DO THE CHURCH AND THE MOSQUE PLAY A ROLE IN THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF AFRICAN IMMIGRANTS IN FINLAND?

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Abstract:

Research has shown that the church and mosque play some role in immigrant political integration, especially in mobilization. In Finland, this is yet not known as no research has yet examined this. This leaves a yawning epistemological gap on whether and how these religious institutions influence immigrant political integration. This paper examines this with African immigrants as case study, using in-depth interviews. The focus is on political mobilization at the municipal level - where many immigrants in Finland have full local suffrage as stipulated by the Finnish Local Government Act (1995). The paper examines not only the influence of the church and mosque in mobilizing them on the conventional forms of politics (such as voting, party membership, campaigning, etc), but also on the unconventional forms (such as in protests, demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, etc). Findings so far reveal that the church and mosque play a relatively little role in these two regards.

Introduction

African immigrants in Finland are roughly divided between Christians and Muslims, with the latter probably higher in number since the Somalis – which are the largest African migrant group in Finland – are mostly Muslim, which makes sense to argue that there are possibly more African Muslims in Finland than there are Christians. The Christians themselves are not a homogenous group. Rather, there are Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox/Coptic, Methodists, Lutherans, Pentecostals/Evangelicals, including various revival movements, with their various modes of belief and worship, and different kinds of trust on their religious and lay leaders. Brown (2011) argues that, in the US for example, this trust determines the leader’s possible influence on his congregants, including on political issues. Edward Dutton (2009) also argues in his study of immigrant religion in Finland that such trust, together with familiarity, co-ethnicity, and proximity in ideals with leaders, plays a strong role on how congregants agree with their leaders.

African Christians in Finland (much like any other immigrants elsewhere) either follow existing religions or denominations in the society such as those mentioned above, or introduce their own (Martikainen 2004; Ketola et al. 2014). Prominent among the newly introduced African denominations include the Redeemed Christian Church of God, The Church of Pentecost International, the Evangelical Church of Christ, the Hosanna Church, and the African Charismatic Movement. On the Muslim side, there is mostly the Somali Islam/mosque which most other African Muslims also belong to, and which is ideologically and theologically slightly different from say, the Tartar and Shiite/Sunni Islam and mosque in Finland, especially in terms of radical and liberal beliefs and preaching (Dutton 2009). With the exception of African migrant Catholics, African Christians in Finland sometimes share churches, or visit different churches, depending on availability and proximity to where they reside. Sharing or visiting of these churches (or even going

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2 For example, the Anglicans, the Episcopalians and the Methodists usually share the same church (Dutton 2009:27-8)
to the same church that has different pastors or priests respectively) exposes them to different influences, both of religious and lay leaders and even among the congregants themselves, including also politicians (e.g. electoral candidates or their campaigners who might come at various times to campaign in the churches, especially during election time). This influence also exists in the mosque where different leaders or preachers might be of different ethnic, ideological and/or theological backgrounds. For instance, according to Dutton (2009), the Sunni mosque in Oulu (in northern Finland) and the Somali mosque in Helsinki (in down south) are not exactly the same due to different leaders from different national, ethnic and theological backgrounds. Amel Boubekour (N.D: 16) argues that “Islamism is not a homogenous phenomenon (because) its actors are different depending on location and historical era, and the methods of action that they propose also evolve over time”. However in general, Muslims are said to have more confidence in their leaders than otherwise. For example, in a comparative study of the influence of Islamic and Hindu religions on Indian Muslim and Hindu political mobilizations respectively in India, Chhibber and Sekhon (2014: 1-4) discovered that it is relatively easier to mobilize Muslims than Hindus on religious lines/sentiments both in rural and urban areas because Muslims have greater confidence in political appeals made by their leaders and Muslim politicians using religious cues or symbols more than have Hindus, and also that Muslims can be easily mobilized where the religious and party divide is socially and politically intense than would Hindus.

Method

The research method used is mostly in-depth interviews with 50 African immigrants, male (N=35) and female (N=15), who are legally resident in Finland, especially in five selected Finnish cities of Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Tampere and Jyväskylä, which altogether have the largest number of African immigrants in Finland, and so could provide enough representative sample for this study. However, some opinions were also sought from a few other Africans in other municipalities. The interviewees were randomly selected and informed of the purpose of the interview and the confidentiality of their identity unless they want it made public. Interviews were conducted during 2014 and the spring of 2015, using face-to-face contacts, Skype, Facebook, and phone calls. Each interview lasted for about 15 - 40 minutes. The questions that guided them include whether participants have been politically mobilized through the church or mosque, and/or whether they themselves have been mobilizers through the same avenues; also whether their churches or mosques are usually used as mobilization venues by politicians. Finally, except a few participants who allowed their real names to be published, all other names used are pseudonyms.

In the following chapters, we are going to examine the theoretical concept of political mobilization, after which we briefly look at the institutions for political mobilization and the factors that affect immigrant political mobilizations in general, before delving elaborately into the case study of the political mobilization of African immigrants in Finland at the municipal level. In the conclusion, we synthesize all arguments.

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3 Why men are over-represented is because men are more likely to answer questions on political issues than women.
The theoretical concept of political mobilization

