

Officials Try to Dispel Fears of New ID Labeled 'Mark of the Beast'

In Kenyan churches, the Antichrist is a frequent sermon subject, one that often serves to feed controversial end-time conspiracy theories.

Those fears of the apocalyptic figure, a seven-headed beast that rises from the sea in the New Testament Book of Revelation, are colliding with a new government effort to assign Kenyans a personal identification number. Clerics are alleging the new ID number will brand their flocks with 666, the biblical mark of the beast.

"This is actually the journey towards the mark of the beast, but I think outside forces are driving the process," said Daniel Mungai, a lay preacher with the Pentecostal Evangelistic Fellowship of Africa churches in Nairobi.

"We are in the end times," Benjamin Mutungi, a Pentecostal church pastor, told Religion News Service. "They will keep upgrading this number until it becomes micro-chip that will be implanted on people's hands or forehead. We do not need to worry for now, but when they start fixing it on the people's foreheads that's the time to rise up."

President Uhuru Kenyatta registered disbelief as he launched the identification known as "Huduma (Service) Number" in Masii, a small town east of Nairobi, on April 2.

"I was shocked to hear that some of pastors are saying that this the devil's number," said Kenyatta. "Goodness! How does the devil come in, in a process of identification?" Kenyatta explained that the government needed the numbers to make it easier for citizens to receive services.

Kenyatta warned church leaders against misusing their privileged positions to mislead their congregations.

Eighty percent of Kenyans are Christian, and bishops, priests and pastors exercise immense influence on national issues, including education, politics and health.

Some government officials have responded to the charges about the mark of the beast with theological arguments of their own. "Those talking about the mark of the beast are ahead of time because you need to die first, then resurrect to get the number," said Karanja Kibicho, the principal secretary in the State Department, Interior Ministry.

Some Christian leaders are similarly dismissing the fears. "The evangelical churches are supporting the number," said Nyabuto Marube, an evangelical pastor with the Church of Christ in Nairobi's Kayole area. "I think to view it as the mark of the beast is to read too much in the Bible. It's also too radical."

But leaflets linked to Pentecostal groups opposing the ID number have been spotted in Mombasa and elsewhere in the country, urging residents not to sign up for the program and quoting apparent proofs from Revelation. "So that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark of the beast," one flyer read, citing Revelation's Chapter 13.

Another, written in Swahili, warned: "It doesn't matter if you are a Muslim, a Christian, a Hindu or a pagan. Understand that when you acquire the Huduma number, you and your creator have parted ways, meaning you will not receive the forgiveness of sin for ever. If you doubt this, ask Jesus (Pray), and the faithful one will provide an answer."

Other church leaders offered a criticism that the government's introduction of the new IDs sowed confusion from the start and said officials should have better educated people on its usefulness.

“Kenyans have several identifications and many view this as unnecessary,” said retired Anglican Bishop Julius Kalu of Mombasa.

On the streets, ordinary citizens have more mundane theories: The number will be used, for instance, to catch cheating spouses. {eoa}

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