

# The Politicization of Sacred Spaces in Kenya: Examining the Nexus between Goonism and Political Violence

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**Abstract-** This paper examines the politicization of sacred spaces in Kenya, focusing on the nexus between goonism and political violence. Guided by Political Theology theory, the paper interprets sacred spaces as contested arenas where religious authority, political legitimacy, symbolic power, and struggles over access intersect. An interpretivist philosophical paradigm and qualitative multiple case study design were employed. Data were collected exclusively from publicly accessible online documentary sources, including news reports, official security and government communications, religious institutional statements and guidelines, audiovisual materials, and other relevant digital sources covering 2022–2026. The principal advantage of documentary research was its capacity to provide multiple contemporaneous accounts of politically sensitive incidents and enable cross-source verification; its key limitation was that online evidence may be incomplete, politically framed, or insufficient to establish responsibility for particular acts. Purposive case selection and documentary triangulation were used to examine the Ngarariga/Limuru disruption in 2024, PCEA Mwiki and PCEA Kariobangi North incidents in 2025, and Witima ACK Church and All Saints Cathedral incidents in 2026, selected because they represented different manifestations and stages of politicization, organised disruption, and political violence. Documentary source saturation determined the adequacy of the documentary corpus. Data were analyzed thematically through cross case comparison, with attention to political mobilization, organized coercion, violence, institutional responses, and the evidentiary status of competing claims. Findings demonstrate that politicization occurs along a continuum from legitimate political participation, civic engagement, and peace building to political messaging, patronage, contested access, organized disruption, intimidation, and violence. The evidence does not establish an automatic relationship between political engagement and violence. Rather, it indicates that goonism can function as an escalation mechanism where politically significant sacred spaces become sites of competing claims over access, visibility, and legitimacy and organized groups employ

coercive methods. The paper concludes that sacred spaces become particularly vulnerable when political competition intersects with organized coercion and contested institutional boundaries. It recommends strengthening religious institutional autonomy, maintaining clear boundaries governing partisan political activity, improving coordination between religious and security institutions, and ensuring impartial investigation and accountability for violence.

**Keywords:** Sacred Spaces, Politicization, Goonism, Political Violence, Political Theology and Religious Institutions

## I. INTRODUCTION

Religion and politics have historically constituted two of the most influential institutions shaping human societies, governance systems, and collective identities (Fox, 2018; Haynes, 2020). While religion provides moral authority, ethical values, and spiritual guidance, politics concerns the acquisition, distribution, and exercise of power within society. Their interaction has profoundly influenced state formation, democratization, conflict, and social transformation across different historical and cultural contexts (Fox, 2018; Haynes, 2019). Rather than existing as completely separate spheres, religion and politics frequently intersect in ways that shape public policy, civic engagement, national identity, and social cohesion (Haynes, 2020; Philpott, 2019).

The relationship between religion and politics has been interpreted differently across philosophical and sociological traditions. Classical sociologists such as Emile Durkheim viewed religion as a source of social cohesion that reinforces collective consciousness and moral order (Durkheim, 1995), while Max Weber emphasized the role of religion in shaping social

action, political authority, legitimacy, and patterns of governance (Weber, 2002). More recent scholarship has challenged the assumption that modernization necessarily diminishes the public significance of religion. Instead, religion continues to occupy an influential position in public discourse, democratic politics, and civil society, particularly in developing democracies where religious institutions continue to command considerable public trust (Casanova, 1994; Haynes, 2020).

One important manifestation of the relationship between religion and public life is the role of sacred spaces. Sacred spaces refer to places that communities recognize as holy because of their religious, spiritual, and symbolic significance. Eliade (1959) conceptualizes sacred spaces as locations where the sacred becomes manifest, distinguishing them from ordinary or profane environments while providing believers with spiritual identity, orientation, and communal belonging. Such spaces include churches, mosques, temples, shrines, and other places of worship. Traditionally, they are associated with prayer, worship, moral formation, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence. Beyond these religious functions, sacred spaces also provide education, humanitarian assistance, counseling, civic education, and conflict mediation, thereby contributing to social cohesion and community resilience (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Haynes, 2020).

Sacred spaces may also constitute important components of the public sphere. Habermas (1989) argues that democratic societies depend upon public spaces in which citizens engage in dialogue concerning matters affecting the common good. Although his earlier conceptualization of the public sphere was largely secular, Habermas (2008) later acknowledged that religious institutions continue to contribute meaningfully to democratic deliberation by articulating ethical perspectives concerning justice, governance, human dignity, and social responsibility. Churches and other places of worship can therefore function simultaneously as centers of religious devotion and influential institutions within civic and political life. It is precisely this intersection of sacred and public functions that makes such spaces susceptible to political engagement and, potentially, political appropriation.

The growing public role of religion has contributed to what scholars describe as the politicization of sacred spaces. This refers to the process through which institutions, practices, or social spaces become increasingly influenced by political interests, partisan competition, or struggles for power (Hay, 2007). Applied to religious institutions, politicization occurs when places of worship become platforms for political mobilization, electoral campaigning, ideological contestation, political patronage, or public endorsement of political actors. Although interaction between religion and politics is neither unusual nor inherently undesirable, excessive political influence may compromise the neutrality, independence, and prophetic role traditionally associated with religious institutions (Philpott, 2019; Haynes, 2020). Thus, the concern is not simply that politics enters religious spaces, but that political competition may transform the character and function of spaces traditionally associated with worship, peace, moral authority, and reconciliation.

Globally, the politicization of religion has assumed diverse forms. In Latin America, churches played significant roles in democratization through Liberation Theology, advocating social justice and human rights (Berryman, 1987). In Eastern Europe, religious institutions contributed to political transformation following the collapse of communist regimes (Froese, 2008). Conversely, in several contemporary democracies, political actors increasingly seek religious legitimacy through strategic alliances with religious leaders, appearances in places of worship, and the use of religious symbolism during electoral periods (Fox, 2018). These interactions may strengthen civic participation where they promote accountability and social justice, but they may also transform sacred spaces into contested political arenas where political competition becomes intertwined with religious authority.

Within Africa, religious institutions occupy a very influential position because of their extensive involvement in education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, governance, peace building, and community development. Sub-Saharan Africa remains one of the world's most religious regions, with religious institutions exercising considerable influence over public attitudes, social values, and political participation (Pew Research Center, 2024). Churches have historically contributed to democratization, constitutional reform, electoral

observation, peace building, and conflict mediation across many African states (Kaulemu, 2018; Gifford, 2021). At the same time, increasing electoral competition has intensified political engagement with religious institutions, creating opportunities for political patronage, endorsement, partisan mobilization, and attempts to appropriate religious legitimacy.

Kenya provides an important context for examining these dynamics. Religion occupies a central position within Kenyan society, influencing education, healthcare, governance, social welfare, and public morality. The Constitution of Kenya (2010) guarantees freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and opinion while affirming that there shall be no state religion. This constitutional framework protects religious pluralism while permitting religious organizations to participate freely in public life. Churches have consequently played significant roles in constitutionalism, human rights advocacy, national reconciliation, electoral peace building, civic education, and accountable governance (Gifford, 2021; Wamue-Ngare, 2022).

During Kenya's transition to multiparty democracy in the 1990s and subsequent constitutional reforms, church leaders emerged as prominent advocates for political liberalization, social justice, constitutional accountability, and human rights. Churches provided civic education, election monitoring, humanitarian assistance, and mediation during periods of political tension, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy as moral institutions within Kenyan society (Cheeseman, 2015; Kanyinga & Okello, 2019). However, the historical relationship between the church and politics has also revealed a more contentious dimension. Makori et al. (2024), in examining the church and violence during Kenya's multiparty elections from 1992 to 2017, demonstrate that churches assumed different roles in violent political episodes, including passivity, condoning circumstances associated with violence, and, in some instances, endorsement or legitimization of violence. This scholarship is important because it demonstrates that the intersection of religious institutions, political authority, and violence is not entirely new in Kenya. However, it does not exhaust the problem examined in the present paper.

