

The Nature and Significance of a Muslim Woman's Contest for Mayor of Lusaka, Zambia

Nelly Mwale¹

¹SHORT BIO

Nelly Mwale is a Special Research Fellow and lecturer at the University of Zambia in the Department of Religious Studies. Her research interests are religion in the public sphere, African Indigenous Religions, religion and education, and Zambian Church history.

INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

University of Zambia, Department of Religious Studies; nelmwa@gmail.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4556-9239>

ABSTRACT

Demonstrating the use of the media as a conduit for communicating religious messages within the political domain, this article interrogates the religion, gender, and media interface through an analysis of the nature and significance of Sirre Muntanga, the only Muslim woman candidate for mayor of Lusaka during the 2016 Zambian general elections. Scholarly engagement on the 2016 elections has focused on the Christianisation of the elections to the neglect of other religions such as Islam and its related gender discourses. Theoretical and empirical studies on religion as well as the media are still lagging in the Zambian context. Since selected members of the Muslim community used the opportunity provided by Muntanga's campaign to promote religious literacy on Islam, this article proposes that the mediatisation of Muntanga's participation in the elections provides a platform for exploring the interaction between religion and the media. The article argues that, while the interface between religion and the media is often ascribed to the growth of media technologies and a religious agenda to convey religious messages, Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka signified how religion, gender, and the media could be linked through the religionisation of politics as shaped by public curiosity and the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation.

KEYWORDS

Muslim; religion; gender; politics; Zambian elections

Introduction

In this article, the following research question is explored: What was the nature and significance of Sirre Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka during the 2016 general elections in the context of religion, gender, and the media in Zambia? The research question is premised on the basis that, despite the fact that religion and the media in the Southern African countries have recorded a boom in popularity and interest by scholars of religion,¹ Zambia had a scarcity of scholarly attention relating to this field of study. The article therefore foregrounds Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka in discourses of how the media became a conduit for communicating messages of religion and gender during the 2016 general elections in Zambia, in order to make a modest contribution towards the engagement of religion and the media in the Zambian context. Zambia

¹ Muhammed Haron, "Religion and the Media: Reflections on their Position and Relationship in Southern Africa," *Global Media Journal* 4, no.1 (2010): 28.

held its general elections on 11 August 2016 with nine contesting parties: the Patriotic Front (PF); the opposition – the United Party for National Development (UPND); the Forum for Democracy and Development (FDD); the People's Alliance for Change (PAC); the United Progressive People's Party (UPP); the Rainbow Party (RP); the Movement for Multi-Party Democracy (MMD); the Green Party (GP); and the Democratic Alliance (DA). Of the positions that were being contested, the mayoral seat for Lusaka attracted Sirre Muntanga from the FDD as a contestant. Prior to the elections, different political parties and contestants were engaged in diverse campaign activities which included the use of social media platforms and the production and broadcast of adverts for radio and television, among others. Religious discourses were not absent from these campaign messages. Contestants and their supporters used the media to convey religious messages, an aspect of the campaigns that had escaped the attention of the pre-election monitors such as the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG) of Zambia.

The inquiry which the article engages with was therefore driven by lapses in religion and the media in Zambia owing to a limited scholarly attention to the study area on one hand, and the preoccupation with Christianity to the neglect of minority religions and groups in the Zambian scholarship on the other, within the discourses of religion in public life. As observed from an African perspective, religious actors had taken advantage of the prevalence and accessibility of the mass media to continue the spread of religion and religious messages across the continent.² In the Zambian context, although it was acknowledged that Islam had grown over the years as evidenced by a remarkable Islamic visibility through the construction of schools, health facilities, and an active participation in social and development programmes,³ coupled with the boom and accessibility of the mass media in the country, there was limited engagement with how the media was used as a conveyor of Islamic ideas. There was also a neglect of religious women and the media, and in particular Muslim women's engagement in public life. Hence this article focuses on how a Muslim woman, named Sirre Muntanga, asserted herself in the media during the elections in Zambia

² Gabriel Faimau and William O. Lesitaokana, *New Media and Mediatization of Religion: An African Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 2.

³ Felix Phiri, *Muslims Association and the Resurgence of Islam in Zambia* (Lusaka: FENZA and Lemban Trust, 2008); World Bulletin, "Zambia's Growing Islam," 13 November 2013, <https://www.worldbulletin.net/islamic-world/zambias-growing-islam-h122789.html>.

by interrogating the nature and significance of her contest for mayor of Lusaka.

