

Religion, Churches and the recurring conflict in Madagascar

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Madagascar, an island located in the Indian Ocean and a former French colony which gained its independence in 1960, has experienced nine episodes of internal conflict since the colonial period, in 1947, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1985, 1991, 1996, 2002, and 2009 (Razakamaharavo, 2018). These episodes displayed various features but were all more or less related to political issues. In 1972 for instance, 40 people were killed and many more injured following the revolt of young people from deprived neighbourhoods, and intellectuals rallying against the state's perceived neo-colonialism and capitalism. In 1991, another conflict episode of a similar scale saw various actors such as Churches, political parties and associations denouncing the 20-year rule of President Ratsiraka and his socialist-inspired policies. In 2002, the two candidates running for Presidency disagreed over electoral results, leading to lethal clashes which took an ethnic undertone. Finally, episode 2009 saw a military coup organized by the former Mayor of the capital city of Antananarivo with the support of major politicians who were already involved in many of the former episodes of conflict. As a result, more than 100 people died between 2009 and 2016. Many internal and external actors got involved in those peace and conflict processes. For instance, the Malagasy state has always been among the major conflict actors in the country,

while external involvement has varied depending on the conflict episode. It goes without saying that local/ indigenous actors, and among them Churches, play crucial roles too.

Religion and Churches have had a major influence in several episodes of conflict, notably in 1972, 1991, 2002 and 2009. With a population estimated at 25 million, according to the last official census on religion compiled in 1993, 52% of the population is animist, 41% Christian and 7% Muslim. Madagascar also counts a small number of Hindus and around 360 Jews. In Madagascar Churches have been playing key roles in the education field, in politics, but also in socio-economic and cultural activities. Churches are present even in the most remote parts of Madagascar. They have radio and TV stations, they print newspapers, they have schools, they provide economic support to the deprived and, most importantly, Churches are generally considered as spiritual guides and even as “parents” to the population.

The Christian community is composed of four big Churches: The Church of Jesus Christ in Madagascar (FJKM, the Protestants of Presbyterian tradition), the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutherans also called the FLM, and the Anglican Church. In 1980, pushed by a desire to fight what they perceived as unjust state policies, these four Churches created an inter-denominational organization called FFKM, the Assembly or National Council of the Christian Churches in Madagascar. Of these four big Churches, the first two are those who have had the greatest influence over time. The London Missionary Society that started evangelizing Madagascar in 1820 is the ancestor of the presently called FJKM. They have been widely known for their nationalist discourses, especially during the post-colonial period. They are associated to the monarchy, the upper class and the Merina ethnic group, who are mainly descendants of the

Nobles and/or live in the highlands (Raison-Jourde 1991). The other main ethnic group, called the Côtiers, are mostly coming from the coastal regions. The Catholics started their own evangelization activities in 1836, and have established themselves in various regions within smaller communities and amongst people of lower classes. As of the 1980s, the Catholic clergy's political engagement became more noticeable, especially as it started protesting against the state, and decided to protect the poor and fight against what it saw as unjust state policies.

It is also worth mentioning the revivalist movement, which is the youngest of these religious actors. The Fifohazana is also understood as “awakening” and it is an indigenous Christian movement that started in 1894. It is a self-governing as well as an independent movement of renewal. There are four main fifohazana sections in Madagascar, which all have charismatic leaders who are also considered to be prophets. Their members, also called “Mpiandry” or shepherds, are in charge of rites of exorcism and healing. The powerful revivalist movement has been constantly growing, and various evangelical Churches with revival and pentecostal inspirations have been created, notably the revivalist Church FPVM that was established in 2002 by the influential Pastor of the Ravoahangy Andrianavalona Church.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, according to the latest religious census conducted in 1993, there were around 7% of Muslims in Madagascar. However, according to the Madagascar 2017 International Religious Freedom report, it is estimated that in 2017, their numbers had significantly grown, to around 20-25% of the population (Madagascar International Religious Freedom Report, 2017). Most Muslims inhabit the coastal regions, and the north-western part of the country. They are mainly Sunni and are often of Indian, Pakistani or Comorian origin. Since the 2009 conflict episode, a growing number of Malagasy have converted, especially in the very poor neighbourhood of 67 Ha in Antananarivo. New mosques have recently been built, a trend

which has been feeding fears of radicalization. It should however be noted that not all Muslims belong to the poorest communities, since for example the Khoja who make up 35% of the Indian community in Madagascar, and who are Shia, are among the wealthiest economic operators in the country.