The relationship between politics and religion in Kenya has therefore consequently become

increasingly complex. Political leaders frequently attend worship services, contribute financially to church development projects, participate in religious fundraising activities, and seek public association or endorsement from influential clergy. Although such participation falls within the constitutional protection of freedom of worship, persistent political involvement within churches may compromise ecclesiastical independence, encourage patronage networks, and weaken the prophetic role of religious institutions (Gifford, 2021; Haynes, 2020). Churches may consequently become not only centers of worship but also a strategic space through which political legitimacy is negotiated and electoral support is cultivated. As political competition becomes increasingly polarized, the transformation of sacred spaces into political arenas may create conditions in which confrontation extends beyond political speech and mobilization to intimidation, disruption, and violence.

Recent political developments have intensified these concerns. During periods of heightened political competition, some places of worship have experienced disruptions, confrontations, intimidation, and heightened security concerns associated with political activity (Haynes, 2019; Haynes, 2020). Such developments have generated public debate concerning the appropriate boundaries between religious freedom, political participation, and preservation of the sanctity of places of worship. They also raise broader questions concerning institutional resilience, public trust, democratic governance, and the capacity of religious organizations to remain independent and impartial within increasingly polarized political environments (Fox, 2018; Haynes, 2020).

Within this emerging context, the phenomenon of goonism has become increasingly prominent in political discourse. Goonism generally refers to the organized use of individuals or groups to intimidate, threaten, disrupt public gatherings, or employ violence in pursuit of political or other powerful interests (Anderson, 2002; Kagwanja, 2003).

The infiltration of organized political coercion and violence into sacred spaces therefore constitutes a significant problem for religious freedom, democratic governance, social cohesion, and national peace building. It threatens public confidence in religious institutions, undermines their moral

authority, and transforms spaces intended for worship into arenas of political confrontation (Haynes, 2020; Fox, 2018). Although existing scholarship has examined electoral violence, church state relations, religious extremism, political patronage, and the historical relationship between churches and political violence in Kenya (Makori et al., 2024), these dimensions have largely been examined as separate or broader phenomena. Less attention has been given to the process through which sacred spaces themselves become politicized and subsequently exposed to organized intimidation, goonism, disruption, and political violence. The problem under study therefore lies not merely in the presence of politics within religious institutions, but in the transformation of sacred spaces into contested arenas where political interests, organized coercion, and violence may converge. It is against this background that the present study examines the politicization of sacred spaces in Kenya, with particular attention to the nexus between goonism and political violence.

## 2.1 Conceptual Literature Review

### 2.1.1 Concept of Sacred Spaces

Sacred spaces occupy a central place in virtually every religious tradition and have historically functioned as centers of worship, moral formation, spiritual renewal, social interaction, and community identity (Thiessen & McAlpine, 2013; Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2004). Although commonly understood as physical locations dedicated to religious activities, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes sacred spaces as socially constructed environments whose significance extends beyond ritual worship to encompass political, cultural, and civic dimensions (Day, 2014; Chidester, 2018; Barkan & Barkey, 2014). Consequently, understanding the politicization of sacred spaces requires an appreciation of both their theological meaning and their sociological role within modern democratic societies (Chidester, 2018; Barkan & Barkey, 2014).

The concept of sacred space was systematically developed by Eliade (1959), who argued that sacred spaces emerge where the sacred manifests itself within ordinary human experience. According to Eliade (1959), sacred places are distinguished from profane spaces because they represent points of divine encounter that provide believers with order, orientation, and meaning. Churches, mosques,

temples, shrines, and pilgrimage centers therefore become symbolic locations through which religious communities experience transcendence while reinforcing communal identity and moral order. Eliade (1959) contends that sacred spaces create a symbolic center around which religious life is organized, making them fundamental institutions within society.

While Eliade (1959) emphasized the spiritual significance of sacred places, later scholars have argued that sacred spaces are equally social institutions embedded within broader political and economic structures. Lefebvre (1991) maintains that space is socially produced rather than naturally existing, meaning that religious spaces reflect historical, political, cultural, and economic relations operating within society. From this perspective, churches are not merely physical buildings but socially negotiated environments whose meanings continually evolve as different actors interact within them. Political leaders, religious authorities, congregants, civil society organizations, and the media all contribute to shaping the public significance of sacred spaces.

Similarly, Knott (2005) argues that sacred spaces should be understood through the interaction between religion, culture, and power. Rather than viewing places of worship as isolated religious institutions, Knott demonstrates that sacred spaces function within wider social systems where religious practices intersect with political authority, social identity, and public policy. Consequently, churches increasingly become sites where competing social interests are negotiated, particularly during periods of political transition, electoral competition, or national crisis.

From a sociological perspective, Durkheim (1995) viewed religion as a collective institution that reinforces social solidarity through shared beliefs, rituals, and moral values. Sacred spaces therefore perform important integrative functions by bringing individuals together around common symbols and ethical commitments. Religious ceremonies conducted within these spaces strengthen collective consciousness, promote social cohesion, and regulate moral behaviour. This understanding suggests that the integrity of sacred spaces is essential for maintaining community stability and peaceful coexistence.

Weber (1905) approached religion differently by emphasizing its influence on authority, legitimacy, and social action. Weber argued that religious institutions frequently shape political authority by providing moral legitimacy to leaders and influencing public values. Churches therefore possess significant symbolic power capable of influencing governance, public policy, and political participation. While such influence may strengthen democratic accountability, it may also expose religious institutions to political manipulation when political actors seek ecclesiastical legitimacy for partisan purposes.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes sacred spaces as important components of civil society and democratic governance. Habermas (2008) argues that religious institutions contribute meaningfully to democratic deliberation by articulating moral perspectives on justice, human dignity, governance, and the common good. Although democratic governance requires institutional separation between religion and the state, Habermas maintains that religious voices continue to enrich public discourse by contributing ethical reasoning that complements secular political debate. Consequently, churches increasingly function as important actors within the public sphere rather than existing solely as private religious institutions.

This understanding has been reinforced by José Casanova (1994), whose theory of public religions challenged classical secularization assumptions. Casanova argues that modernization has not eliminated religion from public life as earlier theorists predicted. Instead, religious institutions have re-entered public discourse through advocacy for democracy, human rights, constitutional reforms, social justice, peace building, and humanitarian interventions. Across many developing democracies, churches have become influential participants in governance while maintaining their religious identity.

Within Africa, sacred spaces perform extensive social functions beyond religious worship. According to Gifford (2021), African churches are among the continent's most influential social institutions, providing education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, conflict mediation, poverty alleviation, civic education, and electoral observation. Their extensive community presence gives them

considerable moral authority and political influence. Similarly, Kaulemu (2018) contends that churches frequently intervene during constitutional crises, electoral disputes, and national reconciliation processes because they command high levels of public trust across political and ethnic divisions.

The Pew Research Center (2024) further demonstrates that Sub-Saharan Africa remains one of the world's most religious regions, with religious institutions exercising significant influence over political attitudes, voting behavior, public morality, and civic participation. This extensive societal influence inevitably attracts political interest, particularly during election periods when political leaders seek legitimacy through religious endorsement and public association with influential clergy.

In Kenya, churches occupy a uniquely influential position within society. Beyond worship, they operate thousands of schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, community development programs, and humanitarian initiatives. They have historically contributed to constitutional reform, democratization, peace building, anti-corruption advocacy, electoral observation, and national reconciliation. During the struggle for multiparty democracy and the constitutional reform movement, religious institutions emerged as significant defenders of civil liberties and accountable governance (Cheeseman, 2015; Kanyinga & Okello, 2019). This historical role strengthened public confidence in churches as impartial moral institutions capable of promoting national unity.

However, increasing political competition has gradually altered the character of many sacred spaces. Political leaders increasingly participate in church services, fundraising activities, thanksgiving ceremonies, and religious celebrations where political messages frequently accompany religious events. While democratic societies protect politicians' rights to worship, scholars have expressed concern that persistent political engagement risks transforming churches from neutral spiritual institutions into contested political arenas (Haynes, 2020; Gifford, 2021). Such developments raise important questions concerning the preservation of institutional independence, religious neutrality, and democratic accountability.

Within the context of this paper, sacred spaces are therefore understood not merely as physical places of worship but as socially significant institutions possessing spiritual, moral, civic, and political functions. Their growing involvement in political activities makes them appropriate sites for examining how goonism and political violence intersect with religion in contemporary Kenya. Understanding the evolving meaning of sacred spaces provides the conceptual foundation upon which the subsequent discussion of politicization is anchored.

