi, 2016). Similar to primordialism, this school of thought acknowledges the significance of ostensibly immutable elements of religious/ethnic identity but deviates from asserting that this inexorably results in conflict. However, this school shares with instrumentalists the perception that leadership and elites play a vital function in the mobilization process but deviates regarding the extent to which these identities can be manipulated. Nonetheless, despite the deviations in illuminating the meaning of religious sectarianism, the phenomenon remains a critical social issue in the contemporary world.

Background Information

The religious sectarianism phenomenon is linked to religious sectarian extremism (RSE), comprising violent action and a divisive ideology grounded in religious differences, which can result in conflicts between religious groups. Globally, religious sectarian extremism is especially a societal problem in the Middle East and South Asia. In particular, Iraq and Syria are among the regions most affected by religious sectarianism (Robinson et al., 2018), marked by sectarian strife elicited by ideological shifts between secularists and Islamists, between liberals and conservatives, and religious divisions between Christians and Muslims, as well as Shias and Sunnis (Mikail, 2014).

In the Kenyan context, religious sectarianism has been embedded in society for decades. An example of such a long-standing sect is the Dini ya Msambwa, meaning the Religion of Ancestral Spirits (Mukanda et al., 2019), that was instituted in the 1940s. In the long run, this religious group transformed into both a religious and political movement that spread outside Western Kenya to Eastern Uganda, with its leader being accused of spurring people against the government and the government banned the sect in 1968 for breach of peace and anti-Christian teachings (Otieno, 2024). Nonetheless, despite their ban, this religious sect remains active presently in Kenya and Uganda.

Furthermore, in the past two decades, diverse New Religious Movements (NRMs) have sprung up in Kenya, with most sprouting because of the central government's failure to react to socio-political issues facing the nation (Baraka, 2024). However, these churches differ from Pastor Mackenzie's sect in that members are not subjected to violence or death. Mackenzie lured thousands of Kenyans into Shakahola, a remote forest in Kilifi County, and preached to them that fasting to death would result in their spiritual salvation.

Besides the existence of a religious sect that was attributed to the vast loss of lives in the case of the Shakahola tragedy, Kilifi County also has intricate socio-religious dynamics. Particularly, the county's socio-religious dynamics are shaped by an intricate interaction of pervasive socioeconomic dynamics, historical power imbalances, religious pluralism, and ethnic diversity. On religious demographics, the county residents practice numerous religions. Most of them (approximately 68 percent) are Christians (Muthangya, 2022). Consequently, independent and evangelical Christian churches have continued to emerge in urban regions. The second-largest religion within the county is Islam, with about 18 percent of the residents identifying as Muslim (Muthangya, 2022). However, despite that Christianity is the largest religion in Kilifi County, Islam has a long history and strong cultural ties within the area. In addition, a small proportion of the county

residents identify as atheists, whereas the rest follow either Hinduism or Traditional African religions. Therefore, the probability of religious sectarian extremism stemming from religious intolerance or interfaith or interreligious disputes could be high.

Problem Statement

The Kenyan coastal region, especially Kilifi County, has had long-held divisions between Christian and Muslim communities around issues like access to economic benefits from the Mombasa port, political power distribution, and land rights (ZINC Network, 2024). Extremist groups have been taking advantage of these tensions, striving to drive a further wedge between the Christian and Islamic communities by endorsing separatism and violence as the sole solutions to their grievances (Tetra Tech International Development, 2024). Consequently, the region has witnessed an insurgency by homegrown Al-Shabaab members that is feeding on historical religious divides within the area (ZINC Network, 2024). In addition, the region, especially the Kilifi area, had also experienced a rise in Christian extremism and religious sects post-2010, as evidenced by the Shakahola tragedy that led to the death of over 400 people, including 200 children (Baraka, 2024). Nevertheless, despite the rise of these groups and the adverse outcomes linked to their emergence, no research had been conducted showing how religious sectarian extremism was affecting community security in the country.

Purpose

This study aimed to establish the background of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya with specific reference to the Kilifi County experience from 2010-2024. During this period, the country in general, and the county in particular, witnessed a spate of incidents linked to religious-based violent extremism.

Literature Review

■ Theoretical Review

▲ *A Theory of Violent Extremist Religious Sects (VERsS)*

Raynold (2021) advanced this theory to explicitly integrate a supernatural motive into religiosity. From this premise, the theory proposes that the predominant motivation for religiosity in violent extremist religious sects is the longing to acquire supernatural rewards (Raynold, 2021). Subsequently, the violent extremist religious sects promise their adherents supernatural rewards purportedly at the directive of a supernatural being that the adherents believe in (Raynold, 2021).

The theory further established that violent extremist religious sects' adherents' commitment is tied to these supernatural rewards. Notably, asymmetric information between violent extremist religious sects and their followers regarding

the sects' communications with the supernatural being and the fact that receipt of the supernatural rewards cannot be ultimately confirmed provides the sects with great leeway to stipulate whatever composition and level of supernatural rewards they regard as necessary to generate desired commitment levels (Raynold, 2021). Besides, since the suggested supernatural rewards are to be dispensed by powerful supernatural beings, the magnitude and range of supernatural rewards considered possible are only limited by followers' imaginations and are susceptible to exploitation by violent extremist religious sects (Raynold, 2021).

Therefore, based on this theory, religious sects ask current and potential adherents to trust them concerning three avowals. These avowals include the religious sect having privileged or special communication with the supernatural being in which the supernatural entity's will is passed on to the religious sect, the religious sect being competent to correctly transmit and translate the supernatural being's will to the followers, and the religious sect being well-committed and well-intentioned to refrain from opportunistic behavior (Raynold, 2021). These views further align with cult dynamics, where cult group members possess unwavering faith in their leader, the group, and its cause to the point that they strongly defend the group, its values, identity, and the cause it stands for to any individual who deviates from their position (Hadding et al., 2023; Kern & Jungbauer, 2022).

These assertions formed the background for understanding how and why adherents trust religious sects and why they may consent to engage in extremist activities for the religious sects. Notably, the theory was utilized to explain how, in the Shakahola tragedy context, adherents of religious sects could have trusted their religious leader to the point that they agreed to commit mass suicides. Specifically, the theory's explanation of followers' perception of their leaders as special and as communicating with a supernatural being could be applied to describe how Paul Nthenge Mackenzie, the religious leader in the Shakahola tragedy, was able to convince his followers to starve to death as a means to 'meet Jesus'.

Furthermore, Raynold (2021) posited that the position of any specific religious sect on the violence gamut and their categorization as violently extreme, extreme, or benign signals a rational choice that is grounded on the sect's preferences and the opportunities and constraints it experiences. In addition, the theory argues that a religious sect that backs using violence is because it considers the marginal benefit and marginal cost of opting for violence in pursuit of its goals is such that the optimal extent of violence it should perpetrate is positive (Raynold, 2021). This framework proposes several characterizations of religious sects, where a benign religious sect comprises a religious sect with the perception that the marginal cost of opting for violence in pursuit of its goals surpasses the marginal benefit at every positive degree of violence.