There is no simple link between religion, Churches and conflicts, as religion may influence the development of conflicts in a number of ways, which are partly cross-cutting (Féron, 2008). In Madagascar, four main configurations seem to stand out: first, Churches can participate in violence in their quest to gain more followers; second, Churches can directly participate in political conflicts, and take sides; third, religion can help legitimizing violence, by sanctifying the struggle in the name of God; in this case, religion is instrumentalized as an instrument of power; finally, religious actors can also become involved in peace processes by using their political, social and cultural influence, and by invoking values of peace and tolerance.

The recurring conflict in Madagascar is not of a religious nature, in the sense that religion is not a major line of division between conflict actors. However, the history of implantation of Christianity in Madagascar is an extremely violent one, and many animists have had to face direct physical, but also structural and symbolic violence that was meant to ensure their conversion. For example, during the colonial period, when the British lost ground in Madagascar, the evangelization of the Jesuits and the British missionaries who were in perpetual competition continued and trapped the Malagasy in a cycle of violence. The Jesuits relied on the French military to support their operations of conversion, and took advantage of being associated to the image of France as a powerful and fear-inspiring colonizer. Anyone who was not Catholic

(thus perceived to be French or supporting the French) was considered to be “the fahavalo”, that is a rebel or an enemy. Many Protestant teachers and Malagasy pastors were sent to jail, executed and judged as rebels. Many therefore converted into Catholicism for fear of reprisal. In the end, the Malagasy who felt trapped in the conflicts between these religious actors were obliged to seek protection and help from their colonizers, the French who eventually imposed religious neutrality as a response. It is also worth noting that religious actors have also benefited from episodes of chaos and tensions, in order to gain more converts. It has notably been the case in the previously mentioned 2009 conflict episode, during which the number of converts to Islam grew in sudden and sharp numbers in the poorest neighbourhood of Antananarivo.

A second configuration, pertaining to the direct involvement of Churches on the political stage, occurs frequently given that religion, class and politics are highly inter-connected and intertwined in Madagascar. Political actors are often religious leaders, and vice versa. One of the major political parties involved in the 1972 episode of conflict was for instance led by a Merina pastor. Another telling example is the fact that one of the Presidents involved in various episodes of conflict, Ravalomanana, was the President of a Protestant Church, member of the ecumenical assembly FFKM. He appeared officially at Protestant services and gave financial support to these entities (personal communications, June 2014 and March 2016). Such behaviour vexed and angered many people, including members of the evangelical Churches and also the FPVM, the large new revivalist Church. It is therefore no surprise that revivalist Churches were among those who went to the streets to bring down Ravalomanana in 2009.

Churches also often take sides and provide direct support to conflicting parties. In 2002 for instance, the Catholic Cardinal Razafindratandra officially announced his support to Ravalomanana. In 2009 however, Ravalomanana was supported by the Protestant FFKM, while the Catholics were inclined to support Rajoelina. These political interventions greatly affected the mediation processes as the population and the conflicting parties lost trust in the Churches and in their capacity to convene conflicting parties around the table and eventually help resolving the conflicts. As political actors, the Churches also developed political projects. In 1991 for instance, the FFKM came up with its own political objectives and ambioned to overthrow President Ratsiraka. Similarly, in 2009 various Muslim actors, especially of Indian origin, directly supported directly Rajoelina as one of the conflict parties, and during the transition that followed, funded various Malagasy Ministries and paid the salaries of civil servants (personal communications, June 2014 and March 2016).

Interestingly, international religious actors have also at times directly intervened in Malagasy politics. At the end of the 1980s, the Malagasy Catholic Church started to directly oppose the President Ratsiraka who wanted to impose policies inspired by Marxist and Third World ideologies. The Catholic Church denounced the disastrous effects of the President's socialist experiment as well as the injustices, exactions and abuses committed by the state prior to the 90s. They also questioned the policies implemented during the decade prior to the elections in 1989. In an interesting international development, the Pope Jean Paul II officially supported the Malagasy Catholic Church's stance, notably during his visit to Madagascar and in the speeches he gave in 1989. His powerful statements played a decisive role and influenced the success of the actions spearheaded by the Churches. The Pope in his discourses denounced "the serious deterioration of the morale climate" in Madagascar as well as the corruption. He emphasized the

need to defend social justice and encouraged the Bishops as well as the youth to stand up and act for what is right. He officially approved the actions that the Bishops had already launched before his arrival in Madagascar, such as the publication of the texts that would eventually lead to President Ratsiraka's overthrow. The Pope praised the content of these texts, which mainly focused on how to restore the nation, and which condemned the wrongdoings of the state. The movement was later on joined by the other main Christian Churches and as a result they created the FFKM, as mentioned earlier (Rakotonirainy, 1996). From that moment on, the FFKM played a key role in supporting the protest movement, encouraging the organization of demonstrations and also of national dialogues, and thus became a prominent actor in the conflict.