#### 2.1.2 Concept of the Politicization of Sacred Spaces

The politicization of sacred spaces has emerged as one of the most significant contemporary issues in the study of religion and politics (Haynes, 2020; Barkan & Barkey, 2014). As democratic systems evolve and political competition intensifies, religious institutions increasingly find themselves drawn into political processes, either voluntarily through civic engagement or involuntarily through political manipulation (Haynes, 2019; Deacon, 2020). While religion has historically influenced political thought and governance, recent scholarship distinguishes between the legitimate public participation of religious institutions and the politicization of sacred spaces, where places of worship become arenas for partisan competition, political mobilization, and ideological contestation (Fox, 2018; Deacon, 2020; Polinder, 2024). Understanding this distinction is critical in examining how churches in Kenya are increasingly becoming sites where political interests intersect with religious authority (Droz & Maupeu, 2013; Deacon, 2020).

The concept of politicization generally refers to the process through which issues, institutions, or social spaces become subject to political influence, contestation, or control. Hay (2007) defines politicization as the expansion of political authority into areas previously regarded as non-political, resulting in increased political contestation over institutions, identities, and public life. Applied to religion, politicization occurs when religious institutions, symbols, doctrines, or spaces become instruments through which political actors pursue legitimacy, electoral advantage, policy influence, or ideological dominance.

Although religion and politics have never existed in complete isolation, scholars distinguish healthy interaction from excessive political intrusion.

Philpott (2019) argues that religious institutions possess legitimate responsibilities within democratic societies, including promoting justice, defending human rights, advocating for peace, and holding governments accountable. However, politicization becomes problematic when religious institutions abandon their prophetic independence in favor of partisan interests or when political actors exploit religion primarily for electoral gain. In such circumstances, sacred spaces gradually lose their neutrality and become perceived as extensions of political power rather than centers of spiritual guidance.

Similarly, Haynes (2020) argues that religion increasingly functions as a political resource within both emerging and established democracies. Political leaders frequently seek religious endorsement because faith institutions enjoy levels of public trust that often exceed those of political institutions. Churches therefore become attractive venues for political messaging, campaign mobilization, fundraising, and image building. While such interactions may strengthen civic participation, they simultaneously expose religious institutions to accusations of political bias, patronage, and institutional capture.

The relationship between religion and political legitimacy has deep historical roots. Weber (1905) observed that religious authority has long been used to legitimize political power by providing moral justification for rulers and political systems. Throughout history, political leaders have sought religious approval to strengthen public acceptance of their authority. Conversely, religious institutions have sometimes relied on political patronage to expand their influence, creating relationships characterized by mutual dependence. Contemporary politicization therefore reflects the continuation of historical interactions between religious authority and political power, albeit within modern democratic contexts.

From a political theology perspective, Cavanaugh (2009) challenges the assumption that religion and politics occupy separate spheres. He argues that both are deeply intertwined in shaping social identities, public morality, and collective action. Consequently, attempts to isolate religion completely from political life may neither be practical nor desirable. Rather than advocating total separation, Cavanaugh calls for

careful regulation of the relationship to prevent political domination of religious institutions while preserving their capacity to contribute constructively to public life.

Within democratic societies, Habermas (2008) similarly acknowledges that religious institutions contribute valuable moral perspectives to public discourse. He argues that religious actors enrich democratic deliberation by advancing ethical arguments concerning justice, human dignity, solidarity, and the common good. Nevertheless, Habermas (2008) emphasizes that religious participation should occur through rational public dialogue rather than partisan mobilization. The challenge therefore lies not in preventing religious engagement in politics but in preserving institutional independence while encouraging responsible civic participation.

Contemporary studies demonstrate that politicization assumes diverse forms across different regions. In Latin America, churches played significant roles in democratization through Liberation Theology, which advocated for social justice, human rights, and resistance against authoritarian regimes (Berryman, 1987). Here, political engagement strengthened democratic participation without necessarily transforming churches into partisan institutions. In Eastern Europe, churches contributed significantly to political transformation following the collapse of communist governments by supporting democratic reforms and civil liberties (Froese, 2008). These examples illustrate that political engagement by religious institutions can positively contribute to democratic development when motivated by ethical principles rather than partisan interests.

Conversely, scholarship also documents contexts where politicization has undermined religious neutrality. Fox (2018) argues that in many contemporary democracies political actors increasingly utilize religious symbolism, worship services, and alliances with influential clergy primarily to secure electoral legitimacy. Such practices often blur the distinction between religious devotion and political campaigning, creating uncertainty regarding the institutional independence of religious organizations. Where electoral competition is highly polarized, churches may become divided along political lines, weakening their capacity to function as neutral mediators during periods of conflict.

Within Africa, the politicization of religion reflects broader processes of democratization, state formation, and governance. Gifford (2021) argues that African churches possess exceptional political influence because they command widespread public trust while providing education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, and community development. Consequently, political leaders frequently cultivate close relationships with influential religious leaders to enhance their public legitimacy. Although such relationships may facilitate dialogue between government and society, they also create opportunities for patronage, political favoritism, and institutional dependency.

Similarly, Kaulemu (2018) argues that churches throughout Africa have played indispensable roles in constitutional reforms, electoral observation, conflict mediation, and national reconciliation. However, increasing political competition has simultaneously intensified attempts by political elites to influence religious institutions. As churches become more visible within governance processes, they become increasingly vulnerable to political manipulation, particularly during election periods when religious endorsement may significantly influence voting behavior.

The Pew Research Center (2024) also reports that religion continues to shape political attitudes across Sub-Saharan Africa more strongly than in many other world regions. High levels of religious participation mean that churches remain influential spaces for community mobilization and opinion formation. Consequently, political actors increasingly recognize sacred spaces as strategic environments for communicating political messages and cultivating electoral support.

The Kenyan experience illustrates these dynamics particularly clearly. Since independence, churches have maintained close engagement with national development, education, healthcare, constitutional reform, and peace building. During the struggle for multiparty democracy in the 1990s and the constitutional review process culminating in the Constitution of Kenya (2010), religious institutions emerged as strong advocates for human rights, democratic governance, and constitutional accountability (Cheeseman, 2015; Kanyinga & Okello, 2019). Their moral authority enabled them to

challenge authoritarian governance while promoting peaceful democratic transition.

In recent years, however, the relationship between religion and politics has become increasingly contested. Political leaders regularly attend church services, contribute substantial financial donations during fundraisers, participate in thanksgiving ceremonies, and address congregations from church pulpits. Although such participation reflects constitutional guarantees of freedom of worship, scholars argue that persistent political engagement may gradually compromise ecclesiastical independence (Gifford, 2021; Haynes, 2020). Churches risk becoming identified with particular political parties or personalities, thereby weakening public confidence in their impartiality.

Recent incidents involving politically motivated disruptions of worship services, intimidation of clergy, and violent confrontations within church compounds have further intensified scholarly concern regarding the politicization of sacred spaces. Recent reporting in Kenya documents violent disruptions at churches, including the storming of ACK All Saints Cathedral and the disruption of worship services at ACK St Peter's Witima Church in Nyeri, where worshippers were forced to flee after tear gas was reportedly deployed and live ammunition was fired (Mutura, 2026). These developments suggest that some churches are no longer merely venues for political speeches but have become contested spaces where political rivalries, organized intimidation, and electoral conflicts are enacted. Such incidents fundamentally challenge the traditional understanding of churches as sanctuaries dedicated to peace, reconciliation, and spiritual formation.

The politicization of sacred spaces therefore extends beyond political speeches delivered in churches. It encompasses political patronage, symbolic endorsement of political actors, partisan fundraising, ideological mobilization, intimidation of dissenting voices, manipulation of religious authority, and, increasingly, the infiltration of organized groups that employ coercion or violence to advance political interests. Recent concerns raised by church leaders and the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCKK) indicate that the use of organized groups, intimidation, and violence is increasingly becoming associated with political contestation, with the National Cohesion and Integration Commission

(NCIC) describing the emerging pattern as the use of "goonism" as a tool of political contestation (Mutura, 2026). This broader understanding provides an essential conceptual basis for analyzing the emergence of goonism and political violence within places of worship.