Although there are only a few studies focusing exclusively on the methodological task of operationalizing political mobilization\(^4\), there are some concrete attempts to define it. For example, Peter Vermeersch (2011) sees it as a process where people (e.g. electoral candidates, campaigners, political parties, community or association leaders, or even ordinary individuals) typically persuade others to engage in the political process or some kind of political action or activism. The key focus is usually on the observed political behavior of individuals and/or groups who mobilize and/or are mobilized.\(^5\) Political mobilization can take place in four different layers, namely: local (micro), regional (meso), national (macro)\(^6\) and international (global). Our research is mainly concerned with the local. Mobilizations at the local level (just like in any other level anyway) could either be conventional/electoral (e.g. voting, campaigning, joining a political party, union, etc) or unconventional/non-electoral (e.g. petition, protest, boycott, hunger strike, lobbying, public statements, press conferences, etc). Thus, although in political science, political mobilization has been commonly tied to electoral politics (e.g. see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Vermeersch 2011), and the effects of electoral campaigning (Shanto and Simon 2000), or to explain the fluctuations in voter turnout (Vermeersch 2011 citing Franklin 2004), it has also been extended to the field of unconventional politics or contentious politics (Martiniello 2007). Martiniello argues that such unconventional forms are also forms of politics, or as Vermeersch (2011) puts it, forms of ‘normal’ characteristic of politics (pp.2-3). In this sense, Martiniello (2007) affirms that “political mobilization refers to the process of building collective actors and collective identity” because “demonstrating on your own does not really make much political sense”, but when this is done collectively, it can give some strong political meaning. Unconventional political inclusion then is said to have deep roots in political sociology, particularly in the study of mass protest and social movements (Vermeersch 2011 citing Amenta et al. 2010, della Porta and Diani 1999, Edelman 2001). This sociological view has allowed political analysts to examine the ways in which protest waves or movements have emerged, how they have developed, and what political impact they could have or have had on policy outcomes, or political and social change (ibid). People who are mobilized, for instance, are usually encouraged to come out en masse and defend their (collective) cause. This cause could be ethnic, social, economic, national or any other, which can be pursued in form of policy enactment, policy adjustment, law decree, or through some other political, social and/or economic action. In summary, political mobilization usually has a distinctly collective dimension attached to it (Vermeersch 2011:1-2).

Furthermore, in “Toward a theory of Political Mobilization” (1974), David R. Cameron argues that the most important result in the whole process of political mobilization is the (expected) increase in the whole scope and exercise of the franchise by franchised citizens in the society, as well as also expected increase in political party memberships and in other political organizations (p.138). He further argues that the extent to which political mobilization involves political induction of people


\(^5\) loc.cit

\(^6\) loc.cit
depends largely on the existence and strength of an organization or institution (e.g. a political party or a political agency) or agent (e.g. candidates or campaigners) in the mobilization process, which through its recruitment process, promotional drives, or the ability to create a favorable image of itself, especially to espouse in its rhetoric the solutions for current political exigencies in local society, or to adapt its organization (or agency) to the existing demand thereof, may either succeed or fail in attracting new members to the political fold (ibid, p.140). Thus, “how the mobilizing agent changes the set of positive and negative political preferences in individuals through its self-promotional activities” is “the critical question which any explanation of political mobilization must address” (ibid). And the extent to which this is addressed, depends mostly on how such organization (or agent) is able to convince individuals (being mobilized) to adopt new patterns of political behavior and commitment and discard their previously held patterns (ibid). For this to happen effectively, Cameron argues that two set of factors are very necessary: 1) the extent to which the mobilizing agent adapts its ideology to articulate and give meaning via a set of political preferences to local discontent; and 2) the extent to which it appropriates to its benefits the resources of the local society, through for example, penetrating and adapting to its purposes the organizational infrastructure already existent in that society (loc.cit).

**Institutions for Political Mobilization**

Cameron (1974) has argued above that to the extent to which political mobilization involves political induction of people, it is only possible with the existence and strength of an organization or an agent. Thus, as far as immigrant political mobilization in Finland is concerned, organizations such as political parties, religious institutions (e.g. church and mosque), the government, immigrant organizations and associations, multicultural bodies, labor unions and student bodies/unions are relatively important. Except perhaps the government, Ireland (2000) and Martiniello (2007) respectively describe all others as “institutional gatekeepers” (Ireland) or “linking bodies” between migrants and the host society (Martinielo) that serve as “mobilizing structures”, or “act as control access to the avenues of political participation available to immigrants in their host society” (Martinielo 2007; Ireland 2000:236-7). In addition, they also “connect people to the state in particular ways, strengthening and weakening ethnic, class, and other collective identities in various places and at various times” (Ireland 2000:236-7; see also Koopmans & Statham 2000). However, our interest in this paper is not on all of them but only on religious institutions such as the church and mosque, especially on whether/how they play a role in African immigrant political mobilization at the municipal level.

Church and mosque are generally said to play important role in immigrant political mobilization in many countries, including in political networking (Galandini 2012; Brown 2011; Wong 2006; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Gerstle 2001; Harris 1994; Tate 1993; Wilcox and Gomez 1990; Verba et al. 1995, 1993). Drawing from Verba et al. (1995:375), Khuram Siddiqui argues that the mechanisms put forth for the stimulation of political interest (in people) occur within religious institutions by the exposure of members to religious sermons of priests and pastors (and also imams), those of lay church leaders through religious meetings in which general political topics, or specific political
issues, are discussed\(^7\) (see also Brown 2011). In this way, the church (and also the mosque) provides a great forum for political socialization where political opinion-making and preferences are made and where potential civic skills, political efficacy, and political knowledge are learned, regardless of members’ level of education and socioeconomic status (Brown 2011; Verba et al. 1995:82), and also where certain political information is shared among congregants sometimes with or without the approval of church officials (Brown 2011; Wong 2006). In Nigeria, for example, this is relatively common, especially in Pentecostal churches where most pastors (and lay leaders) are partisan in their sermons or discussions in apparent bid to promote a political party or candidate. It also sometimes happens even in more traditional churches such as Catholic and Anglican, as well as also in the mosques. In addition, churches also sometimes mobilize its members for protests or demonstrations against political maneuvering. This makes the church (and the mosque) a hot zone for political campaigns in Nigeria during general elections, to the extent that some pastors, priests and imams are sometimes bribed by politicians to speak in favor of a particular candidate and/or party in their sermons as well as in their informal political discussions with their congregants. Wong (2006) also argues that in the US, for example, religious leaders not only mobilize voters, especially immigrant voters, but also involve them in actual political mobilization. This is also done through sermons (for e.g. on political issues), church’s democracy and culture, members’ volunteering work such as contacting of politicians and members/non-members to vote for some particular party or candidate (see also Khuram Siddiqui, n.d). Wong (2006) cites some immigrants, especially Chinese immigrants, as acknowledging the church, for example, as being instrumental to their being in politics. Harris (1994) also argues that black churches in the US, for instance, play an important role in mobilizing its congregants by galvanizing group identity and group consciousness among them and promoting religious interpretations conducive to political participation. In this way, blacks are convinced to turn out en masse to vote, and/or get recruited as party members, or join some other political activities. For Calhoun-Brown (1996) however, it is rather politicized black churches than just any black church that encourage and foster political mobilization and participation among blacks. In Britain, for example, Galandini (2012) argues that black churches provide good political setting for Blacks to gain important political information and hone their political skills for political representation and leadership. Another is that such churches also serve as ‘refuge’ grounds to blacks experiencing racial discrimination and deprivation. In this way, the churches discover and reinforce a strong sense of group consciousness, belonging and identity among them which are importantly necessary for group political mobilization (See also Shingles 1981).\(^8\)

