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A voice for southern Sudan, a gestating new nation

by Christina S.N. Lewis



Voters at the Hai Jelabe School polling station shade themselves from the sun. Lines were long at the polls, with some waiting from as early as 3 a.m. (NCR photo/Christina S.N. Lewis)

Sudan held an historic referendum Jan. 9-15 to determine whether the southern part of the country should become independent from the north. Christina S.N. Lewis was in the country covering the event for NCR as part of a weeks long reporting trip to Africa. Below is her report from the first day of the referendum, which appears in the Jan. 21 issue of NCR.

JUBA, SUDAN -- It is Sunday, Jan. 9: The first day of a historic referendum that will likely split Africa's largest country into two. U.S. Sen. John Kerry addresses a crowd of hundreds, perhaps a thousand, inside St. Teresa's Cathedral, the largest Catholic church in Juba, the capital city of this gestating new nation.

A phalanx of photographers and television cameramen stand in the aisle to the left, following the senator's words. Sitting in a red leather armchair at the very front row is Southern Sudan's president, the tall, dark-skinned Salva Kiir. To his right, a host of dignitaries, including the U.S. special envoy. Farther back, actor George Clooney, who is lending his star power to beleaguered Sudan, a country that is, for now, largely at peace.



And just a few inches behind Kerry, in the midst of this global media furor, stands

Sr. Cecilia Sierra Salcido, founder of Sudan's first Catholic radio station and member of the Comboni Missionary Sisters.

Unlike all the other media who must tape Kerry and the other dignitaries from their spots in the press area, Salcido's voice recorder is sitting on the lectern, placed there by one of the priests. When Kerry concludes, Salcido taps one of the priests on the shoulder again, and he hands the recorder back to her. She thanks him, moves back, sits down on a chair in the middle of the sacristy and starts to check the recording. Meanwhile, her team of three reporters, all Sudanese, was covering the proceedings from the main hall.

Salcido, known to all as Sister Cecilia, runs Bakhita Radio, a four-year-old radio station that features a mix of news, health, civic education and religious programming. Bakhita, which styles itself as "the voice of the church," is the largest and oldest station in the Sudan Catholic Radio Network, which comprises seven radio stations run by church personnel, both local and missionary.



The station puts Salcido at the center of the push for peace

because the vast majority of Southern Sudanese get their news and information by radio. As many as 3.9 million Southern Sudanese were voting Jan. 9-16 to decide whether the south should secede from the north. The vote came about as part of a 2005 comprehensive peace agreement that ended Africa's longest-running civil war.

As of Jan. 12, more than 60 percent -- the percentage required in order for the referendum to be considered valid -- of the 3.9 million registered voters had cast their ballots, according to reports. The population, which had been at war with the north for decades in a struggle that claimed 2 million lives, is widely expected to vote to separate. Yet challenges remain. People fear that ethnic and tribal tensions could flare up as the region attempts to form its own state.

In this turbulent time, Salcido sees herself as a crusader both for Christian values, but also for freedom of the press. In her view, Bakhita not only empowers the people, it is also a sign of the growing democratization of the church.

"People started realizing this was not a church of "Glory Be"s" and hallelujahs or whatever," she told *NCR*

. ?It is a church very much in touch with the reality of the people.?

The Catholic church is one of the strongest institutions in Southern Sudan, which has suffered from 55 years of war with and neglect by the central government in Khartoum. The civil war between the Arabic north and the dark-skinned Christian and animist south has left Southern Sudan, about the size of France, with nonexistent infrastructure. The area has perhaps 30 miles of paved road, according to *Sudan: Darfur and the Failure of an African State* by Richard Cockett, and a miniscule number of educational and health care facilities. The Catholic church, through its schools, hospitals and its network of radio stations, provides much of the region's social services, including disseminating information about how the voting works (not easy with a significantly illiterate population) and encouraging peace between ethnic groups.

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?The religious are very important here,? said Bruce Macpherson, an advisor to the Ministry of Information, speaking a few days before the voting began. ?The church ? is one of the institutions that touch the lives of a lot of people in this country directly, both in the church and also through the radio stations.?

