Hassan J. Ndzovu

*Muslims in Kenyan Politics: Political Involvement, Marginalization, and Minority Status.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2014, 232 pp., 978 0 8101 3002 9, $79.95 (cloth).

This is the first extended treatment of Kenyan Muslim politics since Arye Oded’s *Islam and Kenyan Politics* (2000). With religiopolitical tensions in contemporary Kenya having reached a high-water mark as political cleavages intensify along religious lines, Ndzovu’s short but impressive study is a timely and vital contribution to the body of recent academic literature on religion and politics in Kenya.

Ndzovu’s primary aim in the book is to address what he identifies as the ‘increasing politicization’ (3) of Islam by Kenyan Muslims. In doing so, the author explicitly departs from some of the earlier literature on this subject. For example, he challenges Donal B. Cruise O’Brien’s claim that ‘Kenyan Muslims “seemed to find little to say of their present situation” due to their own incompetence at engaging in national politics’ (6) by outlining in detail over the course of the book the extent to which Kenyan Muslims have played a major part in ‘both the democratic and nondemocratic aspects of national politics’ (15), from the precolonial era to present day. ‘Muslims,’ Ndzovu proposes, ‘despite being a minority have produced the most politically visible form of associational activity in the country’ (ix). The key to understanding the nature of these political mobilizations, he suggests, is not to follow Oded (2000) in reading ‘Muslim politics in Kenya as an extension of developments outside the country’ (91), but rather to attend to the local factors to which Muslims are responding; chiefly a widespread and overwhelming sense of their own marginalisation due to ‘poor education, economic impoverishment, and political powerlessness’ (4). For this reason, Ndzovu endeavours to ‘trace the political history of the Muslim community in Kenya and situate it in the present unfolding political scenarios in the country’ (145). In doing so, he offers an overview
of Muslim political history in Kenya since the nineteenth century that is the most expansive and coherent to date.

In the opening two chapters the author mines a wealth of historical data obtained through fieldwork and archival research in order to chart how Kenyan Muslims have mobilised politically in response to different political regimes since the nineteenth century—from the time of the Omani Al-Busaid dynasty’s rule at the Kenyan coast, through the British colonial era, and right up to the Kibaki presidency. He skilfully draws out several threads that illuminate the contemporary Kenyan context, foremost of which is the issue of the heterogeneity of the Kenyan Muslim community, particularly with respect to ethnicity and race. Throughout the book we see how long-standing ethnoracial divisions between Arab, Swahili, and African Muslims were reinforced by the modes of governance favoured by British colonial administrators, and subsequently exploited by the postcolonial state as a successful means of undermining the collective political mobilisation of Kenyan Muslims. Ethnoracial divisions at the time of independence saw Kenyan Muslims divided on the issues of African nationalism and secession. Compounded by the educational disadvantages faced by Muslims unwilling to attend Christian mission-run schools under British rule, these divisions ensured that it was ‘upcountry’ Christians that led the country into a new era of African-majority rule.

In later chapters Ndzovu turns to the postcolonial context where Kenyan Muslims have, pace Cruise O’Brien, long been ‘a large and active constituent of Kenyan politics’ (146), subject to the arbitrary influence of ‘the political leadership and the prevailing conditions’ (77). Here the author makes an interesting observation that ‘the politics of legislation and constitution’, as in the cases of the Equality Bill 2002, the Suppression of Terrorism Bill 2003, and the Kadhi court debates, ‘have always brought Kenyan Muslims together with a united voice to demand what they regard as rightfully theirs’. Yet ‘whenever Muslims feel that the impending issue is not directly related to their collective marginalization, they retreat back to their ethnic and racial enclaves, jeopardizing any form of desired unity’ (137f), as in the case of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK). Successive Kenyan governments have been complicit in this dynamic by underplaying and even sabotaging the political concerns and ambitions of the Muslim community in a fashion that has only ‘enhanced their resolve to resort to politicized Islam’ (150).

A constant theme throughout the book is that of the failure of Islam and Islamic symbols to serve as a mobilising and unifying factor for Kenyan Muslims because of the heterogeneity of the community and the sheer weight of the ethnoracial politics inherited from the colonial period. However, Ndzovu’s