In a comparative study of African churches in Finland and France, for example, Linda Haapajärvi (2012:57) argues that the church is not just a place for religious practice for Africans but also a place for social interaction, material protection and collective resistance against racial stigmatization as well as poverty in the host society. She further notes that through this, the church contributes to their social (and political) integration in these societies. In Ireland, Fanning and


\(^8\) Shingles (1981:77) particularly explained the role of group consciousness in black political participation, defining such consciousness as the ‘awareness among blacks of their shared status as an unjustly deprived and depressed group’, and arguing that ‘it constitutes to the combination of a sense of political efficacy and political mistrust which in turn induces political involvement’ among them towards claiming their rightful status in the society through active political activism. (For further explanatory expansion, see Christina Wolbrecht & Rodney E. Hero’s edited volume, The Politics of Democratic Inclusion, esp. from p.47)
O’Boyle (2009:23-24) also discover that African immigrants emphasize the role of the Church as ‘a social place’ that give them a sense of belonging in the host society. In fact, some Africans, they say, argue that the church or their religious belief influenced their political mobilization and active political participation. Fanning and O’Boyle thus argue that religion then becomes a motivational stake that fosters a bonding capital among them, but however that this bonding capital, for some, did not eventually translate into bridging capital with the Irish society because of reasons of discrimination. However, some attempt to bridge this gap by joining Irish organizations rather than just staying put in African churches as well as associations (p.37).

Furthermore, when it comes to the mosque, it does appear that generally, it also plays an important political role. For example, Abbasali Farahati, of the Public University of Kashan, Iran, in his 2011 “The Mosque as the First Political-Ideological Base in the Islamic Society” describes the mosque as “the First Political Center in the Islamic Society”, arguing that “from the beginning of the emergence of the mosque in Islamic civilization… mosques were not only built for worshipping the Unique God”, but also serve as an institution for political, educational and social undertakings where Muslims play active political role, through for example, monitoring government’ activities and freely declaring their opinions on political issues, as well as mobilizing to take significant roles in government’s decisions that affect them (pp.146-151). Here, the issue of political Islam was born, which according to Amel Boubekeur (2007:14), denotes a recourse to Islam as the first justification for most political actions, where demands are made vis-à-vis political authorities or in the methods of mobilization and engagement proposed to Muslim communities. Amaney Jamal (2005) also, in his examination of the political impact of American mosques on African-Americans, South Asian-Americans and Arab-American Muslim communities, for example, discovers that mosques, similar to Black (and Latino) churches, serve as important sites for political and civic activities, and hence are mobilization grounds. He argues that National Muslim Advocacy group, such as Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR), for example, carry out voter registration drives during elections through mosque outreach campaigns to encourage members to vote (p.526). In fact, the coalition building efforts of these Muslim organizations across mosques in the US were so effective that the unified Muslim bloc vote in 2000 presidential elections was thought to have been significant for the election of President G.W. Bush (ibid). In addition to this, the US mosques are also said to generate group and ethnic consciousness among Muslims (much like in politicized black churches) which tend to be useful for political involvement. However, Jamal argues that it is not clear whether regular mosque participations are linked to other broader forms of political activity across Muslim sub-groups in the US (p.527). For example, he asserts that when data are disaggregated along ethnic lines, the regular attendance of Arab Muslim Americans (especially the single and the educated) and until recently also that of South Asian Muslim Americans (especially the US-born) increases their political participation, whereas for African-American Muslims, especially those who are older, regular attendance does not necessarily translate to increased political participation (pp.524, 528). However, Eggert and Giugni (2011) argue that membership in the mosque, rather than regular attendance, is what has a positive impact on the political involvement of Muslim migrants.
All these arguments show that the mosque and the church do play a role in the political mobilization of their members. But whether this is going to be applicable to African Muslims and Christians in Finland also is what this paper is all about.

Factors affecting the political mobilization of immigrants generally

Some factors are said to also influence/affect the political mobilization of immigrants. For example, according to the Immigrant Working Group of the EPACE Conference held in Tallinn, Estonia, during 7-8 December 2009, such factors could be grouped into two categories, namely: the individual category (or “individual resources”); and the society category (or “societal opportunity structures”). The individual category include immigrant status, income (including the kind of work that generates it), time, education, previous political experience, social capital (including trust in social networks) in the host society, as well as the size of immigrant electorate. Whereas the society category include the “general features” (e.g. government political participation policies and laws, attitude of political parties and natives towards migrants), and “migration specific features” (such as racism, and whether immigrants are asylum seekers, legal workers, students, or refugees). Some or most of these factors influence “individual motivation” or the personal predisposition to be mobilized, as well as the “general activation process” where the individual makes contacts with others in the process of mobilization (ibid).

Case of African immigrants in Finland at the municipal level

It is now time to ask whether the church and/or the mosque in Finland serve as link to greater levels of political involvement among African immigrants. Are they, for example, conduits for formal and/or informal political mobilization? Do they foster group consciousness and identity that could be relevant for political mobilization? How in fact is the role of the church and the mosque in mobilizing African immigrants in Finland? Are there, for example, political encouragements from pastors/priests and imams in their sermons and/or after-sermon conversations? What about from lay church and mosque leaders, and/or even among the congregants themselves? Do other factors, such as the individual resources and societal opportunities structures enumerated above, for example, encourage or discourage African immigrant political mobilizations? Interviews with African immigrants could answer these questions.

