

# Transforming Societies after political violence

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Good friends,

The topic of today, 'Transforming Societies after political violence' is such a huge and long bridge for me to cross- but I will cross it nevertheless.

I come from Kenya, a country that I love and appreciate so much. But like very many other African countries, Kenya has had its moments of great honour and moments of great shame and failure. An example of moments of ugliness and disorientation is back in 2007/8 after our general elections when we had massive tribal clashes which left close to 2000 people brutally killed and hundreds of thousands displaced. It was not the first time for Kenya to have tribal clashes, as a matter of fact, it has been happening after every five years when we have the general elections. Having given these facts, it is my prayer that we will have peaceful elections come next year when we have the next general elections.

The big question, how do we then actually transform a society after political violence? This isn't an easy one to answer. And I don't think there is no easy formula to do it.

According to me, the ethnic clashes in my country are always politically manipulated by some of our very selfish, corrupt and greedy leaders. The clashes have always left very many people, those who are lucky to not to die, with a lot of pain and hurts. They have also caused a lot of resentments and the desire for revenge in many other people. My family was a victim of the tribal clashes back in 1997, 1998 and in 1999, and this forced us to move to a safer place. In 2008 my elder sister and so many of my cousins and close family members lost all their properties in the tribal clashes- three of my best primary school teachers and village mates were killed too.

At this point, allow me to share with you my story of transforming my society after these political violence. As I have mentioned to you, my family has been a victim of the tribal clashes between the Kikuyus (my ethnicity) and another ethnic group called the Kalenjins. Even before I encountered the ethnic clashes, I already hated all the Kalenjin people. I had been fed with a biased frame and prejudices against them. When my family was thrown out of our home, my hatred grew. I wanted everyone to hate them. I kept passing on the seedlings of hate to all willing listeners. In 2007, I attended a Peace Circles workshop in India. We were reflecting on what builds peace and what destroys peace in the society. For the first time, it dawned on me that even though I always prayed and hoped that Kenya can be a peaceful country, I was still a perpetrator of hatred. I was among those destroying my country's peace by the hatred in my heart, and the bitter and resentful words from my mouth.

That realization was, and has continued, to be paramount in my life. It marked a new life for me. A life of being a reconciler and a creator of peace at our home and society. But it was not an easy choice to implement. First I had to deal with my own hatred towards the Kalenjin people; and to do this I felt it was important for me to apologize to Kalenjin friends for my hatred towards them. It was very difficult for me to apologize, but every time I did it, my hatred melted away and love found some space in my heart.

By doing this, I got the courage to forgive those who were involved in the clashes and to recognize that it is not all Kalenjins who are bad, and that it is not all Kikuyu's who are good! And as someone

said when you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others. After clearing my heart, I took some extra steps to visit the Kalenjin friends homes, and later invited some to my parents home where I was living. Very many visits have happened after that; and I have realized how generalization hinders understanding. I have also learnt that we fight because we don't understand each other; because we don't want to put down our preconceived assumptions.

But even with all this realizations and understandings, after the 2008 violence, I almost felt like I had lost hope to continue with the inter-ethnic peace building. The pain was too much and I almost wished the Kalenjin people bad luck. But I knew I couldn't do this. And I couldn't give up. I had to continue for the sake of the future, for the love of tomorrow and for my great love of African continent. I don't want the coming generation to go through what we have gone through and what we continue to go through. I envision a peaceful country which appreciates ethnic diversity, and upholds the values of humanity. This vision is what keeps me stuck in doing what I do; Meeting with the youth, the women and men all together- with the message of love, trust, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing.

I also strongly feel that if we, the ordinary people, can stand in solidarity on the ground level, we will be able to help our leaders to approach life and politics in a credible manner and help stop them using violence as a viable political strategy.

It is our responsibility to shun the extensive negative ethnicity in the country starting from our own families and homes; We need to explore the environs within our reach so as to create space for understanding of the 'other' as well as have a clear orientation to enable us make conscious and informed decisions & commitments not to contaminate our children with the stories we tell; If we pass seedlings of hate and resentments, the next generation will be full of the same; and this will guarantee more violence in the future. We must tell new stories of love, acceptance and appreciation to the younger ones; For we must decontaminate the future.

I would like to conclude with a quote from Dalai Lama on why we should avoid war and violence and embrace dialogue and reconciliation by all means. He says; ***“War seems to be part of the history of humanity. As we look at the situation of our planet in the past, countries, regions and even villages were economically independent of one another. Under those circumstances, the destruction of our enemy might have been a victory for us. There was a relevance to violence and war. However, today we are so interdependent that the concept of war has become out dated. When we face problems or disagreements today, we have to arrive at solutions through dialogue. Dialogue is the only appropriate method. One-sided victory is no longer relevant. We must work to resolve conflicts in a spirit of reconciliation and always keep in mind the interests of others. We cannot destroy our neighbours! We cannot ignore their interests! Doing so would ultimately cause us to suffer. I therefore think that the concept of violence is now unsuitable. Nonviolence is the appropriate method.”***