Alternatively, an extremist religious sect is one with the acuity that the marginal benefits and cost of opting for violence in pursuit of its goals are such that the marginal costs and marginal benefits are equal at a positive violence level. Lastly, in addition to evaluating its optimal violence level as positive, the theory also associated extreme religious sects with adequate financial and other capabilities needed to plan and efficaciously implement extremist attacks (Raynold, 2021). From these assertions, the current study borrowed the conditions required for religious sects to emerge and perpetrate violence. Therefore, in addition to explaining the trust of followers in their leader regarding mass suicide in the Shakahola tragedy, this theory also proved effective in understanding the dynamics of religious sects in Kilifi County.

■ *Empirical Review*

Several pieces of literature have been published on the nature of religious sectarian extremism globally. Some of these pieces have concentrated on conceptualizing and defining religious sectarian extremism and its focal characteristics. For instance, Al-Hindawi and Kadhim (2021) offered a foundational description of religious sectarianism as an ideology institutionalized by specific groups and centering on hatred towards others, discrimination, fostering prejudice, and sect-based principles. Alternatively, Mabon (2021) questioned the conventional view of sectarianism as rooted in "ancient hatreds," instead arguing for a more nuanced understanding based on political positioning, communal identities, and power structures. His work introduced epistemological, methodological, and ontological considerations in sectarian analysis, particularly outside the Middle East.

Other works on the nature of religious sectarian extremism explored the phenomenon as a political apparatus utilized by states to control populations or retain power (Mabon, 2016; Mabon, 2021). Furthermore, some studies reframed sectarianism not primarily as a religious conflict, but as a product of deeper political and economic negotiations (Ille, 2021), whereas others showed that religious sectarianism can also intersect with national identity, particularly in contexts where religious affiliation is tied to political and ethnic identity (McBride, 2022). Lastly, the state's structure and capacity were exhibited as playing a crucial role in shaping how sectarianism manifests and whether it becomes a unifying or divisive force (Rita & Filiz, 2022).

Furthermore, other studies have concentrated on the drivers and security implications of religious sectarian extremism. A World Economic Forum (2019) report further identified religious leaders unwilling to accept other faiths' legitimacy, regional powers striving to build influence, and political elites pursuing regime preservation as the religious sectarian drivers in the Middle East and the

rationale why sectarianism is prone to remain part of the region for years to come. Consequently, the religious sectarianism rise in the area has been linked to violence. For instance, the sectarian violence in Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon has been attributed to politicized religious differences, grievances between groups, a history of colonialism and foreign intervention, and economic disparities between factions (Antosh, 2016). In Pakistan, religious sectarianism has also led to a rise in Sunni militant groups, which have not only boosted sectarian strife and conflict in the state but also continue to be a danger to the Pakistani citizenry (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Besides, religious sectarian extremism has invaded other regions beyond the Middle East and South Asia. For instance, religious sectarian extremism in the United States can be discovered in the country's current landscape and history (Johnson, 2022). Examples of such incidents include the 19th and 20th century anti-Catholic violence and sentiment (Massa, 2016), the Ku Klux Klan's targeting of Jews and Catholics (Whitfield, 2024), and the 1993 tragic standoff between the Branch Davidians (David Koresh's religious sect, whose extremist beliefs stemmed from the book of Revelation) and U.S. federal authorities, which resulted in the death of four federal agents, many children, and 76 Branch Davidians (Jackson, 2024). Besides, other countries across Europe have also been linked to religious sectarian extremism, especially involving Protestants and Catholics. For example, France is built on a history of intense religious sectarian extremism between Protestants and Catholics that manifested in the form of the French Wars of Religion, which were marked by political instability, massacres, and persecution (Linden & Hamilton, 2020). Consequently, contemporary France still grapples with tensions and religious intolerance fueled by religious disparities (Linden & Hamilton, 2020). Similarly, Northern Ireland also has a history of religious sectarian extremism, with an example being "The Troubles", conflict between Catholic Nationalists (who pursued unification with the Republic of Ireland) and the Protestant Unionists (who endeavored to remain part of the United Kingdom) that led to substantial social and physical segregation, tens of thousands of injuries, and over 3000 deaths in the late 1960s (Roos, 2021).

Similarly, in the African continent, religious sectarian extremism has also been commonplace. For instance, in the Nigerian context, throughout the years, religion has remained a subtext in ethno-regional rivalries like the 1966 coups and their subsequent violence (Dar, 2015). In the 1970s, the country witnessed the foundation of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), which preceded the replacement of a Christian president with a Muslim general, who was quickly assassinated (Dar, 2015). In the 1980s, the country underwent an eruption of religious incidents with conflicts occurring across religious lines (Dar, 2015). However, the 2014 and 2018 years are linked to a peak in religious sectarian extremism because of a heightened

rise in sectarian violence and other forms of religious conflict. For instance, 2014 is associated with some local and state governments discriminating against members of minority religions, with Christian groups facing difficulties in receiving permits to build churches or getting government jobs, religious groups creating their own militia to provide justice and security, and Boko Haram attacks that targeted and killed thousands of people, particularly Christians as well as Muslims who opposed their radical ideology (USCIRF, 2014). Similar trends were observed in 2018.

Religious sectarian extremism has also been linked to community destabilization. For instance, between 2019 and 2021, sectarian violence had subverted the once-peaceful Burkina Faso, transforming the nation into a militant jihadist activity hotbed (The Soufan Center, 2019). The report further asserted that jihadists have long perceived West Africa as a rich ground for growth due to the area's high corruption levels and weak security forces. Generally, sectarian violence has also destabilized the once fairly peaceful sub-Saharan African region, where different religions peacefully coexisted, resulting in escalating religious violence. An example of this change toward instability is the May 2018 Notre Dame de Fatima church attack in the Central African Republic context that left dozens of individuals injured and 15 killed (Ochab, 2018). Similarly, in Mozambique, religious sectarian extremism perpetrated by the brutal Islamist insurgency for nearly 80 years has resulted in over 6,000 deaths and the displacement of more than 1.3 million people (Ajiambo, 2025).

However, in the Kenyan context, no research has been carried out on the nature of religious sectarian extremism. The closest studies on the subject matter focused on the influence of contemporary Islamic ideologies in Tana River and Lamu Counties (Badurdeen, 2021), and researchers also conducted an overview of the New Religious Movements in Kenya (Ndereba, 2023). These studies found that tensions between Islamic groups like Wahhabis, Sufis, and Wahhabis were evident in both counties. However, tensions between these groups were primarily exacerbated because of differing individual interpretations of Quranic texts rather than variances in Madhabs (schools of Islamic jurisprudence).

Additionally, over the years, Muslim religious and human rights organizations have reported that specific Muslim communities, especially ethnic Somalis have remained the target of arbitrary arrests and killings (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2022). In retaliation, the report contended that Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab), the Somalia-based terrorist group, has undertaken attacks in the coastal and northeastern parts of Kenya with some of their attacks targeting non-Muslims due to their faith. For instance, in the coastal region, on July 12, 2023, a majority-Christian village of Juhudi in Lamu County fell victim to a violent assault by the al-Shabaab, where the community members'

livestock were stolen and their houses set ablaze (International Christian Concern, 2024). Within Lamu County, an International Christian Concern (2024) report further stated that the al-Shabaab in their efforts to Islamize the Lamu region, frequently targeted Christian communities and families. Similarly, in Kilifi County, the al-Shabaab group attacked civilians within the Chakama area leading to five injuries and the abduction of one Italian volunteer student on November 20, 2018 (Countering Violent Extremism Research Hub, 2024).

