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

In Nigeria, a palpable hunger for democracy

Patricia Lefevere | Mar. 14, 2011

Businesswoman Funke Sapara displays her voting card during voter registration in Lagos, Nigeria, Jan 15. (APF/Pius Utomi Ekpei)

ABUJA, NIGERIA -- Africa?s largest democracy and second-biggest economy -- Nigeria -- will hold national elections April 9. And in Nigeria, a nation where religion counts, religious people want to be counted.

Nigeria has a population of 155 million. With half its citizens, or 75 million, listed as Muslims, Nigeria has overtaken Egypt as the biggest Islamic country in Africa. Officially, Christians make up 40 percent of the population, though some sources put the figure at 48 percent, due to rapid growth of evangelical megachurches in the south.

Among Christians, Catholics are the largest denomination, comprising 20 percent of the nation. They are among ?the strongest supporters of democracy,? Msgr. Obiora Ike told *NCR*. Ike directs the Catholic Institute for Development, Peace, Justice and Caritas in Enugu, Nigeria.

While the church is not involved at the level of partisan agendas or competition among party ideologies and platforms, it has long advocated for the rule of law, free and fair elections, accountability and transparency in the electoral process. ?The legal system must be the final authority,? not the ballot-rigging and graft that has characterized past polls, Ike said.

The church has urged Catholics to register and to use their conscience as their guide when voting. ?Vote for someone who is courageous, honest and has a vision for the nation ... someone with a good track record,? who is ?tested and trusted,? Ike said. Above all, choose ?candidates who refuse corruption, resist manipulation and reject violence,? he said.

Nigerians have shown a palpable hunger for democracy, Ike said. ?Nigeria was democratic before the British came here. It?s in our culture.?

Evidence of this democratic zest could be seen in the throngs who queued hours in the blazing sun to have their fingerprints electronically scanned and their photographs taken during the recent three-week voter registration drive. The scenes were poignant, given the country?s sad history of elections postponed, canceled, invalidated

and often violent.

Some 68 million Nigerians registered, a number deemed remarkable in a country where 45 percent of the population is under the voting age of 18.

When they go to the polls next month, voters will select their president, governor and members of the National Assembly, which is comprised of 109 senators and 360 members of the House of Representatives.

Leading the pack among 21 presidential contenders is Nigeria?s acting president, Goodluck Jonathan of the People?s Democratic Party, which runs 27 of the nation?s 36 states. Among his opponents is Nuhu Ribadu, known as ?Mr. Anti-Corruption,? a passionate though underfunded reformer from the Action Congress of Nigeria, which holds power in three states.

Jonathan is not unaware of his own good fortune in rising to political heights in Nigeria. He was vice president under the ailing President Umaru Yar?Adua, who spent many months in Saudi Arabia seeking medical care for a kidney ailment in 2009 and 2010.

The National Assembly, reacting to the power vacuum created by his absence -- and acting extralegally -- designated Jonathan the acting president in February 2010. Upon Yar?Adua?s return and subsequent death last May, Jonathan became Nigeria?s constitutional president.

Many contend that Jonathan, a Christian from the south who holds a doctorate in zoology, should not be allowed to seek the nation?s highest office. They view his candidacy as a violation of Nigeria?s ?zoning agreement? by which the presidency rotates between the Muslim north and the largely Christian south -- an arrangement begun in 1999 as an effort toward political and religious equity after 16 years of military rule.

Jonathan dismisses the accord, noting that if Nigerians had agreed to such a system, he would not now be the acting president. Meanwhile, he continues to wear a broad smile under his trademark hat and promises to improve infrastructure, especially education; end the violence in his own southern oil region; and seek $35 billion in investments to secure electricity for all Nigeria.

Power outages and lack of electricity in rural areas have long impeded the nation?s development.

A question that will have to be answered no matter the outcome of the election is how a nation that is earning $282 million a day from its oil production continues to have 80 percent of its citizens living on $2 a day. Even those too young or not registered to vote are demanding answers to that question.

