

Analysis

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Founder and Publisher
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
FAX : 24835620/1
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

Christianity Today's split with Trump highlights deeper issue in white evangelical America

After evangelical publication Christianity Today published a blistering editorial on what it called Donald Trump's "grossly immoral character", some church leaders and the US president himself denounced the criticism as elitist and out-of-touch. The Dec 19 editorial sparked a Christmas holiday debate over religion in US politics, and posed new questions about the close alignment between white evangelical voters and Trump, who has given their beliefs strong political support.

However, the coziness with the Republican president, who was impeached this month by the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives, is exacerbating a long-term crisis facing white evangelicalism, some Christians say - it is being abandoned by younger generations. There has been a big drop-off in white evangelical church participation among adults under 40, and publications such as Christianity Today and religious leaders are struggling to engage "Gen Z", or those born after 1996.

"One of the major factors is that the church is too tied up in right-wing politics," said Greg Carey, a professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. Evangelical activism against gay rights is particularly repellent to many members of a generation where "everyone has friends who are LGBTQ," Carey said.

Trump's presidency may make the age gap worse, some evangelical Christians believe. "Having to go out and defend this guy day after day, as many of these Trump evangelicals are doing, they're just destroying their credibility," said Napp Nazworth, who until Monday was politics editor of another publication, the Christian Post.

Nazworth resigned over the Christian Post's plans to criticize Christianity Today for its anti-Trump editorial. He told Reuters many younger evangelicals opposed Trump's immigration and asylum policies and were concerned about alleviating poverty, in contrast to older members of the faith. Evangelical leaders standing with Trump "will have no moral authority to speak to moral issues of the day after defending him," Nazworth said.

'Religiously unaffiliated'

Evangelicalism, like all forms of Christianity in the United States, is struggling to attract younger members, amid an unprecedented surge in recent years of the number of people identifying as religiously unaffiliated. White evangelical protestants declined as a proportion of the US population between 2006 and 2018, falling to 15 percent from 23 percent, according to analysis by the Public Religion Research Institute.

Higher-than-average voter turnout among evangelicals means the group still represents more than a quarter of the US electorate, but a failure to draw young worshippers means their electoral heft is set to diminish, said Robert P Jones, chief executive and founder of PRRI. The median age of white evangelicals and white Christians overall is 55, according to PRRI data, compared with 44 for the overall white population.

