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# **The role of the church and mosque in the political mobilization of Black African Immigrants in Finland at the municipal level<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract:**

Research has generally shown that the church and mosque play some role in immigrant political integration, especially mobilization. In Finland, this is not yet known as no research has yet examined it on immigrants. This leaves a gap on whether the church and/or the mosque play such role on them. This paper seeks to fill this gap, using Black African immigrants as case study through in-depth interviews. The focus is on political mobilization at the municipal level where many immigrants in Finland have full local suffrage. The study does not just examine the role of the church and mosque in mobilization in conventional politics (such as voting, party membership, campaigning), but also in the unconventional (such as protests, strikes, boycotts). Findings however reveal that both religious institutions play a relatively little role in these two regards.

Keywords: Black African immigrants, political mobilization, church, mosque

## **Preamble**

This paper investigates the role of the church and the mosque in the political mobilization of Black African immigrants in Finland at the municipal level. While there have been some studies and research reports on general immigrant political participation in Finland (Srai 2012; Ahokas 2010; Weide 2008; Valtonen 1997; Sagne et al. 2005; Statistics Finland 2013; Yle 2012, October 24) none has yet examined the role of the church and the mosque or any other religious institutions thereof. Instead, they have generally centered on examining the influence of immigrants' knowledge of Finnish language and culture/society, length of residence, socio-political networks, party mobilization, and/or electoral results of immigrant candidates on their general political participation. This paper therefore seeks to fill this epistemological gap by examining the influence of the church and the mosque as well, using Black African immigrants (henceforth African immigrants) as case study. African immigrants are chosen because they are the most visibly different migrants, with a growing population, which stood at more than 30,000 at the end of 2013 (Statistics Finland 2014). This makes them a potential political force in Finland in the foreseeable

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future. Moreover, by nature and culture, Africans are generally religious, with many being Christians or Muslims<sup>2</sup>, which makes sense to investigate whether this religiosity also influences their political involvement in country of settlement. Through this investigation and subsequent analysis, this paper contributes empirically and theoretically to existing research on immigrant political integration in Finland.

In the following sections, existing literature on the role of the church and the mosque on immigrant political involvement generally would be reviewed, followed by a brief discussion on immigrants and religion in Finland, as well as an explanation of the data collection for this paper. Next is a discussion on the theoretical concept of political mobilization, and an overview of the institutions for political mobilization. Then, the role of the church and the mosque in the political mobilization of African immigrants in Finland comes in, followed by the conclusion where all discussions are synthesized.

### **Church and Mosque in immigrant political involvement**

The church and the mosque have been generally discovered to play important role in immigrant political mobilization and participation in many countries (Chhibber & Sekhon 2014; Galandini 2012; Brown 2011; Boubekeur 2007; Wong 2006; Siddiqui ND; Calhoun-Brown 1996; Gerstle 2001; Harris 1994; Tate 1993; Jamal 1995; Verba et al. 1995; Wilcox and Gomez 1990). Khuram Siddiqui, for example, argues, following Verba et al. (1995) that the mechanisms put forth for the stimulation of political interest in people occur within religious institutions through the exposure of members to religious sermons of priests/pastors and imams, as well as those of lay church and Islamic leaders through religious meetings in which general political topics, or specific political issues, are sometimes discussed (Siddiqui ND; see also Brown 2011 on the church). In this way, the church and the mosque provide a forum for political socialization where political preferences are made and where potential civic skills, political efficacy, and political knowledge are shared/learned, regardless of members' level of education and socioeconomic status (Siddiqui, ND; Brown 2011; Wong 2006; Verba et al. 1995:82). In Nigeria and Ghana, for instance, especially in Pentecostal churches, pastors (and lay church leaders) are sometimes partisan in their sermons and/or discussions with congregants in apparent bid to promote a particular candidate(s) and/or political party. This also sometimes happens even in more traditional churches such as the Catholic

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<sup>2</sup> Most African countries are made up mostly of Christians and/or Muslims, with other religions such as African Traditional Religion, the Bahá'í Faith, Judaism, Hinduism, or Buddhism quite small. Consequently, most Africans I come across in Finland have been Christians or Muslims.

and Anglican, as well as in the mosques. Besides, churches and mosques are sometimes used to mobilize members for protests or demonstrations against unfavorable political decisions. All these make the church and the mosque extremely important in Nigerian and Ghanaian politics respectively, especially during general elections, to the extent that sometimes, some pastors and priests are *indirectly*<sup>3</sup> bribed by politicians to speak in favor of their candidate and/or party before their congregants.<sup>4</sup> Wong (2006) also writes that in the US, religious leaders not only mobilize voters through sermons and informal discussions, but also involve them in practical political mobilization itself. She further argues that this is ingrained in church's democracy and culture, as well as in members' volunteering work ethic in which they contact church members and non-members alike to vote for their choice candidates or party. Wong cites some immigrants, especially Chinese immigrant, as acknowledging the church as being instrumental to their active political participation. Harris (1994) also asserts that black churches in the US, for instance, play an important role in mobilizing its congregants to engage in political involvement, which includes voting, enrolling as political party members, and joining political protests/demonstrations when necessary. Such mobilization also includes their contacting church members and non-members alike to vote for their choice candidates in anticipation of good results for their church and group. In other words, political mobilization somewhat ignites or reminds of the group consciousness and identity among them, and religious interpretations are sometimes used to encourage this and enhance mobilization and participation. In Britain also, Galandini (2012) affirms that black churches provide similar setting for Blacks, where they not only gain important political and social information for political involvement and group consciousness, but also hone their political skills for political representation and leadership. She further argues that in building group consciousness, for example, black churches also serve as a place of refuge, where blacks experiencing racial discrimination and deprivation in the host society find psychological and spiritual comfort through sharing with members their experiences and getting psychological and spiritual assistance as well as also material protection and social support (See also Haapajarvi 2012). In this way, the churches also discover and reinforce a strong sense of belonging in the host society which is quite necessary for group political mobilization.<sup>5</sup> For Calhoun-Brown (1996) however, it is instead *politicized* black