From the perspective of this paper, the politicization of sacred spaces is conceptualized as the process through which Christian places of worship increasingly become arenas of partisan political mobilization, political patronage, ideological contestation, organized intimidation, and political violence, thereby compromising their spiritual neutrality, institutional independence, prophetic witness, and peace building mandate. This conceptualization recognizes that political engagement by religious institutions is not inherently problematic; rather, concern arises when political interests undermine the sacred character, moral authority, and democratic role of places of worship. This discussion provides the conceptual bridge to the next section, which examines goonism as an emerging form of organized political coercion and its relationship with the politicization of sacred spaces in Kenya

### 2.1.3 Concept of Goonism

Goonism has increasingly emerged as an important concept in contemporary political discourse, particularly within developing democracies where electoral competition is frequently characterized by intimidation, coercion, and organized violence (Bekoe, 2012; Straus & Taylor, 2012). Although the term is widely used in political commentary, media reports, and public debate, it remains comparatively underdeveloped within academic literature. Existing scholarship tends to discuss goonism indirectly through concepts such as political thuggery, youth militias, organized political violence, coercive mobilization, electoral intimidation, and clientelist politics (Bratton, 2008; Collier & Vicente, 2014; Raleigh, 2016). Consequently, there is a need to conceptualize goonism more clearly within the broader literature on political violence and democratic governance. Generally, goonism refers to the organized deployment of individuals or groups to intimidate, threaten, harass, assault, or disrupt individuals and institutions on behalf of political, economic, or other powerful interests (Bratton, 2008; Collier & Vicente, 2014). Unlike spontaneous acts of violence, goonism is characterized by planning,

coordination, sponsorship, and deliberate use of coercion to influence political or social outcomes (Straus & Taylor, 2012; Raleigh, 2016). Goons are therefore not merely violent individuals; rather, they often operate as organized agents acting under the direction or protection of influential political actors, business interests, or criminal networks (Anderson, 2002; Mueller, 2008)..

Political scientists frequently analyze goonism within the framework of political violence and informal institutions. Wilkinson (2004) argues that political elites in competitive democracies sometimes employ organized violence strategically to influence electoral outcomes, suppress opposition, intimidate voters, and consolidate political dominance. Rather than relying exclusively on formal state institutions, political actors may utilize informal coercive groups capable of operating with varying degrees of deniability. Such groups become instruments through which political competition extends beyond lawful democratic processes into organized intimidation and violence.

Similarly, Collier (2009) observes that organized political violence frequently emerges where democratic institutions are weak, state enforcement is inconsistent, and political competition is highly personalized. Under such conditions, informal coercive actors become valuable political assets because they can mobilize supporters, disrupt opponents' activities, enforce political loyalty, and protect elite interests without direct official involvement. Goonism therefore reflects broader institutional weaknesses rather than isolated criminal behavior.

Conflict-oriented scholarship similarly interprets goonism as one mechanism through which competing political actors seek to preserve power and control over political resources (Marx, 1867/1976). From this perspective, coercion may emerge where struggles over political and economic resources intensify. Goonism may therefore be associated with broader patterns of political competition, intimidation, and control over political opportunities.

Within democratic theory, organized political intimidation fundamentally undermines constitutional governance. Diamond (2015) argues that democratic consolidation depends upon peaceful political competition, respect for civil liberties, and institutional accountability. The use of organized

groups to intimidate political opponents weakens public confidence in democratic institutions by replacing persuasion with fear and coercion. Consequently, goonism threatens electoral integrity, citizen participation, and the legitimacy of democratic governance.

The phenomenon is particularly visible in many emerging democracies. Across parts of Africa, political violence has often involved the recruitment of unemployed youth into organized groups used to mobilize supporters, disrupt rival political meetings, intimidate communities, and influence electoral outcomes. Boone (2014) notes that political patronage networks frequently sustain these groups through financial incentives, promises of employment, or protection from prosecution. Consequently, organized violence becomes embedded within broader systems of clientelism and political patronage.

Research by Mueller (2008) further demonstrates that youth unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, and weak governance create favorable conditions for the emergence of organized political violence. Young people experiencing limited economic opportunities may become susceptible to recruitment into politically sponsored groups that promise financial rewards, social status, or protection. While poverty alone does not produce political violence, it increases vulnerability to manipulation by political entrepreneurs seeking to mobilize coercive actors during periods of heightened political competition.

In Kenya, organized political violence has accompanied several electoral cycles, particularly during periods of intense political contestation. Studies by Cheeseman (2015) and Kanyinga and Okello (2019) demonstrate that political mobilization has historically involved the use of informal youth groups, ethnic mobilization, patronage networks, and organized intimidation. Although considerable scholarly attention has focused on electoral violence, less attention has been devoted to understanding how similar forms of organized coercion increasingly extend into religious institutions and places of worship.

Recent political developments indicate that churches are no longer insulated from these dynamics. Reports of organized groups disrupting worship services, intimidating clergy, assaulting congregants, and

interfering with religious gatherings suggest that sacred spaces are becoming new arenas for politically motivated coercion (Polinder, 2024; The Standard, 2026; Kenya News Agency, 2026). Such incidents have been reported at All Saints Cathedral in Nairobi and other places of worship, prompting religious leaders to warn against turning churches into arenas of political confrontation. Unlike conventional electoral violence occurring in campaign venues or public rallies, these incidents directly violate the sanctity of places traditionally associated with peace, reconciliation, and spiritual reflection. Such developments raise important questions regarding the changing nature of political violence in Kenya and the vulnerability of religious institutions to organized political interference (Anderson, 2002; Kagwanja, 2003; Polinder, 2024).

The emergence of goonism within sacred spaces also reflects changing strategies of political mobilization. Churches command significant moral authority and attract large congregations representing diverse demographic groups. Political actors may therefore perceive religious gatherings as strategic opportunities for demonstrating political strength, intimidating opponents, influencing public opinion, or preventing criticism from influential religious leaders (Deacon, 2020; Polinder, 2024). Where organized groups are deployed to achieve these objectives, sacred spaces become contested political environments rather than neutral centers of worship. Recent reporting on the disruption of a public forum at All Saints Cathedral, together with concerns raised by church leaders about the use of organized groups in places of worship, provides contemporary evidence of this development.

The consequences of goonism within places of worship extend beyond immediate physical violence. Organized intimidation undermines religious freedom by creating fear among clergy and congregants, discourages open civic dialogue, erodes institutional independence, weakens public confidence in religious leadership, and threatens the peace building role historically performed by churches (Deacon, 2020; Polinder, 2024; Haynes, 2020). It may also encourage self-censorship among religious leaders who fear retaliation for criticizing political leaders or addressing issues of governance, corruption, and social justice (Deacon, 2020; Haynes, 2020).

Despite growing public concern, scholarly literature specifically examining goonism within sacred spaces remains limited. Existing studies predominantly analyses electoral violence, youth militias, political patronage, and democratic governance without explicitly investigating how organized political coercion manifests within religious institutions (Anderson, 2002; Kagwanja, 2003; Deacon, 2020). Consequently, there remains a significant conceptual and empirical gap concerning the drivers, manifestations, and implications of goonism in churches and other sacred spaces in Kenya.

For the purpose of this study, goonism is conceptualized as the organized and politically motivated use of individuals or groups to intimidate, threaten, disrupt, assault, or otherwise employ coercive means within or against sacred spaces in order to advance partisan political interests, suppress dissent, influence public perception, or intimidate religious actors. This conceptualization extends beyond conventional electoral violence by recognizing that contemporary political coercion increasingly targets religious institutions as strategic sites of political contestation (Anderson, 2002; Kagwanja, 2003; Haynes, 2020).

#### 2.1.4 Concept of Political Violence

Political violence remains one of the most contested concepts in political science because scholars disagree not only on its definition but also on its causes, manifestations, legitimate boundaries, and relationship with democratic governance (Tilly, 2003; Galtung, 1969). While there is broad agreement that political violence involves the use or threat of force to influence political outcomes, considerable debate exists regarding whether violence should be understood primarily as physical coercion, structural oppression, symbolic domination, or a combination of these dimensions (Tilly, 2003; Galtung, 1969; Bourdieu, 1991). These competing perspectives become particularly significant when examining violence occurring within sacred spaces, where coercion is often psychological, symbolic, and institutional before it becomes physical (Bourdieu, 1991; Galtung, 1969).