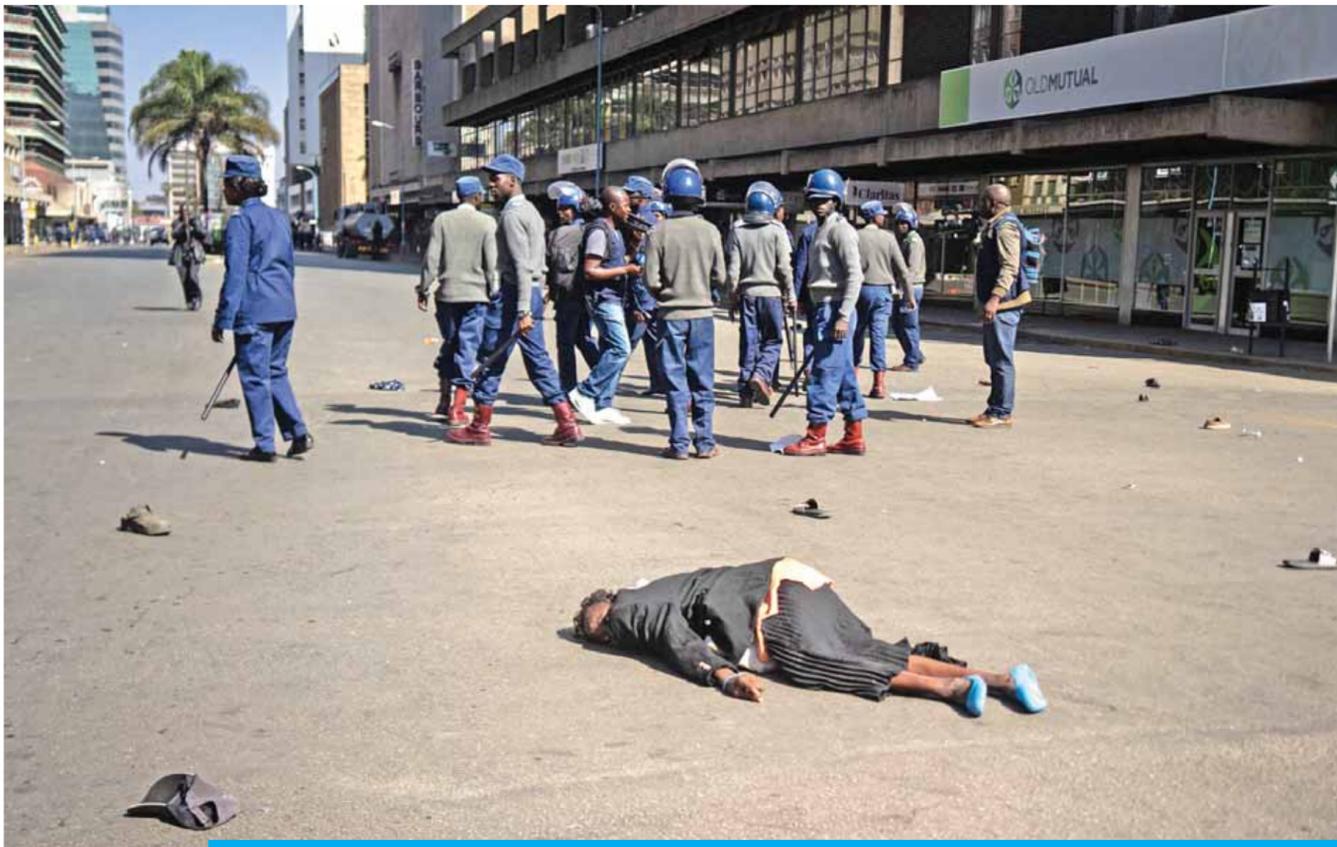
The evangelical church's "singular focus" on same sex marriage, relationships and abortion is failing to engage younger generations, said Randall Balmer, a professor of religion at Dartmouth University, and a former editor at Christianity Today. They are motivated by a broader set of issues, he said, adding "in terms of sexual orientation the younger generation just shrugs about that."

'Partisan attack'

The perhaps unlikely alliance between conservative Christians and the twice-divorced New York real estate developer has been important for Trump in a country that is more religious than most other western democracies and where a president's spiritual life is closely examined. White evangelical Christians overwhelmingly voted for Trump in 2016, when exit polls showed he won 81 percent of their votes. They have mostly stuck with him despite the controversies over his harsh attacks on political rivals and demeaning comments about women, thanks largely to Trump appointing scores of conservative judges who support restrictions on access to abortion.

Many US evangelicals also strongly support conservatives in Israel, and hailed Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the US embassy there. Trump, who describes himself as Presbyterian and whose advisors include evangelical figures such as Florida televangelist Paula White, dismissed Christianity Today as "far left". A group of nearly 200 leaders from the conservative wing of evangelicalism defended him in a letter to the magazine, praising the president for seeking the advice of "Bible-believing Christians and patriotic Americans". — Reuters

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In this file photo taken on Aug 16, 2019, a protester lies unconscious on the ground after being beaten by police near Unity Square in Harare. — AFP

Zimbabwe journalists suffer as regime tightens grip

Fmanuel Mapfumo has been unable to lift heavy objects since a Zimbabwe police officer fractured his left arm as he was covering a story last August. The 28-year-old journalist was filming a banned protest in the capital Harare when it happened. Opposition supporters were voicing their discontent with the country's ailing economy when police descended on the crowd with batons. Mapfumo, who works for the Zim Morning Post, said they ordered him to stop filming. "I identified myself as a journalist," he told AFP. "But the next thing I remember is being dragged into a group of police officers who beat me all over my body."

Rights groups have accused Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa of persistently violating human rights since he took office in 2018. In August last year six people died after the army used force against civilians protesting a delay in the announcement of election results. In January, the army attacked protesters marching against a hefty fuel price hike, leaving 17 dead. And as Mnangagwa has tightened his stance on dissent, journalists have also suffered repercussions. "We documented 18 cases of abuse of members of the media this year," said Tabani Moyo, who heads the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) - up from only one case in 2018. Most of the incidents involved police officers, he added.