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<sup>3</sup> This is usually done through financing short term projects in the church or mosque, or being overly generous in church or mosque donations, weeks or months before elections

<sup>4</sup> All these are said to also happen in the mosques according to responses from some of my Muslim interviewees.

<sup>5</sup> Shingles 1981, 77, also argues that the 'awareness among blacks of their shared status as an unjustly deprived and depressed group' in the US for example, 'constitutes to the combination of a sense of political efficacy and political mistrust which in turn induces political involvement' geared towards claiming their rightful status in the society through active political activism. See also Wolbrecht & Hero's edited volume, *The Politics of Democratic Inclusion*, esp. from p.47

churches and not just any black church that encourages and fosters such consciousness and political mobilization among its members.

Furthermore, in Ireland also, Fanning and O'Boyle (2009, 23-24) also discover that African immigrants emphasize the role of the Church as 'a social place' that gives them a sense of belonging in Irish society. In fact, some Africans, they say, argue that the church or their religious belief has greatly influenced their active political mobilization and participation. Fanning and O'Boyle thus affirm that the church then becomes a motivational stake that fosters a *bonding* capital among them, but that this bonding capital, for some, did not eventually and unfortunately translate into *bridging* capital with the Irish society because of reasons of racism. However, they point out that a few tried to bridge this racial gap by joining Irish organizations rather than just staying put in African churches and associations (ibid p.37).

When it comes to the mosque, it also plays an important role in political mobilization. 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 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 information sharing and mobilization where Muslims play active role in monitoring government' activities and declaring their opinions on political issues aimed towards taking significant roles in government's decisions that affect them (ibid, pp. 146-151). Thus, in this role of the mosque, political Islam was born, which according to Amel Boubekour (2007, 14) denotes a recourse to Islam as the first justification for most political actions by Muslims, because it is where demands are made by Islamic authorities on Muslim faithful for active participation in the political process. Jamal (2005) further discovers, in his examination of the political impact of American mosques on African-Americans, South Asian-Americans and Arab-American Muslim communities, that mosques, similar to Black (and Latino) churches, serve as important sites for political and civic activities for these immigrants. Specifically, he notes that the National Muslim Advocacy group, such as Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR), for instance, carries out voter registration drives during elections through mosque outreach campaigns to encourage members to vote (ibid, p.526). In fact, the coalition building efforts of these Muslim organizations across mosques in the US, he says, were so effective that the unified Muslim bloc vote in 2000 presidential elections was thought to have been significant to the election of President G.W. Bush. In addition to this, he points out that the US mosques generate group and ethnic consciousness

among Muslims (much like the politicized black churches) which is very useful for political mobilization. However, he affirms 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 because 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 into increased political participation (ibid, pp.524, 527-8). However, Eggert and Giugni (2011) argue that it is membership in the mosque rather than regular attendance that has a positive impact on the political involvement of Muslim migrants.

In any case, what these arguments show is that the mosque and the church play a significant role in immigrant political mobilization. In Finland, this might be possible but in the absence of any such research yet<sup>6</sup>, we cannot say whether or not the above arguments could be of any relevance to African immigrant political mobilization. Although party mobilization was also studied in previous studies, whether they use religious institutions or not to mobilize was never mentioned.

### **Immigrants and Religion in Finland**

Christian and Muslim immigration to Finland is as old as immigrant arrivals. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (the State church) was until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the only officially recognized religion in Finland following the Lutheran Reformation of the 1520s (Martikainen 2014). But with the Russian annexation of Finland in 1809, came the Russian Orthodox Church which was equally officially recognized owing to the annexation (Martikainen 2004; Kääriäinen 2011). The Russian presence also brought with it small religious minorities such as Catholics (mostly Poles), Judaists (mostly Russian Jews) and Tatar Muslims, although they were not officially recognized. Then, the Dissenter Act of 1889 allowed the establishment of other Protestant churches such as the Methodists and Baptists, making it possible for anyone who left the Lutheran church to join another registered Protestant church (Ibid; Heininen & Heikkilä 2002). But it was the Religious Liberty Act of 1922 that gave full religious recognition and freedom to all religions and residents eventually (Martikainen 2004, 114-6).

This paved the way for immigrants that arrived later to follow existing religions (Martikainen 2004; Ketola et al. 2014), or establish their own. By 2009, Martikainen estimates that immigrants were

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<sup>6</sup> After extensive research and inquiries, I could not find any.