Classical scholarship conceptualises political violence primarily as an instrument for pursuing political power. Gurr (1970) argues that political violence originates from relative deprivation, suggesting that individuals resort to violence when

there is a widening gap between what they believe they deserve and what they actually experience. According to this perspective, frustration generated by perceived injustice eventually transforms into political aggression. Gurr therefore locates the origins of violence largely within the psychological responses of individuals and groups experiencing exclusion.

However, this explanation has been criticized for reducing political violence to emotional frustration. Tilly (2003) contends that political violence is seldom a spontaneous reaction to deprivation; rather, it is organized, strategic, and deeply embedded within political competition. He argues that violence is not simply the consequence of frustrated citizens but a deliberate political strategy employed by organized actors seeking to alter relationships of power. Whereas Gurr privileges grievances, Tilly (2003) emphasizes political organization, mobilization, and opportunity structures. This distinction is important because it suggests that not every politically dissatisfied group becomes violent; violence frequently requires leadership, organization, and strategic calculation.

Similarly, Kalyvas (2006) challenges both grievance-based and purely structural explanations by arguing that political violence is rarely random or irrational. Instead, it is selective, calculated, and context-dependent. Violence often targets institutions and individuals whose symbolic significance exceeds their immediate political importance. From this perspective, attacks on churches cannot simply be interpreted as isolated criminal acts or emotional outbursts. Rather, they may represent calculated attempts to undermine institutions that possess considerable moral legitimacy and influence within society. Sacred spaces therefore become politically strategic targets precisely because they shape public opinion and confer social legitimacy.

This strategic interpretation contrasts with Galtung's (1969) broader conceptualization of violence. Galtung distinguishes direct, structural, and cultural dimensions of violence, thereby drawing attention to forms of domination that may precede or accompany overt physical violence. Applied cautiously to the present study, this perspective draws attention to the possibility that political domination within religious institutions may precede physical confrontation. The study nevertheless distinguishes such institutional or

symbolic politicization from documented acts of political violence.

Galtung's expansive conceptualization has also attracted criticism. Coady (1986) argues that defining violence too broadly may conflate social injustice with violence itself, weakening analytical precision. This criticism is particularly relevant to studies of religion and politics, where political influence over religious institutions may occur without immediate physical aggression. The present study therefore recognizes the multidimensional character of violence while maintaining a clear distinction between symbolic politicization, organized coercion, and overt political violence.

Another important scholarly debate concerns whether political violence represents the failure of democracy or an inherent feature of democratic competition. Liberal democratic theorists such as Diamond (2015) argue that political violence reflects institutional weakness, ineffective rule of law, and democratic failure. According to this perspective, mature democracies provide peaceful mechanisms for resolving political disagreements through elections, judicial institutions, dialogue, and constitutional processes. Violence therefore emerges where democratic institutions lose legitimacy or fail to regulate political competition effectively.

In contrast, scholars of contentious politics caution against treating violence merely as evidence of democratic collapse. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) argue that political contention is a normal characteristic of democratic societies. The critical issue is not the existence of political conflict but the forms through which conflict is expressed. Democratic systems inevitably generate competing interests; however, when institutional safeguards weaken or political actors deliberately abandon constitutional rules, ordinary political contention may evolve into organized violence. This perspective suggests that violence occurring within sacred spaces should not be interpreted solely as criminal behavior but also as an indicator of changing patterns of political contestation in Kenya.

The relationship between political violence and religion represents another area of scholarly contestation. Traditionally, religion has been viewed primarily as a force for peace, reconciliation, and moral transformation. Scholars such as Appleby (2000) argue that religious institutions possess

enormous potential for conflict resolution because they command moral legitimacy, promote forgiveness, and encourage dialogue across divided communities. Churches therefore function as important peace infrastructures within democratic societies.

Conversely, scholars including Juergensmeyer (2017) argue that religion cannot be understood solely as a peace building institution. Religious spaces, symbols, and leaders may also become politically contested because they possess considerable authority, legitimacy, and mobilizing capacity. Political actors therefore seek to appropriate religious legitimacy, while competing groups may deliberately target churches to weaken their influence or silence critical voices. From this perspective, violence occurring within sacred spaces is not accidental but reflects broader struggles over legitimacy, authority, and symbolic power.

The Kenyan context illustrates this tension particularly well. Historical studies by Cheeseman (2015) and Kanyinga and Okello (2019) demonstrate that churches have simultaneously functioned as defenders of constitutionalism and as arenas where political actors seek legitimacy through public association with religious authority. While religious institutions played transformative roles during the struggle for multiparty democracy and constitutional reform, recent political developments suggest an increasing shift towards partisan engagement, political patronage, and organized intimidation within places of worship. This evolution demonstrates that churches are no longer merely observers of political conflict but have increasingly become contested political spaces themselves.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature remains pieced. Studies on political violence predominantly examine elections, ethnic conflict, protests, or state repression. Research on religion, by contrast, concentrates largely on public theology, peace building, governance, or church-state relations. Very few scholars explicitly investigate how the politicization of sacred spaces transforms churches into sites where organized political violence and goonism, converge. Consequently, important questions remain unanswered regarding the mechanisms through which political actors penetrate sacred spaces, the strategic value of churches within political competition, and the implications of these

developments for democratic governance and religious freedom.

**2.1.5 Nexus between Goonism and Political Violence**  
The relationship between goonism and political violence has become increasingly significant within contemporary political science, democratic governance, and conflict studies (Tilly, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006). Although these concepts are frequently used interchangeably in political discourse and media reporting, scholarly literature demonstrates that they represent distinct yet interconnected phenomena operating at different levels of political contestation (Anderson, 2002; Kalyvas, 2006). The central debate concerns whether goonism constitutes an independent form of violence or whether they should be understood as tactical manifestations of broader political violence (Tilly, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006). This distinction is particularly important in analyzing the politicization of sacred spaces, where organized intimidation, public disorder, and political coercion increasingly converge within institutions traditionally associated with peace and moral authority (Anderson, 2002; Kagwanja, 2003; Haynes, 2020).

The dominant literature on political violence has traditionally privileged macro-level explanations focusing on electoral conflict, civil wars, insurgencies, terrorism, and state repression (Gurr, 1970; Tilly, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006). Within this tradition, organized violence is generally examined as a struggle between the state and non-state actors or between competing political movements. Such approaches have generated substantial knowledge concerning the structural causes and political consequences of violence but have paid comparatively little attention to the informal actors who operationalize political coercion at the local level.

Some scholars conceptualize goonism primarily as an extension of clientelism and patronage politics. Van de Walle (2007) argues that neo-patrimonial political systems frequently rely upon informal networks through which political elites distribute resources in exchange for loyalty. Within these patronage systems, organized groups may be recruited to protect political interests, intimidate opponents, mobilize supporters, or disrupt competing political activities. Violence therefore becomes embedded within broader political relationships rather than existing as an isolated criminal phenomenon. From

this perspective, goonism is less about spontaneous violence than about the institutionalization of coercion within patron-client networks.

However, this interpretation has been challenged by scholars who argue that reducing goonism to patronage politics overlooks its autonomous social dynamics. Mueller (2008) contends that organized political violence cannot be explained solely through elite manipulation because local actors possess their own motivations, identities, and interests. Individuals recruited into politically organized groups may pursue economic survival, social recognition, group solidarity, or personal security independently of elite political objectives. Consequently, goonism should be understood as a negotiated relationship between political elites and local actors rather than a purely top-down instrument of political control.

An additional area of scholarly contestation concerns the changing geography of political violence. Traditional literature assumes that political violence occurs primarily within explicitly political arenas such as campaign rallies, polling stations, government institutions, or public demonstrations. Recent scholarship increasingly challenges this assumption by demonstrating that political conflict has expanded into schools, universities, markets, media institutions, and religious organizations. Kalyvas (2006) argues that violence frequently follows centers of social influence rather than formal political institutions alone. Consequently, spaces possessing symbolic legitimacy become strategically valuable political targets.

This observation has important implications for understanding sacred spaces. Churches occupy unique positions within society because they combine moral legitimacy, community trust, organizational capacity, and extensive public visibility. As Appleby (2000) argues, religious institutions function simultaneously as peace builders and influential actors within civil society. Conversely, Juergensmeyer (2017) contends that precisely because religion possesses symbolic authority, it inevitably becomes an object of political contestation. Political actors therefore seek either to appropriate religious legitimacy or neutralize religious criticism. The infiltration of goonism into churches should therefore not be viewed as accidental but as reflecting the strategic importance of sacred spaces within contemporary political competition.