All African immigrants interviewed are eligible to participate in local elections under sections 26, 27 and 33 of the Finnish Local Government Act (1995), which states that immigrants are to vote and/or be voted for in municipal elections as long as they “have reached the age of 18 not later than on the day of the election, and (their) municipality of residence as defined by law, is the municipality in question on the 51st day before Election Day, and (for third-country nationals) who at that time have had a municipality of residence in Finland for an uninterrupted period of two years”. This makes their political mobilization necessary and important. All of the Africans interviewed also are legal residents, and also are church- and mosque members respectively, with more than fifty percent being active members, which all makes it possible for them to know exactly

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9 cf. The analysis of the Immigrant working group of the EPACE Conference held at Tallinn, Estonia on 7-8.12.2009, as reported by the Democracy Unity of the Ministry of Justice, Finland
whether political mobilization exists in their churches or mosques, or not. For the church, for example, it appears not many of them in Finland serve as arenas for political mobilization broadly speaking. Even discussing politics in some churches from the pulpit seems like a taboo as concerned religious leaders probably presume that such discussions should be better off in relevant political institutions than in the church. But this is not to say that there is no official church-politics relationship in Finland, which mostly concerns the state church - the Lutheran Church - that has its own research center (or Kirkon tutkimuskeskus in Finnish) where researchers research on this relationship, and have in fact published some ethical suggestions for the government (Marjukka Weide, email communication, 11 March 2015). Not long ago, the research center, for instance, organized a panel on ethical values for political parties in Finland, which was also posted on Youtube (ibid). So, in a way, the Finnish Lutheran Church as an institution mobilizes ethico-political values for parties and candidates. However, this does not strictly mean that Lutheran churches in Finland are formally used for political mobilization during electoral campaigns. In most cases, this is not usually the case. As Marjukka Weide, a Finnish researcher and a Lutheran, explains:

I have personally not seen any outright political campaigns after the service (in the Finnish Lutheran church). During the service, the Lutherans tend to sit in their pews silent, so not much room for campaigning… unless a part of the sermon, which I have not experienced either, talks about it. So … I would assume it's much more fluid than direct campaigning, something more subtle and informal that happens when people gather in an atmosphere of trust and community. Someone knows someone who's running for the elections; their name comes up at the after-service coffee etc for discussion (ibid)

Charles, a Liberian immigrant and a member of a Lutheran parish in a Helsinki suburb agrees to this claim, pointing out that he has actually “seen electoral candidates and politicians, mostly Finns, meandering through the crowd after church service during coffee time, telling people, including myself, about their candidacy or their parties and asking them to vote for them…. I saw this both in 2008 and 2012 municipal elections” (Interview: 20 January 2015). Three in every seven Africans argue that this happens in their churches too. Nonetheless, there is some argument that churches use their congregation for political mobilization. For example, Olli Sulopuisto, a Finnish journalist in Helsinki, argues that “Many Finnish people were quite certain that some parts of Perussuomalaiset (- the far right Finnish party also known as the Finns Party), mainly the Helluntailaiset (i.e. the Pentecostals) and the Christian Democrat party, do use (their) congregations for political mobilization” (Olli Sulopuisto: email communication, 11 March 2015). However, my informal communications with some the politicians in these parties reveal that they have different views, with some agreeing that their congregations are indeed used for political mobilization. One particular politician argues very strongly that “congregations can be mobilized to mobilize for votes for the party because majority of them are party members just as they are church members. And so, I see no problem in their participating in (political) mobilization” (Informal communication: 30.12.2014). Whereas some other politicians disagree, arguing that any political mobilization in the church is usually done informally, much like Marjukka Weide’s argument above: that it is “something more subtle and informal…. Someone knows someone who's running for the elections; their name comes up at the after-service coffee etc…” (Weide, email communication, 11 March 2015), and the person is possibly discussed. Also, it takes the form that Charles described, with
politicians actually coming to the after-service coffee to campaign informally, and if possible, even distribute their campaign cards and fliers.

This is not quite similar to what happens in other churches, especially the so-called “free” Pentecostal churches, such as the Finnish and African evangelical churches respectively, which seem to have a different ideology to church and politics. Many of these free churches, in fact, appear to believe that politics and church should be totally separate, and therefore not be mixed. Hence they do not usually use the church as arenas for political mobilization whether in the formal or informal sense, even though they command a lot of young, active and devoted members (Martikainen 2004). For instance, Emmanuel Edeh, an African preacher, theologian and politician of Nigerian origin in the city of Tampere (in the near central region of Finland), who has been elected as councilor in the Tampere municipal council from 2004-2012, argues that

> All through my years of campaign, I have never campaigned in the church or used the church as a place to mobilize my voters even though I am a popular preacher in the church. This is because I do not want to mix church with politics. I think both should be totally separate… So, I mainly campaigned through the media, and of course through person-to-person contacts also. Nevertheless, I would say that most of my voters have always come from the church, especially from regular church attendees and devotees who usually vote for me not only because they saw my adverts in the media or heard about my candidacy from friends, but mostly because they know me very well in the church… (Interview: 22 February 2015)

Edeh has also recently founded an international evangelical church in that same city, and is gradually commanding a growing crowd of attendees and influence. Similarly, Rita, an African candidate of Ugandan origin in 2012 municipal elections in Espoo who is an Anglican faithful but often attends Charismatic revival movements, argues that “I didn’t use the church to mobilize voters even though I am an active church member and a lay leader. But, I did so unofficially by talking to people after church services and after weekly lay meetings. I usually do this by first explaining why I am a candidate and what benefits I would bring to my voters, and then I would beg for their votes. And I think this worked because I received a number of votes even though unfortunately I did not win eventually…” (Interview: 22 January 2015).