The article draws on the 2016 general elections context, because the elections were not only renowned for the popularity of religion in the political discourses, but also the extensive use of the media. In addition, the religion, gender, and media discourses during the 2016 general elections largely focused on the religionisation of the elections. For example, in an analysis of the interplay among the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation, presidential photography, and social media, it was concluded that Edgar Lungu's social media presidential photography in various places of worship and political campaigning functioned as subliminal texts underlying the declaration as a religious-political state apparatus for political legitimisation.⁴ Therefore, the religionised and mediatised elections presented an opportunity to uncover the media's interconnectedness with religion and gender through the example of the discourses that were ignited by the Muslim woman contestant in the elections.

The article argues that the media acted as an avenue for relaying messages on religion and gender. It advances that, while religion and the media were often linked, based on the development of new media technologies, the Zambian context also confirmed that religion and the media could be linked through the quest for religious literacy among the outsiders of a particular religion and the insiders. This linkage was shaped by the religionisation of politics in ways that point to the interaction of both religious and political agendas. The article proceeds with defining religionisation, highlighting the context of the setting and the approach to theory and method before discussing the nature and significance of Muntanga's contest for mayor through her representations in the media, and accounting for the ways in which the media was used as conduit for communicating Islamic messages in the context of the 2016 mayoral elections in Zambia.

Defining Religionisation and Religious Discourses

In the present context, religionisation as a term is closely linked to politics, and in particular, the political discourses of the 2016 general

⁴ Chammah J. Kaunda, "Christianising Edgar Chagwa Lungu: The Christian Nation, Social Media Presidential Photography and 2016 Election Campaign," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 4, no.1 (2018): 215-45.

elections in Zambia. Although the religionisation of politics is often largely framed in the theories of secularism where the secular and religious are interdependent,⁵ the article takes a position in which, contrary to the perception of secularism, ideas are tied to the separation of powers between politics (the state) and religion (religious institutions) to the detriment of the latter.⁶ As such, the religionisation of politics is employed to refer to the ways in which religion characterised the political discourses surrounding the 2016 general elections. Indirectly, the article points to how, contrary to projections that secularisation would lead to a decline of religion in public life, religion had re-entered the public sphere through politics in Zambia, among others. The religionisation of politics could be observed in the presence and influence that religion has on politics to which it serves both as a subject and an object.⁷ In the 2016 general elections, religion was a subject that clouded the campaign messages and an object that was used for political gain by different players. This signified the nature of the Zambian political terrain, because religion as a political instrument could only be utilised by political systems for political gains within a society that was receptive to religion.⁸

The article employs the religionisation of politics to aid the description of the reciprocal interaction and interconnectedness of religion and politics as exemplified in the ways in which religion became part of the 2016 political discourses in the media through the example of Muntanga's narrative. In this way, the article acknowledges that religionisation relates to the lack of a clear boundary between the political and religious realms.⁹ Religion and politics therefore influence each other reciprocally, with religion being politicised and politics being religionised. The religionisation of politics is also related to the ways in which religion shaped the 2016 general elections through the religious discourses, here

⁵ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 192.

⁶ Peter L. Berger, "A Sociological View of Secularisation of Theology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6, no.1 (1967): 3-16.

⁷ Carolina Ivanescu, "Politicised Religion and the Religionisation of Politics," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, no.4 (2010): 313.

⁸ Jaco Beyers, "Religion as Political Instrument: The Case of Japan and South Africa," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 28, no.1 (2015): 142-64.

⁹ Ivanescu, "Politicised Religion," 313.

understood as language in use,¹⁰ constructed as oral or written texts and functioning within social contexts.¹¹

Approach to Theory and Method

The article anchors the exploration of the nature and significance of Muntanga's contest in the 2016 mayoral elections on how the media shaped discourses of a Muslim woman through the concept of mediatisation and the mediatisation of religion. The theories of mediatisation and the mediatisation of religion point to the role of media in the construction of religion in a contemporary society, including the ways in which the media has become an important source of information about religious issues as well as a tool for active engagement with religion.¹² The mediatisation theory as a framework is used to aid the understanding of how the media works as a channel for religious messages, because religion is increasingly subsumed under the logic of the media through the process of mediatisation.¹³ For example, as a conduit of communication, the media acts as the primary source of religious ideas, while within language and cultural environments, the media shapes the religious imagination in accordance with the genres of popular culture and takes over many of the social functions of the institutionalised religions, providing both moral and spiritual guidance and a sense of community. The mediatisation theory is therefore used, because the focus of this article is to understand the nature and significance of a Muslim woman's contest for mayor of Lusaka in 2016.