The Kenyan experience illustrates this transformation. Historically, churches functioned as relatively neutral institutions promoting constitutional reform, electoral peace, civic education, and national reconciliation (Cheeseman, 2015; Kanyinga & Okello, 2019). More recently, however, increasing political polarization has coincided with reports of organized disruptions of worship services, intimidation of clergy, violent confrontations among political supporters within church compounds, and politically motivated interference with religious gatherings. These incidents suggest that sacred spaces are becoming extensions of broader political contestation rather than remaining insulated from democratic conflict.

Despite growing public concern, the existing literature remains remarkably fragmented. Studies of political violence rarely consider churches as strategic sites of political coercion. Research on religion predominantly emphasizes peace building, governance, and public theology while giving limited attention to organized political violence within places of worship. Similarly, scholarship on goonism focuses largely on elections, youth militias, urban violence, or sports-related disorder without examining their convergence within religious institutions.

#### 2.1.6 Political Theology theory

Political Theology provides the theoretical lens for understanding how religious authority, political legitimacy, and struggles over power intersect within sacred spaces. Drawing on Schmitt (2005), Moltmann (1967), Metz (1980), and Cavanaugh (2009), the perspective recognizes that political authority may draw upon religious symbols, institutions, and moral legitimacy to strengthen political claims. In the Kenyan context, this helps explain why churches become politically significant and why their spaces and authority may become contested during periods of intense political competition.

A further insight concerns the contestation of authority. Cavanaugh (2009) argues that the boundaries between religion and politics are continuously negotiated through struggles over power and legitimacy. Applied to this study, this suggests that politicization occurs when political interests increasingly seek access to religious

platforms, audiences, and symbolic legitimacy. Where such contestation becomes coercive, organized intimidation and disruption may emerge within or around sacred spaces. Political Theology therefore provides a useful interpretive lens for examining how struggles over political legitimacy can intersect with the authority and autonomy of religious institutions.

This theoretical perspective does not assume that political engagement with religion is inherently problematic or that violence is an inevitable consequence of politicization. Rather, it helps explain why sacred spaces can become politically contested when political actors seek religious legitimacy or when competing groups struggle over access, influence, and authority. The empirical findings that follow therefore provide the basis for determining how, and under what conditions, such contestation may intersect with goonism and political violence.

## 2.2 Research Methodology

The study adopted an interpretivist philosophy and qualitative multiple-case study design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018) to examine the politicization of sacred spaces in Kenya and the nexus between goonism and political violence. It relied exclusively on publicly accessible online documentary evidence, including news reports, official government and security records, religious institutional communications and guidelines, social-media content, audiovisual materials, and relevant scholarly and civil society sources (Bowen, 2009). Documentary materials were identified through systematic and iterative searches of publicly accessible news-media archives, institutional websites, Google and Google Scholar, and relevant digital platforms. Searches used combinations of terms including politicization of churches, sacred spaces and politics, church and political violence in Kenya, goonism, goons in churches, church disruption, and political intimidation, together with the names of relevant incidents, political actors, counties, and religious institutions. The searches focused on materials published between 2022 and 2026, corresponding to the study period, and were conducted iteratively to identify both individual incidents and corroborating accounts. Supplementary searches were undertaken when new incidents, actors, or documentary evidence emerged during the review process.

Sources were included where they contained substantive information directly relevant to political mobilization, political interference, intimidation, organized disruption, goonism, political violence, or institutional responses within or around sacred spaces in Kenya. Particular attention was given to contemporaneous media reports, official government and security records, religious institutional communications, and other sources providing identifiable accounts of relevant incidents or institutional responses. Sources that were duplicative, lacked sufficient information to establish their relevance, or did not provide identifiable documentary evidence were excluded. Cases were purposively selected as documented incidents or episodes directly relevant to the study's research question (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case selection did not assume that all incidents represented equivalent forms or levels of politicization or violence. Rather, each case was assessed according to the nature of political activity, the role of the sacred space, the actors involved, evidence of organized coercion, the form and extent of violence or disruption, institutional responses, and the evidentiary limitations of available accounts.

Documentary triangulation was used to compare accounts across different source types and to assess their consistency, independence, and evidentiary status (Bowen, 2009). Where possible, media reports were cross-checked against independent media accounts, official records, religious institutional communications, and other documentary sources. This procedure was important where reports contained allegations concerning political sponsorship, the identity of perpetrators, or responsibility for violence. Where accounts differed, the study did not treat contested claims as established facts; instead, competing accounts were retained as such and interpreted according to the strength, independence, and degree of available corroboration. Consequently, the analysis distinguished between documented events, reported allegations, corroborated claims, and analytical interpretations. This approach was intended to minimize the risk of equating media reporting frequency with incident frequency or treating unverified allegations as established evidence.

Documentary saturation was reached when successive searches across news media, official institutional records, religious communications,

social-media and audiovisual materials, and scholarly and civil society sources produced no substantively new cases, actors, forms of politicization, manifestations of goonism, or consequences relevant to the research questions. Specifically, saturation was considered achieved after three consecutive rounds of documentary searching and cross-source comparison yielded only previously identified cases, recurring accounts, or corroborative information, with no substantively new categories relevant to the research questions emerging (Saunders et al., 2018). The use of documentary saturation was therefore based not simply on the number of sources reviewed, but on the point at which continued searching ceased to generate substantively new empirical or analytical information.

Data were analyzed thematically through systematic coding and cross-case comparison (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Yin, 2018). The analysis examined recurring patterns concerning political mobilization, access to sacred spaces, political interference, organized coercion, goonism, political violence, institutional responses, and consequences for religious institutions and congregants. Cross-case comparison was used to identify similarities and differences across incidents while retaining the distinctive contextual features of each case. Documentary triangulation was integrated throughout the analytical process to assess the consistency and evidentiary status of competing accounts. Table 2.1 presents a comparative profile of the selected cases, highlighting their political context and actors, evidence of organized coercion, documented violence or disruption, institutional response, and key evidentiary limitations.

Table 2.1 Comparative profile of selected cases

| Case                                                    | Political context/actors                                                                            | Coercion                                                | Violence/disruption            | Response/limitation                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Ngarariga/<br>Limuru<br>Kiambu, 28<br>Nov. 2024         | Funeral; Gachagua,<br>political figures,<br>suspected goons<br>(Kimani, 2024)                       | Suspected goon<br>disruption;<br>sponsorship<br>unclear | Disorder; injuries<br>reported | Limited evidence on<br>organizers/sponsors                |
| PCEA<br>Mwiki-<br>Nairobi, 6<br>Apr. 2025               | Worship; Gachagua,<br>unidentified group<br>(Tongola, 2025)                                         | Attempted<br>intrusion;<br>organization<br>unclear      | Gunfire                        | Security intervention;<br>perpetrators unclear            |
| PCEA<br>Kariobangi<br>North<br>Nairobi, 30<br>Nov. 2025 | Thanksgiving;<br>Gachagua, rival youth<br>groups (Cerullo, 2025;<br>Omondi, 2025)                   | Rival groups;<br>weapons; arrests                       | Injuries;<br>confrontation     | Police<br>investigation/arrests;<br>sponsorship contested |
| Witima<br>ACK<br>Nyeri, 25<br>Jan. 2026                 | Worship; Gachagua,<br>competing groups<br>(Saya, 2026; Tongola,<br>2026)                            | Coordinated<br>disruption;<br>attribution<br>unclear    | Tear gas; gunfire<br>reported  | Police investigation;<br>responsibility contested         |
| All Saints<br>Cathedral<br>Nairobi, 12<br>June 2026     | Civic forum; civil<br>society, religious<br>leaders, groups of men<br>(Kisia, 2026; Wanza,<br>2026) | Organized entry;<br>CCTV evidence                       | Violent disruption;<br>assault | Police investigation;<br>sponsorship<br>unestablished     |

Source: Authors' compilation from cited documentary and media sources.

