

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 4, 2008 at 8:21am

Catholics must walk carefully in Kenya's political crisis

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Kenya's current slide into ethnic violence, which so far has generated 100,000 refugees and left more than 300 dead, ought to be a subject of grave concern for global Christianity, and not just for the obvious humanitarian and geostrategic reasons. In a real sense, nothing less than the destiny of Christianity in the 21st century is at stake.

Trackers of Christian trends have long prophesied that the next 100 years should shape up as an "African Century," given the enormous explosion in the continent's Christian population. In the 20th century, sub-Saharan Africa went from fewer than 8 million Christians to an estimated 360 million. Buoyed by that missionary and demographic energy, African Christianity is emerging as a protagonist in church affairs to a degree not seen since the age of Augustine, with the starring role played by African prelates in the ongoing crisis within Anglicanism merely the most obvious case in point.

Painting in broad strokes, Christianity in Africa tends to be youthful, vigorous, rooted solidly in the Bible rather than abstract theology, blending deep spiritual convictions with keen political and social engagement, and perhaps most beguiling of all, largely uncontaminated by the ideological polarization familiar in Western theological debate. Contrary to popular impression, African Christianity is not uniformly "conservative," which is a Western taxonomy, but often an intriguing blend of Biblical literalism with progressive social reform. The dream is that dynamic African Christians might reinvigorate the faith in other parts of the world.

For African Christianity to fulfill that potential, however, it will have to come to terms with the contagion of tribalism.

Hence the importance of Kenya, a nation of 37 million people that's roughly 78 percent Christian, with one-third Catholic and the rest spread among a wide variety of Evangelical, Pentecostal, Mainline Protestant and African Initiated Churches. Kenyan Christianity has produced an impressive share of global leaders. The general secretary of the World Council of Churches, the chief umbrella group for global Protestantism, is a Kenyan Methodist, Rev. Samuel Kobia. Pope Benedict XVI recently named the Archbishop of Nairobi, John Njue, as one of just nine African voting cardinals. Anglican Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi of Kenya is among the leaders of the traditionalist wing of his church; some 30 American congregations have broken away from the Episcopal Church in the United States, because of its pro-homosexual stance, to affiliate with Nzimbi's Anglican Church of Kenya.

Kenya is also one of the economic and political powerhouses of the continent, with the best infrastructure, communications networks and educational systems in East Africa. Most multinational companies, non-governmental organizations and media outlets that operate anywhere in East Africa choose to set up shop in Nairobi, making Kenya both physically and psychologically far more integrated with the rest of the world than any other country in the region.

If Christianity can't make a stand here, it's a fair question what hope it might have anywhere else.

To date, the evidence is not encouraging. On Wednesday, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu volunteered to help mediate the standoff between the government of President Mwai Kubaki, which is backed by his Kikuyu tribe, and the opposition "Orange Democratic Movement" led by Raila Odinga, a member of the Luo people. While there are 42 distinct ethnic groups in Kenya, the Kikuyu, who represent an estimated 13 percent of the population, have tended to dominate political and economic sectors, breeding resentment among other groups.

What's noteworthy about Tutu's intervention, however welcome it may be, is that no Christian leader in Kenya apparently has sufficient moral stature to bring the parties together. That's especially troubling given the proud history of church leaders in Kenya, with Catholics in the front line, of rallying civil society during the authoritarian regime of Daniel Arap Moi.

In this crisis, however, some Christian leaders appear to have inadvertently exacerbated divisions. In perhaps the most prominent example, Njue has twice expressed opposition to the Kenyan concept of *Majimbo*, referring to a sort of federalist politics in which the country's regions would gain power at the expense of the central government. *Majimbo* has been the rallying cry of Odinga's opposition movement, and in the context of Dec. 27 national elections Njue's statement was read as an indirect endorsement of Kubaki, a Catholic. (Odinga describes himself as an Anglican, though some allege he's not exactly practicing.)

Njue's intent, backed by the majority of the bishops' conference, clearly was to defend national unity. Here's how he explained it in a late October press conference in Nairobi:

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"What the country needs now is to be a united nation, and for Kenyans to have a sense of belonging," Njue said. "As the Catholic church, we do not support any particular party, but we have to go by those principles we see are valid for the wellbeing of the nation. We think it would be disastrous if we were to move in that direction. I think we need to help our people mature and to get that spirit of unity."