Men holding small radios are a common sight along Juba's dusty streets and inside the traditional mud, wood and straw huts that lie on the outskirts of Juba. The wealthy few who own cars can listen there. And many follow the radio via mobile phones, which are ubiquitous in Southern Sudan. (Listening to the radio on a cell phone is free.)

Bakhita is ?very professional and very good,? said Joseph P. Kruzich, public affairs officer for the U.S. consulate in Juba. ?I think that they provide a vast and accurate network for the people of Sudan [and] they are very passionate about the freedom of press in the south and I think that's important to preserve.?

In a sign of Bakhita's independence, the station has faced political pressure and police harassment in the past. In December 2009, a group of policemen entered the Bakhita compound and beat one of the station's female employees, Salcido said. This past spring, government security forces visited Salcido's offices, demanding that she cease her political programming.

The visit was a mistake, she said: The police had confused Bakhita with another station. Relations have now improved, according to several accounts, particularly since a new minister of information, Barnaba Marial Benjamin, took charge.

Seed becomes a tree

Salcido was born in Mexico in 1967 and became a sister in 1990. She has spent 11 years in Sudan, including time in Khartoum. She speaks Arabic, Italian and Spanish. She studied journalism and communications at La Salle University in Philadelphia for six years. She also spent two years in Egypt learning Arabic.

The radio station broadcast live for the first time at midnight on Christmas Eve 2006. ?We were born with Christ,? said Salcido, tongue in cheek. It is named after St. Josephine Bakhita, the patron saint of Sudan. Born in Darfur, she was enslaved, moved to Italy, subsequently freed and converted to Christianity. She then became a Canossian sister in Italy and was beatified in 2000.



Since its founding, the radio station has grown from a virtually one-woman operation (‘I was doing everything’) into a roughly 25-person enterprise that employs more women than men, an intentional act of ‘affirmative action,’ according to Salcido. Program funding comes from Catholic Relief Services, Pax Christi and other organizations. The radio equipment and support provider is an Italian company. Bakhita does sell ads, but the rates are low, Salcido said, so that no one can confuse them with a for-profit enterprise.

Salcido is fond of elaborate metaphors. She describes the growth of Bakhita like that of a tree or a child.

‘This radio is like a seed that was planted in the right place at the right time. If you had a child I think it would be like this. You have a child and then you don’t realize until they are getting married that they have grown. I think it is the same thing that has happened to me. Bakhita has grown so much. The small seed has become a tree and we are already enjoying the shade and the fruits.’

On the second day of voting, Salcido felt sick. She had not taken a day off in five weeks, she said. True to form, she used a metaphor: ‘The battery is asking for some rest.’

She is in her usual spot, sitting behind her paper-strewn desk in Bakhita Radio’s offices. A flat-screen monitor showing her e-mail account is to her left. However, the monitor can also show the station’s precise lineup, which she can manipulate at will. She also uses the computer to instant-message the radio control room.

Salcido wears a white peasant-style blouse from Mexico. A silver cross on a brightly beaded string hangs from her neck. A white cotton headpiece covers her hair. A stream of visitors come in and out of her office, which, in traditional journalistic style, is separated from the newsroom (about six cubicles) by a glass window and an open door. One visitor is Emmanuel Tombe, a tall, lean young man.

‘Where have you been?’ Salcido asked.

‘Out.’

‘Any complaints? How’s it going?’ Salcido asked.



Tombe is one of six of Bakhita’s staff who managed to get credentials to visit the country’s polling places. Salcido has sent them out into the field to report on the voting live via cell phone. The young man responds that all is calm, but that the checking of registration books, which polling personnel look up by number and then have each voter verify with their thumbprint, is very slow. ‘In one hour, maybe 20 people vote,’ Tombe says. However, Tombe has been texting reports of such problems to an international nongovernmental organization that relays the information to the voting commission, called the Southern Sudan Referendum Bureau.