263Chat under attack

The rise of attacks on journalists has brought back memories of the regime under former president Robert Mugabe, whose increasingly despotic rule cracked down

on the independent media. Mugabe was toppled by a military putsch in 2017 after 37 years in power, which led some of the country's embattled media professionals to hope for better days. That optimism was short-lived, however. Costa Nkomo, 30, was injured by police officers in January while reporting on a skirmish with unlicensed street vendors in downtown Harare. "A policeman to whom I identified myself as a journalist beat me up," said Nkomo, who was filming for a local news site named 263Chat.

Three months later, baton-wielding policemen chased one of Nkomo's colleagues into the 263Chat offices for filming a similar incident. "We managed to push them out of the office," said Nkomo, who took refuge on the balcony with a dozen fellow reporters. "They retaliated by firing a tear gas canister into the office and locking the door from outside." That incident caused outrage, prompting the government to promise an investigation. "Our constitution guarantees freedom of the media and government respects the constitution," tweeted the information ministry after the incident.

No protection

Government spokesman Nick Mangwana told AFP the information ministry had "engaged the police over the issue of safety for journalists". But he also said police had raised concerns about journalists "causing mayhem" by failing to respect safe distances without clearly identifying themselves. But the press cards issued by the government to allow reporters to do their job do not always guarantee protection. In August, journalist Leopold Munhende was

arrested alongside a group of rural teachers demonstrating for better pay. "A policeman grabbed me by the belt and ordered me to join the teachers," said Munhende, who was detained for seven hours. "I produced my accreditation card, but he wasn't interested." Munhende said an officer told him that he needed permission from the police to cover the demonstration. "It's that kind of ignorance of the law that is disturbing," he added. Munhende never reported the incident: He did not trust the police to investigate their own, he said.

'All kinds of excuses'

"Any journalist who is abused by the police should report the matter," said police spokesman Paul Nyathi, adding that perpetrators "should be brought to book". Nyathi blamed police mistreatment of journalists who had identified themselves on "operational difficulties". He added that "so-called freelance journalists" made it difficult for the police to relate to the media. But Moyo at MISA, which along with other groups has organized several meetings with police officers, complained about the lack of cooperation.

"The police will make all kinds of excuses, even when (there is) video or picture evidence," he told AFP. "They will move the complainant from pillar to post, saying they are trying to locate the implicated officer. They pretend to be ignorant and incompetent when it suits them," he added. Mapfumo meanwhile has taken matters into his own hands and is now suing the police commissioner general. — AFP

Lagos priced-out residents seek shelter in abandoned buildings

Adekunle Adigun is gainfully employed as a commercial lawyer on Victoria Island in Lagos, yet as he finishes work each day he does not know where his home for the night will be. For that, he turns to a man known as Papi, who leases space to Adigun and hundreds like him in abandoned and often unfinished buildings in the Lagos Island district - for about 200 naira (\$0.65) a night. "It is not ideal and it is a little scary, but everybody knows everybody so we are safe," Adigun, 27, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation as he sorted through bags of clothes in front of a bar.

Despite his professional stature, Adigun's 40,000 naira (\$130) monthly pay means he cannot find a permanent place to live in Nigeria's commercial capital. He moved to the Lagos megacity of about 20 million people in 2017 - which was initially designed to house 6 million people. Lagos's attractive location on a lagoon has only

fuelled its population, which the UN estimates could double by 2050, and rental prices, according to real estate experts.

Estate agent Moses Farama said that "a lot of the houses in Lagos are overpriced". "If we consider the minimum and average wages of the people living in Lagos, we can't say the market for houses is working properly," he added. With urban planning far outpaced by the city's growth, an overabundance of businesses has packed its island portion, said Oluwatosin Ajani, a Lagos-based financial analyst for BlackHouse Media, a public relations agency. "The mega-city plan is essentially a gentrification project," he said. "The government displaced a few waterfront communities, people that have existed in those spaces for generations," he said. "Of course, there is no home for them."

Idris Salako, commissioner for the Lagos state ministry for physical planning and urban development, said the government wants to make the city "a 21st century economy and destination for investment". "A lot of structures that are uncompleted or abandoned in the city may be distressed and not fit for habitation," he said in a phone interview. "Some of them are on drainage channels or unoccupied because of high rent or sales value. This government is working to resolve a lot of the problems."