To ensure systematic extraction and comparison, a documentary extraction matrix was developed to capture source identification, case identification, location, sacred space, political and religious actors, and nature of politicization, goonism, political violence, drivers, public response, consequences, proposed responses, and evidentiary assessment. The

matrix enabled the researchers to distinguish descriptive information from interpretation and to record the evidentiary status of competing claims. The documentary corpus was organized electronically using clear case and source identifiers. An audit trail was maintained to document decisions concerning source inclusion and exclusion, coding,

interpretation, source verification, and cross-case comparison (Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2022; Yin, 2018).

Table 2.2 Documentary extraction matrix

| Category                 | Information extracted                                             |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Source identification    | Title, author/institution, date and source type                   |
| Case identification      | Incident, event or controversy                                    |
| Location                 | County, town or setting                                           |
| Sacred space             | Church or religious institution                                   |
| Political actors         | Political individuals, parties or institutions                    |
| Religious actors         | Clergy, leaders or religious institutions                         |
| Nature of politicization | Mobilization, patronage, campaigning, endorsement or interference |
| Goonism                  | Organization, intimidation, coercion, disruption or violence      |
| Political violence       | Threats, assault, confrontation, destruction or related acts      |
| Drivers                  | Political, social, economic or institutional factors              |
| Public response          | Public narratives and reactions                                   |
| Consequences             | Institutional, political and social implications                  |
| Proposed responses       | Strategies and interventions                                      |
| Evidentiary assessment   | Corroboration, limitations and status of claims                   |

Source: Authors' compilation (2026).

The methodological approach was designed to ensure that the study remained analytically cautious while capturing the complexity of politicization within sacred spaces. Rather than treating every political engagement within a church as evidence of goonism or political violence, the study differentiated ordinary political participation from political interference, organized coercion, and violence on the basis of the available documentary evidence. This distinction was central to the cross-case analysis and enabled the study to examine the conditions under which political engagement within sacred spaces escalated into coercive or violent contestation.

The exclusive reliance on publicly accessible documentary evidence alone may limit access to actors' firsthand accounts and to institutional records that may not be publicly available. Future research could therefore complement documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews with clergy, congregants, political actors, security personnel, and other relevant stakeholders, alongside additional primary institutional and government records. Such evidence could provide deeper insight into political sponsorship, organizational networks, motivations, institutional decision-making, and the experiences of actors directly involved in or affected by the incidents. This would complement, rather than replace, the documentary approach adopted in the present study.

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Overview of the Documentary Evidence

The analysis does not treat political engagement with churches as inherently violent. Instead, it distinguishes between political participation in religious spaces, political appropriation of sacred platforms, institutional resistance, and confrontational forms involving intimidation, organized disruption, alleged goonism, and physical violence. Particular attention was given to the actors involved, the nature of political mobilization, the role of sacred spaces, the presence of organized coercion, and institutional and security responses. Reports from different sources were triangulated, and allegations were distinguished from independently established facts.

Overall, the documentary evidence provides a basis for examining how the politicization of sacred spaces can create conditions in which political mobilization intersects with goonism and political violence. The following section presents the results of this analysis, beginning with the documented patterns of political appropriation and contestation within sacred spaces.

#### 3.2 Findings and Discussion

The documentary evidence covering 2022–2026 demonstrates that the politicization of sacred spaces

in Kenya takes different forms, ranging from political presence and mobilization to organized disruption, intimidation, and violence. Importantly, the evidence does not establish a direct or automatic relationship between political activity in churches and violence. Rather, the cases indicate that the risk of escalation becomes more evident where political competition enters sacred spaces, competing groups contest access or visibility, and organized actors employ coercive methods. The findings therefore point to a conditional nexus between the politicization of the sacred, goonism, and political violence, rather than suggesting that political engagement with religious institutions is inherently violent.

The first manifestation identified in the documentary evidence is the increasing use of sacred spaces as politically significant sites. During the 2022 electoral period, political leaders increasingly interacted with congregations, while religious institutions simultaneously attempted to maintain boundaries around political activity. The National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) guidelines restricted politicians from addressing congregations from the pulpit, endorsing candidates or turning religious contributions into campaign platforms, while still allowing political leaders to worship as ordinary congregants (NCCCK, 2021). These restrictions were reiterated in 2024, indicating that the concern was not an isolated electoral problem but an ongoing institutional attempt to protect the autonomy of sacred spaces (NCCCK, 2024).

The significance of these restrictions becomes clearer when considered alongside the broader literature. Churches in Kenya occupy an unusual position as both religious and public institutions. They command moral authority, possess organized constituencies and frequently participate in national debates concerning governance and social justice (Gifford, 2021; Maluleke, 2005). Their political importance therefore extends beyond the physical church building. A politician appearing in a church can gain visibility and association with an institution that possesses considerable moral legitimacy. The concern expressed by the NCCCK over the pulpit and political donations consequently reflects a deeper struggle over the boundary between religious authority and partisan political authority.

This helps explain why politicization of sacred spaces cannot be reduced to politicians simply attending

church. The problem arises when religious platforms, relationships or resources become incorporated into political competition. The political use of the pulpit, for example, gives political communication a moral setting that differs from an ordinary political rally. Similarly, public recognition of political donations may transform an economic contribution into symbolic political capital. Bourdieu (1991) is useful here in showing how material resources can be converted into symbolic authority, while Political Theology provides a further understanding of why such symbolic authority becomes politically valuable. Political actors may seek proximity to institutions capable of conferring moral legitimacy, while religious institutions seek to protect the authority attached to their sacred functions.

The documentary evidence shows that this contest over political access and legitimacy became increasingly confrontational after 2022. On 28 November 2024, the funeral service of Erastus Nduati in Ngarariga, Limuru, was disrupted while former Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua and other political figures were present. Reports indicated that suspected goons disrupted the proceedings, damaged property and caused disorder around the gathering (Citizen Digital, 2024; Capital News, 2024). The importance of the incident lies not simply in the disruption itself but in the fact that a religious gathering became a site of political confrontation. The sacred setting did not prevent political competition; instead, its political significance appears to have contributed to the contestation surrounding the gathering.

A similar pattern was observed at the PCEA Mwiki Parish on 6 April 2025. The documentary evidence records that unidentified individuals attempted to force their way into a Sunday service attended by Gachagua. Church members reportedly formed a human barrier, while gunshots were subsequently heard. Capital News reported the attempted intrusion and gunfire but could not establish who fired the shots, while The Standard reported that the individuals involved were described as goons and that Gachagua's security detail fired shots into the air (Capital News, 2025; The Standard, 2025).

The Mwiki incident is particularly important because it demonstrates the movement from political significance to physical contestation. The evidence establishes an attempted intrusion into a politically significant religious gathering, followed by gunfire

and security intervention. It does not, however, establish who organised the individuals involved or who initiated the shooting. The finding must therefore remain limited to what the evidence demonstrates. This caution is essential because politically contested incidents often generate competing accusations, and accepting such accusations as established facts would exceed the documentary evidence.

What emerges from Mwiki is therefore not proof of a particular political sponsor but evidence of a changing form of political confrontation. A religious gathering associated with a politically prominent figure became sufficiently contested for groups to attempt physical access and for security personnel to respond with force. This supports the wider literature on political violence which shows that political contestation can move from competition over ideas and electoral support towards physical control and intimidation when political actors perceive significant stakes in a particular space (Gurr, 1970; Tilly, 2003; Kalyvas, 2006).

The Kariobangi North incident of 30 November 2025 provides stronger evidence of group-based confrontation. The incident occurred at PCEA Kariobangi North Church during a thanksgiving service attended by Gachagua following David Wanyoike's election as Member of the County Assembly. The Standard reported that two groups of youths carrying weapons became involved in an altercation, six people were injured and police described the disturbance as appearing planned and premeditated (The Standard, 2025). The Star subsequently reported that the National Police Service opened an investigation, while political actors offered competing accounts of what had occurred (The Star, 2025).

The case provides stronger evidence for the role of organized groups in the escalation of political confrontation. Unlike an isolated disagreement between individuals, the evidence points to rival groups, weapons, injuries and police intervention. Reports also contained allegations that some youths had been sponsored to disrupt the event (Capital News, 2025; Kenyans.co.ke, 2025). However, these allegations were not independently established. They are therefore treated in this study as documented claims made by political actors, rather than as

evidence that a particular politician organized the violence.