Asked about the violence that threatens to mar the election, Ike said that what is often labeled religious or sectarian conflict is a complex mixture of ethnic disputes, power politics and the battle for jobs, land and water rights. When Shariah law was introduced in 12 Muslim majority states in the north in 2000, rioting ensued, resulting more than 1,000 deaths.

Ike cites Jos, a city that sits on the fault line between the Muslim north and Christian south, as ?a bad example of the politicization of religion.? The city of about 100,000 is three hours north of the capital, Abuja. Since 2001 more than 2,000 people have been murdered in and around Jos, capital of Plateau State.

On Christmas Eve, 38 people were reportedly killed and 74 wounded in seven explosions at two areas of the city where many were finishing their Christmas shopping.

Human Rights Watch reported 200 deaths due to ethnic and religious violence in the Jos area during January. At least 5,000 people have been displaced by the conflict over the past year.

The majority of the violence has begun in or near churches or mosques. Christian groups have strongly criticized security forces for not forestalling future violence or prosecuting the perpetrators so that others would be deterred from further acts.

People get arrested, but are rarely ?brought to book,? said Fr. Maurice Henry, regional superior for the Society of African Missions here. Henry, a native of Ireland, has spent 40 years as a Catholic missionary in Nigeria, much of it in and around Jos.

?You could not find a more peaceful place in all of Nigeria,? he said, at least up to a decade ago. But recently people from outside the area have come to Jos to trade, work in its tin mines or graze their herds after climate change had decreased northern grasslands.

While the Nigerian Constitution protects the rights of people in their native setting, known as *indigenes*, those not from a local government area often feel discriminated against -- especially in education, jobs and land rights, Henry said -- even if they have been in the area for decades.

Henry regretted that ?Christianity hasn?t broken through the ethnic barrier.? But he said the churches continue to work to advance peaceful coexistence.

In March 2010, when killings erupted in Jos, Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja and the sultan of Sokoto, Sa?ad Abubakar, the highest spiritual leader of the Islamic north, were able to hold a joint press conference within 24 hours, stressing that the tenets of both religions offer a way toward peace.

On Feb. 24, representatives of 11 Muslim women?s organizations and 11 Christian women?s groups met in a Muslim center in the northern city of Kaduna. Calling themselves Muslim and Christian Women Coming Together as Mothers of the Culture of Peace, they discussed ways to continue their peace-building and involve youth, said Julie Ideh, head of programs for Catholic Relief Services in Abuja, who attended the meeting.

Sr. Kathleen McGarvey, an Irish sister of Our Lady of the Apostles who works in the area of interfaith dialogue, facilitated the gathering.

By April, Catholic Relief Services hopes to have had four well holes bored and 10 latrines built in Jos South, which is inhabited by people of both faiths. The agency is working with local partners on a pilot project designed to meet a basic need. ?We hope water can be a source of cohesion rather than conflict,? said Lauren Pelascini of Catholic Relief Services.

Ideh, a native of Ohio, has spent 10 years with CRS, five of them in Nigeria. She sees more young and dynamic Nigerians working in key areas and becoming leaders. Many are returning from overseas, bringing their talent and investment capital into a country that has just marked 50 years of independence. ?Even musicians are singing messages of peace,? she noted.

An estimated 1 million Nigerians live in the United States, many of them highly educated professionals. Some 700 Nigerian priests and sisters serve the U.S. church while some of the 25,000 Americans who make their home in Nigeria work in its Catholic parishes, schools and hospitals.

While violence could still postpone the elections, all Nigerians with whom *NCR* spoke during a week in the federal capital of Abuja hoped that would not happen. The need for security during the campaign and at the polling stations was on everyone?s mind as was the need to closely monitor the election and the vote tally.

In interviews, Jonathan has repeatedly said that ?violence will not break out.? He has also called upon Nigerians

to be less greedy and to create a commonwealth of Nigeria that belongs to all its citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion, age, education or economic status.

[Patricia Lefevere is a frequent contributor to *NCR*.]

Source URL (retrieved on *04/26/2015 - 16:12*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/nigeria-palpable-hunger-democracy