61% Christian<sup>7</sup>, 19% Muslim<sup>8</sup>, 4% Buddhist, 2% ethno/native religionist, 1% Hindus, and 11% non-religious (Martikainen 2011, 2014). By 2013, Ketola et al. confirm that two-thirds of immigrants are Christian, while one in five is Muslim, with a smaller proportion religiously non-affiliated (Ketola et al. 2014, 165). The accurate percentage of African immigrants is not clear, but Martikainen estimates that African Christians constitute 30% and Muslims 64%, in 2009, with Somalis being the Muslim majority at 16% (Martikainen 2011, 240). The Somali Muslim, including also Ghanaian Muslims, have their own mosques, especially in the Capital region, which are usually rented buildings where many other Black African Muslims go for worship and other religious activities. The Islamic leaning/teaching in these mosques however differs from one another due to ideological, theological and/or ethnic leanings (Dutton 2009). African migrant Christians, on the other hand, are not a homogenous group either. There are Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals and revival movements. Some of these, especially the Pentecostals, Evangelicals and revival movements, were established by Africans themselves. They include: the Redeemed Christian Church of God, the Church of Pentecost International, the Evangelical Church of Christ, the Hosanna Church, Dominion Believers Assembly, and the African Charismatic Movement.

With the exception of Catholics, many other African immigrant Christians sometimes share churches for worship or for other Christian activities, depending on the availability/proximity of the church in question to where they reside. Dutton argues that Anglicans, Methodists, Episcopalians in Finland, for instance, often share the same church where sermons are often paralleled “on the social gospel rather than (on) more evangelical preoccupations and tendencies” (ibid, p.28). Sharing or visiting of the same or different churches with different pastors/priests, exposes them to different influences of religious and lay leaders, including also among the congregants themselves, who in addition, have different kinds of trust on their leaders, depending on the familiarity, similarity of interests, and/or affinity with the leaders. Brown (2011) argues that, in the US for example, such trust usually determines the leaders’ possible influence on their congregants on societal issues, including the political. For Dutton (2009), besides these factors, co-ethnicity and proximity in ideals with leaders, also play a strong role on how congregants agree or disagree with leaders on important issues including the political. This he says also exists in the mosques where different leaders tend to have influence on their congregants depending on these factors which also shape beliefs. Boubekeur (2007, 16) affirms that Islamism is not a homogenous phenomenon because its actors are often from

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<sup>7</sup> Down from estimated 76% in 1990 due to slow-down in Western Christian migration to Finland - Martikainen 2011, 240

<sup>8</sup> Up from estimated 6% in 1990 due to increase in Muslim migration - ibid

different backgrounds and of varied influences: “the methods of action that they propose (therefore) also evolve over time”. Siddiqui (n.d) argues that some Islamic leaders issue *fatawa*, - a decree mandating Muslim faithful in Sunni Islam to participate in a societal process, such as the political. But he however notes that obedience to such decree mostly depends on the relationship the faithful have with the issuing leader. In any case, Muslims are said to generally have stronger confidence in their leaders than arguably do any other religious group, and this makes their mobilization relatively easier especially when based on religious sentiments. For example, as Chhibber and Sekhon discovered in their comparative study of Muslims and Hindus in India, it is easier to mobilize Muslims based on these religious cues and symbols than Hindus because Muslims have great trust in political appeals made by their leaders unlike Hindus. Chhibber and Sekhon (2014, 1-4) further argue that this was also the case even where religious and party divide is socially and politically intense, in both rural and urban areas. Finding out whether African immigrant Muslims and Christians have great trust on their leaders or not, is one of the major aims of this paper.

## **Data Collection**

The data collection method used is qualitative in-depth interviews with 50 African immigrants, male (N=35) and female (N=15),<sup>9</sup> legally resident in Finland, especially in five 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. Nonetheless, a few opinions were also sought from some other Africans living in other municipalities. In-depth interview is essential for this study because it provides detailed insights into personal experiences and explanations on the topic in question (Kvale 1996). And qualitative method was chosen because it helps examine life as it is lived, situations as they are constructed, and things as they happen within a context of inquiry (Wood 1999). Interviewees were randomly selected<sup>10</sup> and informed of the purpose of the interview and the confidentiality of their identity unless they want it made public. But only one person allowed his name published; other names used are therefore pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted during 2014 and 2015, using face-to-face contacts, Skype, Facebook, and/or phone calls. Each interview lasted for about 15 to 40 minutes. The questions that guided them include whether participants have been politically mobilized through the church or mosque, and whether their church or mosque is formally or informally used for political mobilization by politicians and/or church leaders, especially during general elections.

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<sup>9</sup> Why men are over-represented is because there are more African men in Finland than women.

<sup>10</sup> This was done from a pool of my African network as well as my friends' African networks in Finland, the major criterion used is that respondents are from the sub-Saharan Africa.



I have analyzed the interviews thematically, reading each interview transcription well, and marking down themes and elements of interest, such as respondents' countries of origin, whether they have been successfully politically mobilized in the church/mosque, have been mobilizers themselves, and the results. Also included are whether/how close they are to their religious or lay leaders in the church/mosque, or with their fellow congregants, and whether/how these leaders or fellow congregants have influenced their political mobilizations. Importantly, the way they interpret their experiences and the usage or non-usage of their church/ mosque for political mobilization was also of interest, including the similarities and differences in their responses. This is especially important in making implicit comparisons between Christians and Muslims.