Of the three ways of thinking about religion and media (media as conduit, language, and cultural environments), the media as conduit for communication is here deemed as significant. As such, the article particularly taps into how the media becomes a conduit for conveying religious ideas, because its interest is on uncovering how the only Muslim woman contestant has used the media to communicate Islamic messages during the electoral campaigns, and the significance of her

¹⁰ Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹¹ Tunde Onadeko, "Discourse Analysis: The Fundamentals," in *Studies in English Language*, ed. Adeyemi O. Babajide (Ibadan: Encrownfit Publishers, 2000), 81-104.

¹² Stig Hjarvard and Mia Lovheim (eds.), *Mediatisation of Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹³ Stig Hjarvard, "The Mediatisation of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change," *Northern Lights: Film and Media Studies Yearbook* 6, no.1 (2008): 9-26.

contest in the context of religion, gender, and the media discourses in Zambia. In this way, the article employs the mediatization theory to discuss the role of the media in communicating religious messages and as a platform for representing religion and political discourses in the context of the 2016 general elections in Zambia.

The article is informed by the analysis of discourses surrounding a Muslim woman contestant in the 2016 general elections in the media that emerged not only from the mayoral election contender herself, but also the local leaders of the Muslim and women Muslim associations. Based on the mediatization theoretical perspective on the role of the media in communicating religious messages and as a consequent platform for the representations of religion and politics, the article addresses the research question that focuses on exploring the nature and significance of Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka in 2016.

Given that the increasing use of smartphones and other mobile devices, together with improved internet access, present opportunities for communicating and mobilising along religious lines, social media is an area for research, as religious websites are dynamic archives of religious worlds.¹⁴ The article also draws on social media messages (especially Facebook) of Muntanga in the public sphere in order to understand how the media has shaped the discourses of religion and gender in the context of a Muslim woman's participation in electoral politics in Zambia. In this case, the media was limited to its technological use in which it acted as a conduit for the transmission of a religious ideology and opinions. Apart from social media, the different forms of media, such as television, newspapers, and photographs in the public space are used as supplementary sources for analysis because these were prominently used during the 2016 general elections campaigns.

Contextualisation of the Setting

This section contextualises Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka by describing the religious landscape, Islam and Muslim women in Zambia, and the media context.

¹⁴ Rosalind Hackett, Anne Melice, Steven van Wolputte and Katrien Pype, "Interview: Rosalind Hackett Reflects on Religious Media in Africa," *Social Compass* 61, no.1 (2014): 67-72.

The Religious Landscape

Zambia is a multi-religious society with Christianity being the dominant religion. Other religions include Islam, Hinduism, and Zambian indigenous religions, as well as the Bahá'í faith, Buddhism, and Sikhism which account for smaller percentages in terms of following. After the official declaration of the country as a Christian nation and the consequent expansion of Pentecostalism in the 1990s, the religious landscape in the country completely changed as first, a religious desk at State House and more recently (2016), a Ministry of National Guidance and Religious Affairs with the mandate of actualising the Christian declaration, were established by the state. Suffice to note that though the country is declared to be a Christian nation, the constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for the freedom of conscience, belief, and religion. The different religious communities in Zambia are therefore living in total harmony.¹⁵

Islam and Muslim Women in Zambia

Although Felix Phiri remarks that the reality of Islam in Zambia is barely documented,¹⁶ there has been a growing interest in scholarship on Islam in the country. For example, in recent decades, different Zambian scholars have shown an interest in Islam, with Phiri being a prominent voice in the country. He has documented the Muslim associations and the resurgence of Islam in Zambia and linked the revival of Islam among the already existing Muslims and the increasing number of indigenous converts to Islam, to the local Muslim associations in postcolonial Zambia.¹⁷ Other Zambian scholars have examined the teaching of Islam through religious education programmes¹⁸ and the religious education syllabi of 2013¹⁹ in Zambia's senior secondary schools.

In addition, a few postgraduate students at the University of Zambia have also taken an interest in Islam. These studies are related to conversions to Islam in Liteta in Zambia's central province²⁰ and *Zakaʿt*'s

¹⁵ Scott D. Taylor, *Culture and Customs of Zambia* (London: Greenwood Press, 2006).

¹⁶ Phiri, *Muslim Associations*.

¹⁷ Phiri, *Muslim Associations*.

¹⁸ Joseph Chita, "Reflecting on the Teaching of Islam in the Religious Education Teacher Education Programme," *Changing Societies and Personalities* 3, no.2 (2018): 285-91.

¹⁹ Oswald Tembo and Gift Masaiti, "The Teaching of Islam in Zambia's Senior Secondary School Religious Education Syllabus of 2013: Stakeholders' Perspective," *Zambian Journal of Religion and Contemporary Religious Issues* 1, no.1 (2019): 157-78.