This distinction strengthens rather than weakens the finding. The objective is not to identify a political sponsor where the documentary evidence cannot do so, but to establish how organized confrontation operated within a politically significant sacred space. Mueller (2008) similarly cautions against treating political violence as a simple top-down process in which political elites mechanically control violent actors. Local actors may possess their own motivations, networks and interests. The Kenyan evidence is therefore better interpreted as demonstrating the availability and deployment of organized coercive capacity within political competition, without assuming a uniform chain of command.

The distinction between goonism and political violence is vital at this point. Goonism should not be treated as synonymous with political violence. Rather, the findings suggest that it can operate as a mechanism through which political confrontation becomes coercive. Political violence is the broader phenomenon involving the use or threat of physical force for political purposes, whereas goonism refers to organized group behavior through which intimidation, disruption, confrontation, or coercion may be carried out. The relationship is therefore one of mechanism and possible outcome, rather than conceptual equivalence.

Across the Mwiki and Kariobangi cases, the evidence suggests an emerging sequence: political competition creates the context; mobilization creates competing groups; contestation over access or participation produces confrontation; and the introduction of coercive tactics creates the possibility of physical violence. This sequence should not be interpreted deterministically. Most politically significant church gatherings do not become violent. The point is that the documented violent cases show a recurring pattern in which organized group action intensifies an already contested political environment.

The significance of the sacred setting becomes clearer at this stage. These confrontations did not occur randomly in public spaces. They occurred around religious gatherings that carried political significance because of the presence of political leaders, the nature of the event, or the civic role of the institution. The church therefore became more than a

backdrop to political conflict; it became part of what was being contested. This finding draws attention to the intersection of religious authority, political legitimacy, and control of socially significant space, concerns that are central to Political Theology (Schmitt, 2005; Cavanaugh, 2009).

The Witima ACK Church incident of 25 January 2026 represents a further escalation. The documentary evidence records the disruption of a Sunday service attended by Gachagua through the use of tear gas, while reports also described gunfire, the evacuation of worshippers and clergy, and damage to vehicles. Police subsequently opened investigations (The Standard, 2026; The Star, 2026).

Witima is analytically significant because political confrontation moved closer to the core activity of worship itself. At Mwiki, the principal issue was attempted intrusion and subsequent gunfire. At Kariobangi North, rival groups confronted one another around a thanksgiving service. At Witima, coercive action directly disrupted worship and affected worshippers and clergy. The escalation therefore moved from contestation around a religious gathering towards direct insecurity within the sacred environment.

Again, the study does not assign responsibility beyond the available evidence. Political actors offered competing explanations of the incident, and some claims concerning responsibility remained contested. The defensible conclusion is that a church service was disrupted through serious acts of coercion and that the incident demonstrated the vulnerability of worshippers to politically associated violence.

The Witima case also illustrates why the sacred character of the space matters. Violence inside or immediately around a church carries a different social meaning from violence occurring in an ordinary political gathering. It challenges not only physical security but also the expectation that the church is a protected moral and communal space. The intrusion of coercive political conflict into worship therefore represents a disruption of both physical security and the normative boundary separating worship from political violence.

The All Saints Cathedral incident of 12 June 2026 extends this finding beyond worship services. The

incident occurred during a post-budget review forum at the cathedral, where civil society representatives, religious leaders and members of the public had gathered. CCTV footage reportedly showed groups of men arriving on motorcycles and entering the cathedral grounds before the meeting was disrupted. Subsequent police investigations relied on the footage to identify suspects.

This case is particularly important because the gathering was civic rather than a conventional political rally. It demonstrates that the political significance of sacred spaces is not restricted to sermons or worship. Churches can provide trusted spaces for public discussion, accountability and civic participation. Their moral legitimacy and organizational capacity make them important institutions in democratic life. Consequently, disrupting a civic forum in a cathedral may represent not only interference with a religious institution but also disruption of a legitimate space for public political expression.

The All Saints case therefore reinforces an important finding from the study; the politicization of sacred spaces does not necessarily mean that churches have become partisan institutions. A church may become politically significant precisely because it remains a trusted space in which citizens can discuss political questions. The political contestation of such spaces can consequently arise from their civic legitimacy rather than from partisan affiliation.

Across these cases, a consistent pattern becomes visible. Political actors and groups attach political significance to sacred spaces because those spaces possess visibility, legitimacy, collective organization and moral authority. Where political competition intensifies, competing actors may seek to secure or deny access to those spaces. Organized groups can then become involved in intimidation or disruption. When coercive tactics escalate to weapons, tear gas, physical assault or destruction of property, the result is political violence.

This pattern can be summarized as: political significance of sacred space, contestation over access and legitimacy, organized mobilization, intimidation/disruption, physical confrontation then political violence. The value of this formulation is that it does not claim that politicization inevitably produces violence. Instead, it identifies the

conditions under which the relationship becomes visible in the documentary evidence. It also explains why goonism is important to the analysis. Goonism occupies the intermediate position between political contestation and physical violence by providing an organized form of intimidation or coercion.

The finding is further supported by the broader scholarship on political mobilization and collective violence. Gurr (1970) emphasizes political frustration and mobilization; Tilly (2003) links violence to struggles over political power and collective action; Kalyvas (2006) demonstrates the importance of local actors and contested control; while Pearson and Stott (2007) caution against treating collective disorder as purely spontaneous. Together, these perspectives help explain the movement from political competition to organized confrontation. The present study extends this discussion by showing how that process can unfold within or around sacred spaces, where political conflict acquires an additional symbolic dimension.

The role of religious institutions is consequently ambivalent. They can become vulnerable spaces when political actors seek to appropriate their legitimacy, but they can also resist such appropriation. The NCCK's repeated guidelines demonstrate continuing efforts to prevent partisan political activity from taking over the pulpit, altar and religious gathering (NCCK, 2021; NCCK, 2024). The restrictions therefore represent more than administrative regulation. They constitute an institutional attempt to preserve the boundaries of religious authority in an environment where political actors increasingly seek access to socially legitimate spaces.

This is where the Political Theology perspective emerges naturally from the evidence. The central issue is not simply that politicians enter churches or that churches engage in politics. It is that political authority and religious authority intersect within the same social space. Political actors may seek the legitimacy associated with religious institutions, while churches attempt to retain sufficient autonomy to exercise their own moral authority. Where this relationship becomes excessively politicized, political competition can extend into struggles over who controls the meaning, access and use of sacred space. The cases of Mwiki, Kariobangi North and

Witima show how such struggles can acquire a coercive dimension.

The findings therefore also qualify any assumption that the politicization of religion is necessarily negative. Kenyan churches have historically contributed to democratic reform, peace building and public accountability (Cheeseman, 2015; Kanyinga & Okello, 2019). Religious institutions cannot simply withdraw from public affairs without undermining aspects of their social and moral responsibility. The problem arises when legitimate public engagement is transformed into partisan appropriation, or when political competition is enforced through organized intimidation.

### 3.3 Conclusion

The central finding is therefore that politicization becomes particularly problematic when sacred authority is incorporated into partisan political competition and when competing political actors or groups seek to control access to politically significant religious spaces through coercive means. Goonism becomes important at the point where organized intimidation and group confrontation provide the mechanism through which such political competition can escalate into violence. Overall, the 2022–2026 evidence demonstrates that sacred spaces in Kenya can become contested arenas where political legitimacy, religious authority and physical control intersect. The Mwiki, Kariobangi North, Witima and All Saints Cathedral cases represent different points along this continuum. Together they show that the relationship between goonism and political violence is neither accidental nor automatic. It emerges when politically significant sacred spaces become sites of competing claims, organized mobilization and coercive attempts to influence who can participate, assemble or exercise political visibility.

This study therefore concludes that goonism functions as an escalation mechanism within the politicization of sacred spaces. It is not synonymous with political violence or proof of political sponsorship. Where organized coercion enters political competition, goonism can turn contests over access and legitimacy into physical confrontation and, in some cases, violence particularly towards and during electioneering seasons in the country. This paper therefore recommends strengthening religious institutional autonomy, maintaining clear boundaries governing partisan political activities, improving

coordination between religious and security institutions, and ensuring impartial investigation and accountability for violence that will largely aid in averting political violence in 2027 Kenyan general and subsequent elections.

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