### **The theoretical concept of political mobilization**

Although there are only a few studies focusing exclusively on the methodological task of operationalizing political mobilization (Salat et al. 2013) there are some concrete attempts to define it. Peter Vermeersch (2011), for instance, defines political mobilization as a process where people (e.g. electoral candidates, campaigners, political parties, community/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 (Salat et al. 2013). Political mobilization can take place in four different layers, namely: local (micro), regional (meso), national (macro) and international (global) (ibid). This paper 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. protest, boycott, hunger strike, lobbying, public statements, etc). Although in political science, political mobilization has been commonly tied to electoral politics (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Vermeersch 2011) the effects of electoral campaigning (Shanto and Simon 2000 in Vermeersch 2011) and/or to explain the fluctuations in voter turnout (Vermeersch 2011 citing Franklin 2004) it has also been extended to the field of unconventional (or contentious) politics (Martiniello 2007). Martiniello argues that in unconventional politics, "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 done collectively, it gives strong political meaning (ibid). Also, Vermeersch (2011) drawing from Amenta et al. (2010), della Porta and Diani (1999), and Edelman (2001), opines that unconventional political inclusion has deep roots in political sociology, particularly in the study of mass protest and social movements, which

has allowed sociologists and political scientists to examine the ways in which protest waves or movements have emerged, how they have developed, and what political impact they have had on policy outcomes, or on political and social change. He argues that people who are mobilized are usually encouraged to come out en masse and defend their collective cause. This cause could be ethnic, economic, social, educational, and/or political, and may be local, national, or international, for reasons of policy enactment, policy adjustment, law, or decree. Thus, he suggests that political mobilization can be said to have a distinctly collective dimension attached to it (Vermeersch 2011:1-2; see also Martiniello 2007). For African immigrants in Finland, this collective cause can be an improvement in their socioeconomic situation owing to racial discrimination. It might also be educational (e.g. on non introduction of school fees<sup>11</sup>) and on environment.

Furthermore, in “Toward a theory of Political Mobilization” (1974, 138), David R. Cameron opines that the most important result in the whole process of political mobilization is the expected increase in the whole scope and exercise of franchise by franchised citizens, as well as also on the potential increase in political mass organizations and/or in political party memberships. He further argues that the extent to which political mobilization involves political induction of people depends largely on the existence and strength of an organization or institution (e.g. religious/social organization, political party, government, etc), or a political agent (e.g. a campaigner) in the process of political mobilization, 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 a local society, and 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). Therefore, “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 also depends largely on how such organization (or agent) is able to convince individuals being mobilized to adopt new patterns of political behavior and discard their previously held pattern (ibid). For this to happen effectively thus, Cameron singles out two critical factors: 1) the extent to which the mobilizing agent adapts its ideology to articulate and give solution to local discontent; and 2) the extent to which it appropriates to its benefits the resources of the local society by penetrating and adapting to its purposes its organizational infrastructure (ibid). In the case of African immigrants, for any mobilizing agent to succeed in any promotional drive to mobilize them, be it in

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<sup>11</sup> Student unions in Finland have campaigned vigorously against government’s proposal to introduce school fees for foreign students, and many African students have joined in the protest

conventional or unconventional (political) platform, the person would first need to articulate and give solution to their local discontent (e.g. socioeconomic discrimination, school fees introduction, etc). Secondly, the agent would also need to penetrate and adapt to his/her benefits the organizational infrastructure of the local society in the promotional drive, which in the context of this paper, could be the church and/or the mosque.

### **Institutions for Political Mobilization**

It is already clear that the existence and strength of an organization or an agent is very necessary to the successful political mobilization of people (Cameron 1974). In Finland, as far as immigrant political mobilization is concerned, especially at the municipal level, such organization or institution include the municipal government, political parties, religious institutions, immigrant organizations/associations, multicultural bodies, labor unions and student bodies/unions. Except perhaps the government, Ireland (2000) and Martiniello (2007) respectively describe all others as “institutional gatekeepers” (Ireland) or “linking bodies” (Martiniello) between migrants and the host society which serve as “mobilizing structures”, or “act as control access to the avenues of political participation available to immigrants in their host society” (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” (ibid). However, our interest in this paper is not on all of them but only on *religious institutions* such as the church and mosque.

### **Case of African immigrants in Finland at the municipal level**

All African immigrants interviewed are eligible to participate in Finnish local elections under sections 26, 27 and 33 of the Finnish Local Government Act (1995), which states that immigrants are eligible to vote and/or be voted for in municipal elections if 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”. Thus, all my interviewees have been legally resident for at least two years in a municipality of residence. They are also church and mosque members respectively, with more than sixty percent being active members, which all makes it possible for them to know whether political mobilization occurs in their churches or mosques, or not. Some of their responses indicate that political mobilization, strictly speaking, does not occur in their churches or mosques. Even discussing politics from the pulpit seems almost like a taboo, as concerned religious leaders appear to see

