

Pulpit as a Forum for the Restoration of Government

In dialogue with Rev. Dr. Njoya, Unbound has transcribed, edited, and restructured selections from his book, The Divine Tag on Democracy (Yaounde, Cameroon: Editions CLE, 2003), offering a compelling new witness to the church in the public square of Kenya. We begin with a few contextual remarks.

Prefatory Contextual Remarks

Kenya

Post-colonial Kenya saw its first direct elections in 1957. The Kenya African National Union (KANU) formed a government just before Kenya assumed independence in December 1963. KANU ruled under a single party constitution from 1964 to 2002, with just two presidents: Jomo Kenyatta (1964-78) and Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002). The regime was generally regarded as undemocratic and in violation of human rights, particularly through the suppression of political dissent. In 2002, the new National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) won the presidency, marking a free election and significant turning point for the country.

Timothy Njoya

From the pulpit to the streets where he has joined like-minded Kenyans in peaceful demonstration, Rev. Njoya has constantly demanded freedom from the political dictatorship in Kenya. This has not been without a sharp and intimidating response from the Kenyan authorities, who have often accused Rev. Njoya of subversion. Following a sermon in October 1986, the President accused him of producing subversive pamphlets in the guise of Sunday sermons. His outspokenness has often resulted in detention without trial.

On July 7, 1997 while at a pro-democracy gathering at the All Saints Cathedral in Nairobi, the police forcibly invaded the Cathedral, badly injuring Rev. Njoya, among others. On June 10, 1999, while at a pro-democracy procession outside Parliament in Nairobi, Rev. Njoya was the victim of a merciless beating from a private army hired by state operatives. He was brutalized while the police stood by and watched.

In his efforts to create a culture of freedom, justice and equality in Kenya, Rev. Njoya has had to take on not only the mighty monolith that is the state in Kenya but also the church, from where he has been variously disowned at critical moments.

- The International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development

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By Timothy Njoya

In Kenya, the civil society abdicated its stewardship of governance to the government, and the government failed to become *government*. These failures were preaching events in which the pulpit became the forum raising democratic awareness about the lack of democracy in our society. These events awakened Kenyans to know that their faith could help to establish a caring, sustaining, and nurturing system of governance in which the government would see human beings in the same light as God sees them—unlike the government inherited from colonialism, which saw society as cheap or worthless capital.

At the time, though, the church did not have a faith by which to articulate the whole Gospel. The sermons filled this vacuum by expounding faith as the context in which *all other* contexts are changed. They communicated ideas and issues so worthy of national and international debate that they provoked the church and the government to justify their existence.

A ‘Subversive’ Sermon

On July 8, 1984, I preached a sermon on the Gospel of Luke, appealing to people to pray for outcasts. When Parliament returned from recess,

Mr. Sifuna rose and told the speaker, Mr. Fred Mati, he had an important communication to make. He said that on July 8, 1984, the Rev. [Njoya] of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA), delivered a sermon on radio and television, making extremely perturbing statements... [Rev. Njoya] said some quarters of the press seem to rejoice at the suffering of another Kenyan. He asked the president to invite, as Jesus did, the lost sheep... and release those in detention, to invite Ngugi wa Thiong’o [Kenyan author imprisoned by the government and identified by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience] back to the country. (*The Nation*, July 19, 1984, p. 1).

In response, the Ministry imposed a ban on live broadcast and began censoring sermons before they aired on the radio or television in order to avoid the transmission of “subversive” ones. By that evening, technicians from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had ripped from the walls of the church the public address system connecting the church with the voice of Kenya. When the Minister of Broadcasting defended my rights to pray, he lost his job.

The Minister of the State explained that the government had always allowed the church to worship without interference because the church had confined itself to just that: worship. He added that worship must be “complimentary to the government policies and aspirations, in the interest of law and order.” So, he said, “Rev. Njoya went beyond the limits and interfered with government actions. His preaching was not in keeping with the spirit of peace, love, and unity” (*The Nation*, July 20, 1984).

On Friday, July 20, 1984, the Secretary General of the PCEA telephoned me and demanded a copy of the sermon. I immediately drove to his office and sat silently as he read the text. I asked him, “Isn’t that Luke’s theology about Jesus?” He furiously showed me the door and said, “Go

back to your work while I think of the answer.” In a few hours time, the Secretary General entered my office and delivered me a letter. I offered him a seat and he refused. He watched me read the letter. My lips shook as I read. I sweated and developed a migraine before reading the last paragraph. The letter asked me to move out of the church. I was instantly dismissed and another minister was brought in to take my place.

This hit me harder than my conflict with Parliament. How would I feed my family? I knelt down and prayed for an hour.

