

“WHOSE INTERESTS IS ZAMBIAN POLITICS SERVING?” ASKS JCTR

Zambian politics has been interesting in the past three quarters of 2009 for mostly three reasons: (i) Zambian politicians are validating the old adage that “politics is a dirty game,” (ii) Church has been told it has no role in politics but only to praise-sing government, and (iii) politics does not truly serve Zambians who must be the custodians of politics.

“It is so sad that more than 17 years of Zambia’s adoption to multi-party democracy, our politics and governance are still unstable and manifest immaturity to an extent of attempting to shut down all opposing views. This have been manifest in the recent NGO Act, banning of demonstrations over acquittals of prominent figures, criticism of Church’s valid concerns of lack of democracy and good governance in Zambia, and limiting freedom of the press,” states Dominic Liche, Governance Officer at the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

Politics remains that of name-calling, name-dirtying, lies, and just a dirty game to get into positions of power. One just has to read the newspapers (both Government and private) of the day to see this. We are yet to see mature and honest politics that have people’s needs and aspirations at heart. We are yet to see politicians that clearly indicate to us what difference they will make once elected not politicians that strive against all odds to get into power even if it means distributing mealie-meal or promising undo-able things. The Parliamentary by-elections in Chitambo, Kasama, and now in Solwezi are witness to this bad view of politics.

Despite the fact that the Church in Zambia, especially the three Church Mother Bodies, have been instrumental in Zambia’s politics, democracy and service delivery, Church has been told not to meddle in politics and remain in the pulpits. Surprisingly, Churches that sing praises to Government are highly commended by Government. Such hypocrisy is not building our nation but dividing it. For how can the Church remain in the pulpits when they preach to people that are poor, hungry, suffering because of bad policies, lack good healthcare, do not know where public resources go? The Church would be failing to preach the Word of God if they remained in the pulpit and remained blind to the harsh realities that people go through in their day to day lives. Some comments by Government persons who also are Church persons sometimes confuse Government position with Church position. One has only to read the Gospels and see how Jesus Christ interacted with the people of the day (feeding the hungry, welcoming sinners, healing the sick, giving advice to the rich and politicians, and suffering to the cross). It would be sad to see Churches persecuted for telling the truth or trying to work hard to improve the lives of the people they preach to.

It would be hard, given the events of the past three quarters, to confidently assert that politics in Zambia is serving the interests of all Zambians. Whilst it might be serving the interests of few privileged Zambians, the majority of “unnoticed” **Zambians continue to suffer in poverty, in rural underdevelopment, in leaders that publicly proclaim they are there only to make laws and not represent their people, in leaders that are not committed to bringing good laws through a good Constitution.** The acquittals of prominent persons and the “hallelujahs” that followed from some Government officials leave little to be desired. And when some Zambians expressed themselves about such acquittals, they were either arrested or threatened in the strongest words possible. Little do our leaders realise that the very people they deny freedom of expression, freedom and rights to demand explanations and justifications for use of public resources, rights to demand speedy and realistic national processes, are the ones who vote them in power and keep them in power. The basic requirement of democracy and good governance is that people participate in national processes and that people remain free to assert their wishes in elections and other processes. It is a sham to embrace democracy and good governance in rhetoric, whilst denying persons rights to participate fully in the governance of the country. After all, democracy is rule by the people themselves.

Mr. Liche further asserts that “the Church Social Teaching, the framework within which we work at JCTR, stresses that all decisions should be made for the **common good** of all in community and should be tested against whether they benefit the **most vulnerable** in society. We are yet to see if the new Constitution, the African Peer Review Mechanism, the 2010 National Budget, and the National Development Plans, are designed in such a way that they benefit the most vulnerable in society. When we have talked about possible inclusion of justiciable Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in new Constitution, we are told it is too expensive and will bankrupt the nation. But where are resources coming from for increased emoluments for Cabinet and Parliamentarians, for gratuities for Parliamentarians, and for paying National Constitutional Conference (NCC) members with their never-ending NCC? Even when the answer is that these are budgeted for, then why not plan and budget for improving the lives of the poor, improving the lives of those in rural areas, improving not only the GDPs and inflation rates but the real lives of the people?”

When some civil society organisations raised strong moral voices against such “unnecessary” expenditures, they were dubbed enemies of Government. Has anyone tried to honestly calculate such “unnecessary expenditures and tried to see how many people such would serve in Zambia?” If so, where is the conscience of our leaders, most of whom are Christians? Are the interests of politicians (both in ruling party and opposition) really the people that vote them into power or simply their own? These are questions JCTR poses to our politicians in Zambia.