Some African interviewees confirm that they have seen or have been approached informally in their churches by candidates or their campaigners after church services and/or lay weekly meetings. For instance, Kanda, a male Zambian migrant and a member of Hosanna Church in Vantaa, “Usually, politicians don’t do this campaigning during church service or inside the church because no right-thinking pastor or reverend would allow such to happen … I think the church is a sacred place and should be kept sacred all the time” (Interview: 16 February 2015). This indirectly implies that politics is a mundane thing and should be kept separate from the sacred, which is the church! Furthermore, Belinda, a Congolese female Catholic immigrant in the city of Espoo in Southern Finland, argues that “in my church, they (politicians) don’t usually say anything but distribute their campaign fliers and cards standing at church doors after Mass and after weekly (lay) prayers and meetings. They can explain to you if you need explanation on the contents.… Also, they don’t usually come all the time” (Interview: 4 January 2015)
These arguments imply that the church is at least to some extent used for political mobilization even if informally. On the other hand, some African immigrant politicians never used the church formally or informally for political mobilization, because they never even thought about it in the first place. For instance, Paul Abbey, a Nigerian immigrant and one-time municipal councilor in Jyväskylä, argues that

I did not mobilize through the church at all or any other religious institution during my campaign in 2012 municipal elections because I never even thought about it in the first place…. I instead mobilized through African associations and through person-to-person contacts, and also in the media (Email message: 20 December 2014)

Also, Puko, an Ethiopian candidate in Lahti (Southeastern Finland) in 2008 municipal elections who belongs to the Coptic Church argues that “I never campaigned in the church because I rarely attend. In fact, since I came to Finland 20 years ago, I have only attended once. So, it would be ridiculous for me to go and campaign in where I am not known” (Interview: 2 May 2015).

This officially non-use of the church for political mobilization appears to be nearly common, especially in African churches, as argued by some non-electoral respondents. For example, Kuro, a Ghanaian immigrant of the Church of Pentecost International in Helsinki, and Kiri, a male Zimbabwean immigrant and a member of a small African Methodist church in Joensuu (Eastern Finland), respectively argue that such does not happen in their churches. For instance, Kuro argues that

No one comes to our church for any political activity (and) neither is any leader involved in any such act. My church has never been a venue for (any) political activity. In fact, my church is non political (Interview: 15 May 2015)

And for Kiri,

I have never seen them (politicians, candidates or their campaigners) in my church or in any association I attend. No leader has ever talked of politics in our church (Interview: 15 June 2015)

Also, Tusu, a Kenyan female migrant of the Finnish evangelical church in Vantaa emphasizes that

I only see politicians come to associations that I attend, and not in the church.... They usually approach the association leaders first to seek permission before telling members about their candidature and the policies they could introduce which explains why they want their votes… (Interview: 17 June 2015)

Although it is clear that some churches in Finland do not usually serve as arenas for political mobilization, it does happen that sometimes there are political encouragements from some church leaders such as priests and pastors both during sermon and/or after it. For instance, Ubara, a Tanzanian migrant in Jyväskylä who belonged to African charismatic movement but later joined the Turku Home Church - a splitter of the Finnish evangelical movement, argues that

…. Some of my church-mates and I used to have political discussions with our pastor because he is good at discussing it. He is a great man in politics and usually reminds us
during election time before concluding (church) service that we should remember to vote because our vote counts…. (Interview: 10 January 2015)

For Dimma, an Ivorian Lutheran in central Helsinki, “our reverend actually preaches about politics and morality in the pulpit, especially during election period. And he can discuss it extensively after church with whoever is interested…” (Interview: 12 November 2014).

Two in every eight African migrant interviewed agree to this. Essentially, the overlooking of the informal campaigns done by politicians in their churches can also be seen as an indirect support from priests and pastors. Sometimes, they even privately ask for a direct support from their congregants for a particular candidate or party. For instance, Petri, a Rwandan male migrant in Tampere and who attends the Assemblies of God, argues that “my pastor has once or twice or even thrice encouraged us to vote for a particular party or candidate because he says they are good and could represent us well in the municipal council, and I did…” (Interview: 4 November 2014).

However, the possibility of hearkening to this kind of request depends largely, as Brown (2011) has argued, on the trust members have on either of them, together with familiarity, co-ethnicity, and/or proximity in ideals that Dutton (2009) talked about. For example, among those Africans who usually discuss politics with their pastors or reverends and actually hearken to their call to vote, more than forty percent have such trust on them, seeing them their leaders as people who can discern between good and bad. Some were also influenced because of their sharing of the same ethnicity or nationality, political interests, or spiritual ideals with the pastor or priest. Thus, a Sudanese Anglican female migrant in Vantaa who shares the same ethnicity with her pastor argues that he has two times voted for two different candidates “just because my pastor encouraged me to do so. I listened to him because he is my pastor, and also because he is my fellow tribesman, and not that I was really convinced of the candidates…. But I believe in the pastor, I believe he knows who is good and who is not…” (Interview: 1 March 2015).

There are also sometimes political encouragements from lay church leaders, as well as also from even among congregants themselves, especially through their own initiated political discussions, usually after church services or meetings. These lay church leaders are usually leaders of intra-church associations (both religious and secular) such as of youth organizations, men and women organizations, choir, pious societies such as various prayer groups, etc. Their political encouragements are usually said to be of two types: the ones that are made during association meetings, but towards the end, and the ones that are made after, especially while leaving the church premises. In the first, it is usually more general, non-personal, non-partisan, and therefore not an open campaign for anyone or party. For example, it usually takes this form: “Brother (or sister), election is around the corner. Please vote. Remember that it is your civic duty”. In the second, it is usually partisan, personal, one-on-one, and selfish. It usually goes like this:

Leader: Have you thought about voting in this coming election?
Member: Not really, still not decided.
Leader: Ok, do you have any candidate in mind?
Member: Well, Mr. A came to our hometown association the other day for votes with some promises, and I am thinking of voting for him.
One in every four African migrant interviewed in fact attests to having been approached by a church lay leader, or even sometimes by a pastor in this manner. However, it is not clear whether many have been convinced to vote for advertised candidates through such encounters, although a few has testified that it sometimes made them doubtful of their own candidates, to the extent that they had had to eventually dump these candidates for the leader’s own.

Notwithstanding, political discussions among the congregants themselves also sometimes takes the nature of the above dialogue; in some cases, it also takes the form of a group discussion with its attendant pro et contra arguments, usually on which candidate or party to vote for, and why. Such discussions usually heat up so terribly that consensus is not possible. A Nigerian male migrant in Vantaa who goes to Redeemed Christian Church of God in Helsinki and a Cameroonian migrant in Espoo who goes to Jehovah’s Witnesses’ church respectively argue that, “Yes, it is usually difficult to agree on a particular party or candidate or both,” said the Nigerian, “because everybody often has their own candidate or party. Sometimes, this kind of discrepancy might lead to a near fight, especially when some try to lord their arguments over others in apparent bid to persuade them to vote for their candidates or parties. That is why at the end of it all, nobody convinces anybody.” (Interview: 8 January 2015). For the Cameroonian, “As far as politics is concerned, my church here is not into politics. Nevertheless, I personally prefer one-on-one discussion because the arguments and explanations are clearer and more sensible than when in a group. For instance, the two candidates I voted for in 2008 and 2012 municipal elections were the ones argued about by two of my church friends. I listened to their respective arguments and they made sense…. However, I have to say that such discussions with fellow congregants are sometimes a thug of war, with periodic shouting and no general consensus in most cases…” (Interview: 9 April 2015).