Moreover, Kilifi County has also been associated with the killings of individuals of traditional religious faiths. In this county, religious extremists and witches are perceived as hidden enemies who secretly design violence that threatens society (Wanjala, 2024). Besides, both extremists and witches are considered evil figures that deserve extreme punishment. Consequently, the county has long been attributed to the killings of elderly persons because suspicion of witchcraft practices (Kenya News Agency, 2024). However, the source of information on these extremist practices is mainly newspapers and reports, which do not guarantee quality and accurate results. As such, besides adding to the literature by exploring the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County, the current study conducted a rigorous investigation and relied on primary data to ensure the obtained results were high-quality and reliable.

Methodology

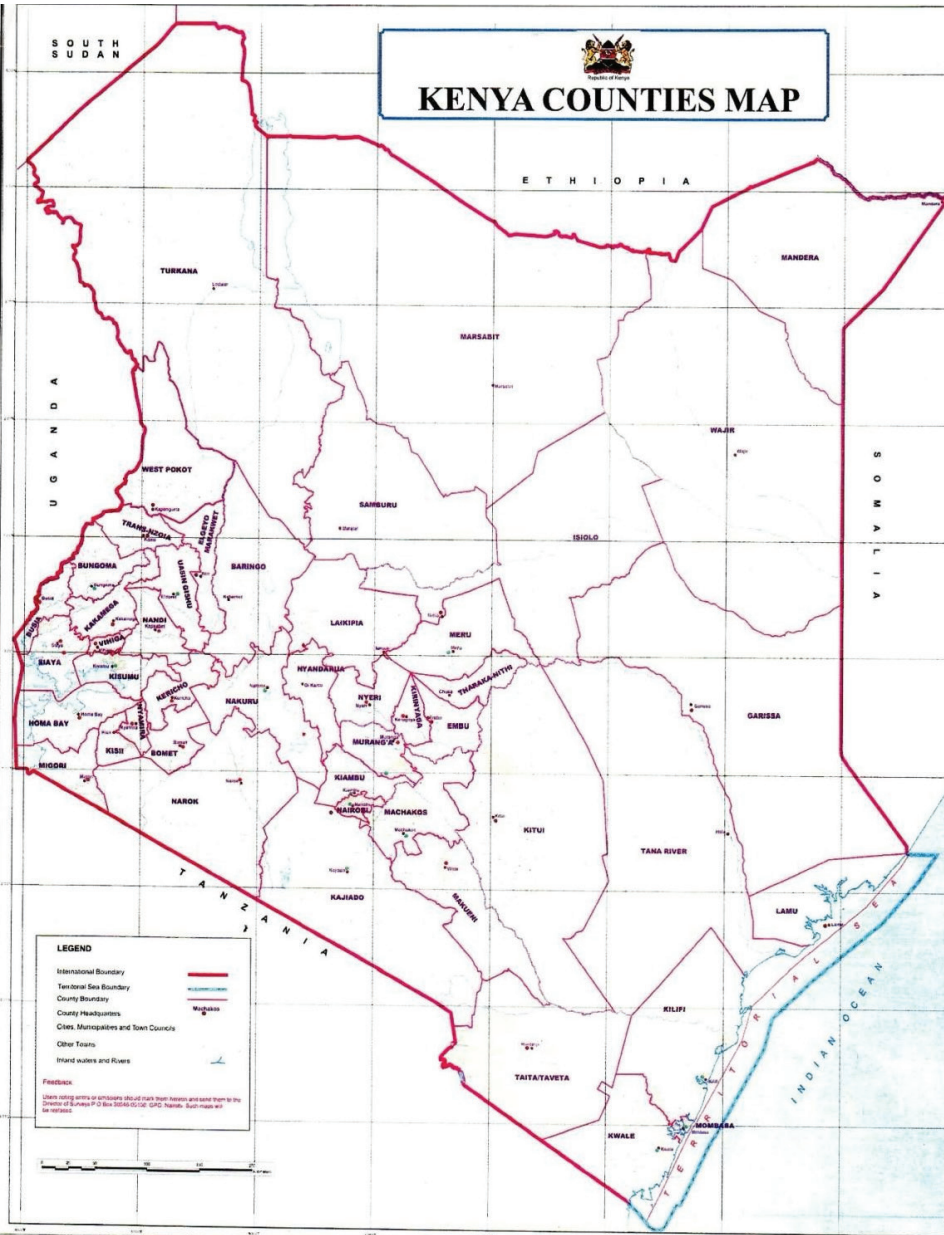
■ Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to establish the background of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya. This research design was fitting for this study, for it intended to methodically identify, describe, and interpret the manifestations, forms, and characteristics of religious sectarian extremism across Kilifi County and Kenya, in general. Besides, given that the religious sectarian extremism phenomenon is context-dependent and intricate, employing the descriptive research design permitted the researcher to capture what exists (the present state of religious sectarian extremism) without the manipulation of the variables. Utilizing this research design also allowed adoption of quantitative and qualitative data to fulfill the research aim. However, despite using both data types, the current study primarily utilized quantitative data in answering the research questions, whereas the qualitative data complemented the quantitative data.

■ Area of Study

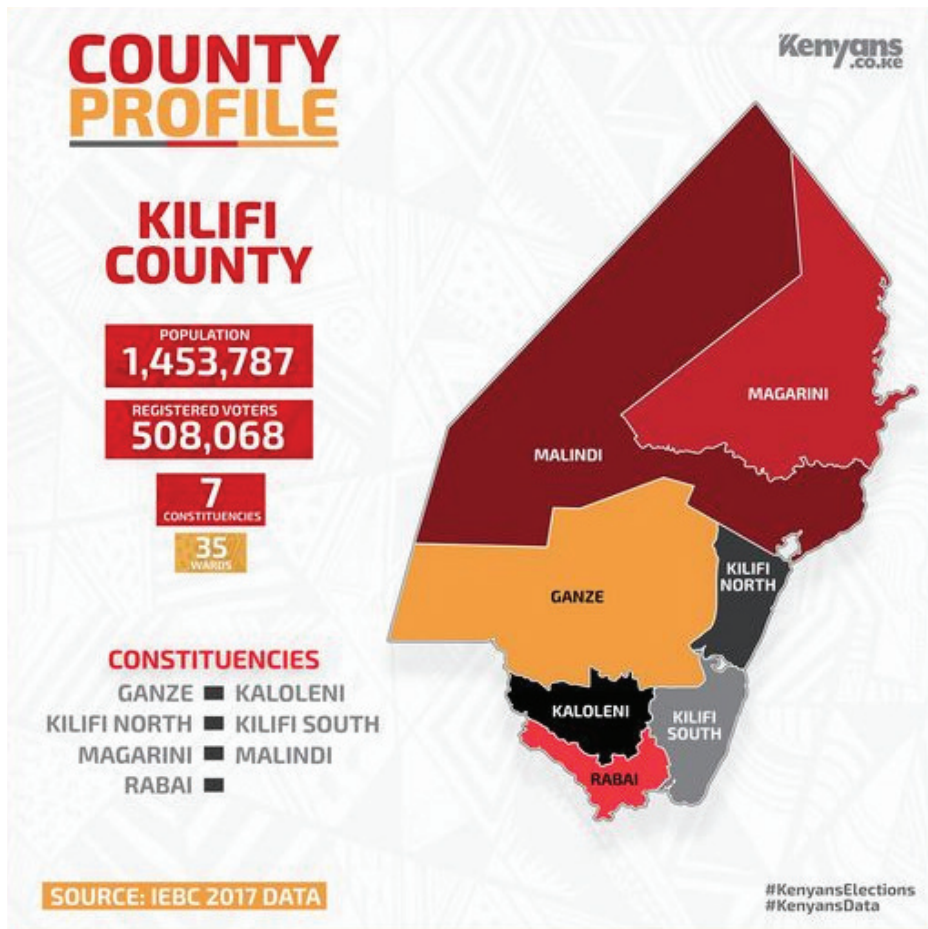
The study was conducted in Kilifi County. The county borders the Indian Ocean to the east, Kwale and Mombasa counties to the south, Taita Taveta County to the west, and Tana River County to the north, as shown in the map below.

