

Big guns in African church blast corrupt politics

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 12, 2009 NCR Today

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Two of the biggest guns in African Catholicism were locked and loaded in the synod hall on Monday, and both had the same target in their sights: politicians and political parties which they blasted as corrupt and interested only in self-preservation, a problem one of them memorably described as a "cancer eating up our continent."

Those big guns were Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier of Durban, South Africa, and Cardinal John Njue of Nairobi, Kenya. Both are widely considered among the top tier of prelates in Africa, and both have a broad regional influence — Napier especially in Southern Africa, and Njue in East Africa.

If the early days of the Synod for Africa have been marked by candor about the church's own internal challenges, Monday the pendulum swung back in a strongly *ad extra* direction, focused on the broader political life of the continent. Fox Napier and Njue may not have offered any compelling new cures, but they certainly minced no words about the diagnosis.

The Synod for Africa is meeting in the Vatican Oct. 4-25.

Napier, one of three co-presidents of the Synod for Africa, condemned what he described as a new kind of "monster that usurps power undemocratically."

Today's dictator is no longer the lone African strongman, the "president for life," he said, but rather a party that never seems to relinquish power. Fox Napier observed that four Southern African nations — Botswana, Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique — have been ruled ever since independence by the same political party.

If those parties were winning free and fair elections, Fox Napier said, it would be one thing — but that, he suggested, is clearly not the case.

"When a party arrogates to itself all credit for achieving liberation," he said, "when it claims that it alone knows what the people want or need, even though it refuses to ask or listen to them; when it forces through legislation and imposes policies which are patently against the known wishes of the people; when it claims that anyone with contrary views is ipso facto a counterrevolutionary, anti-transformation racist; then something has to be seriously wrong."

That sort of behavior, Fox Napier said, amounts to "a coup d'etat in all but name."

Just to make sure that no one missed the main target of his critique, Fox Napier added that, "When the party identifies itself so completely with the state that its president can feel safe claiming "[our party] will rule until Jesus Christ returns!," is he not implying that nothing, not even the democratic process, will dislodge it from power?"

That was a crystal-clear reference to South African President Jacob Zuma, who has reportedly asserted that his party, the African National Congress, will govern the country until Christ returns to earth.

Fox Napier closed with a prayer for "true and sustainable liberation, not from colonizers, but this time from the dictatorship of the all powerful party."

Njue came out firing too, asserting that "Africa continues to thirst for good governance."

"Many countries in Africa continue to struggle under bad governance," he said, "where unchecked hunger for power has led to impunity, corruption, manipulation of people, and other similar social political evils."

Njue cited the violence that rocked previously stable Kenya in 2008, pulling no punches in saying that the heart of the crisis lay in "leaders [who] would rather stick to constitutions that give them unchecked power, leading to anarchy and dictatorship."

Among other things, Njue noted that repeated promises by Kenyan leaders to bring the perpetrators of the violence to trail have yet to be fulfilled. He described politics focused on power as a "cancer that is eating up our continent," and insisted that "a cure must be found."

Njue ticked off a series of possible contributions the church could make to forming a better class of political leaders, including:

- "Chaplaincies for politicians
- "Strengthening Catholic media
- "Formation based on the church's social doctrine

How much difference any of those steps might make, especially in the short term, is anyone's guess. (Even Bishop Egidio Nkaijanabwo of Kasese, Uganda, conceded that despite protesting abuses repeatedly in various African nations, the church does "not seem to be getting much success.")

As the dust settled on Monday's rhetorical fireworks, however, at least one thing seemed clear: the Synod for Africa is likely to make a few politicians, and their ruling parties across the continent, nervous before it's done.

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