politics as better off in relevant secular institutions such as political parties than in the church or mosque. In the case of the church, for example, this is not to say that there is no church-politics relationship in Finland. There is and this mostly concerns the state church - the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) (henceforth, Finnish Lutheran church) - which has been the sole state church until the nineteenth century, and which implies that many political leaders were Lutheran and that the church to a great extent influenced societal mores and ethos until recently when this influence started waning gradually due to increasing disinterest in the state church among the majority. Incidentally, the ongoing massive loss of memberships may have also contributed to this (Yle, 2014, February 12, November 29; 2013, July 17). According to René Gothóni, a professor of comparative religion at the University of Helsinki, this disinterest and loss of membership is because “People’s commitment to the (Lutheran) church is generally weaker (now), and (that the state) religion does not have such a great significance in everyday life any more” as it did before. This he says is a result of individualism, urbanization and growing secularity in the Finnish society (Yle 2013, July 17). Nevertheless, the Finnish Lutheran church as an institution has a research center (or *Kirkon tutkimuskeskus* in Finnish) where it researches and publishes on church-state relations, as well as on ethical suggestions for government and political parties. It also organizes seminars and panels for government and political parties which are sometimes posted on Youtube (ELCF 2015; Weide 2015, March 11). However, this does not mean that the Lutheran church allows for *secular* political mobilization in its parishes by political parties and candidates during general elections. This does not happen, at least not formally. As Juri Mykkänen, a Finnish lecturer in political science at the University of Helsinki, argues, Lutheran parishes “are not used by politicians to rally voters or boost campaigns (in general elections). Actually in my opinion, this is extremely rare”. However, “this is not to say that religion or religious organizations would be insignificant in Finnish politics” but that political parties and candidates formally “do not hold campaign meetings in (Lutheran) church premises”. Instead, they use their own social and political networks (Mykkänen 2015, August 13; also Mykkänen 2011).

Also Marjukka Weide, a Finnish researcher, attests that

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 (in the church dining room) etc (for discussion) (Weide 2015, March 11)

However Mykkänen acknowledges that in church elections, the Finnish Lutheran church does formally advertise and mobilize its members for participation. Juhani Niinisto, a Finnish journalist, also attests that Finnish political parties mobilize and participate actively in church elections by nominating their own candidates who are usually Lutherans and campaigning for them (Finland Times, 2014, November 5). The campaign is usually done in the church and within its circles (Ibid; see also Mykkänen 2015, August 13, 2011; Yle 2013, July 17).

Thus only in church elections are mobilizations done formally. In general elections, such as municipal elections, it is rather something “much more fluid than direct campaigning”. This also implies that electoral candidates do also come and mingle during the after-service coffee. For example, some African immigrant Lutherans did confirm this. For example, Charles, a Liberian Lutheran in a Helsinki suburb parish, asserts that “I have seen electoral candidates and politicians, mostly Finns, meander through the crowd after church service or during coffee time, telling people about their candidacy and asking us to vote for them.... I saw this in 2008 and 2012 municipal elections....” (Interview: 20 January 2015). For other Finnish Protestant churches, there are however mixed claims/arguments in this regard. Olli Sulopuisto, for instance, affirms that “Many Finnish people were quite certain that some parts of *Perussuomalaiset* (i.e. the far right Finnish party also known as the Finns Party), mainly the *Helluntailaiset* (the Pentecostals) and the Christian Democrat party, do use (their) congregations for political mobilization” in general elections (Olli Sulopuisto, Finnish journalist, 2015 March 11). However, my informal discussions with some politicians reveal they have different views: some agree that their congregations are mobilized to support their candidates in general elections. One Pentecostal politician particularly argues that “we do mobilize members to mobilize support for our candidates because majority of them are party members just as they are also church members. And I see nothing wrong in their participating in this mobilization” for the party (Informal communication: 30 December 2014). While another, a Catholic, disagrees, arguing that any political mobilization in the (Catholic) church is done informally: “Brief conversations are sometimes done after Mass outside the church building: campaign cards and fliers are also distributed to those that gather” (Informal communication: 28 October 2014). These however are not the same with what happens in the so-called “free” Pentecostal churches<sup>12</sup>, such as the African and Finnish evangelical churches, which seem to have a different ideology to church and politics relations. Many of these churches believe that church and politics should be totally kept separate since they presumably belong to different domains. Hence the free churches are not used as

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<sup>12</sup> These are churches that mostly do not have historical close ties to the State, and they include many Pentecostal churches.

arenas for political mobilization whether formally or informally, even though, as Martikainen (2004) argues, they command many young, active and devoted members, who can actively participate in this mobilization. As an illustration, Emmanuel Edeh, an African preacher, theologian and politician in Tampere (near central region of Finland) who has been elected to the Tampere municipal council during 2004 to 2012, and who also has founded an international evangelical church in the same city with a growing crowd of young and vibrant members, argues that

All through my years of (political) campaigns, I have never campaigned in the church... even though I am a popular preacher.... This is because I do not want to mix church and 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)

One in three of African electoral candidates interviewed share similar belief, with some pointing out that the idea of campaigning in the church or mosque never came to their mind in the first place. For the electorate, a good number confirm that political mobilization in any form has never happened in their church. For example, Kuro, a Ghanaian man of the Church of Pentecost International in Helsinki, and Kiri, a Zimbabwean lady of a small African Methodist church in Joensuu (Eastern Finland), respectively asserts 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 nonpolitical (Kuro, 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 woman of the International Evangelical Church in Espoo argues that

I only see politicians come to the associations that I belong (in Finland), and not in the church.... They usually... tell us about their candidature and the policies they could introduce... that could favor us (immigrants).... (Interview: 17 June 2015)