Nonetheless, many African immigrants interviewed find political participation solely a thing that may be discarded even when religious influences advise on the contrary. A factor that plays a decisive role in this perception is the social and economic status of immigrants, which have also generated some kind of group consciousness among African immigrants that consequently stifles their political participation. This is because many Africans in Finland are of low economic status due to racial discrimination in Finnish labor market. Even when they have all the requirements in addition also to having a competitive edge owing to rich previous work experiences (usually elsewhere), they are not offered the job (Ndukwe 2015). People in this category do not usually believe that politicians or electoral candidates mobilizing them can really change their marginalized situation. In fact, one African argues that “We have heard the empty promises and stories about our redemption over and over again candidates and parties, yet nothing happens. It all implies that they tell us such stories or make promises to win our vote. So, we have now become wiser. No more political deception!” (Interview: 3 February 2015). Many Africans interviewed have similar
perception. Incidentally, this political deception or failure has drawn many closer to the church as a means for succor, not necessarily as an avenue to revive political interests or ambitions. Dutton (2009: 34) argues that “people may be more inclined to become religiously involved as immigrants” because it provides them with social status as well as the identity that they lack in the society. He further argues that immigrants of low socioeconomic status could be more attracted to conservative organizations, such as the church or mosque, especially when their low status is a result of structural racism in the host society (p.38) (See also Haapajärvi 2012). Thus, even when electoral candidates or their campaigners are of African origin, this does not necessarily change the way they are perceived by these immigrants. A political encouragement from a trusted and respected pastor or priest or lay leader, or even a fellow congregant, might not also be convincing in this scenario. In fact, in such a situation, such political encouragements might even lead to a suspicion that the person encouraging is being partisan or has been bribed. This perception (rightly or wrongly) might consequently erode the trust or respect this particular person enjoys. For instance, Toro, a Gambian male migrant of the Hosanna Church in Espoo argues that

I have been approached on some occasions by (some) Finnish candidates in my church in Espoo, claiming that they are not happy with the bad socioeconomic situation of immigrants in Finland…. But I know it is a mere ploy to seek my vote…. I did not believe in their honesty ….’ (Interview: 14 October 2014)

Also, Luta, a Somali female convert to the Catholic Church in Helsinki, argues that

Some politicians have asked me to vote them or their party because they would do things for us immigrants, but I usually ignored them because I don’t believe in them at all. I don’t believe in their sincerity, and so, I didn’t vote for them… (Interview: 16 May 2015).

These perceptions are corroborated by an argument of an ex-councilor in Tampere who argues that his experiences and observations in the municipal council proceedings showed him that many Finnish candidates who got African votes with a promise to address the marginalization they face in Finnish society did not eventually do anything in this regard in the municipal council. He illustrated that on many occasions he has had to battle argumentatively with them on these issues during council proceedings but many of them turn deaf ears (Interview: 25 April 2015). Jamal (1995:532) argues that it is not enough for an individual candidate to claim to identify with a particular (ethnic) group. He or she must also have had a similar experience with them such as relative deprivation in order that he or she could represent them well (see also Miller et al. 1981).

Thus, perceptions on African candidates as politicians are sometimes neutralized by this group consciousness of relative deprivation, and further also enhanced by their nationalities (i.e. countries of origin), ethnicity, familiarity, and similar interests (in bettering the African condition in Finland). In other words, it does happen that when African candidates and congregants are of the same country of origin, or specifically, ethnicity, especially in a multinational church that most African churches are in Finland, this increase the chances of successful political mobilization. A Senegalese
male immigrant in Jyväskylä who belongs to the Salvation Army and the Congregation of God - a small religious community that has been active in Turku since 1970s (Martikainen 2004) – for example, argues that he rather prefers voting for a fellow Senegalese or a West African candidate than any other “because they are closer to me (ethnically or geographically) even when I don’t know them well”. In fact, a good number of Africans interviewed made similar arguments. And unless there has been an earlier close bond (e.g. through friendship or marriage) between them and other candidates, the situation they are not likely to vote for such people. Thus, country/region of origin and ethnicity particularly play a major role in African migrant political mobilization.

Then, when it comes to mobilization in the informal political arena, such as protests, demonstrations, strikes, etc, it seems also far-fetched from the churches. Nearly more than half of all respondents I interviewed argued that this is not really or never done in their churches. “At worst, we write (protest) letters to the appropriate authority” said Peter, a Ghanaian assistant pastor in an African Pentecostal church in central Helsinki, “where we table out our concerns or disagreements on issues that concern or worry us and ask for a fair hearing. In most cases, our concerns are addressed accordingly. But even if not, we usually continue to write or visit until it is addressed. We never have to go out to protest. That is not the function of a church. It is rather the function of secular associations I think…” (Interview: 27 March 2015). Nearly three quarters of Africans interviewed agreed that informal political mobilizations of such nature have mostly come from the different associations they belong to whether they be African, Finnish or international, rather than through the church. And such associations include for example, labor/trade unions, student unions, environmental organizations (such as Greenpeace), and African hometown or national associations. Two in every four clergyman I interviewed agreed with Peter’s argument, emphasizing that it makes sense for a church to avoid being seen as radical by encouraging its members to roam the streets in protests, or engage on strikes of whatever nature. “That would be ridiculous”, said a Finnish Lutheran pastor in Jyväskylä, “because people would then see the church as political or something like that instead of moral and religious! I think the best thing to do in a dire situation is to contact the relevant agency or go there in person in a civilized manner” (Interview: 22 May 2015). However, the writing of protest letters, the contacting of the relevant agency, and the visiting of such offices even if in the so-called civilized manner are all forms of politics (Martiniello 2007)

