

VOICES FROM THE SOUTH



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The Church's Role in the Age of Terrorism and Economic Globalization

The Karibu Foundation is an independent foundation that supports voices from the Global South that provide alternatives to the dominant paradigms of power, distribution, and development.

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In this month's "Voices from the South," former Africa Coordinator for the UN Millennium Development Goals and former Anglican observer to the UN, Hellen Grace Akwii-Wangusa from Uganda, reflects on the state of changing global power dynamics. In particular, she looks at the role of the Church in an age of terrorism and economic globalization. In her article, she argues that the space for civil society and advocacy is shrinking under the guise of the fight against terrorism around the globe. The Church therefore has a critical role in speaking out for dignity and human rights, as religion is increasingly associated with extremism.



By: Hellen Grace Akwii-Wangusa

Geo-political and financial power shifts are occurring around the world, and the private sector and military forces have emerged as powerful actors particularly in the Global South. Terrorism has replaced economic globalization in the mainstream debate, and the space for non-state actors is shrinking under the guise of controlling spaces for terrorists to operate.

Africa (and other settings in the South) is witnessing a resurgence of a rush for its wealth and natural resources by transnational and multinational companies to countries that have very little negotiating capacity. These entities enjoy the monopoly of accessing and developing natural resources at the cost of the rights of the citizens. This defies the whole notion of sovereignty lying with the people, and that natural resources belong to the people and are held in trust by their governments.

Because of these shifts in global powers and interests, long-standing attempts to

promote democracy, good governance, and a just world are being squashed globally, creating spaces for religious extremists to hijack power, and for dictatorships that crush any form of opposition undetected. Such regimes thrive on "majoritarianism" claiming to have been voted into power through regular elections. These elections seem "democratic," but are conducted by electoral commissions that are neither independent nor capable of delivering free and fair elections. Others regimes have manipulated constitutions or coerced their members of Parliament to lift presidential term limits.

What is the role of the Church in all of this?

The Church in the global North in particular has the responsibility of advocating against the double standards their governments apply. Under the guise of fighting terrorism, dictators and rebels alike have been armed. This has created space for "terrorist"-fighting regimes, no longer under scrutiny, to commit heinous acts against their people.

These regimes use security organs to terrorize and shoot at peaceful protesters. In the case of Uganda, police publicly undressed women participating in peaceful demonstration against po-

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litical injustice. This is a global tragedy. Governments who commit to fight terrorism are arming autocratic regimes that end up using the same arms to perpetuate violence, and genocide unnoticed!

Another shift in global interest was a direct result of the global economic meltdown. Financing became a defining factor of what gets implemented, but also the excuse for reducing the support for the civil society programs and church movements in the South. This has forced many organizations and Churches to scale down their work, especially advocacy around governance, since the results are not always immediate, quantifiable or measurable.

The Church in the North needs to review foreign policies, interests and ideology of their governments, and debunk religious extremism and intolerance that underpin the so-called political alternative to democratic governance. It must recast the resistance to migrants against the resurgence of “protectionism,” and consider using cross-cultural community dialogues to create opportunities for the people most affected by violence to own the process and

provide ways of mitigating it sustainably. This will also help the church generate new approaches and partnerships that will facilitate resourcing, as well as investment in research-based advocacy work that transcend just providing support for deliverable services.

The main challenge for the Church in Africa however, is having the moral authority to fight undemocratic, oppressive and unjust governments. It is even harder for some churches that have been coopted by state through patronage, effectively muzzling them from being the mouthpiece of the people. This is particularly daunting at a time when a collective response for averting what seems like the makings of genocide in Burundi is urgently needed.

In such cases, the Church must start by Truth Telling before re-appropriating basic principles of governance. Furthermore it must analyze the risks, opportunities and new strategies necessary to engage with highly militarized regimes and dictatorial leaders, and provide wholesome solutions to hurting communities based on the principle that if one part of its body suffers the

rest suffers.

Additionally, the church must champion the development of “mutually transforming relationships” between men and women; find concrete ways to address the deeply rooted cultural stereotypes and patriarchal attitudes. Mutually transforming relationships shall help us meet each other with the goal of empowering, without the intent to condemn or patronize.

This is crucial for the Church as a religious entity in a global context where religion is increasingly associated with extremism and terrorism; the global church needs to be a champion of rights, justice, equity and dignity because we subscribe to the tenet that there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female; for we are all one! ■

Hellen Grace Akwii-Wangusa from Uganda is the former African Coordinator for the UNDP Millennium Development Goals, as well as the former Anglican Observer to the UN. She has worked closely with economic justice issues through the Jubilee South campaign as the coordinator of the African Women’s Economic Policy Networks in 20 countries, and has served as the Vice President of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC).

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