²⁰ Aisha Hanjoomo, "Da'wah at Work: Investigating the Introduction of Islam in Chibombo District" (MEd diss., University of Zambia, 2014).

contributions to the alleviation of poverty in Lusaka.²¹ These studies were driven by the boom of Islam that had resulted in the conversion of the indigenous Zambians from Christianity to Islam. As can be deduced, the discourse has not yet embraced the contributions of Muslim women in the country's public life. Credit is here given to Phiri²² who has attempted to include the contributions of Muslim women to the development of Islam in the country.

By way of ethnic origin, Muslim women are divided in four major categories, namely the Asian, the Yao, the Somali, and the indigenous converts, alongside the less prominent minority groups from the Congo, as well as East and West Africa.²³ The majority of Muslim women in Lusaka are from the high-density residential areas and can easily characterise themselves as the poor of the society who deserve to be beneficiaries of *Zakat*.²⁴

The Muslim women are also organised through associations. There are two prominent organisations linked to Muslim women in Lusaka, namely the Lusaka Muslim Women Trust (LMWT) and the Zambia Islamic Child Care Education and *Da'wa* Association (ZICEDA).²⁵ While the LMWT is a women's organisation, the ZICEDA has women representation in the administration. The LMWT provides female religious teachers in four townships of Lusaka (Matero, Old Kanyama, Chawama, and Mtendere) where the majority of the participants are lower class women. By the end of the last century, Muslim women have already taken their place in the growing Muslim community as LMWT substantially contributed to the affirmation of the Zambian Muslim women identity through religious instruction, regular gatherings, and charitable projects.²⁶

Prominent Zambian Muslim women in public life in Lusaka are few. The most notable was Ayesha Kayambwe, a Catholic convert and trained primary schoolteacher who became a leading figure under the Zambian women. She was distinguished for her "audacity" to speak out in the name of Islam in general and the Muslim women in particular, and was a

²¹ Zanga Zimba, "The Impact of the Islamic Act of Almsgiving on Poverty Alleviation among the Poor in Lusaka Urban District" (MED diss., University of Zambia, 2019).

²² Phiri, *Muslim Associations*.

²³ Phiri, *Muslim Associations*.

²⁴ Taylor, *Culture and Customs*, 35-36.

²⁵ Phiri, *Muslim Associations*.

²⁶ Phiri, *Muslim Associations*.

regular guest on the radio programme, *Focus on Islam*, presented on Radio Phoenix – a programme that was cancelled mainly due to organisational difficulties among the Muslims themselves.²⁷ It was in this context that Muntanga emerged as a contestant in the 2016 general elections, becoming one of the notable Muslim women in the Zambian public life.

The Media Context

The media includes a wide range of communication media such as television, cinema, video, radio, photography, advertising, newspapers and magazines, recorded music, computer games, and the Internet. The relationship between the media and religion, which has currently become more popular, is not a novelty. Perhaps the important question is how the media was understood and interpreted in different historical times, be it in technological terms where the media became a conduit for the transmission of a religious ideology, or as an institution where the media became a structured complex of social relations²⁸ and the religious change linked to shifts in media forms and practices of mediation.²⁹

In Zambia, religion and the media were popularised in the 1990s with the growth of televangelism. This was largely driven by the liberalisation of the airwaves through the Radio Communications Act (1994) that resulted in the birth of radio and television stations in different provinces. The rise of private media also entailed that religion could be mediated widely.

Unlike South Africa where there are Muslim owned and controlled community radio stations,³⁰ Muslim initiatives in radio and television were yet to emerge in Zambia. Hence, Muntanga used the available media, such as radio and television feature programmes and social media platforms to communicate religious messages. This scenario resonated with the Nigerian context in which African Traditional Religion, Christianity, and Islam used the mass media for commercialisation.³¹ Despite these developments, scholarship on religion and the media in Zambia

²⁷ Phiri, *Muslim Associations*, 193.

²⁸ Richard Fox, *Religion, Media and Cultural Studies: Theory, Religion and Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Hackett, Melice, Van Wolputte and Pype, "Interview: Rosalind Hackett."

³⁰ Muhammed Haron, "The South African Muslims Making (air) Waves during the Period of Transformation," *Journal for the Study of Religion* (2002): 111-44.

³¹ Pius Oyeniran Abioje, "A Critique of Commercialisation of Religions in Nigeria via the Mass Media," *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no.2 (2011): 57-80.

was yet to evolve. Hence this article seeks to make a modest contribution to this discourse within a Zambian context.