FIGURE 1 ▲ A map of the Kenyan counties



The constituencies making up the county consist of Magarini, Malindi, Ganze, Rabai, Kaloleni, Kilifi South, and Kilifi North, as displayed in the map below.

FIGURE 2 Map of Kilifi County



The county had a population of approximately 1,453,787 citizens (Maarifa Centre, 2022). The main communities living within the county comprised European settlers, Arabs, Indians, Bajuni, Swahili, and Mijikenda. Other Kenyan communities, including Luhya, Kalenjin, Luo, Kikuyu, and Kamba, also resided in Kilifi (CJGEA, 2023). Most were early settlers who voyaged from their native areas during the colonial period, while others moved to Kilifi County to work or participate in large and small-scale businesses (CJGEA, 2023). Besides, despite having smaller religious communities of the Hindu and the African Indigenous religions, the majority of the residents were either Christians or Muslims. This diversity in religions, however, had created religious and political tensions within the County, especially arising from the killings of elderly individuals based on suspicions of witchcraft, and the mass killings in the Shakahola area. The presence of these tensions, extremist activities, and the upsurge of religious sects like Pastor Mackenzie's church justified choosing Kilifi County as the area of study to investigate the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya.

■ **Target Population**

The study's target population was the 1,453,787 citizens of Kilifi County. Particularly, adults within the county were targeted. In addition to the Kilifi County citizens, the study also targeted government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society members due to their knowledge of religious sectarian extremism in the county.

■ **Sampling Technique**

Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, the study arrived at a sample population of 384 from the target population of 1,453,787, this being the number of respondents that should be drawn from a population size of 1,000,000 or above. The cluster sampling technique was utilized in choosing a sample population of 384 respondents from the population of Kilifi County residents, government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society members. The sampling technique's capacity to ensure a proper representation of the entire population validated its use in the study. This sampling technique works by segmenting the population elements into different clusters. In the current study's context, these clusters entailed Kilifi County residents, government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society members as sample units. Then, the researcher randomly chose the sampling population from the four clusters.

The researcher randomly chose 345 respondents from the Kilifi County residents' population, 13 from the government officials' population, 13 from the religious clerics and scholars' population, and 13 from the civil society members' population, as exhibited in Table 1 below. From this sample population, 90 percent were Kilifi County residents due to increased availability and accessibility compared to the other sample populations. These residents were sampled from households without considering their gender. Government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society members formed the remaining 10 percent of the sample population.

TABLE 1 ▲ **Sample population**

Category	Sample population
Kilifi County residents	345
Government officials	13
Religious clerics and scholars	13
Civil society members	13
Total	384

■ **Instruments and Tools**

The study relied on a questionnaire and a key informant interview guide to collect data from the 384-sample population. Notably, the researcher devised a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended questions to enable quantitative data collection from the citizens. The reliance on structured questionnaires was due to their capacity to permit quantitative data collection and gathering of accurate data.

Furthermore, the questionnaires had two sections. The first collected the respondents' demographic data, whereas the second was on the nature of religious sectarian extremism. In the first section, the respondents were requested to offer information on their gender, age, highest level of education, how long they had been a Kilifi County resident, and their religion. In the second section, they were offered a five-point Likert scale {1 = strongly disagree (SD); 2 = disagree (D); 3 = neutral (N); 4 = agree (A); 5 = strongly agree (SA)} to indicate the extent to which they agreed on the 15 set questions on the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya, focusing primarily on Kilifi County.

On the other hand, a key informant interview guide was employed in gathering data from government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society members. The interview guide aimed to prompt a discussion on the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County. Particularly, government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society members were asked to answer queries pertaining to how they would describe the nature of religious sectarianism in Kilifi County, as well as how religious sectarian extremism had manifested in the county. Every interview took approximately 15 minutes.

■ **Validity and Reliability**

Multiple measures were observed in the study to improve the study's validity and reliability. First, the study carried out a pilot exercise involving 38 respondents (representing 10 percent of the sample population) from Mombasa County to increase the questionnaire's validity. Choosing respondents from Mombasa County to engage in the piloting study was to avoid dispensing questionnaires to the same individuals, thus affecting the research validity. The completed questionnaires from the pilot study were used in computing the data collection instrument's Cronbach's alpha statistic. A Cronbach's alpha statistic value of 0.7 and above was interpreted as an indication of adequate reliability score and availability of internal validity for the questionnaire items.

Additionally, the questionnaires were modified based on the piloting study results. The researcher also sought the supervisor's expertise regarding the questionnaire and key informant interview guide formulation. The two data collection

instruments were then modified based on the supervisor's insights to further improve their reliability and validity. These exercises helped ensure construct validity by accepting input on the relevance, interpretation, and clarity of the questions in the questionnaire, while helping pinpoint misleading or ambiguous items to enhance instrument design. Relying on the supervisor's expertise also ensured the instrument had content and face validity by ensuring the questionnaire items adequately covered all the study's main variables and the utilized scale measured what it was meant to measure.

■ **Data Collection Procedure**

The data collection process commenced with formulating the data collection instruments comprising the structured questionnaire and the key informant interview guide and then acquiring research permits from the relevant authorities, especially the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Afterward, the researcher carried out a pilot study and used this exercise's results combined with the supervisors' comments to modify the questionnaires and the interview guide before the actual data collection procedure. Upon altering the data collection tools and ensuring their validity and reliability, the researcher administered the questionnaires and interviews to the 384 respondents physically and digitally.

■ **Data Analysis**

After data collection, the questionnaires were inspected for completeness, and any incomplete questionnaires were disposed of. The completed questionnaires were then evaluated to ensure that the respondents had provided the appropriate responses to the formulated questions. Then, the responses were analyzed using quantitative data analysis techniques. The employed quantitative data analysis techniques were descriptive statistics consisting of standard deviations and means.

