News

A Black man stands before a white wall and wears a violet zucchetto, pectoral cross and bisho

Cardinal-designate Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla of Juba, South Sudan, is pictured in an April 8, 2021, photo. Pope Francis announced during his July 9 Angelus that Ameyu Mulla will become a cardinal. (OSV News photo/Catholic Press Photo)

Fredrick Nzwili

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When the next consistory convenes at the Vatican on Sept. 30, a South Sudanese archbishop -- whose installation met stiff resistance -- will be among the 21 recipients of the red hat.

Pope Francis announced Archbishop Stephen Ameyu Martin Mulla of Juba a cardinal-designate on July 9, the date of South Sudan's 12th anniversary of independence -- making it a double celebration for the church and the nation, considered the world's youngest.

The 59-year-old prelate has been on the front lines of the peace and reconciliation efforts in the conflict-ridden East African nation. After over 21 years of civil war, the longest running in Africa, the country gained independence in 2011. Despite this, South Sudan continues to struggle with conflicts linked to ethnicity, politics and

resources, and climate change-related disasters.

Soon after the announcement, Ameyu Mulla said the church in South Sudan was happy "with this gift on Independence Day."

"It's a double happiness. We need to take care of it. (May the) Lord strengthen us in the search for peace … so that every time we receive news like this, we may celebrate with peace being a reality," he said.

Although he is the first in South Sudan, Ameyu Mulla said that it did not matter, since the service the church offered to the faithful was most important. He explained that the appointment was not a personal promotion, but an elevation of the whole Catholic Church in South Sudan.

"The happiness of the church is my happiness … so, I am happy, too, about this appointment because it is a way of serving our church in a higher way," he said.

Ameyu Mulla became known to the world when he hosted Francis in Juba in February 2023. He recalled that the pontiff had seen hope in the people's faces, and that the appointment was because of that hope seen during the Feb. 3-5 pilgrimage of peace.

"(The) elevation by his holiness Pope Francis has given us a challenge, as a church, a church that is struggling to bring peace to our people … the Holy Father has always seen the hope of our people, and that's why he appointed me to the group of cardinals," he said.

"We are -- a majority of us -- young people and through this elevation, we have been put in the spotlight," the archbishop of Juba said at a press conference July 9.

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Born in Ido in the Equatoria region of Sudan on Jan. 10, 1964, Ameyu Mulla attended the Minor Seminary in Torit and in Wau from 1978-1983 and later studied philosophy and theology in Wau and Juba; he was ordained a priest of the Diocese of Torit in 1991.

From 1993-1997, he attained a degree in dogmatic theology from the Pontifical Urbaniana University, later taught in various Catholic colleges and institutions, and

worked as a non-violence and democracy consultant for a local South Sudanese organization. His dissertation at the Roman university was titled "Toward Religious Dialogue and Reconciliation in Sudan."

The cardinal-designate then taught at the seminary in Juba, of which he also served as rector. Since 2013, he has also worked in the administration of the Catholic University of South Sudan.

In March 2019, he was ordained bishop of the Diocese of Torit in southeastern South Sudan, and a year later, he was installed as the archbishop of Juba.

Although considered a young archbishop, Ameyu Mulla has been shepherding the See named after the country's capital -- also the seat of power for the Catholic Church in South Sudan -- which is an influential post, holding sway on matters of national interest. The archdiocese is the richest in terms of resources, generating a big income from land leases and rented buildings. The archbishop of Juba is also seen as a symbol of unity and reconciliation for the people torn apart by war.

But after the appointment of Ameyu Mulla as archbishop in 2020, various indigenous groups, some clergy, chiefs, youth and women protested his installation. Writing in two letters, some priests and laymen alleged that Ameyu Mulla had sired six children. They also raised concerns that he is not a native of Juba and that he has limited knowledge of the local language and the culture of the indigenous people. The groups said the nunciature had been influenced by government officials and some clergy in the archdiocese in the appointment.

The resistance triggered some violence and open threats. On March 8, 2020 -- at the height of the controversy -- a group of Catholics from the archdiocese attacked Fr. Nicholas Kiri, who was the priest overseeing the planning of his installation. The youth had stormed the priest's residence, beat him and dragged him into St. Theresa's Cathedral in Juba.

Over the years, the tensions calmed down, and Juba -- and Ameyu Mulla -- were in the spotlight of the global church with Francis' apostolic trip in February. The cardinal-designate wrote a letter to Francis after the pontiff left the country.

"The peace which our country so badly needs is not a purely human peace based on personal interests, but rather the peace of Jesus," said the archbishop.

In addition to Ameyu Mulla, there are two other African cardinal-designates: Protase Rugambwa, coadjutor Archbishop of Tabora, Tanzania, and Archbishop Stephen Brislin of Cape Town.