

Human rights activist urges churches to confront Mugabe's government

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SUMMARY & COMMENT: Just as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) -- under Martin Luther King -- decided to employ a confrontational yet non-violent campaign to batter down the walls of exclusionary political and cultural institutions in the American South, the Church in Zimbabwe is being called upon to play a similar role. MLK was keen-sighted enough to realize that social change does not usually occur through providential whim. The second piece, "Civil Society Needs to Build a Social Movement" from Zim's Daily News, elaborates upon this theme. JM.

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Harare, 29 November (ENI)--

Zimbabwean human rights activist, Lovemore Madhuku, has urged churches to "preach the gospel of confrontation" and to help bring an end to the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF) party's "oppressive and dictatorial style of leadership". "People, including the church community which has been quiet and passive for a long time, must unite and confront the regime which does not respect the rights of the people they are accountable to," Madhuku, the chair of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), said in the country's second largest city, Bulawayo. He was speaking at a public meeting convened on Friday last week by Habbakuk Trust, a Christian advocacy group.

The NCA is a broad coalition of church and human rights groups, students and political parties. It has led several protests in the past two years to press for a new constitution. President Robert Mugabe has amended the constitution 16 times since leading the country to independence from Britain in 1980.

Earlier this month Archbishop Pius Ncube, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Bulawayo, implored church leaders during a speech in South Africa, to "apply pressure on Mugabe and his followers to change".

"To the church community," said Madhuku, "I say prayer [alone] cannot work under the incumbent regime and the wisest thing to do as God's servants is to preach the gospel of confrontation." Madhuku, a constitutional law expert at the University of Zimbabwe, has been arrested and detained without trial by the police a number of times.

Churches in Zimbabwe have faced criticism through the opposition press for either condoning or contributing to the breakdown in the rule of law, with some newspaper cartoonists ridiculing church leaders.

In February 2000, the NCA led a campaign advocating a No-vote to the government's bid to introduce a new constitution which, among other things, empowered the government to take over commercial farms for resettlement of black peasants, without compensating the owners.

Following the success of the No-vote, bands of ruling Zanu- PF militants and their supporters launched a violent campaign of farm invasions which have displaced at least 600 000 farm workers and their families, with an ensuing drop in food production exacerbating a current famine threatening millions of people.

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Civil Society Needs to Build a Social Movement

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EDITORIAL

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BUILDING a strong pro-democracy social movement is always the task of civil society when operating under an oppressive political environment.

It is now more than just a given that the situation pertaining in Zimbabwe qualifies to be defined as an oppressive political environment and that civic-based organisations have been and still are trying to build an all-embracing social movement.

With this in mind, questions about civic society and the role of the alliance of civic organisations in the last twelve months needs review.

And this also needs to be done within the context of how civic organisations are competing amongst themselves for the shrinking political space in an attempt to remain relevant to the Zimbabwean people and the democratisation processes.

A starting point would be to be able to define a social movement. As the name suggests, social movements are inclusive organisations comprised of various interest groups. Social movements will contain the significant strata of society such as workers, women's groups, students, youth and the intellectual component.

These various interest sectors of society will be bound together by one common grievance which in most cases will be the commonly perceived lack of democracy in a specific political setting.

This has been particularly the case within the last two decades of the South African anti-apartheid struggle and more relevantly, in the last four years in Zimbabwe.

The only significant difference between the Zimbabwean situation and the anti-apartheid social movement in South Africa is that the former tends to be less defined and less focused. In fact, in Zimbabwe people can sometimes be forgiven for thinking that the social movement has been split.

The best manifestation of the social movement in Zimbabwean civil society has been the formation of strategic alliances. The most significant social movement alliance was the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA) alliance that was formed, as its name suggests, to drive for democratic constitutional reform in an increasingly oppressive State environment.

This social movement was then overrun by the shift toward a desire for a less idealistic but pragmatic social movement that began as the National Working People's Convention (NWPC) that sought the formation of a mass-based, non-violent opposition political party to challenge the ruling Zanu PF.

Naturally a lot of civil society leaders left the NCA to become potential Members of Parliament, especially after the February 2000 constitutional referendum. But the NCA did not fall flat on its face because of this; it retained a fair number of civic society organisations that sought to re-engage Zimbabwean civic space with the constitutional agenda.

Simultaneously however, other alliances of non-governmental organisations began to play a greater role and therefore undermine the social movement status that the NCA and the NWPC had acquired.

Alliances such as the Zimbabwe Election Support Network, Civic Alliance for Social and Economic Progress and the Crises in Zimbabwe Coalition emerged to deal with multiple themes and issues that, whilst not undermining the democratisation agenda for civil society, seriously compromised the social movement ethos that had begun to take root.

The idea of alliances between various civic organisations became a prevalent feature of the civic society landscape. And in most of the alliances which emerged, the central factor became that of leaders of various organisations and not members of these organisations.

Ultimately there was a cyclical nature to alliances in which one would sometimes find the same leaders floating in and out of various alliances, thus compromising the formation of a vibrant social movement.

And in the past year the trend has not shifted significantly. But the new characteristic of inter-alliance competition for recognition has become more prevalent. And in all this the pattern of whether social movement can still be constructed in Zimbabwe is dependent upon changing or keeping alliance systems as part of the emphasis toward democratisation by civic society.

It is our respectful view that the alliance system within Zimbabwean civic society is now a fairly impractical option. This is because the period between 1998 and end of 2001 was characterised by an alliance system between various civic organisations that commanded not only public attention but also public support and participation.

After the presidential election there was a shift from public participation to public observation of civic society activities. This attitude from the public is what has resulted in civic society leaders waiting for the economy to collapse and for the ruling party to dig its own grave. This is a disempowering perception of the way forward for a civic society that is in urgent need of a social movement. Moreover, it also disempowers the very people it is meant to serve.

It places no faith in the ability of people to organise themselves and challenge that which they perceive to be wrong.

The way forward in order for there to be a construction of an ostensible social movement that will attempt to bring democracy to citizens' lives and food on their tables, has to be the ability of the various civic society organisations to agree to disagree. There is obvious need for those non-governmental organisations that do not believe in fighting for democracy and enjoy the fine line of engaging the current government to retain their right to do so.

But there should be a distinction between these types of organisations and those that come out clearly as being in search of a clear democratisation process, that will regularly clash with the government line.

The second compelling objective is for various alliances to concentrate on individual membership as opposed to institutional membership.

No civic alliance worth its salt in the last year can safely claim to have long-term prospects of survival in Zimbabwe without organisational restructuring that takes into cognisance the role that can be played by an individual member, as opposed to an institutional member.

A semblance of balance between both must be struck so that there is a direct link of the alliance with an ordinary citizen. This will help boost public participation in the organisation, thus contributing gradually to the focus on establishing a social movement

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