Both the quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the data analysis. The interview responses, comprising the qualitative data, were analyzed using thematic analysis. Using this technique, the researcher grouped the respondents' answers into patterns and groups (themes). Then, the main themes from the responses were discussed in the study.

■ **Ethical Considerations**

The study complied with numerous ethical considerations. First, as stated earlier, the researcher obtained permission to conduct the study in Kilifi County from relevant authorities. Then, the researcher obtained the respondents' consent before involving them in the study. The respondents were also informed of the study's purpose and assured of confidentiality and privacy throughout the study. Lastly, the collected data was only used for academic purposes.

Findings

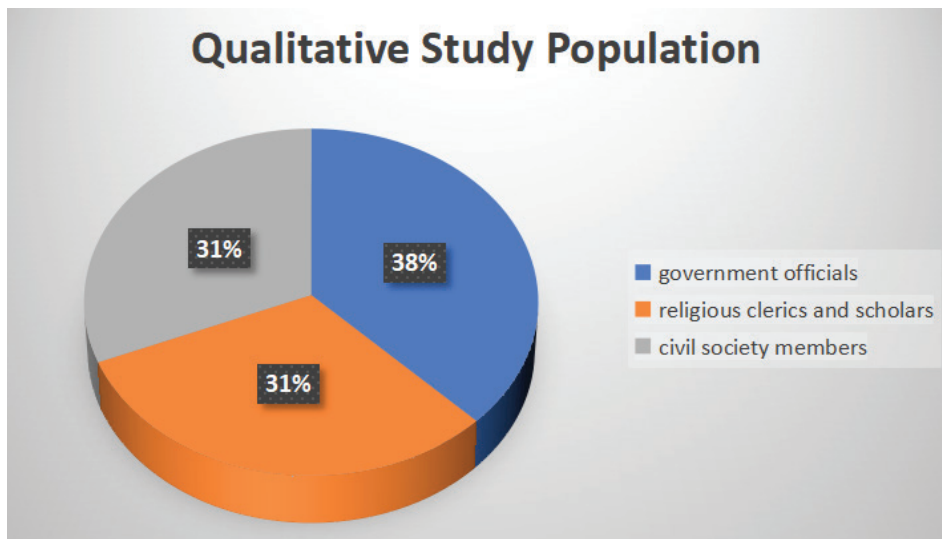
The study conducted both quantitative and qualitative research to help explain the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya, with the qualitative results complementing the quantitative results by presenting the respondents' insights regarding the subject matter.

■ *Response Rate and Background Information*

▲ *Interview Respondents*

The study aimed to interview 39 respondents comprising 13 from the government officials' population, 13 from the religious clerics and scholars' population, and 13 from the civil society members' population. From this population, the researcher interviewed 16 members of government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society populations to obtain their insights regarding the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County. From the 16 interviewed responses, six were government officials (38 percent of the respondents), five were religious clerics and scholars (31 percent), and the remaining five were civil society members (31 percent).

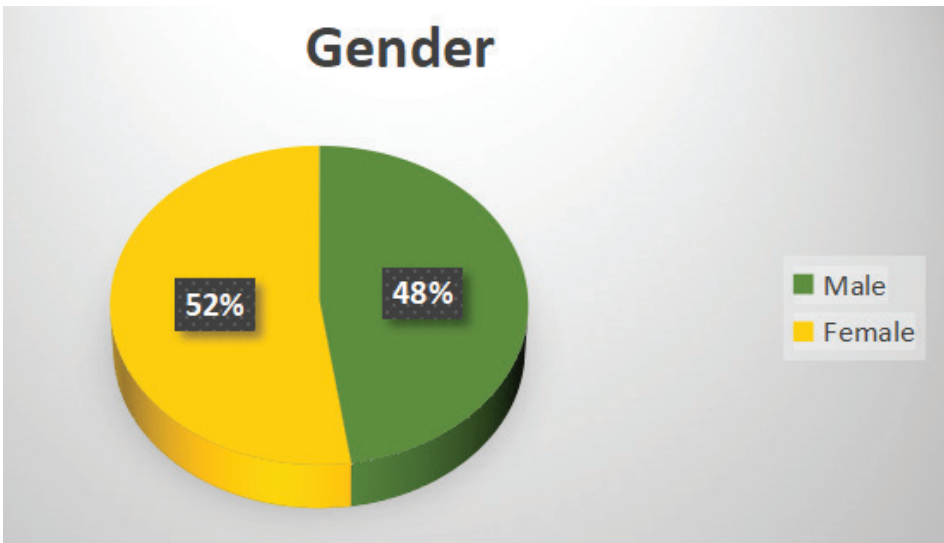
FIGURE 3 ▲ The respondents



▲ *Questionnaire Response Rate and Demographic Information*

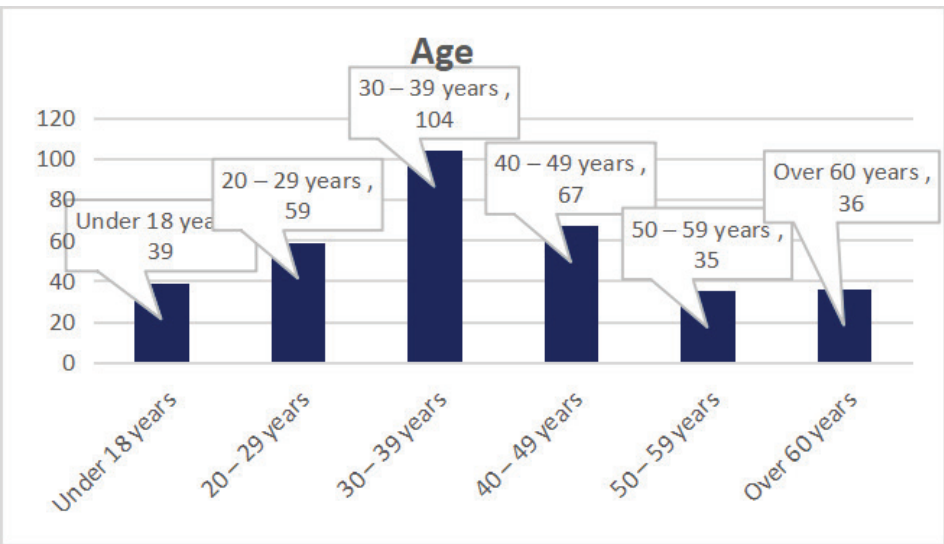
The study aimed to dispense questionnaires to 345 Kilifi County residents, but only collected data from 340 residents. Of the 340 respondents, 162 were male (representing 48 percent of the respondents), and 178 (52 percent) were female. These results implied that the study attained a good gender distribution.