As in the church, so also it is in the mosque as far as political mobilization of African immigrants in Finland is concerned, both formally and informally, and whether by Muslim candidates or Christian ones. This is despite the fact that the mosque has already been described above as the first political center in Islam where Muslims clamor and deliberate on how to take roles in government or indirectly partake in government’s decision-making (Farahati 2011) and has also in practice been used to mobilize for both conventional and unconventional politics in various countries. The Arab Spring and the subsequent elections that followed is an example. Muslim candidates in Finland especially Africans however rarely use it for either of the purposes. It appears that a good number of them, especially the Somalis, consider the mosque too sacred for politics or political activity, even

10 The Salvation Army is not considered a separate church in Finland but rather a humanitarian organization known mainly for its second-hand shops and humanitarian aid (Martikainen 2004:157). Thus, most of its members also belong to different churches as well as revival movements.
though Tiilikainen and Ismail (2013:112) have argued, in their study of the Somalis in Helsinki, that “in contrast to the role of organisations, religious communities such as mosques were considered a functional way for Somalis to organise among themselves and to help people with their concerns” This organizing, it seems, is more about other issues than about politics! A Somali female, for instance, argues that mosque is mostly concerned with religious, ethical and social issues because they “give lectures in which they tell us about living with others, the good manners and such thing” (ibid). In addition, she notes that mosques also help in Somali integration in Finnish society, but she clearly never mentioned politics. The Chairman of the Helsinki Islamic Center (Helsinki Islam Keskus), adds to her voice, pointing out that the Center is never used for political activities and neither is the mosque. “Muslim politicians in Finland use other avenues, such as associations, etc, to mobilize”, he concludes (Interview: 10 June 2015). Nevertheless, a Somali male politician in Vantaa argues on the contrary, emphasizing that a difference should be made between a mosque and an Islamic center:

While a mosque is a house of prayer and preaching, an Islamic center is more of a place for lectures and meetings on sundry issues such as religious, political, social, cultural, and the economic. And so, while a mosque may not be strictly used for political campaigns, an Islamic center may perhaps be used…. But it is not out of place to talk about politics during sermon in the mosque anyway, especially when it is good for the society, especially for the gathered Muslim faithful…. So, yes, to answer your question, political mobilization can be done in the mosque, even if to some extent… (Interview: 23 October 2014).

This claim aligns with a response from a Ghanaian male immigrant in Helsinki who was also an imam in Ghana: “The mosque is certainly used for political mobilization. In Ghana, for example, both Muslim and Christian politicians come to the mosque during election time to canvass for votes after prayers, and they are given equal hearing. They table out their policies, and try to woo the congregation…. But here in Finland, I have never seen them come, and I don’t know why…” (Interview: 25 June 2015)

These arguments confirm that politics can be talked in the mosque. They apparently also relate to that of Chhibber and Sekhon (2014:4) who argue that “the mosque is ... a place for the (Muslim) community to congregate, and on Friday prayers, to listen to an imam deliver a sermon on religion or on social and political issues facing the ummah (the community)”. One then would expect that this would be utilized by electoral candidates in Finland, especially African Muslims, for political mobilization. But, it does appear that many of them prefer instead other avenues such as the media, associations and person-to-person contacts. As Hamzat, an experienced Somali political campaigner in Jyväskylä argues,

I think Muslim politicians (in Finland) rarely use the mosque as an avenue for political mobilization. It is not that it is totally out of place to do so though, but I personally think that talking about one’s political ambition in the mosque either directly by one or indirectly by the imam would be a distraction to those at prayer and reflection…. I prefer rather talking to potential Muslim voters in a different setting. Sometimes I use Islamic expressions such as Quranic quotations to persuade them, especially those who I know are strong Muslims. This is better if my electoral candidate is a good practicing Muslim so that my argument would be more convincing…. But in all, I would say that the media, associations, and personal
contacts are the more effective campaign mediums among Muslim candidates in Finland than the mosque … (Interview: 20 April 2015)

Quite a number of African immigrant Muslims interviewed agree to this, arguing that they would rather stand at the mosque door and distribute political fliers and posters to Muslim faithful after prayers than talk or had imam talk about their own political ambitions inside the mosque. Only two in seven had the opposite view, with them arguing that they actually usually go to the imam to ask for ‘blessing and help’ during political campaigns. For instance, Abdulaziz, an Algerian Muslim politician in Tampere, and Yusuf, a Gambian Muslim political campaigner in Espoo, respectively argue that a respected imam is a major political weapon that any serious Muslim politician should tap. But they also agree that “Posting posters on information boards at the mosque is another effective way since “many read the boards after prayers”. Another means of political mobilization which they emphasize is growing among Muslim candidates in Finland is the use of mobile phones, especially texting. For Abdulaziz, “Some candidates also use the online social media, especially facebook”. But Yusuf argues that especially calling and texting are extremely more important than others because “some Muslim voters do not attend the mosque or not so regularly. And so, calling or texting them seems the better way to reach them” (Interviews. 2-3 June 2015).

Nevertheless, a Ghanaian Muslim politician in Oulu (Northern Finland) named Abdul, argues that for any Muslim candidate or politician to mobilize through the mosque, s/he must have been a respectable and popular Muslim, whose track attendance on the mosque as well as active participation is also well known among the Muslim faithful there. “In this way, his political messages could appeal to majority of Muslims in that mosque because the political arguments of unpopular Muslims do not appeal to anyone and no imam will even give room to such a person or even talk on their behalf in the mosque. In fact, it is better for the person to use other means such as associations to campaign than use the mosque…” (Interview: 14 June 2015). When interviewed, some Somali politicians who had previously run for municipal elections agree, pointing out that they had never used the mosque for political mobilization. However, it was not clear whether they did not do so because they were not respectable and popular Muslims, or that they were simply not regular mosque attendants. However, some like Jama, a Somali Muslim municipal councilor in Tampere did admit that he was unpopular among the Somalis in the city (who form the majority in the mosque there), and therefore could not mobilize there as he has no friends:

I did not use the mosque to mobilize during my election campaigns. In fact, I have never used it for any political activity because I don’t know anybody there. All my campaigns instead have been through the media mostly, and the individual contacts that I have. These individual contacts are also mostly native Finns, not Somalis, and I think I got most of my votes from them… (Interview: 27 March 2015)

This probably might imply that he does not attend the mosque regularly, or that he is not in fact a practicing Muslim.

