

Kenyans fear rise in Christian-Muslim conflict

by [Ken Chitwood](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue

While the smoke that hung over the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi has dissipated, tension still lingers in the air.

The attack by al-Shabaab militants in September on a mall frequented by Westerners in Kenya's capital city left at least 67 dead. But the burning of a Christian church in the majority-Muslim city Mombasa just two weeks later suggests that the nation is on the precipice of more conflict between Christians and Muslims.

This is dispiriting for many in a country that for years enjoyed relative peace between the two monotheistic religions that dominate the region.

"I am afraid that now Muslims will attack more, and the Christians will arm themselves and fight back," said Paul Komu, a truck driver and Christian who was driving near Westgate when the attacks occurred.

Kenya is predominantly Christian, with Muslims making up about 11 percent of its population, mostly along the Somali border, its coastal region, and in cities such as Mombasa.

John L. Allen Jr., author of *The Global War on Christians*, wrote that just as Africa is the pacesetter for Christian and Muslim growth, it has also become one of the primary fronts for Christian-Muslim conflict—though not always in Kenya. For years, Kenya has been a refuge for people fleeing strife in other parts of the continent.

But Christian mission agencies such as the Mission Network report incidents of persecution pouring over the Kenyan border with Somalia. Mombasa is a flashpoint for conflict, and foreign militants and terror groups have wreaked havoc in the past—as was the case with the 1998 al-Qaeda bombing of the U.S. embassy in Nairobi.

To a large extent, day-to-day relations between the Muslims and Christians have been amicable.

Jamal Faroole, a Somali Muslim living in Nairobi, said, “For a long time we have had peace with Christians in this country.”

David Ongwaye, a Lutheran pastor in Kebirigo, Kenya, said that while there has been more political correctness than practical cooperation, “there was no thought that Muslims were plotting to cause mayhem.”

Now, sentiments have shifted. “The human mind gets suspicious,” said Faroole. “People were already suspicious of Somali Muslims, and now I fear it will only get worse.”

Ongwaye mentioned the targeting of non-Muslims in the mall attack as particularly unsettling. During the siege, the attackers demanded that Muslims identify themselves and leave the scene.

“The incident at Westgate has, in my opinion, rendered Christians more vulnerable to the Muslims, and as such any future ‘ecumenism’ will be met with caution. It was very clear that those hostages who would recite the *shahada* were saved from the bullet,” he said, referring to the Muslim profession of faith.

Newton Kahumbi Maina, an expert in Christian-Muslim relations at Kenyatta University, said competition for converts, education and politics have exacerbated and preserved a centuries-long conflict.

Notwithstanding history and the fact that suspicion and outright trepidation grip the country, the majority of Kenyans, on both sides, said they do not want to see escalating violence. Some even struck a hopeful tone.

Komu said he wants to see reconciliation. “Somali and Kenyan Muslims are still our cousins,” he said. “Borders can divide us, but we are still extended family.”

Ongwaye, who said he was going to visit a Muslim friend on the coast, said that from his Christian perspective the mandate of Jesus to “love thy neighbor,” which both Muslims and Christians can embrace, is more relevant than ever. —RNS