In mosques in Finland, formal political mobilization does not also seem to exist despite the fact that it has been described as a political center in Islamic society (Farahati 2011). The Chairman of the Helsinki Islamic Center, for example argues that the mosque in Finland is never used for political activities and neither is the Islamic Center, although this is possible in Somalia. Muslim politicians

in Finland, he says, instead usually use different associations and the media to mobilize for supporters (Interview: 10 June 2015). A Somali female immigrant in Helsinki also argues that the mosque in Finland 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” (Tiilikainen and Ismail 2013, 112). We could see that politics is excluded. Musa, a Burkinabe Muslim political campaigner in Tampere further confirms that,

I think Muslim politicians in Finland rarely use the mosque for political mobilization, not because this is totally out of place I think, but because I personally feel that talking about one’s political ambition in the mosque either directly by one or indirectly through the imam would be a distraction to those at prayer.... I prefer rather talking to potential Muslim voters in a different setting.... But, I do use Islamic quotations to persuade them.... 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 that Muslim candidates use in Finland than the mosque or even Islamic center.... (Interview: 20 December 2014)

These arguments show that although politics is possible inside the mosque, and that Islamic cues could be used to mobilize Islamic voters as Chhibber and Sekhon (2014) for example discovered in India, this is not yet possible in Finland, probably for reasons expressed by Musa, or for some other reasons. However, informal campaigning appears possible in both mosques and churches. For instance, Caleb, a Tanzanian Muslim in Vantaa argues that during municipal elections, politicians usually come to their mosque on Friday after prayers to distribute their manifestoes and cards to mosque members. “But they don’t come inside; they stand at the door” (Interview: 20 April 2015). Many African Muslims interviewed confirm this, arguing that they prefer it “outside the mosque building”. But a few has the opposite view, emphasizing that they prefer it inside the mosque either as part of the sermon or during after sermon announcement. Those in this group argue that doing it this way is what any serious-minded Muslim candidate should do “to get the spirits of Muslims when it is still high”. However, they note that for any Muslim candidate to use these mediums, s/he must have been known and respected among the Muslim faithful in that mosque. Also, his or her track record of attendance and active participation should also be known. “In this way, his (or her) political messages could appeal to the Muslim faithful because the political (campaign) message of less unknown or less respected Muslims do not appeal to anyone and no imam will even give a room to such a person to talk in the mosque, let alone talk on the person’s behalf . In fact, it is better for such a person to use other campaign means than the mosque....” (Abdul, Ghanaian Muslim in Oulu, 14 June 2015). This might also apply to Christian politicians who are not known among church members. However a Tanzanian political scientist in Espoo suggests that if a politician is

popular in the society for good reasons but is weak in church attendance, s/he might still be successful in mobilizing church members because the good popularity s/he enjoys in the society would possibly overshadow the weak church attendance because church members are also society members.

In general, many Christian and Muslim respondents believe that pasting campaign posters that contain electoral manifestoes on information boards at the church or mosque is one of the effective ways that candidates do sometimes use, but which should be used regularly because many Christians and Muslims read the boards regularly (Interviews: 2-3 June 2015). Another said crucial method they said is the use of digital and online social media, such as mobile phone, facebook, twitter and Youtube. According to many, some candidates are also using this platform. This is important, they say, because “many voters no longer attend religious services, or not so regularly, and so, reaching them through these digital means is a better option” (ibid). Paul, a Liberian politician in Tampere, interestingly confirms that although he uses “direct physical approach in my campaign drive regularly, I also use online social media to communicate my invisible constituents....” (Interview: 15 June 2015). Some respondents also attest that they often use online social media to access campaign information, communicate with candidates, and ponder well before making voting decisions. On the other hand, some respondents however argue they prefer physical contact with candidates and therefore feel happy when they are approached by candidates/campaigners at the church or mosque in the manner described above. For instance, Kanda, a Zambian male member of Hosanna Church in Espoo, argues that “African candidates do usually come towards the end of church service, waiting outside the building, because no right-thinking pastor or reverend would allow political campaigns inside the church... I think the church is a sacred place and should be kept sacred all the time” (Interview: 4 January 2015). Also, for Belinda, a Congolese female Catholic in Helsinki, “in my church, they (politicians) sometimes do come after Mass and talk to us about their (electoral) ambitions; but this is outside not inside (the church). They also distribute their campaign cards, and explain anything if you need explanation....” (Interview: 5 January 2015). Nevertheless although this campaigning is not usually done inside the church or mosque, the condoning of their being done within church or mosque premises can also be construed as an indirect approval by concerned religious leaders.