Sirre Muntanga, a Muslim Woman and the Media in the 2016 Mayoral Elections

This section discusses the nature and significance of Muntanga's contest in the mayoral election campaigns through discourses of the Muslim woman contestant in the media in order to demonstrate how the media became a platform for communicating messages on Islam and Muslim women in particular.

The Nature of Sirre Muntanga's Contest for Mayor of Lusaka

The nature of Muntanga's context is viewed through the prism of her Muslim identity and electoral campaign messages. As alluded to, Muntanga was the only Muslim woman contestant in the 2016 general elections. She originates from the Chawama Muslim community, one of the densely populated areas (popularly referred to as "compounds" in Zambia) in the city of Lusaka. Thus, with the exception of her religious identity as a Muslim woman and her origin, not much was revealed about Muntanga in the public discourses. The prominent portrayal remained that which was tied to her participation in politics and the consequent shift in Muslim women's participation in politics.

While Muslim participation in general elections at different levels was not new, Muslim women participating in politics, particularly as exemplified by Muntanga's contest in the elections, was a recent development in Zambia. For example, in 2004, when former President Mwanawasa visited the Makeni Islamic Centre, he commended their work through the medical clinic that serviced more than 4,000 patients per month, with the magnitude of their primary, secondary, and vocational schools around the country. Mwanawasa also implored the Muslim community to actively participate in politics. This earned Mwanawasa the support of the Kabwe Muslim Association that instructed its members to vote for him and the then ruling MMD in the 2006 presidential elections. The larger Islamic Council of Zambia (ICZ) generally endorsed Mwanawasa's appeal for greater Muslim participation in the political processes, though it adopted a nonpartisan stance and called on its membership to register to vote, cast ballots wisely, and stand as candidates in the elections.³² As such,

³² Taylor, *Culture and Customs*, 2006: 36.

Muntanga's participation in the electoral contest could not be detached from this broader Muslim engagement in the political life of the country.

Muntanga's campaign messages were centred on transforming Lusaka city:³³

People in Lusaka have been yearning for an opportunity to get a leader of their choice, a leader that understands, a leader that will be available, a leader that will deliver... Since independence, Lusaka residents populating the townships have been subjected to drinking water from the shallow wells. This is one of the things that we have to change in Lusaka and being one of the people that drink this kind of water daily, I know exactly what the townships need.³⁴

Wearing her *hijab* on her campaign posters and messages, Muntanga presented herself as "the chosen one from the compounds, a woman who understands and has tasted the plight of the majority," youthful, dynamic and visionary, and branded herself as *msikana wa mukomboni* (a young lady from the densely populated areas).³⁵

Muntanga reflected an understanding of the influence of the media through one of her quotes: "Malcolm X quotes: the media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent and that's power because they control the minds of the masses."³⁶

Muntanga reached out to the electorates through the television and radio chat shows. For example, she featured on Joy FM, Hot FM and ZNBC television, among others, including the use of photography in places where she visited the electorates. In addition, she used her Facebook blog to convey her messages, which became an archive of her political journey. Ultimately, the nature of Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka can be described as serving both religious and political notions as shaped by her context.

³³ Stephen Kapambwe, "Who will take Lusaka Mayoral Seat?" *Times of Zambia*, 2016, <http://www.times.co.zm/?p=88028> *Times of Zambia*.

³⁴ Kapambwe, "Who will take Lusaka Mayoral Seat?"

³⁵ Sirre F. Muntanga, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/sirre4lusakamayor>.

³⁶ Muntanga, Facebook.

The Religious Discourses and the Significance of Muntanga's Contest for Mayor of Lusaka

As Muntanga presented a transformational message to the electorates, her participation in the mayoral elections ignited debates that revealed the media as a platform for communicating messages on Islam and Muslim women in particular. To start with, her identity as a Muslim woman sparked off some interest from the electorates who, among other things, questioned her participation in the elections. Apart from the curiosity from the general public, her participation in the elections also attracted a debate within her Muslim community as to whether a woman could be a political leader. The men from her own Muslim community had mixed reactions when she announced her candidacy.³⁷ As such, the significance of Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka was revealed through the messages on Muslim women's engagement in politics that began to enter the political sphere through the attempts to clarify her participation in the elections. For example, leaders such as those from the Zambia Interfaith Networking Group on HIV and AIDS noted that

[t]here is a school of thought that is going to tell you that women are not supposed to vie for political positions; they are supposed to be at home. Another school of thought from the feminists would tell you they need to; in fact, they will tell you that women can even lead prayers...Islam believed that for society to succeed, the family has to be built on a solid foundation and the person that builds that solid foundation is a woman. If a woman's participation in politics is going to take her away from the home, then there is a problem. But if a woman can manage both her duties at home while taking responsibilities elsewhere, there is nothing wrong with her participating in politics.³⁸

The concerns over a woman's participation in political leadership within the Muslim community also resonated with some elements in the Zambian indigenous religious worldview that tended to support patriarchal systems. For example, in an analysis of the Zambia National Women's Lobby group in the 2001 tripartite elections, it was revealed that women had long played a largely supportive role in the national Zambian politics perpetuated by the patriarchal notions of women as mere supporters of the male dominated society.³⁹ Apart from the

³⁷ Muntanga, Facebook.

