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Africans: Church needs role in election monitoring

Bronwen Dachs Catholic News Service | Sep. 19, 2011

ACCRA, Ghana -- The church must strengthen its role in observing and monitoring elections in African countries where electoral violence prevails, said church representatives from 20 African nations.

Noting that 12 African countries are scheduled to hold elections before the end of 2011 and 14 others in 2012, participants in a mid-September conference organized by Catholic Relief Services and the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar said that "poor governance is often the source of intimidation, violence or conflicts in Africa during and after elections."

"More often than not," elections in Africa have been manipulated "to satisfy selfish or partisan interests to the detriment of the common good," participants said in statement signed by Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle of Accra. Other signers included chairs of their national bishops' justice and peace commissions: Bishop Paul Bemile of Wa, Ghana; Bishop Alexio Churu Muchabaiwa of Mutare, Zimbabwe; and Bishop Gbaya Boniface Ziri of Abengourou, Ivory Coast.

Among the main causes of electoral violence are the "lack of political will to implement reforms that support democratic principles and practices, partisan administration and management of electoral bodies," ignorance, illiteracy and poverty, as well as "manipulation of ethnic identities and inadequate training of polling officials," the statement said.

The participants resolved to make resources available to support the good governance and peace-building initiatives and to ensure that these resources are "effectively, transparently and judiciously used."

Urging Christians to "bring to bear on politics their Christian faith and virtues," the participants said it was sad that, "after more than a century of Christianity in many African countries, some Christians still use ethnic identities in politics to the exclusion of others."

The conference looked at issues of justice, reconciliation and peace, in line with the 57 pastoral proposals the bishop delegates offered to Pope Benedict XVI as the October 2009 Synod of Bishops for Africa concluded.

The church "has not always engaged effectively with political leaders for the cause of peace and development," said the final statement, noting that this "is contrary to the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ."

Participants said legal frameworks to guarantee Africans the freedom to exercise their democratic rights need to be put in place.

In a talk at the conference, Archbishop Palmer-Buckle said the church needs to "speak out against electoral abuses and all forms of malpractices," noting that it "cannot afford to shirk" its responsibility to speak out "on behalf of the voiceless."

"We have to speak out and defend what is right and just, even at the risk of our lives," he said.

He appealed to experts in good governance to help Catholic universities and other institutions in Africa "to establish faculties of political science for the understanding and implementation" of the church's social teaching.

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