

We are the World: The Islamic Party of Kenya and the Tensions of Citizenship on the Indian Ocean Rim

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This paper explores the interface of transnational identities and the postcolonial state in an Indian Ocean context. Specifically, I examine the meteoric rise of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK), a group that offers a window on the friction between global ideological currents and domestic politics in the postcolonial era. Kenyan Muslims occupy what Kai Kresse has termed a ‘double periphery’: marginal to the larger Muslim umma and a majority-Christian state. In the 1970s and 80s this positionality proved a political quandary, while discrimination under a one-party state produced a sense of ambiguous citizenship. However, Kenya's return to multiparty democracy in early 1990s offered Muslims an unprecedented opportunity to voice their grievances, challenge repressive state practices, and articulate new political visions. Unlike any other movement at the coast, the Mombasa-based IPK energized a cross-section of urban youth by fusing the discursive transnationalism of contemporary Pan-Islamist currents with demands for greater rights within the secular Kenyan state.

The 1990s was an era of political ‘awakening’ across the Muslim world and the IPK tapped into this community of sentiment. Drawing inspiration from Sudanese, Egyptian, and other Islamist parties, the IPK was able to marshal Muslim identity as a potent political catalyst. But even while the IPK evoked the global umma--‘we are the world’ boasted one pro-IPK mural--its primary concern was rousing Muslims to claim rights within Kenya. As a result, the IPK’s platform echoed popular Kenyan demands for social justice, with added emphasis on citizenship issues such as political representation and difficulties in obtaining national IDs. In response to the threat posed by the IPK, the Moi government denied the party legal registration, while local ruling party leaders branded the IPK ‘foreign Arabs’ and sponsored violent anti-IPK youth groups. More critical to the demise of the IPK was the fact that Pan-Islamist rhetoric alienated community leaders and fueled charges of both ‘fundamentalism’ and foreign backing. The IPK’s strategy thus proved a double bind. In their attempts to relieve the tensions of citizenship on the Indian Ocean rim, the IPK employed a discursive transnationalism that mobilized young people but became a means to discredit and suppress a potentially influential political movement.