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Warsaw, Poland — August 30, 2018

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The Catholic Church in Bosnia-Herzegovina has urged the country to improve human rights and political representation after upcoming elections, 23 years after the country was divided by a bloody war.

"In a country like this, still suffering the wounds of conflict, it's essential to bring people together, and for every individual and group to feel they enjoy full rights," said Msgr. Ivo Tomasevic, secretary general of the country's bishops' conference.

"Until now though, we've been ruled by a peace agreement rather than having a normal state, and the lack of organization has been exploited by the politicians," he told Catholic News Service Aug. 30. "We now need to elect people who'll take the country in a good direction and create hope for better things to come."

His comments came as campaigning began for the Oct. 7 elections. Voters were set to elect a new central tripartite presidency, as well as separate presidents and legislatures for Bosnia-Herzegovina's Serbian and Muslim-Croat entities.

Tomasevic said older citizens remained deeply affected by the 1992-1995 war, which left more than 100,000 dead, while many younger people, born after the fighting, had left for other countries in search of work.

He added that widespread dissatisfaction exists over conditions since the U.S.-brokered November 1995 Dayton peace agreement, including failure to implement a provision to allow refugees and displaced people to return home.

"People have counted on the international community, but it isn't really a community, since the views and interests of the U.S., Russia, Turkey and other players are quite different," Tomasevic said.

"The effects of the war have merely been made permanent, preventing people expelled from occupied territories from returning, and enabling larger groups to use democratic means to gain power over smaller ones," he said.

Catholics made up 18 percent of Bosnia-Herzegovina's 4.3 million citizens before the Balkan war, which ended with the formation of separate Serb- and Muslim-dominated territories in a single state. The country's four dioceses now have fewer than half their pre-war Catholic inhabitants, and church leaders have frequently complained that the Dayton guarantees for equal rights and representation were routinely ignored.

In comparison, 44 percent of the population is Muslim and 35 percent Serbian Orthodox.

In July, the six-member bishops' conference said in a pastoral letter that the elections offered Catholics a chance to seek greater justice and ensure "respect and faithfulness to Christian values."

"Regardless of the many reasons for dissatisfaction and frustration with the long-lasting poor state in Bosnia-Herzegovina, we are still witnesses to hope," the letter said.

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"It is particularly important the constitutionality of each people is consistently respected when implementing these election results, so electoral legitimacy will prevail. Without this, a society administered by law will actually be governed by injustice and legal violence," the bishops wrote.

Tomasevic said poorer communities often were ignored by aid donors, who only supported "the largest groups."

He added that the church itself had trouble getting help to some small Catholic parishes where membership has fallen to just a few dozen.

"In northern Bosnia, many villages now have only their priest to represent them, but the international organizations won't speak to them because they aren't regarded as political representatives," the priest said.

"From the church's standpoint, people in every part of the country should enjoy human rights and religious freedom, and feel represented. But while the politicians show little interest, more people leave, depriving those who remain of any hope," he said.

The pope, who made a one-day visit to Sarajevo in June 2015, urged political leaders to "build bridges not walls" in a late July message to a symposium of Catholic theologians in Sarajevo, advising Bosnians to avoid "antagonisms between sides fighting for primacy."

In their letter, the bishops said they were confident the elections offered an "opportunity for a new beginning," which could uphold "different national, cultural, linguistic and religious particularities and identities."

Cardinal Vinko Puljic of Sarajevo told Aid to the Church in Need in mid-August that up to 10,000 Catholics were leaving Bosnia-Herzegovina annually "because of unequal treatment at political and legal level." He said he also feared growing anti-Christian pressure, as the country's Muslim majority expanded with Middle Eastern funding and that entire villages inhabited by Arabic speakers emerged.

"While we have good relations with Slavic Muslims, it's hard to engage in dialogue with radical Muslim groups from the Arab countries, especially since they ignore our presence," Puljic said. "Europeans don't understand Islam well, and don't know what it's like to live alongside radicalized Muslims."