FIGURE 4 Gender distribution



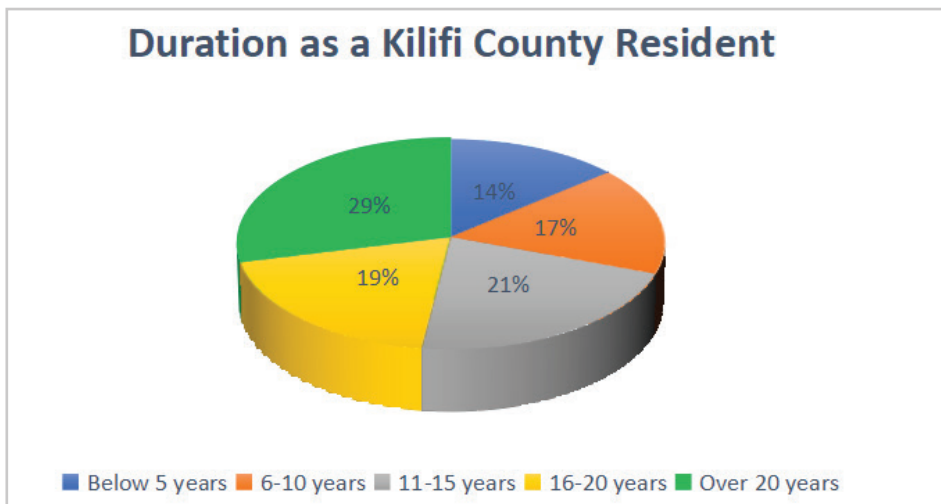
Besides, the respondents' ages ranged from below 18 years to over 60 years. Thirty-nine respondents were below 18 years, 59 were between 20 and 29 years, and 104 respondents were between 30 and 39 years. Sixty-seven respondents were aged between 40 and 49 years, 35 were between 50 and 59 years, whereas the remaining 36 were over 60 years. These findings showed that all the age ranges were well distributed, with most of the respondents being between 30 and 49 years. The findings also meant that all the age brackets were well represented in the study and their insights on the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County were captured within this research.

FIGURE 5 Respondents' age



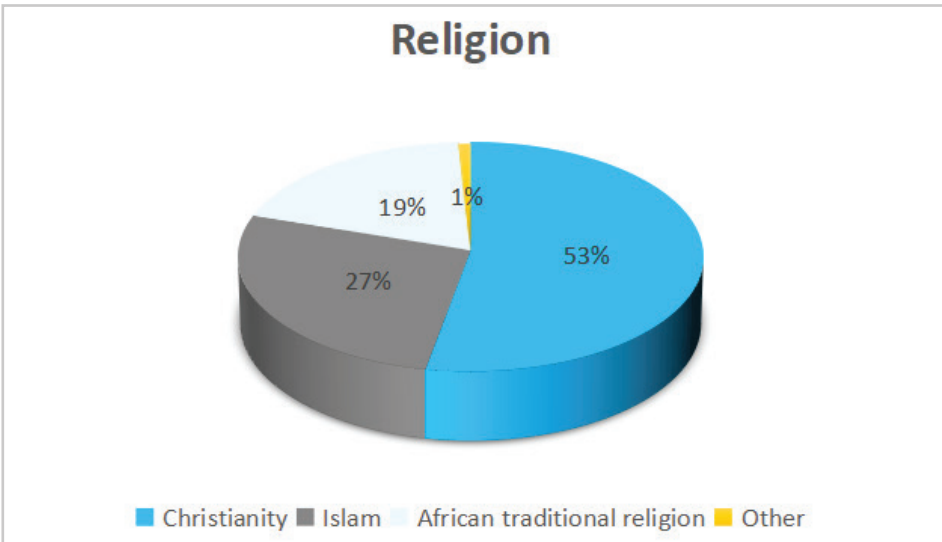
Additionally, the respondents were asked to specify how long they had been Kilifi County residents. Fourteen percent of the respondents answered that they had been living in Kilifi County for less than five years, 17 percent had been Kilifi County residents for six to ten years, whereas 21 percent had been Kilifi County residents for 11 to 15 years. Nineteen percent of the respondents had been living in the county for 16 to 20 years, and the remaining 29 percent had lived in the county for over 20 years. These results demonstrated that most of the respondents had lived in Kilifi County for more than 20 years. In addition, more than three-quarters of the respondents (86 percent) had lived in Kilifi County for more than five years, inferring that they had a good knowledge of the county's undertakings, including the area's nature of religious sectarian extremism.

FIGURE 6 ■ Respondents' duration as a Kilifi County resident



Lastly, the respondents' religions ranged from Christianity and Islam to the African traditional religion. Approximately half of the respondents (53 percent) were Christians, 27 percent were Muslims, 19 percent practiced the African traditional religion, whereas the remaining one percent identified other as their religion. These results matched earlier findings within this study that Kilifi County has a diversity of religions, with a majority of the residents being Muslims or Christians and the minority practicing the African Indigenous religions or Hinduism. Additionally, these study findings indicated that all the religions in Kilifi County had been captured in the study, and thus, reliable findings could be obtained on the nature of religious sectarian extremism within the county.

FIGURE 7 ▲ Respondents' religions



Besides, the respondents' ages ranged from below 18 years to over 60 years. Thirty-nine respondents were below 18 years, 59 were between 20 and 29 years, and 104 respondents were between 30 and 39 years. Sixty-seven respondents were aged between 40 and 49 years, 35 were between 50 and 59 years, whereas the remaining 36 were over 60 years. These findings showed that all the age ranges were well distributed, with most of the respondents being between 30 and 49 years. The findings also meant that all the age brackets were well represented in the study and their insights on the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County were captured within this research.

■ **The Background of Religious Sectarian Extremism**

To establish the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County and Kenya in general, the respondents were asked to show their agreement with statements relating to the subject. A five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; and 5 = Strongly Agree) was employed in measuring their responses. Their responses are depicted in Table 2 below (*next page*).

The respondents agreed that their local leaders emphasised the difference between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and the African Indigenous religions in their campaigns and speeches (Mean = 4.05, SD = 0.83), and that other religions' members discriminated against other religions based on faith and religious practices (Mean = 4.03, SD = 0.82). They also stated that they had been verbally abused and hated because of their religion (Mean = 4.00, SD = 0.89) and their religious leaders had been attacked because of their faith (Mean = 3.77, SD = 1.05). However, despite facing discrimination, the respondents affirmed that they did not consider the African Indigenous practices as a legitimate religion

TABLE 2 ■ The Background of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County

Category	Mean	SD
Local leaders emphasise the differences between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and the African Indigenous religions in their campaigns and speeches.	4.05	0.83
Members of other religions discriminate against my religion based on faith and religious practices.	4.03	0.82
I have been verbally abused and hated because of my religion.	4.00	0.89
I do not consider the African Indigenous practices, especially those practiced by the Mijikenda communities, as a legitimate religion.	3.80	1.03
Our religious leaders have been attacked because of their faith.	3.77	1.05
I have witnessed conflicts within Kilifi County arising from religious leaders having different worldviews and theological positions.	3.60	1.12
Destruction of places of worship by other religions is common in Kilifi County.	3.59	0.97
Religious divisions between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and the African Indigenous religions are common in Kilifi County.	3.48	1.11
My religion is heavily involved in aspects of local politics.	3.39	1.32
I consider other religions (outside my own) as legitimate faiths.	3.33	1.16
I believe that conflict and crisis are needed to bring about change.	3.31	1.10
All the religions in Kilifi County coexist peacefully.	3.29	1.20
My religion is marginalized and members of my faith face injustices from the local and national government.	3.22	2.11
I would engage in any violent activity, without a concern for my safety, to protect my faith and religion.	3.16	1.40
Relations between Christians and Muslims in Kilifi have remained hostile in the recent past.	2.74	1.23

(Mean = 3.80, SD = 1.03). In addition, they agreed that they had witnessed conflicts within Kilifi County arising from religious leaders having different worldviews and theological positions (Mean = 3.60, SD = 1.12), and alluded to the destruction

of places of worship by other religions (Mean = 3.59, SD = 0.97) and religious divisions between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and the African Indigenous religions (Mean = 3.48, SD = 1.11) being commonplace in Kilifi County.