Outside, two very dirty men, one Italian, one Spanish, are putting the finishing touches on a new 72-meter antenna. The mast, now operational, has extended Bakhita’s coverage to the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Salcido says. Meanwhile, Salcido has already made plans to put the old mast, only 30

meters high, to use as a relay antenna in Lobonock, to extend the station's reach even farther.

To be sure, Bakhita Radio is just one of a number of church institutions supporting the people of Sudan. For example, there is also the Jesuit-led Catholic University in Juba and Wau (*NCR*, Nov. 12). Solidarity With Southern Sudan, an organization supported by nearly 200 religious congregations from around the world, runs the region's only nurse-training facility in the province of Wau, and it is currently building a teacher-training institute in Malakal. Recently the organization partnered with Catholic Relief Services to lead 101 days of prayer for peace in Sudan, an initiative that drew global attention.

Salcido's congregation, the Comboni Missionaries, has a large presence outside of the radio network as well. Its founder, St. Daniel Comboni, first came to Sudan in the 19th century. The Combonis run dozens of parishes, primary and secondary schools in the region. Many institutions that are now run by local people were initially founded by the Combonis, such as the Comboni College in Khartoum, said Sr. Cleonice Salvadeo, superior of the Comboni Sisters community in Juba. Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international aid and development arm, provides financial and logistical assistance to a huge number of charitable organizations in Southern as well as Northern Sudan.

The vast majority of Southern Sudanese are Catholic, including President Kiir, who worships at St. Teresa's each week. The centrality of the church in Sudanese politics was on display in Kerry's speech Jan. 9, in which he said, "It is faith that has brought the people of Southern Sudan to the brink of nationhood. And it is faith that will carry you through the coming months and into a future that is at the same time bright with promise even as it is filled with challenges."

Kerry quoted from the Gospel of Mark to illustrate a point about humility. He also cited the golden rule: "Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you."

A ritual sacrifice

Southern Sudan's future remains precarious. Not only must the south maintain close economic and political ties with the north, even if secession occurs, it must also maintain unity among the different tribal and ethnic groups within its own borders. Many fear that without the north as a common enemy, southern tribes will begin fighting among themselves for power in the new regime and for access to the oil money that will likely pour into the nation.



The traditional tribal religions remain powerful. On the third day of voting, a Dinka wise man, wearing an all-gray garment and with a buoyant head of black and white tightly-coiled hair, led a group of men and women out to the edges of Juba's main polling center and slaughtered a goat and chicken in a ritual sacrifice.

After a period of call-and-response chants, two men held the goat by its hooves, one pulled something across its throat to silence its cries. Then a man sawed into its mid-section, disemboweling it. The men twisted the body around. The other continued to saw as a crowd of people, both Western and Sudanese, watched, alternately transfixed and disgusted. When the goat was split into two, the gray-haired man grabbed the hind part and threw it over the fence and into the street. It represented Northern Sudan. The crowd cheered. Then, a chicken was decapitated and its head was thrown into the street. The crowd dispersed quickly, the dead animals left where they lay.

According to a local journalist, on the first day of voter registration in Juba late last year, five bulls and

five rams were slaughtered in the middle of the square, the location of the mausoleum of John Garang, considered Southern Sudan's founder, who signed the 2005 peace agreement months before dying in a helicopter accident. The journalist pointed out dark patches in the dusty ground, created from the animals' blood.

At press time, the official tally would not be available until mid-February. Independence would not be finalized until July and many issues remain unresolved between the north and south, particularly the status of Abyei, along the border. At least 30 people have been killed there recently.

Meanwhile, Salcido continues to ply her trade. On the day before the referendum she spoke with a station supporter who had heard a rumor that Bakhita was going to be closed. "This is the wrong information," said Salcido. "We will never stop."

"Really, this has all been preparatory exercises," she said a few days later. "For us, the real game begins on the 9th of July."

[Christina S.N. Lewis is traveling through Africa in the early weeks of 2011, reporting on the lives and work of Catholics there, focusing in particular on the work of women religious.]

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