The Secretary General’s press statement declared, “Pulpits are for the Good News and not for political motives... Pastors who misuse pulpits or their licenses for ill motives will be doing so at their own risk” (*The Nation*, July 21, 1984). But when the decision went before the full Presbytery, the General Secretary had the shock of his life. The Presbytery asked an elder from my congregation to read the script of my sermon. After he finished, everybody except the two Head Office officials shouted, *a-a-a-men*. The elder from Mombasa stood up and said, “The Presbyterian Church gets its theology and government from the Bible and the Holy Spirit, not from the State.”

That day, the Nairobi Presbytery did not let the civil society down by endorsing the Head Office’s *shoot-your-wounded-soldier* attitude. The Presbytery stood by me.

Some Context: Can subversion come from the house of God?

What you need to understand is that the Baba Taifa had ruled Kenya for thirty years. Kenya, during and after colonialism, had never created a forum for open debate in the government. When JM Kariuki wanted to introduce debate in Parliament, asking why Kenya should become a country of ten millionaires and ten million destitute, he was picked up by police within the precincts of Parliament and murdered. Hence, by default, debate in Kenya began in the pulpit.

What you also need to understand is that when the British, Belgian, Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch, and German governments apportioned Africa to each other (in the 1884 Berlin Conference), Maritime Trade and not democracy was the prime mover. When the wind of change came and Africa had to be independent, nationalism and imperialism brokered constitutions without participation by the populace. Independence was mere ceremonial arrangement. No thought was given to women’s rights or self-determination. The new constitution simply confirmed colonial laws which treated Africans as sub-human, soul-bearing objects and women as men’s property. The church and the government got used to thinking that creativity, debate, and the questioning of the status quo were expressions of sin and insurrection.

To this point, President Moi (President of Kenya, 1978-2002) once asked, “How could subversive documents come from the house of God?”

A Turning Point: To die or live by the sermon

This question became the turning point in my ministry. It redefined the future of my calling. They said that conduct like mine would result in empty churches. But I resolved to die or live by the sermon, i.e. by faith.

By calling clergy subversive, the President opened a new chapter in media history, propelling faith to become the forum for change. The President, inadvertently, helped sermons move from the church to the self-censored media. What a special present to the Gospel! He opened the bridge between faith and society. I was overwhelmed by people flocking to St. Andrew's church, from all over the world, from Monday to Sunday, asking for sermons. All they wanted were sermons!

President Moi's wrath pulled the churches out of their closets. He globalized the debate. He became the feet and wings of faith like a bee scattering pollen. Blaine Harden of the Washington Post observed,

The church has emerged as one of the few institutions willing to challenge the policies of Kenya's powerful president and his ruling African National Union (KANU) party... According to the U.S. State Department's report on human rights in Kenya, political discussion in Moi's eight-year rule has 'increasingly focused on local subjects, and there is no criticism of the president or any policies which he initiates or supports.' The clergy stands alone here in bucking this trend. (*Washington Post*, October 26, 1986, p. 29).

Harden's observations were quite correct in that any voice of reason from the Kenyan Legal System, Mass Media, Kenya Planters Cooperative Union, the Civil Service, University, and Parliament had landed many in their graves. The state picked up as traitors any lawyers, professors, managers, students, and street people who dared think independently, stigmatized them as dissidents, tortured some, detained others, and while some escaped the country, the rest had their corpses found in the bushes. State brutality had compelled the church to choose: privilege or faith? God's calling or compromise with state power?

A Church / State Issue

Unfortunately, the church panicked. The state pressured the PCEA for a ruling on my sermon. The Moderator of the General Assembly made this press release:

The concern of the content of this sermon has been raised with the Moderator of the General Assembly by the State Supreme Authority. The sermon has been termed a subversive document... It seems to this office, indubitably, Rev. Njoya's sermon is a direct and deliberate provocation of the state leadership. The Moderator of the General Assembly is required by the state to give an immediate answer pertaining to the production and distribution of Rev. Dr. Njoya's sermons. Now, the issue of this sermon is a Church State issue.

Allegations such as these carried the weight of capital punishment. The statement constituted clear evidence that the civil society had abdicated its responsibility for governance to the state.

I needed guidance. For inspiration, I looked at some primers like *Rules for Radicals* by an American labor agitator, Saul Alinsky. I broadened the scope of my spirit by borrowing from the spirits of the dead: Plato, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr... some ancient originality. After examining Nyerere's, Nkrumah's, and Kaunda's wisdom about one-party systems, I arrived at the philosophical conclusion that **if humanity has made some headway in realizing that the ultimate value of every institution is its distinctively human effect—its effect upon**

conscious experience—we may well believe that it is humanity as a whole to whom sovereignty belongs, and not to the church and the state alone.

