NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Cameroon journalist warns of ëcheap political pointsí from popeís visit

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 13, 2009

Charly Ndi Chia

Cameroon, a West African nation of 19 million that?s roughly 30 percent Catholic, is arguably the Vatican?s favorite destination in Africa. When Benedict XVI arrives on March 17, opening his first swing in Africa since his election to the papacy in 2005, Cameroon will become just the third African nation to have hosted three papal trips. (John Paul II visited Kenya and the Ivory Coast three times). Cameroon is also the papacy?s preferred platform to address the entire African continent: When John Paul came in 1995, he used the occasion to present ?Ecclesia in Africa,? his apostolic exhortation summing up the 1994 Synod for Africa. Benedict XVI will likewise issue the working paper for the second Synod for Africa in a meeting in Yaoundé, Cameroon?s capital, with bishops from across the continent.

In part, the Vatican?s fondness for Cameroon is related to the fact that, unlike many of its neighbors, the country has enjoyed four decades of peace and stability since independence in 1960. In part, too, it?s because Cameroon is Africa in miniature: It has both Francophones and Anglophones, spread among some 275 ethnic groups, most of which also have unique local tongues. It includes four distinct geographic zones that sum up much of the continent?s topography, and it also counts substantial populations of Christians, Muslims and followers of African Traditional Religions, all living in basic harmony.

In other ways, Cameroon also offers an object lesson in Africa?s ills. Most observers say longtime President Paul Biya ? a former Catholic seminarian whose father was a famed catechist ? has maintained power since 1982 through a combination of intimidation and corruption. Cameroon also illustrates the ?resource trap?; though blessed with timber and oil, as well as fertile soil that produces coffee, sugar, cocoa, and other cash crops, Cameroon is still significantly under-developed. Its per-capita GDP ranks among the ten highest in sub-Saharan Africa, but especially in rural areas, poverty remains endemic.

For local insight on Benedict XVI?s visit, NCR *turned to one of Cameroon?s best-known journalists: Charly Ndi Chia, editor-in-chief of The Post, a widely read independent newspaper, and president of the Cameroon Union of Journalists. Ndi Chia claims the distinction of being Cameroon?s ?most arrested journalist,? having been detained ten separate times over the years for his criticism of the government. Ndi Chia spoke March 12 by phone from Yaoundè.*

What are the major challenges facing Cameroon today?

First, we hear a lot of talk about a so-called ?democratic agenda? for Cameroon, but it?s not real. We?ve only had two heads of state since we achieved independence almost fifty years ago, which hardly makes for robust democracy.

Then there?s the issue of corruption. Again, talk about the problem never leads to change. Here?s how things work: Every so often the government sets up an anti-corruption unit, and they?ll spend lots of money on it. The people in charge are entitled to fabulous stipends, so, ironically, the anti-corruption effort becomes a vehicle of corruption. Even if they were serious, however, all the acts of that unit are subject to the discretion of the head of state. Rarely does anyone go to jail; if they?re caught, the most that might happen is that they?re asked to refund the money, which is not really a punishment.

Let me put it to you this way: We?ve got public officials whose salary is supposed to be $600 a month, but they?re living in million-dollar homes, they have a collection of fancy cars, and so on. That money has to come from somewhere.

We also have an economy that?s comatose, or, at best, wheelchair-bound. We should be rich, but there?s no accountability for how resources are used. The private sector and the informal sector are not at all encouraged, because taxes are extremely high. In Cameroon, a citizen has virtually no rights ? not just because of outright repression, but because systems don?t work. For example, if you call the police to come help you, they?re likely to say that there?s no gas in the squad car, so they can?t go anywhere. They?ll tell you to bring the guy who?s attacking you down to the police station if you want help.

How does the government survive?

The minds of our citizens have been horsewhipped ? by poverty, by the military and paramilitary groups, by political propaganda, and so on. That?s the only explanation as to why our people tolerate, for example, a president who practically lives in Europe. In fact, I?ve sometimes been tempted to run a headline along the lines of, ?Biya visits Cameroon,? because he spends so much time away.

Our opposition parties lack committed leadership. I would say that in Cameroon, the manipulation of poverty has been elevated to an art form. People are conditioned to beg for crumbs from the table, and when they get them, to shut up. It?s like a bad joke.

What role does the Catholic Church play in Cameroon?

It has a very, very strong role, to say the least. It is the silent opposition ? silent, but potent. In fact, it?s not always silent. From time to time, the bishops? conference will take a stand on burning national issues, and what they say is usually frank and forthright. They?ve even trained credible election monitors, who have turned out to be much more effective than those dispatched by international agencies.

Our lone cardinal [Cardinal Christian Tumi, 78] has been very vocal. He says what he likes, and what he thinks. He?s simple, straight-forward, and non-partisan. Sometimes, bishops, priests and nuns in Cameroon have had to pay with their lives because of the church?s stands. Some have been assassinated.

Do these interventions from the church make any difference?