³⁸ Muntanga, Facebook.

³⁹ Bizeck J. Phiri, "Gender and Politics: The Zambia National Women's Lobby Group in the 2001 Tripartite Elections," in *One Zambia, Many Histories, Towards a History of*

patriarchal culture, there are numerous reasons that account for women's tendency to be engaged in politics as mere supporters in post-independence Zambia such as a lack of resources and commitment.⁴⁰ Muntanga's contestation for the mayoral position therefore received attention not only because she was a Muslim, but also because she was a woman. Despite these debates, the rights of women to participate in politics regardless of their religious and political affiliation were provided for in the country's legal provisions, including the National Gender Policy.⁴¹ Hence, Muntanga's participation in the elections signified the strides that had been made in the Zambian context to facilitate women's engagement in political leadership not merely as supporters of the male political candidates, but as contestants themselves.

The religious discourses in the media not only reflected the debates surrounding Muntanga's participation in the mayoral elections, but also signified how the media could be a platform for promoting Islamic literacy. By this, Muntanga's participation in the elections provided an avenue for correcting the misconceptions of Islam that were exhibited during the electoral campaigns in the public sphere. Despite democracy allowing more opportunities for women's participation in the political arena, the Internet and multiple media platforms provided increased opportunities to promote patriarchal religious and cultural beliefs.⁴² In the Zambian context, the media platform created a space for women to assert themselves. For example, given the public misconceptions of women in *hijabs*, resulting in Muntanga being labelled as a member of Boko Haram and Al-shabaab, among other misleading terms, the Muslim community used the media to clarify why women wore a *hijab*: 'God has instructed women to wear it as a means of fulfilling His commandment for modesty. The women, wearing a *hijab* had a personal choice that was made after puberty and intended to reflect one's personal devotion

Post-Colonial Zambia, eds. Jan-Bart Gewald, Marja Hinfelaar and Giacomo Macola (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 259-74.

⁴⁰ Bertha Osei-Hwedie, "Women's Role in Post-Independence Zambian Politics," *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture and Social Justice* 22, no.2 (1998): 91-3.

⁴¹ Office of the President, *National Gender Policy: Government of the Republic of Zambia* (Lusaka: Government Printers, 2000).

⁴² Anthony M. Gunde, "Holy Symbols of Violence: New Media, Religious Rhetoric and Gendered Power Relations in Malawi," in *New Media and the Mediatization of Religion: An African Perspective*, ed. Gabriel Faimau and William O. Lesitaokana (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 140.

to God.⁴³ These associations of Muslim women with the hijabs and terrorist activities has a long history.⁴⁴

Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka also opened up avenues in which challenges of Muslim women were spelt out in the public media. A Muslim woman aspiring for leadership faced a double opposition, because some conservative factions within Muslim groups did not believe that a woman should be in a leadership role.⁴⁵ For Muntanga, the discrimination gave her a platform to tell people more about Islam, and she felt that if many Muslims would participate in elections, the discrimination would soon be a thing of the past,⁴⁶ signifying that her participation had both religious and political undertones. As concluded in other contexts, media representations of Muslim women had revealed a discrimination against women. For example, Muslim women were either disadvantaged through misrepresentative choices of images or silenced through a general lack of due prominence.⁴⁷ It must be noted that the "discrimination" reflected in Muntanga's public narrative was only tied to the discourses of the political campaigns, because Muslims and Christians have historically co-existed peacefully in Zambia.⁴⁸

Muntanga's participation in the elections further ignited the question as to why people had to vote for a Muslim. Situated in the broader discourses of Zambia as a Christian nation, Muntanga used the media to highlight the Islamic virtues that would enable her to perform her mayoral functions:

In terms of accountability, we Muslims believe that we will be judged for whatever we do in this world and in the hereafter; this has also been mentioned in the Quran that hearing and sight and the heart will be asked on the Day of Judgment. Every one of us is responsible and accountable for what we are in charge. Under my leadership as mayor, I expect that the directors, management and auditors of the council will perform their

⁴³ Christine Chisha, "Who are these Women in Hijabs?" *Zambia Daily Mail*, 22 October 2017, <http://www.daily-mail.co.zm/who-are-these-women-in-hijabs/>.

⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁴⁵ Muntanga, Facebook.

⁴⁶ Muntanga, Facebook.

⁴⁷ Al Jazeera News, "UK Media's Portrayal of Muslims 'Misleading and Negative:' Study." 9 July 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/uk-media-portrayal-muslims-misleading-negative-study-190708104550539.html>.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Culture and Customs*; Phiri, "Gender and Politics."

professional duties with the objective of satisfying the needs of the public and to God as well....⁴⁹

These sentiments were backed by the notion that giving service to people was part of her Islamic faith.

Towards an Explanation of the Significance of a Muslim Woman's Contest for Mayor of Lusaka in the 2016 General Elections

While religion and the media discourses were often portrayed as intentional efforts by religious individuals and communities to use the media for religious purposes, the mediatisation accounts in the 2016 general elections were by and large ignited by a public search for answers on matters relating to Muslim women, gender, and politics. This signified the quest for knowledge on Islam in the public domain as well as women's struggles in political leadership, entrenched in religion and gender discourses. It can safely be argued that, while religion and the media were often linked, based on the development of new media technologies,⁵⁰ the Zambian context also confirmed that religion and the media could be linked through the quest for religious literacy as shaped by the religionisation of politics. For instance, by raising questions on whether a Muslim woman could engage in electoral politics, the teachings of Islam on the subject were brought to the fore, hence demonstrating how the media became a conduit for seeking religious clarifications and communicating religious messages. This also brought to the fore the religionisation of politics in which religion was used to garner support, and in turn created communities of religious dialogue through religious institutions and actors who spoke on religious matters pertaining to Muntanga's participation in the elections.

In addition, while Muntanga's contest revealed some form of religious illiteracy exhibited through name calling and searching for reasons why a Muslim woman deserved to be voted for, this also unveiled the literal understanding of the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation which remained only a declaration because the individual rights and freedoms remained guaranteed in the country's constitution. Despite this, religion became part of the political campaigns in ways that reflected the two-

⁴⁹ Muntanga, Facebook.

⁵⁰ Faimau and Lesitaokana, *New Media and Mediatisation of Religion*.

sided use of religion in politics (campaign and de-campaign) with messages that pointed to Christianity's legitimacy in leadership. For example, the campaign messages reflected the use of biblical names and verses and the declaration of Zambia as a Christian nation to attract electorates especially at the presidential level. During the campaign, political rallies often commenced and closed with a prayer, depicting a form of public worship. Some campaigners were going to the extent of using "hallelujah-amen" as a rhetorical strategy to create rapport with the listeners, hence reducing religion to a political tool. It was therefore probable that this scenario of Christianised political campaigns raised the big question of Muslim participation in the elections. Hence the media became an avenue for wider publicity and clarification as part of the media's recognised role in the mediatisation theory.

Muntanga's contest for mayor further pointed to the broader use of religion in the context of political competition and the nature of the religionisation of politics. For example, while the questions that were raised could easily be associated with religious illiteracy, this portrayal could be deemed as part of the wider political nature of the 2016 general elections in which a contestant's religiosity was questioned and used as a basis for campaigning and de-campaigning others. For instance, at presidential level in which the major two contestants were Christians, the campaign messages in the media were not devoid of name-calling, including using labels like "Satanists."⁵¹

While a label like "Satanist" could easily be perceived as a pointer to religious illiteracy in the public sphere, they also underlined the nature of political religionisation anchored on attracting political support for oneself and de-campaigning other contestants in the 2016 general elections, in ways that could easily be associated with electoral campaigns serving political and religious agendas. This therefore contributes to explaining the use of the media by the selected members of the Muslim community to promote religious literacy on Islam, sparked off by labelling Muntanga and questioning her participation in the elections. As such, the media became a conduit for communicating religious ideas as underpinned by the mediatisation theory. The media also created a community of those advancing Islamic ideas in the context of the elections as Muntanga's participation in the elections became a basis for religious authorities,

⁵¹ Daily Nation Reporter, "I'm not a Satanist, Says HH," *Zambia Daily Nation*, 1 April 2016, <https://www.zambiadailynation.com/2016/04/01/im-not-a-satanistsays-hh/>.

communities, or other representatives to purposely place information about religion in the media.⁵² This signified the mediatisation theoretical position that points to the ways in which the media have become important sources of information about religious issues as well as tools for active engagement with religion.⁵³ For instance, Muntanga's Facebook posts that addressed ideas on Islam and gender from her perspective alongside the reviews and comments, created and shaped Islamic discourses in the campaign that allowed for the construction of religious identities among the Facebook users. This was by indirectly creating a virtual religious community in support of Muntanga's candidature in the elections. This resonated with the argument that online platforms like Facebook provide spaces for increasing levels of religious satisfaction among the followers of popular Christian preachers in Africa.⁵⁴