Living conditions

Adigun spends the night with more than 20 people in a bedless 100-square-foot room facing Tafawa Balewa square in the city centre. Morning brings a scramble for water to shower, and by 5am the water is often cut off, he said. While cheaper housing options exist on the mainland, Lagos's traffic jams can add more than four hours to a daily commute, Adigun explained. When he lived with family in Oworonshoki, northeast of Lagos, he spent more than two hours getting to work in the morning.

Tunde Braimoh, a member of the Lagos House Assembly, said that "we are using the bus rapid transit system to link parts of Lagos that are hard to reach". "We are also working on fixing the roads to decongest the city and road systems," he said in a phone interview. But the quality of available housing is a bigger problem, locals say, with many reporting settling into deplorable conditions. "Sometimes, when it rains, water leaks from the walls," said freelance writer Vivian Nnabue. "Whenever it rains, everybody now knows what to remove - like furniture - and place in strategic places," she added.

The government is trying to improve access to homes through initiatives like an affordable mortgage finance scheme. And a spokesman for the housing ministry in Alausa said that many structures on the island as well as the mainland were marked for demolition. — Reuters

The panama hat and the keffiyeh - Guinea Bissau's contenders

Voters in Guinea-Bissau had a choice between two old political hands in yesterday's presidential election run-off, although both have very different styles and backgrounds. Here are profiles of the two men:

Domingos Simoes Pereira

Former prime minister Pereira has been politically active since his youth but this is his first run for the top office in Guinea-Bissau, a country with a turbulent history of coups since independence. Known throughout the country by his initials "DSP" - and his Panama hat - the 56-year-old Pereira is a former ally of outgoing President Jose Mario Vaz but now his fiercest critic.

Pereira, leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), scored just over 40 percent of the vote in the first round in November, well ahead of his rival Umara Sissoco Embaló. In the campaign's only televised debate this week, he portrayed himself as the candidate of virtue and good management, and accused Embaló of illegally financing his campaign from abroad. "The money which you are bringing into the country isn't going through legal channels," he charged. A civil engineer by training, Pereira studied in

Ukraine and California. Since his youth he has been active in the PAIGC, which led the bloody struggle for independence from Portugal in 1974. He became party leader in 2014 and was picked to become prime minister by Vaz who won a presidential election that year. But the two men quickly fell out over accusations of mismanagement of the country and corruption and he was sacked by Vaz in August 2015.

Pereira led his party to election victory in March this year but Vaz refused to nominate him as prime minister. A Christian, Pereira is married with three children. He is a member of one of the country's smallest ethnic minorities, the Kasanga. Before becoming prime minister, he served as minister of public works in 2004-2005. He also led the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) between 2008 and 2012.

Umara Sissoco Embaló

Embaló is a reserve brigadier general who wears a red-and-white Arab keffiyeh headress and is pitching himself as a unifier of the nation. He is also a former prime minister, under Vaz between 2016 and 2018, but now represents Madem, a party formed by PAIGC rebels. The 47-year-old who is nicknamed "The General" trailed Pereira in the first round of voting with just under 28 percent, but has come out fighting. In Thursday's debate, he hit back at Pereira's allegations, accusing his rival of "dipping into the state's coffers" to finance his election campaign and lashing the PAIGC for mismanaging the economy. Embaló says he is a "Muslim married to a Christian", and like Pereira, he is the father of three children. To burnish his credentials, during



Domingos Simoes Pereira



Umara Sissoco Embaló

the debate the multilingual candidate spoke in Portuguese Creole, which is spoken by a large part of the population. He hopes to bank on the support of the main candidates who were eliminated in the first round, including Vaz.

Born in the capital city Bissau, Embaló is a member of the Fulani ethnic group, and he studied social and political science in Spain and Portugal. He is a football fan, and supports Belgian team Standard Liege. He sought early retirement from the army in the 1990s, and got involved in business, including an investment fund set up by the regime of ousted Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. In October, Prime Minister Aristide Gomes of the PAIGC, accused him of plotting a coup, charges Embaló denied. "I'm not a bandit and I never get involved in subversive actions. Those who know me know that I am not violent," he told AFP at the time. — AFP