On the other hand, although it is clear that churches and mosques in Finland do not *formally* serve as arenas for political mobilization, it does happen that sometimes there are *formal* political encouragements from some church or mosque leaders during their sermons and/or after sermon



conversations with congregants. For instance, Ubara, a Tanzanian Christian in Vantaa who attends the Turku Home Church – a splitter of the Finnish evangelical movement (Martikainen 2004), 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...that we should be part of decision-making.... (Interview: 10 January 2015)

Also, Baariq, an Angolan Muslim in Helsinki,

Our imam sometimes includes politics in his sermon, even outside election time, but more so, during it. He usually encourages us to vote in order that we should have adequate political representation because he believes that this is the key to stopping discrimination against immigrants in Finnish society... and I do usually vote because of this (Interview: 12 April 2015)

For Dingba, an Ivorian Lutheran in Tampere,

During election time, our pastor sometimes preaches about politics and morality in the pulpit, urging us to vote for morality. And she can discuss it extensively after church services with whoever is interested...I think I agree with her. Politics and morality should go together to enhance political morality (Interview: 12 November 2014)

In today's world of 'neutral morality', Susan Mendus (2009) makes a strong argument in her *Politics and Morality* that politics needs to be fused with strong morality broadly speaking, in order to make the current tumultuous world a morally better place. The church and the mosque, being moral houses, could play a key role in this regard through sermons on politics and morality. And so, religious leaders who do this could be fulfilling a great moral duty not only to their locality, but also to the world. Similarly, religious leaders who also urge immigrants to vote, for example, in order to reduce their social exclusion through political representation, are also combining a great moral and civic duty to the world since they are contributing to its tolerance, fairness and solidarity. This could however be more or less relevant when such leaders are able to discern between good and bad electoral candidates as some of my respondents have argued that their church or mosque leaders do sometimes advise them to vote for a particular candidate or even party. For instance, Petra, a Rwandan woman who attends the Assemblies of God, argues that "my pastor has once or twice or even thrice encouraged us to vote for a particular candidate during after service chats with him because he says they are good and could represent us well in the municipal council, and I did each time...." (Interview: 4 November 2014). Also, Rabiah, a Ghanaian Muslim in Helsinki argues that

her immigrant imam does also advise them to vote for immigrant-friendly parties because “they would be of great help to our wellbeing in Finland, and I do vote for them” (Interview: 30 August 2015). Whether the intention of these religious leaders is morality or merely partisan is not clear or known. Nevertheless, the possibility of hearkening to such advice depends on the trust those being advised have on them, as well as also on familiarity, co-nationality/ethnicity, and/or proximity in ideals or interests with them (Brown 2011; Dutton 2009). For instance, among respondents who have adhered to such advice, more than one-third has strong trust on their leaders, seeing them as those who have good spirit of discernment – i.e. being able to competently discern between good and evil. Co-ethnicity or nationality also comes next. For instance, a Sudanese Anglican faithful in Jyväskylä 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 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...and I voted....” (Interview: 31 March 2015).

Moreover, there are also political encouragements from lay leaders in the church and mosque, as well as also from among congregants themselves, especially through their own initiated political discussions, usually after church services or meetings. The lay leaders, for example, are usually leaders of intra-church or intra-mosque associations such as various men/women/youth organizations and pious societies/prayer groups. The political encouragements they usually give are said to be of two types, namely: the ones made during association meetings and the ones made after, especially while leaving the church premises. In the first, it is usually more general, non-personal, non-partisan, and therefore cannot be termed a campaign for any candidate or party, but a general advice to church or mosque members to vote during election time because “it is your civic duty”. In the second, it is usually partisan, personal, and selfish, because it is aimed at supporting a particular candidate or party. Usually it takes a form of a dialogue between a leader and a member.

One in four interviewees attests to having been approached by a church or mosque lay leader in this manner. Some respondents also affirm that this has sometimes made them doubtful of their own candidates, to the extent of their dumping these candidates for the leader’s own candidates. Such dialogue also happens among the congregants themselves with similar result. Sometimes, it also takes the form of a group discussion after church services or mosque prayers with attendant *pro et contra* argumentations, usually on which candidate/party to vote for, and why. This sometimes heats up to the extent that consensus is usually impossible. For instance, a Nigerian man in Helsinki who goes to Redeemed Christian Church of God opines 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. This might lead to a quarrel when someone tries to lord their arguments over others in the 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).

Critically, some respondents argue that they find political participation sometimes a thing to be discarded even when religious influences (such as church leaders or fellow congregants) advise on the contrary. A factor that plays a decisive role in this is their poor social and economic status, which has also generated some kind of group consciousness among them. It has been established in research that most Africans in Finland face racial discrimination, especially in social life and the labor market, regardless of their level of education, length of stay in Finland, and Finnish language skills (Egharevba & Hannikanen 2005; Forsander 2008, Rastas 2013b; Ndukwe 2015). This is also despite the Finnish Non-Discrimination Act (2004) which is against all kinds of discrimination whether based on ethnicity, color, nationality, sex, gender, or religion. African victims of this discrimination usually do not believe that politicians/electoral candidates mobilizing them can change their marginalized situation. For instance, Toro, a Gambian migrant of the Dominion Believers Assembly, for instance, argues

I have been approached on some occasions by some Finnish candidates in my church, 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, Muhammad, a Senegalese Muslim in Vantaa, argues that

Some Finnish politicians have asked me to vote for 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 they would do anything....They are not immigrants, let alone Africans (Interview: 16 January 2015)

