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As South Sudan progresses, church leaders 'talk hard' about problems

Paul Jeffrey Catholic News Service | Oct. 22, 2012
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More than a year after national independence, relations between church and state in South Sudan are experiencing growing pains.

"I am happy with the government and with (President Salva Kiir). He's a Catholic and he prays in our church when he's at home," Archbishop Paulino Lukudu Loro of Juba told Catholic News Service. "But it doesn't seem as if the government is as willing to listen to the church as before."

During the decades-long independence struggle against the Sudanese government in Khartoum, Catholic and other Christian leaders collaborated extensively with the political movement that became today's government in Juba. And while church leaders report that relations with government leaders remain positive, their patience with the government's response to corruption and other troubles is wearing thin.

"The government's time is running out to work with the church. Until now, whatever weaknesses there were, we played the game of understanding. It was a new situation, and we understood that we were beginning, not from zero, but from under the ground," the archbishop said.

"Now there's a moment when we have to talk hard, and it may cause a problem. We're not talking about people being against the government or trying to overthrow the government. We want the government and the people to be together," the archbishop said.

Lukudu and Episcopal Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul issued a pastoral appeal Oct. 10, celebrating negotiations between the governments in Juba and Khartoum that led to a Sept. 27 agreement about oil and borders. South Sudan's oil was 98 percent of its economy, yet earlier this year it shut down production because of a lack of agreement over using Sudan's pipelines to transport it.

The two church leaders also said they were heartened by the advances that have accompanied independence for the South.

"We have a functioning government and civil service, a police force, tarmac roads in Juba and an increasing network of all-weather roads outside, an ever-growing mobile phone network, commercial flights to most major towns, a relatively free press with FM radio stations covering many areas, and much more. Few could have imagined this during the darkest years of the war. Progress may not have been as fast as some would have hoped, but a new country takes time to develop, and a degree of patience is needed. It is our hope that once oil begins to flow again, the money which becomes available will be used to speed up the development of the nation," the church leaders wrote.

Yet they also warned that all was not right.

"Corruption within our government cannot be ignored and is constantly on the lips of the ordinary people," the

appeal stated.

"These issues of corruption, tribalism, land grabbing and injustice are too many and too big, and they won't let us build a new country. The church isn't deaf to this situation," Lukudu said.

John Ashworth, an adviser to the Sudan Council of Churches, said church leaders recognize the tradeoffs necessary in a society that a short time ago was a fragile coalition of often-feuding militias bound together only by their common opposition to northern rule.

"The bishops are realistic. They know why there's corruption. They know why the government has to be made up of people who represent constituencies, whether they're ethnic groups or militias. You can't just sack them all. Otherwise you'd not only have no government, you'd have civil war," Ashworth, a former Mill Hill priest, told Catholic News Service.

"They are also aware that there are people who spent 22 years in the bush and sacrificed their whole adult life and now feel that it's payback time. 'Somebody should buy me a house and send all my kids to school.' Nonetheless, the bishops are calling for change," he said.

Lukudu said he still has the ear of the government.

"I've spent time with Salva Kiir and shared with him how his good decisions aren't being implemented, how the decisions of the ministries aren't being executed," he said. "He's aware of that. He accepted what I said. There's homework to do here."

One of South Sudan's most vexing challenges is the control that one ethnic group, the Dinka, have over most of the national government.

"The president has a big group of advisers around him, and most of them are Dinkas, just one ethnic group. This is a very serious problem," Lukudu said. "Is the president free to decide and to act on his own? Someone told me the president is a hostage to his very own people. He needs to be freed from that situation."

Whatever tensions may exist between church leaders and the government of South Sudan, they have collaborated closely on several matters, including trying to stop an ethnic conflict in Jonglei state that led to hundreds of deaths in the last year.

Violence nonetheless continues in Jonglei, and Lukudu said Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir is supplying the rebels.

"Bashir knows the weaknesses of our people very well, our tribalism and hunger for money," he said, adding, "and I'm sure he's using it."

Bashir's harassment of Southerners and Christians living in the North has also angered church leaders, including the archbishop of Khartoum, Cardinal Gabriel Zubeir Wako, who has had difficulties traveling in and out of Khartoum.

Since South Sudan became independent in 2011, Bashir's government has stepped up attacks not only along the ill-defined border between the two countries, but has renewed its military campaign in Darfur and stepped up bombing of the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile state, causing hundreds of thousands of refugees to flow across the border into South Sudan.

Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala of Tombura-Yambio said Bashir underestimates the resolve of independent southerners.

"I don't know how Omar can manage a war with Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, and the east of the country all at the same time," the bishop said. "He wants to fight a war with the South and then say to other northerners, 'Look, these people broke away and they're still causing us problems.' He wants to use us as a scapegoat. But Omar should stop thinking that fighting South Sudan is going to help him. People here aren't going to give in."

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