I soon learned to take advantage of my phone being bugged to help the Special Branch compile a true briefing to the president about my next prophetic agenda. In fact, I got accustomed to using the Special Branch surveillance to have dialogue with the national security machineries. I was on the top, it turns out, of daily briefings. The fact that I escaped assassination was sung by Dumfermline in 1615: *God moves in a mysterious way, God's wonders to perform.*

In the meantime, the church continued to debate what exactly it should do with me. The Presbytery proposed I take early retirement. The Head Office wanted me deposed.

Had I wanted to form my own church, this was the time. There was not a day that passed without a minister proposing we leave the church and form our own. But forming a splinter church would have reduced the power of the faith movement and destroyed the broad based unity of Muslims, Christians, humanists, and others. When the National Christian Council's officials proposed I form my own church, they were confusing issues of governance with desire for power.

I left these machinations to others and stuck to my sermons, winning international media to my side. President Moi summoned all Kenyan Ambassadors and officials to defend the Kenyan position. This failed. God's free gifts of faith and conscience moved forward. The Catholic Church, long praised by the government for not being subversive, began to address issues of national interest and to issue pastoral letters to the press.

But on August 15, 1987, the Presbytery yielded to the pressure of the Head Office (and the state), deposed me of office, and sacrificed me on the altar of state infallibility.

Deposed or not, I continued to preach. The police abducted my lawyer (who was working a case for three detainees), stripped him naked, "teased" his body, and demanded to know why he was found in possession of a copy of my (apparently outlawed) sermon. They took him to prison without trial and kept him there for over ten months.

Know that hundreds of church members and workers suffered more than me. And even then we refused to fracture. I loved my moderator and president, and would have stood between a bullet and them at all times during my struggle with them. I would not have fought for democracy without them. Moi was still a member of the human species and accountable to God. Our common humanity was thicker than our differences. Please understand: African autocrats did not destroy democracy. There was no democracy in the colonial institutions they inherited. Their imperialism, in other words, did not come from a peculiar African disease. Africans had no special defect preventing them from embracing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, scriptural norms, democracy, and human dignity. Rather, they were handed a system incapable of becoming democratic.

Our *Raison d'être*: Jesus Alone Is Lord

Throughout all these struggles, the people kept their faith in God's governance. God's democracy was forming in their lives. They practiced it in their kitchens by sharing

responsibilities. Democracy begins where two or three are gathered together for the purpose of taking care of each other in the same way the Creator cares for them. In this way, human governance must take its cue from divine governance (so that our governing bears the substance of God's approval, standard, imprint, "tag").

God governs by talking, listening, reasoning, and inviting people to "come and let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18). This is no joke. God has set up procedures for facilitating complaints and grievances, which Job (Job 7:20) utilized by hitting back against God. Jesus followed suit and yelled at God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). If Jesus and Job had complained like that before President Moi, Mobutu, or Amin, they would have been disfigured and disposed of by the Presidential secret bureau.

It was faith in such a God, not a President Moi, that kept us going. Faith is governance where God's jurisdiction and human jurisdiction share both mutual responsibility and limitations. The only rule St. Paul issued on faith happened to be a political one. The rule was simply this: assent that Jesus is Sovereign (Romans 10:9). Emperors Nero, Titus, Decius, and Domitian reacted against the bearers of faith very cruelly. It cost the apostles their lives. The Kenyan government consistently reacted equally against governance, against this simple theological, democratic principle: to be human is to submit our will to the will of those who submit theirs to us, because two are better than one, and we are all made in God's image.

Unfortunately, Christianity as a religion has also often balked at this governance. In fact, the Christianity of today is a product of deliberate non-governance, which means supporting whatever government supposed to provide Christianity with a climate conducive for soul-saving. The church opted for "spirituality." Christians walked away from the stewardship of their lives and left it to the state, chasing the illusion of a hazy and cloudy paradise. In the meantime, there was Apartheid; there was white supremacism; there was Kenya...

But Christ's apostles organized a structure for body-care-taking, *diaconia* (duties owed by everybody to everybody). In Acts, deacons were arranged to care for physical needs. The Lord's Prayer does not say *God's will be done* in the church, soul, or spirit, but *on earth*. In what came to be known as the Great Commission, Jesus sent the disciples to *all nations* (Matthew 28:19), not to *all souls*. Jesus was crucified and resurrected *in body*.

In Kenya, faith gave birth to activist and advocacy movements for no other interest than to translate its vision of God's governance into social reality. This distinguished faith from the church's preoccupation with liturgy, church attendance, Bible study, Sunday school, social services, and other cross-avoidance practices.

For, "Thus says the LORD: If you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth" (Jeremiah 15:19).

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