This mobilizing strategy follows Cameron’s theoretical assertion in which a mobilizing agent is expected to adapt his/her promotional drive to address a local discontent of the group being mobilized. However, in the case above, ethnicity or immigrant status appears to hamper it. The impact of ethnicity on voting decision has been documented in research (Vermeersch 2011; Bergh and Bjorklund, 2011; Stegmaier, Lewis-Beck, and Smets 2013; Fisher et al. 2015). Key findings indicate that visible minorities are more likely to vote for members of their own ethnic or racial group than otherwise, especially when they are victims of structural discrimination. This implies that they probably nurse doubts about members of the majority population. Another possible reason

is that municipal elections are not usually taken seriously by some African immigrants unlike the parliamentary which they believe is more important since parliament makes laws that could change immigrant marginalized socioeconomic situation unlike municipalities that lack such powers. However, being that many African immigrants do not qualify to vote in parliamentary elections yet since it requires Finnish citizenship which many do not yet have, they however do not also vote in municipal elections, thereby staying in political limbo. As an alternative, many draw closer to the church (or the mosque) as a means of succor from the socioeconomic marginalization (Haapajärvi 2012). Dutton argues that “people may be more inclined to become religiously involved as immigrants” because it provides them with social status and protection from racial stigmatization (Dutton 2009, 34, 38). In situations like this, political mobilization from politicians who are not members of the marginalized group may be fruitless because of doubts on their sincerity to deliver any promise made as we have seen in the two interviews above. Political encouragement in this situation from a trusted religious or lay leader, or a fellow congregant, to vote for such people may also be fruitless, and might be viewed that the person encouraging may have been bribed by the candidate in question. This suspicion (rightly or wrongly) might consequently erode the trust/respect the mobilizer enjoys from the mobilized. However, sometimes, there may be a realistic reason for this doubt on such politicians. An African ex-councilor in a big Finnish city, for instance, argues that from his experience at the municipal council, *some* Finnish councilors who got immigrant votes with a promise to address their marginalized situation eventually do nothing in this regard at municipal council proceedings. He further argues that he has had to persuade them on several occasions to speak for immigrants who voted them (Interview: 25 April 2015). The lackadaisical attitude might probably be because they do not experience what immigrants experience, and so do not feel this same way. But it also confirms the accusation that their seeking immigrant votes was simply to get elected. Jamal (1995, 532) argues that it is not enough for a candidate to claim to identify with a marginalized group; it will be good if s/he also has some racism experience in order to feel what the group feel, and hence represent them well.

Furthermore, in the informal political sector, such as protests, demonstrations, strikes, etc, political mobilization in the church or mosque seems far-fetched, despite their societal marginalization. According to Peter, an official of the Church of Pentecost International, “At worst, we write (protest) letters to the appropriate authority 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 when not, we usually continue to write or visit until it is addressed. We never have to go out to protest. That is not the role of a church. It is instead the role of secular associations

I think....” (Interview: 27 March 2015). A good number of Islamic leaders concur, adding that “the best thing to do in a dire situation is to go to the relevant agency in person and complain in a civilized manner” (Interview: 22 May 2015). This is interesting, given the Islamic role of the mosque as a political center where such mobilization is prepared. The Arab Spring is a good example (Hoffman & Jamal 2014; Ardic 2012). Ardic (2012, 38) argues that besides being a house of prayer, the mosque also functions “as a locus of anti-government agitation and logistical centers of preparation for demonstrations”. However many African Christian and Muslim respondents opine that in a quiet country like Finland it makes sense for a church or mosque to avoid being seen as radical through encouraging its members to roam the streets in protests, or engage in strikes. They further attest that the protests they have so far engaged in in Finland mostly came from secular associations/unions such as labor/student unions, and/or environmental organizations (e.g. Greenpeace). Nonetheless, the writing of protest letters, the contacting of the relevant agency, or actual visiting of their offices even if in a civilized manner, is all forms of politics (Martiniello 2007).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined and analyzed the role of the church and mosque in the political mobilization of African immigrants in Finland. Findings reveal more similarities than differences. In other words, while formal mobilization was seldom done in both institutions, informal mobilization was fairly common. Part of the reason is the tacit belief that the church and the mosque are respectively sacred and therefore should be kept separate from mundane politics. However, even though many religious leaders do not allow formal mobilization in the church or mosque, some are said to preach about politics during sermons, or engage congregants in political conversations, especially at election times, to encourage them to vote. But it is good to note that adherence to such encouragements usually depends on the trust congregants have on the leader, which might include whether both are from the same country, ethnic group, share similar religious ideals or political interests, or are in close friendship or marriage. This is particularly crucial in a multinational African church or mosque, and also in the face of the socioeconomic discrimination that Africans face in Finnish society.

Nevertheless, by largely preventing formal political mobilization, the church and mosque in Finland, unlike their counterparts in the UK, Ireland, and the US respectively (Galandini 2012; Jamal 2005; Fanning and O’Boyle 2009) block one of the important avenues for immigrant political socialization where political knowledge and skills are learned or honed, and congregants

encouraged to engage in political mobilization themselves. As a consequence, the spiritual and ethnic bonding that the church and mosque foster among blacks in Finland does not translate into important *political bridging* with the Finnish society. In a country like Finland, with its shortcomings in immigrant relations, this spiritual and ethnic bonding could be a veritable political instrument in igniting member interests in political engagement, especially towards having a strong bloc vote that would be relevant in electing black political representatives.

Meanwhile, a comparative research would be needed on other immigrants in Finland, especially those experiencing similar racial discriminations<sup>13</sup> (ENAR-Finland 2010) to discover whether or not (and if so, to what extent and nature) their respective religions influence their political engagement.

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