On the other hand, the respondents were neutral regarding whether their religions were heavily involved in aspects of local politics (Mean = 3.39, SD = 1.32), considered other religions outside their own as legitimate faiths (Mean = 3.33, SD = 1.16), and believed that conflict and crisis were needed to bring about change (Mean = 3.31, SD = 1.10). They were also neutral concerning whether all the religions in Kilifi County coexisted peacefully (Mean = 3.29, SD = 1.20) and whether they perceived their religion as marginalized and members of their faith faced injustices from the local and national government (Mean = 3.22, SD = 2.11). Lastly, they were neutral on whether they would engage in any violent activity, without a concern for their safety, to protect their faith and religion (Mean = 3.16, SD = 1.40) and relations between Christians and Muslims in Kilifi have remained hostile in the recent past (Mean = 2.74, SD = 1.23).

These findings show that religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County materialized in the form of discrimination, hatred, and abuse, whether verbally or physically, of other religions based on their religious practices and faith. In addition, the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County was shown as entailing religious divisions between the different religions, conflicts due to religious leaders having differing worldviews and theological positions, and the destruction of places of worship by other religions. Similarly, in the rest of Kenya, religious sectarian extremism is perceived as manifesting in the form of religious divisions, verbal and physical attacks, hatred, and discrimination. For instance, in 2014, several cases of the Al-Shabaab attacking other religions (apart from Islam) were well documented. These cases include the atrocious execution of 36 non-Muslim quarry workers after splitting them away from the Muslim workers in Kormey, Mandera (BBC, 2014). A somewhat similar case was reported within the same year when Al-Shabaab assailants divided passengers in a bus travelling from Mandera to Nairobi into two groups: the Muslim and Christian. While the Muslim passengers were permitted to leave unharmed, the 28 Christian passengers were executed (Cummings, 2014).

In addition, several articles have depicted the targeting of specific Muslim communities, especially those of Somali descent, through arbitrary arrests, detention, torture, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings (Office of International Religious Freedom, 2022). In retaliation, the International Christian Concern (2024) and Countering Violent Extremism Research Hub (2024) reports exhibited that Muslim extremist groups, particularly the Al-Shabaab, targeted and attacked Christians. Therefore, these findings depicted an existing cycle of violence grounded in religious differences, which forms the nature

of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya.

The findings also identified the local leaders as contributing to the spread of religious sectarian extremism. As articulated by Bwire (2019), religion can be employed as a tool to either divide or unite individuals, where, in the cases of areas with religious sectarian extremism like Kilifi County, religion is perceived as a tool to divide individuals. Notably, the study findings showed that religious leaders divided Kilifi County residents by using speeches and campaigns to stress the differences between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and the African Indigenous religions. Similarly, in the case of the Sunni and Shia groups, literature showed that leaders utilized the sectarian differences between the groups to mobilize support during civil wars and conflicts in countries such as Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria (Nuruzzaman, 2019). Thus, from these findings, one can deduce that religious sectarian extremism generally manifests due to disparities in theological teachings, practices, and interpretations, with leaders leveraging these differences to gain political advantages.

Additionally, the researcher interviewed 16 government officials, religious clerics and scholars, and civil society populations to obtain their insights regarding the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County. Three themes arose from the interviewees' responses: "extreme beliefs and deeply rooted," "subtle," and "neutral." Regarding the first theme, 11 of the 16 responses alluded to religious sectarian extremism as extreme and deeply ingrained in Kilifi County, as well as involving radical beliefs and practices that cut across all religions within the county. Some of the verbatim responses included:

R001: The religious sectarianism in Kilifi can be described as extreme irregardless of the religion.

R002: ... the radical beliefs and practices cut across all religions, the Christian faith being the latest having experienced the Shakahola massacre. The extremism of the Islam faith is exhibited by the radicalization and recruitment into extremist militant groups such as AS and ISIS. Also, the retrogressive traditional beliefs and practices of killing the elderly, associating them with witchcraft has also been rampant within the county.

R004: The issue is pronounced as evidenced by formation of many splinter groups within the Protestant church who have made the county as the epicenter of their church activities.

R008: It is characterized by extreme beliefs that have culminated in massive deaths in the name of going to heaven. The menace has largely affected Christianity.

On the other hand, some of the interviewees perceived the nature of religious sectarian extremism as subtle, which led to the development of the second theme “subtle.” Four responses matched this theme and identified religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County as not widespread. Some of the verbatim responses were:

R006: While religious sectarianism in Kilifi County exists, it is generally more subtle and tied to socio-economic and cultural dynamics rather than outright violence or hostility. Efforts to promote dialogue and address underlying inequalities are crucial for mitigating tensions.

R013: There is not really that kind of deeply rooted religious sectarianism in Kilifi County.

Lastly, one of the interviewees was unsure regarding the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County. Therefore, generally, the results showed a mixture of responses, which could be a result of a difference in their area of residence. Nonetheless, similar to the quantitative results, the interview findings demonstrated that a majority of the respondents believed that religious sectarian extremism was widespread and deeply entrenched in the county. The results also showed that religious sectarian extremism manifested in the form of radical beliefs and practices.

For a better understanding of how this phenomenon transpired, the interviewees were asked to describe how religious sectarian extremism manifested in Kilifi County. The interviewee responses showed that religious sectarian extremism had manifested in the form of religious extremism. Examples of these verbatim responses were:

R001: Religious sectarian extremism has manifested in the form of emergence of religious cults. A tragic example is the case in the Shakahola area of Malindi, where a religious cult led by Paul Mackenzie, leader of the Good News International Church was implicated in mass killings.

R004: The most recent case is the idea being propagated by a group known as Hizbut Tahrir whose proponents have support of certain Mosques and outrightly rejected in others. The group takes those opposed to the idea of going back to the era of Muslim caliphate (Khilafa) system of government as traitors and collaborators who support the oppression of Islam. On the other side, those opposed to their campaign have branded the group as anarchists who are only being influenced by external ideologies that are based on violence and extremism.

R005: ... the massacre of individuals through fasting/ starving to death by hitting them with blunt objects or burying them alive to catalyse their death. The disappearance of youth to join extremist groups across the border to Somalia and

within Boni forest also paints a grim picture of how religious sectarianism has established itself within the county of Kilifi. Endorsement of extremist ideologies, like in the case of the Shakahola incident, had contributed to the spread of religious sectarian extremism in the county. These findings are especially captured in the responses that suggested that religious sectarian extremism had manifested:

The findings especially showed that religious leaders' exploitation of Kilifi County residents' financial and socio-economic hardships and their preaching and endorsement of extremist ideologies, like in the case of the Shakahola incident, had contributed to the spread of religious sectarian extremism in the county. These findings are especially captured in the responses that suggested that religious sectarian extremism had manifested:

R006: We have had Christian based churches establishing places of worship similar to Shrines/ Alters where prayers are performed to help faithfuls solve their socio-economic challenges. Also, the sermons are aimed at fooling faithfuls on the need to focus going to heaven as quickly as possible. Those practicing Islam have not been left behind as youths have joined radical groups such as Alshabaab / MRC with the aim converting inhabitants of the coastal region, Kilifi County included, to Islam by force.