Be that as it may, the arguments show that being a good Muslim with of course regular mosque attendance relates with responsible representation in politics. In other words, if one is not active in the mosque, one might not likely be active in political service. But this argument might mean that it
is only Muslim candidates that can represent Muslims well. That is to say that non-Muslims cannot do a good job. But the contrary might be case because political activeness and religious activeness are not always related. In other words, a non-Muslim, or a Muslim who is passive in mosque attendance but is politically savvy and also community-conscious, could do something tangible for the Muslim community when elected, sometimes even much more than an active Muslim could.

On the other hand, it has been argued that passive Muslim candidates should rather use associations (as an alternative to the mosque) to mobilize for votes or even protests. But this appears problematic especially among the Somalis in Finland because their associations are said to be fragmented owing to distrust and disunity among them (Tiilikainen and Ismail 2013). In fact, in the focus group interviews conducted by Tiilikainen and Ismail, this was clear in the arguments. For instance, a Somali male participant states categorically that

There are no organisations that can be described as representatives of the Somalis or forwarding the need of the Somalis (in Finland). Somaliliitto (Somali League) is the closest I think… but all the rest of the hundreds of (Somali) organisations that are spoken about in this country (do not represent us) … (ibid, p. 110)

A female participant also added,

There are many (Somali) organisations in this country (Finland) but they can only benefit the people when they are united…. Personally, I have not seen (any Somali) organisation that helps the (Somali) people, or people saying that they are going to an organisation for help. They carry the Somali name as title, but they don’t represent us (ibid, p.111).

In this kind of scenario, political mobilization can be difficult, because the disunity has also meant that many do not trust Somali politicians since they are seen as being in politics only for selfish reasons rather than for the interest of the Somalis (ibid). Hence, this situation discourages quite a number of Somalis from standing as candidates or attending campaign meetings. It also discourages potential imams from speaking about politics in the mosque. “How can you speak about politics in the mosque when people are divided?”, asked one Somali imam in Helsinki (Interview: 23 April 2015). Thus all of this perhaps explain why Somali political participation in Finland has been very low (ibid, p. 113), and also why, despite a fairly large number of Somali candidates at municipal elections in recent years, only very few has been elected. This lack of participation also happens in the informal political sector, such as protests. Somalis rarely organize protests or strikes, apparently because of this disunity, but more so, because as one Somali imam puts it, “it might increase the society’s hatred on us because we know we are very much hated for being the first large number of refugees to arrive here…” (Interview: 23 June 2015). This unfortunate situation however does not mean that many Somalis are comfortable with their sad situation, they are apparently not. In fact, as one female Somali summarized: “We have lived here (in Finland) for more than 20 years… but … we don’t have people who (can) argue for our rights, even if we are dead, no one will speak for us, and if we live on, no one can speak for us…. That is why the Finns treat us like this (i.e. badly), we are like dead prey who doesn’t have anyone standing for their rights (ibid, p.111). Most of my interviews and informal talks with Somalis in Finland confirm this frustration.
Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the political mobilization of African immigrants in Finland through the church and mosque. The result is that the interaction between religion and politics in this regard is very low, and in some cases, even nonexistent. Most Africans interviewed emphasize that politics and religion should be totally separate. Even though many of them are strong Christians or Muslims respectively, and in some cases, also politically active, they seem to prefer political mobilizations through other avenues. This preference appears to show that they consider the church and mosque so sacred that they should not be ‘tainted’ by mundane politics. In other words, politics meddling in the church or mosque distracts them from their religious role as a moral house. However, in some cases where political mobilization has been possible through the church, for example, it has been mostly due to trust, proximity in ideal, ethnicity or nationality with, and/or confidence in the church religious and lay leaders as well as also fellow congregants themselves. In these cases, the church should be seen as a body that encourages and fosters rather than discourages civic participation of immigrants in the host society.

Besides, for an increasing number of African immigrants, the church (and the mosque) also serves as an arena of socialization, protecting them from the pressures of racial discriminations they face in Finnish society, especially in the socioeconomic sector, and which incidentally has been a big hindrance to their political mobilization and participation. For people in this category, for example, mobilizing them, through the church or mosque or any other avenue would appear difficult as they do not believe that those mobilizing them would be able to concretely address their situation. And not even political encouragements, formal or informal, from religious and lay leaders, or from fellow congregants, can change their perception. For example, an Eritrean man in Jyväskylä argues that

To me as a person, I have experienced a lot of racist discriminations in the job market and social life here (in Finland). And If I don’t get my economic and social life going, I have no business with political participation. Come to think of it: will political participation give me food, or deposit money in my account, or what? Can you see it is a waste of time? (Interview: 7 July 2013).

This is one of the reasons why, in general, African immigrant political mobilization in Finland is been low, and consequently also one of the reasons why their political participation and representation has also been low. In their study of immigrants in Sweden, for example, Back and Soininen (1998), find out that the long-term exclusion of immigrants from the labor market is a critical obstacle to their further social and political participation in the Swedish society. Thus, a long-term inclusion of African immigrants in the Finnish labor market might possibly impact positively on their political mobilization and participation. But, it has also been argued that in some parts of the world where certain immigrants experienced similar discriminations, they became instead politically active in order to change their disadvantaged situation through the ballot box, including also lobbying for political and administrative appointments, because they believe, and perhaps rightly too, that having more say in political and administrative decision-making could directly or indirectly impact positively on their socioeconomic status. Patrick Ireland (2000:235), for example, argues that in the event of rampant discrimination and racism, immigrants should, as a response, organize and articulate their political interests possibly along ethnic, racial, and/or
religious lines, and mobilize through these socialization processes. The Arab-Americans (Jamal 2005), the African-Americans (Shingles 1981), and the Somalis in America, especially in Minnesota (Harinen et al. 2013), and the Jewish-Americans, among others, are said to be among those who took concrete steps politically (and are still taking such steps) in order to emancipate themselves from racial discriminations against them. It is hoped that African immigrants in Finland could also toe that line.

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