

# **ELECTIONS: A DAY OF HOPE FOR USA AND FOR ZAMBIA**

Peter Henriot

Elections are coming near.... Yes, and I've already cast my vote for President!

No, not in the Zambian elections this coming Thursday, but in the USA elections one week from today. Since my Zambian Reg Card says, "Alien," I can't queue up this coming Thursday to vote for the fourth President of Zambia. But my USA passport allowed me to mail in a ballot last week for the forty-fourth President of the United States of America.

Voting is surely a privilege and a duty, whether in Zambia or in the USA. It's a privilege because it enables me to act as a free citizen, making a choice on my own, based on my personal evaluation of a candidate and not forced. And it's a duty, because otherwise I'm not contributing to the process of democratic rule and not acting as a mature person of intelligence and responsibility, with a patriotic love of my country.

## **A VOTE FOR OBAMA**

Whom did I vote for? Well, ballots are supposed to be secret, but I have no hesitancy to acknowledge that my mail-in ballot vote went for Senator Barack Obama! Why? Here are five short answers – short but meaningful for me.

First, he is against the illegal and immoral war in Iraq. He has never supported it, and he will disengage from it as soon as possible. Second, he is committed to a national economy of more jobs and better pay. Third, he will be more sensitive to the needs of Africa, not simply because of his roots here but because of his vision of a more just world. Fourth, will attract fresh faces to his Administration, replacing those tired and thoughtless persons in key positions now in Washington. And fifth, he has run a clean campaign, exchanging ideas and challenges, not insults and lies.

Now I readily admit that I've painted a rather idealistic picture of Obama and his campaign. He certainly is human and has his faults and mistakes. I don't agree with all his views, at least the way he has expressed some of them. For example, his seemingly unqualified support of Israel and his unclear support of abortion.

But Obama comes across to me as a man of ideas and passion, honesty and compassion. And he would surely be a change for the better from the persons and programmes that have been such an embarrassment and danger in Washington DC for the past eight years! I was really proud and glad to cast my vote last week. And yes, ask me in a year or two whether I'm still glad and proud....

## **AND WHO IN ZAMBIA?**

But if I weren't voting in the USA elections, and instead had the chance to vote in the Zambian elections, whom would I vote for? That might be a question some readers of this column would like to ask me! Well, it's not for me to say out loud, no matter what my feelings within might be. Not being a citizen of this country, I think that I should keep my opinion to myself.

But I know the criteria I would use in choosing whom to vote for – the descriptive norms laid out in the recent Pastoral Message of the three Zambian Church Mother Bodies. The list of those norms is not so new, but is nevertheless very timely and pressing: "We re-emphasise,"

say the church leaders, “that the candidate must be God fearing, honest, compassionate, hard-working, selfless, and have a profound love of the poor. Integrity and humility, with a desire to serve and not to be served, should mark the candidate’s past, present and future.”

Surely that’s a pretty difficult set of requirements for any of the four candidates to say that he fulfills as he seek the precious votes of fellow citizens. Maybe only Jesus could offer a candidacy that would satisfy all those notes! But it certainly should give voters something to think about and pray over, and then go the polls in a responsible fashion with the good of Mother Zambia in mind and heart.

## **LESSONS FROM KENYA**

I’m in Nairobi at the moment that I’m writing this column and the aftermath of electoral malpractices (rigging) and subsequent tragic violence is still being felt. Can Zambia learn anything from what so sadly happened in this supposedly stable democracy and vibrant economy? Let me suggest three lessons.

First, have an electoral commission that is free of political dominance and maintains the confidence of the voters. The Kenyan experience shows what happens when the key officers charged with running a “free and fair” election are seen to be biased in favour of the ruling party candidate. Ignoring of obvious signs of rigging and manipulation of votes combined with an early declaration of a winner on very suspect grounds. These sparks ignited the fires of resentment and anger.

Second, have church leaders maintain a clear non-partisan stance so that their calls for peace and justice can be respected and heeded. It was sad that some prominent ecclesial figures were seen to be openly supportive of one candidate, with suspicions that the support had more of a tribal basis than a substantive evaluation of character and policies. When violence broke out, the voice of these leaders was less than convincing in calls for moderation.

Third, effectively address the underlying causes of tension before they erupt into murderous violence. The long-standing land issues and tribal resentments – with consequent economic and political inequities -- have long been just below the surface of what appeared to be a tranquil and prosperous society. It came as no great surprise then that anger could boil up to such a degree.

## **LESSONS FOR ZAMBIA**

So in Zambia, we must have clearer signs of an Electoral Commission that takes prompt action to guarantee fair practices before, during and after elections. It’s too late now to make up for some of the obvious abuses of government resources, misuse of the media and blatant threats of violence. But now let’s see appropriate dismissals, arrests and prosecution of those whose actions have damaged a free and fair electoral process.

We can thank God that in Zambia the main churches have continued to maintain a non-partisan stance in guiding voters to choose the candidate best qualified to serve the people as President. It is only the unknown “coalitions” or unheard of “fellowships” of church actors that rush to endorse a particular candidate in partisan fashion, finding money from some source to publish large adverts and claim favourable headlines.

It is clear, however, that deep-rooted tensions do exist in Zambia, despite the so-often cited calm and “passive” temperament of Zambians. Just listen to the frustrations of high-density

urban compound dwellers who face the water and garbage situations frustrating decent living conditions. Or sense the anger of youths who cannot find decent employment. Or talk with rural residents who don't see the basic education and health services due to them as citizens of this country. All the abundant promises of presidential candidates won't smooth these tensions unless some concrete actions are taken to meet the frustrations and angers.

Yes, Thursday 30 October can indeed be a "day of hope" for Zambia. And I pray that 04 November will also be a "day of hope" for the USA – and for the rest of the world!

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