If they didn?t, ministers from the government wouldn?t always be hot on the heels of interviews given by church leaders in order to respond. It makes them panic.

Here?s an example: Some time ago, nine young people just disappeared. It turned out they had been shot and surreptitiously buried by the security forces, because they had stolen some gas or something like that. The perpetrators would probably have gotten away scot free if the church had not raised its voice. Because the church spoke out, the governor of the area was forced to arrest some big shots in the army, and there was a trial. As it turned out, the court basically favored the army, even though the evidence [against them] was overwhelming. Still, some small fry ended up being dismissed, which is more than would have happened otherwise.

What about the Muslims in Cameroon?

The Muslim community is a minority, mostly concentrated in the north. When they speak out, it?s usually in defense of their own community interests: ?Give us schools up here because we voted for you,? that sort of thing. ? They can be tenacious in defending their rights as a minority, but they?re not so aggressive when it comes to broader national questions.

How are relations between Christians and Muslims?

Very, very cordial. There have never been any problems. They mix well together. If there are problems, it?s one Muslim faction against another, not Christian vs. Muslim. They?re well integrated. About the worst that might happen is that cattle from a Muslim area will stray into areas farmed by Christians, but that?s not a religious conflict.

Is there fear of radical Islam being imported, triggering the sort of Muslim/Christian bloodshed that?s happened in Nigeria?

I think I can say emphatically that there?s no such fear. On the contrary, if there?s fear about violence, like what happened in Rwanda, it?s focused on tensions between Anglophones and Francophones, not Christians against Muslims. [Note: Cameroon was formed in 1961 through a union of the former French colony of Cameroun and the southern part of the English colony of British Cameroons. Today, Francophones constitute roughly 80 percent of the population and Anglophones 20 percent. Over the years minority Anglophones have voiced grievances, and there is a small independence movement in the English-speaking south.]

What do you think the significance will be of Pope Benedict?s visit?

It?s very important in several ways.

For sure, the president will use it to score some cheap political points. It?s a bit like football [soccer]. Cameroon is very strong in football, and people in Cameroon are fanatical about the football team. It?s really the only time that you don?t see any tension between Anglophones and Francophones, because everyone is behind the Lions. Our national team is called the ?Indomitable Lions,? and Biya has a catchphrase, ?win like a lion.? It?s like a win for the Lions is a winning streak for the regime. When they win, the president declares a national holiday, so everybody can drink and forget their woes.

It will be the same with the pope. Catholics in Cameroon are fanatical about his visit, and it will be used by the government as a plaything. The government-controlled media, the TV and radio, will highlight those aspects of the trip that involve the head of state. They already have signature tunes for the event, all intended to emphasize the relationship between the pope and Biya. That may influence a lot of impressionable minds, a lot of loyal Catholics.

Average people hope the pope will address important issues of morality, especially political morality. My paper

recently ran a survey asking people, ?What should the pope tell Biya?? Many people said they want the pope to tell Biya not to run again in 2011, that his time is past. They want him to talk about good governance and democracy, maybe about cutting taxes. I would say there?s almost a plaintive cry for the pope to talk about reducing poverty. In general, they?re looking to the visit to solve problems that haven?t been solved for close to fifty years by our politicians or by Western nations.

Do you think people have unrealistic expectations?

Probably, many do. Of course, the pessimistic ones are saying, ?To hell with the pope?s visit. Things won?t change. It will only give more credibility to a dictator.?

Do you think Biya is afraid of what the pope might say?

Not really. Even if the pope says something challenging, the government knows how to challenge it. For them, what?s most important is the head of state rubbing shoulders with the pope, and the chorus of ?alleluias? that will come from the state-owned media. They?ll say it shows how important Biya is, that two popes have come here in rapid succession.

How will you judge the success of the visit?

Whatever happens, I suspect most people will feel good about it. The late Pope John Paul II came here twice, and Cameroon as a big Catholic nation felt privileged and honored. The last time he was here, in 1995, he presented a document from the Synod for Africa. This pope too is coming to present a document for all of Africa, so people will feel the pope has honored Cameroon again. For sure, people will stream to Yaoundè, they will be glued to their TV sets, they?ll buy all kinds of trinkets and gadgets with the pope?s image, and so on.

Finally, what?s the attitude in Cameroon toward the United States?

It?s changed positively because of the way the ambassador is conducting herself. [Note: Janet E. Garvey, a career member of the U.S. Foreign Service, has been ambassador to Cameroon since September 2007.] When the U.S. government endorses some aspect of the regime?s performance, people are disappointed. When it takes a critical stand, the U.S. is hailed. Recently the ambassador spoke out about appointments to our electoral body, so the U.S. is enjoying a run of good press in Cameroon. The image is very positive. Of course, the icing on the cake is the man in the White House, President Obama. People here will do anything to try to identify themselves with Obama, and his popularity rubs off on the United States.

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John Allen is in Africa covering Pope Benedict XVI?s March 17-23 trip to Cameroon and Angola. Watch the NCR web site for his daily reports.

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