Third, religion has also been used as a tool for mobilization by political and religious actors, and religious values and references have been convened for political purposes. Madagascar's recent history provides us with numerous examples of such processes. In 2002 for instance, the powerful and respected Revivalist leader Nenilava told his followers that Ravalomanana had been chosen by God, and had the mission to restore Madagascar. Many among the population believed it. During his electoral campaign, Ravalomanana also used a Bible verse "Aza matahotra, minoa fotsiny ihany" or "do not be afraid, just believe" which seduced the population even in the most remote parts of the country. Many political rituals and practices make direct references to religious traditions and beliefs. For instance, it is very common to see during street protests a long queue of revivalists opening up the line, and performing exorcism or saying prayers. Whenever a given party succeeds in breaking into a government building, revivalists are brought in to perform exorcism and to banish evil from the place, so that the Ministers chosen by

God can safely be put in place. Some religious actors go even further by threatening to excommunicate those who refuse to vote for “Gods’ chosen”.

Finally, what is interesting to see in the case of Madagascar is that religious actors have also regularly acted as peacemakers. That is the fourth configuration. Religious leaders can indeed often play a very important role in conflict resolution insofar as they often are charismatic leaders who have a great influence on their religious adherents, and who are generally trusted by politicians and other religious officials. They can mobilize values such as empathy or sanctity of life in order to convince their fellow believers of the righteousness of a peace process, and then convert an agreement concluded at the elite level into genuine changes at the grassroots level. This involvement of religious elites in peace processes in Madagascar has taken both top-down and bottom-up forms. As an example of the latter, the Churches when they overthrew President Ratsiraka in 1991 used what can be considered as a pragmatic “non-violent” approach. This approach does not directly involve the use of religious values but instead entails using tactics and strategies to weaken the opponent and undermine his/ her authority for a greater good, such as the defence of the weak, of the oppressed, or more generally of human rights. That was what the Catholic and the Protestant Churches did in 1991, with the support of external religious actors such as the ecumenical movement of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. The discourses the FFKM delivered including those of the Pope, which contributed in the defeat of the President, indeed revolved around building peace, protecting human rights, resisting all forms of violence and addressing issues relating to human needs.

The role of Churches in mitigating local conflicts is also paramount. Within some of the congregations in the remote parts of the country, when there are disputes, the local parties take the matter to the pastors or the bishops who act as mediators (Pastor Razafindramanga, personal communication, March 2016). This means that the way the Churches are perceived and the way they act at all levels of the social structure also allocates them a certain legitimacy, influence and power to act as peacemakers. In the case of Madagascar, these resources manifested themselves through the trust put in the Churches when they led mediation and negotiation initiatives in the episodes of conflict that occurred in 1972 and 1991. It is therefore understandable that, during some episodes of conflict, the Malagasy trusted the Churches to such a point that, for example in episode 1991, the FFKM drafted and wrote the new constitution, and organized the national dialogue. Its members were also among those who got seats in state institutions.

To conclude, the case of Madagascar shows that as key social actors, and even when the conflict does not have a strong religious dimension, Churches and religions often play a central role in the cycle of violence. Despite their claim of standing largely outside of temporal matters, Churches are highly permeable institutions, both in terms of structures and of values. In many ways, the Churches reflect the complexity of the Malagasy conflict. This can be seen through the love-hate relationships within the FFKM, the palpable local tensions in the poor neighbourhoods where various Churches, mosques or animists cohabit and very often provoke each other through slogans eliciting anger among their communities. Recently for instance, the display of “Jesus saves” signs by a Christian Church and of “Jesus is not the messiah” signs by the salafist Imam of Abou-Bakr have generated heated controversies in the deprived 67Ha neighbourhood in

Antananarivo. In parallel, most of these religious actors have been trying to establish a more just and fair society by protecting the weak and the poor against political abuses. On the whole, religions and Churches have had an ambiguous impact on the dynamics of the conflict, sometimes fostering escalation and at other times de-escalation. Currently, and as the conflict in Madagascar is threatening to re-escalate again, religions and Churches continue to play a pivotal role, although religious leaders appear to have lost some popular support because of the bias they displayed in 2009, and of their involvement in shady practices within state institutions. The FFKM continues to carry on its mediation work by organizing various workshops within its congregations, while trying to involve the political elite in the dialogue process, however without significant achievements (yet). As they are still seen as providers, educators and protectors, most religious actors have however managed to maintain the moral ties they have built with the population, especially at the local level. They therefore constitute key resources and allies for building sustainable peace in Madagascar.

Recommended Readings

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