R007: Through vulnerable individuals in financial and economic predicaments not forgetting incompetent sheiks with misconstrued verses of the Hadith and Quran.

R009: Through the Shakahola massacre, where many Christians were forced to die in the name of going to meet Jesus.

R011: Extreme fasting that has led to deaths and selling of property by adherents to join the sects.

In addition, the findings pointed to religious sectarian extremism manifesting as religious divides and fears of witchcraft as exhibited in the responses:

R003: In some coastal regions, including parts of Kilifi, there is an intersection between fears of witchcraft...

R005: The lid on religious extremism has been lifted by the community living in fear of their elderly being attacked on accusations of wizardry...

To further expound on how religious divides had shaped religious sectarian extremism, the interviewees were asked whether they believed that existing religious divides within Kilifi County had resulted in the rise of religious sects and religious sectarian extremism. One primary theme, "yes," emerged, where 14 of the interviewees believed that religious divides had shaped religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County. Examples of the verbatim responses included:

R001: There exist intolerance on the content of teachings and others do not tolerate teachings of others based on sect differences such as the Shia and the Sunni Muslims. The same applies to Christians and this is the common trend as opposed to Christianity on one side and Islam on the other.

R002: Historically, Kilifi County just like the rest of the coastal counties, has had Islam and Christianity having a near equal followership amongst the local population. This in addition to strong cultural practice has presented a fertile ground for sectarianism/ extremism within the county. All religious groups tend to use extremist methods to gain members and at the same time retain them.

R005: Yes, there exists various religious groupings with differing scriptural interpretation. This has made some groups to view themselves as the only one doing the right thing and others are viewed to be wrong.

Lastly, the remaining two interviewees answered “no”. They believed that religious divides had not influenced religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County. Therefore, in general, the interview and questionnaire results matched in that most of the respondents identified religious sectarian extremism manifested in the form of extremist and radical beliefs and religious teachings, religious extremism, and religious divides. These findings matched literature from the Middle East that exhibited religious sectarian extremism as transpiring in the form of religious extremism. For instance, Sunni extremist groups, like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), were depicted as primarily targeting Shia Muslims, with Sunni clerics further boosting anti-Shia rhetoric, which continues to catalyze large-scale sectarian violence (Ahmad, 2021).

Similarly, in the African context, religious sectarian extremism arose in the form of religious divides and extremist practices. For instance, in Nigeria, insurgencies led by Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Boko Haram targeting Christians and Muslims who failed to follow their hardline ideology remained common. This proved that religious sectarian extremism not only arose between different religions, Muslims and Christians, but also within faith groups. In addition to religious divides, religious sectarian extremism was portrayed as being exacerbated by socioeconomic inequality and political manipulation (Adamaagashi et al., 2023). These results complement this study’s finding that the economic hardships within Kilifi County further aggravated religious sectarian extremism. Therefore, the emergence and spread of religious sectarian extremism in Kilifi County, Kenya, the continent, and beyond can be attributed to an amalgamation of elements, including disparities in theological teachings, religious practices, and faiths, fueled by economic hardship, local leaders, and religious leaders.

Conclusion

This study aimed to establish the background of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya with specific reference to Kilifi County. The study findings indicated religious sectarian extremism as manifesting in the form of religious divides, discrimination and hate, and attacks on other religions. Moreover, this nature of religious sectarian extremism was shown to be driven by religious leaders having dissimilar worldviews and theological positions, and local leaders utilizing campaigns and speeches that accentuate the variances between the religious groups in Kilifi County: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and the African Indigenous religions. Therefore, the study concluded that the nature of religious sectarian extremism in Kenya arose from differing religious practices and faiths, which in turn led to religious divides, attacks, hate, and discrimination of individuals of other religions.

These findings concurred with studies conducted in the rest of the country. Notably, similarly to the Kilifi context, in the rest of Kenya, religious sectarian extremism was perceived as manifesting in the form of religious divisions, verbal and physical attacks, hatred, and discrimination. However, an analysis of the global discourse suggested that the nature of religious sectarian extremism was context-specific. Nonetheless, similarities to the Kenyan situation were also observed.

Finally, these results are linked to several implications for theory, policy, and practice. First, the study depicted religious leaders as playing a focal function in either fueling or mitigating religious sectarian extremism. These results inferred the need to train local clergy in deradicalization methods, peace education, and conflict sensitivity to help minimize the spread of religious sectarian extremism. Regarding policy implications, the results indicated the need for support for faith-based peace councils to impede the upsurge of sectarian ideologies and mediate tensions, as well as the formal incorporation of conflict resolution mechanisms and interfaith dialogue into education policy and national cohesion. Regarding theoretical implications, the study results support the reframing of religious sectarian extremism beyond theology by devising theoretical models that conceptualise the phenomenon as not only a theological or doctrinal clash, but also a socio-political construct, driven by economic factors, identity politics, and elite manipulation. This concept of elite manipulation is somewhat captured in the theory of violent extremist religious sects. However, in this theory, this manipulation is attributed to religious leaders, who are seen as special by their followers. As such, future theories can further expound on the contribution of elite manipulation to religious sectarian extremism.

Recommendations

The study drew two primary recommendations from its findings. First, the study findings demonstrated that religious sectarian extremism is deeply entrenched in Kilifi County. In this light, the study recommends that the government initiates an extensive religious literacy campaign using a whole-of-society approach aimed at creating awareness and building resilience at the grassroots. This entails civil society organizations working with religious leaders across the country, especially in areas like Kilifi County with cases on religious sectarian extremism, to educate the county residents and generate awareness of religious sectarian extremism. These education programmes could also work to encourage independent thinking and questioning of extremist religious practices instead of practicing blind acceptance or faith. They should also collaborate to sensitize communities on how to pinpoint manipulative techniques like emotional manipulation, thought control, and isolation and empower them to act against religious sectarian extremism, hence preventing a similar case to Mackenzie's.

Lastly, the study recommends the development of a national regulatory framework, led by the Ministry of Interior and National Administration, to monitor religious sects, including mandatory registration and regular audits to detect extremist teachings. In developing this framework, Kenya can benchmark other countries that have effectively devised and implemented similar frameworks. An example is the French Interministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances (Miviludes), a government body that analyzes and observes the activities of groups with sectarian characteristics. Regarding the legal framework, the Miviludes is bestowed with the power to identify “cultic deviance” based on specific criteria, coordinate repressive and preventive actions, and inform the public of any religious sectarian extremist events. Borrowing from this example, the proposed regulatory framework should clearly define religious sectarian extremism and its characteristics, as well as promote the establishment of an observatory on religious sects. This observatory should focus on monitoring religious institutions that pose a risk to Kilifi's security.

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