Although Muntanga was not the winning candidate in the mayoral elections, her public engagement through the elections ultimately remained significant for contributing towards the exemplification of how the interaction and discourse of religion and the media were shaped by the context and different actors involved. Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka further added to announce the individual and collective contributions of Muslim women towards the visibility of Islam and development of the country. As was the case in Burkina Faso, Muslim women made contributions to the development of Islam through activism with associations, personal initiatives, religious studies, pilgrimages to Mecca, and media activities, and in turn used every opportunity to gain visibility and seek recognition of their religious legitimacy within their community.⁵⁵

Based on how religion and politics interacted in the 2016 general elections and the consequent discrimination associated with Muntanga's participation as a Muslim woman in the media, the article argues that the

⁵² Kwame Asamoah-Gyadu, "Media Demonise African Religions." In Proceedings of 2011 Media Projects Conference: Journalism, Ethics and Religion. Accra, 24 June 2011.

⁵³ Stig Hjarvard and Mia Lovheim (eds.), *Mediatisation of Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁴ Motilola Akinfemisoye, "Type Amen and Share to Receive an Instant Miracle: Expanding the Frontiers of Religious Satisfaction Online in Africa," in *New Media and the Mediatisation of religion: An African Perspective*, eds. Gabriel Faimau and William O. Lesitaokana (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 123.

⁵⁵ Frederick Madore and Muriel Gomez-Perez, "Muslim Women in Burkina Faso since the 1970s: Towards Recognition as Figures of Religious Authority?" *Islamic Africa* 7, no.2 (2016): 185-209.

kind of politicking that could easily be associated with a lack of knowledge and appreciation of each other's religion, did not represent the wider recognised relationship between Muslims and Christians in Zambia who mutually co-existed as provided for in the country's constitution and a multi-religious society. The sound relationship was exhibited by the state's recognition of Muslim contributions to the nation in different historical periods. For example, the Lusaka Muslim Community Association was helping needy people across the country including the digging of boreholes so as to provide water and the distribution of relief food, blankets, and mosquito nets, among others.⁵⁶

The relationship between Islam and Christianity further remained mutual in that religious ideas and practices of each religion were respected. For example, the Muslim community in Zambia recently hailed President Edgar Lungu for his solidarity with them during their month-long season of Ramadan that demonstrated a spirit of tolerance that existed in Zambia. During the month of Ramadan, the Makeni Islamic Society Trust that represented the larger Muslim Community in Zambia, acknowledged receipt of the public statements, social media posts, and personal messages wishing the Zambian Muslim community a blessed *Eid* – a gesture that affirmed the warm, tolerant, and cordial nature of the country.⁵⁷ As such, Zambia remains a country in which Muslims and Christians co-exist⁵⁸ and the Muslim contributions to the country's developmental agenda are recognised.

Conclusion

The article interrogated the interconnectedness of religion and the media through the exploration of the nature and significance of Sirre Muntanga's contest for mayor of Lusaka during the 2016 general elections in Zambia. Based on the mediatisation of religion and religionisation of politics, the article showed that Muntanga's contest for mayor signified how Muslims turn to the media to convey Islamic messages and how the interaction between religion and the media could not only be based on the availability of media technologies, but also on public demand for

⁵⁶ Noah H. Abbaker, "Freedom of Worship in Zambia, Sudan," *Times of Zambia*, 4 April 2016, <https://allafrica.com/stories/201604051627.html>.

⁵⁷ Chris Phiri, "Muslims Hail Tolerant Zambian Spirit," *Zambia Reports*, 6 June 2019, 15, <https://zambiareports.com/2019/06/06/muslims-hail-tolerant-zambian-spirit/>.

⁵⁸ Mark Riedemann, "Islam in Zambia: Small and Notable," Interview with Fr. Felix Phiri, *Zenit*, 11 April 2011, <https://zenit.org/articles/islam-in-zambia-small-and-notable/>.

religious messages as shaped by the religionisation of politics. As a conduit for religious messages, the media were largely used to clarify Islamic ideas on Muslim participation in politics, thereby confirming the mediatisation theoretical position on the role of the media in the construction of religion in a contemporary society, including the ways in which the media have become important sources of information about religious issues as well as tools for an active engagement with religion. The article has therefore signified that the religion, gender, and media interface could also be shaped by different contexts and actors.

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