Njue is not the only Christian leader to express reservations about *Majimbo*. The Rev. Wellington Mutiso, chair of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya, also opposes it, saying "The unitary system is best, because as Kenyans we have a major problem with ethnicity, as we are so tribal."

Yet Njue's statements in particular, perhaps because of his cachet of being a new cardinal, seem to have fed ethnic tension. One Protestant leader close to the Orange Democratic Movement called Njue "a mouthpiece of Kikuyu tribes in the Catholic church in Kenya," and a leading Kenyan columnist referred to the statements as a major "goof." (For the record, Njue is not a Kikuyu, but a member of the small Embu tribe.) At least one brother Catholic bishop distanced himself from Njue; Archbishop Zacchaeus Okoth of Kisumu said Njue's position was not binding on Catholics, noting that it had not been expressed in a pastoral letter. (Here, too, some sense the tug of tribalism. Kisumu is overwhelmingly Luo, and a strong base of support for Odinga.)

Perceptions of a partisan stand have been exacerbated by the fact that Odinga signed a "memorandum of understanding" with a Muslim association, creating fears of religious division on top of existing tribal fractures. The Kenyan bishops issued a critical statement about the deal from Rome during their mid-November *ad limina* visit to the pope, warning that "granting special religious favors during campaign time is wrong."

However justified these interventions have been, the plain political fact is that in a truly free and fair election, Odinga would almost certainly have prevailed, and Njue and the Catholic bishops are now perceived by many of his supporters as part of the opposition. Their challenge thus is to project a model of civic-mindedness, open to all parties and concerned for the common good.

African Christians are certainly capable of it. One thinks, for example, of the famous Christmas sermon delivered in 2005 by Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, in the presence of then-President Olusegun Obasanjo. Onaiyekan urged Obasanjo to prepare democratic elections in 2007 rather than scrapping the constitution so he could claim a third term. Onaiyekan cleverly crafted his remarks as praise, expressing confidence the president would "resist the deadly temptation to want to remain in power perpetually by hook or by crook," but the message was clear. Obasanjo was said to have fumed privately, but eventually he relented.

Onaiyekan's message had credibility, and not simply because Obasanjo is a Christian in a country where the political class has traditionally been dominated by Muslims, so most people would have expected Onaiyekan to blindly support a Christian president. Onaiyekan also hails from Yoruba country, the same

tribe to which Obasanjo belongs. Onaiyekan's willingness to set aside tribal logic in order to speak for all Nigerians was thus impressive, and potentially decisive in laying the basis for a peaceful transition of power -- albeit in elections that most observers regarded as flawed.

While addressing the Kenyan crisis is primarily something for Njue and other local leaders to figure out, Christians around the world can at least express solidarity loudly and clearly, letting Kenyans know that the world is watching. Doing so is not merely a matter of protesting the oblivion to which Africa is routinely consigned, but it's also a recognition that our common Christian future is at stake.

On a trip to Kenya three years ago, I happened to be a dinner guest at the residence of the then-Archbishop of Nairobi, Raphael Ndingi Mwana a'Nzeki. Now 76 and retired, Ndingi carries the stately bearing of an African elder. While he's listed in the Vatican's *Annuario* as 76, in truth he doesn't know precisely how old he is; there were no birth certificates issued in the bush, but when he was baptized the parish clerk said he looked about 14, and that's how it went on the books.

That night we dined on a leisurely meal of traditional African dishes, with just enough Western-style entrees that I didn't feel completely adrift. Afterwards we retired to Ndingi's living room to sip wine and watch the local evening news. After one especially bombastic politico was interviewed, Ndingi expressed disagreement.

"But, Your Grace," one of the other clerics in the room playfully chided, "that man is from your people." (Ndingi is from the Akamba, an ethnic group concentrated in the eastern part of Kenya.)

"It makes no difference," Ndingi snorted. "Dishonesty doesn't belong to a tribe."

That's a sentiment that merits prayer, and whatever forms of active support the global Christian community can muster.

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