

WILL 2007 BE A GOOD YEAR FOR ZAMBIA?

Peter Henriot

The year 2007 is going to be a good year here in Zambia!

That's the feeling I have as we begin the New Year. Why do I have that feeling? Is it realistic? Is it based on facts or on hopes?

Well, to be honest, it is a real mix of facts and hopes – sometimes more hope than fact! – that gives me this feeling. But I think it is honest to say that the potentials continue to be greater than the problems here in Zambia. So what we need to do is to apply those potentials with some honest dedication and generous sacrifice. Can we count on that commitment from all of us?

SOME GOOD SIGNS

What are some of the signs of a “good year” coming up? First, it does seem like we will have a good harvest. Maybe not as good as last year, but much better than was feared several weeks ago. The rains have come in high measure and the hard-working farmers are in the fields each day. The Government says it is making strong efforts to cooperate with the blessings of rain and farmers in order to assure that 2007 will be a time of meeting the food needs of the people like inputs and markets. Surely some difficult spots here and there, but on the whole, a very promising possibility, thank God!

Will 2007 be a good year for a new Constitution? Well, that is going to depend very much on the two main movers for finally getting into place a process, a content and a conclusion for meeting this number one priority for good governance. These two main movers, of course, are the government and the civil society. Yes, the opposition parties will have a role to play, but they will only be effective, in my opinion, if they cooperate with the widely respected and intelligent civil society organisations led by the Oasis Forum.

Remember, this Oasis Forum is comprised of non-partisan leadership from the moral community (the three church bodies), the legal community (the Law Association) and the civic community (the non-governmental organisations). It has the task, which it says it is assuming with vigour right away, of offering alternative plans, sensitising the public, and engaging in constructive dialogue with the government.

The government's task is to listen to the people – that's essential to democracy! – and not continually claim to be the only recognised power in place. After all, it did not achieve majority support in the last election, for a variety of reasons that should be paid attention to. Coming into office with only 40% of the votes does not give it the only source of wisdom in correct constitutional interpretation. So it must dialogue with others, for example, on whether such a lengthy road-map is constitutionally necessary. There are certainly non-partisan experts that are offering a different interpretation of what is constitutionally correct in this whole process.

There is hope that the President and his advisors would recognise this and engage in creative and constructive dialogue with others. A Constitution is not a partisan document and no party, Ruling or Opposition, can claim ownership of process or content. There is a wonderful opportunity for the current government leadership to demonstrate statesmanship that will both leave a great historical legacy and offer an example to other African states.

POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

What about the opposition parties? Will it be a good year for them? Only if they assume the role of responsible opposition. That means more focus on policies and less on personalities. When Parliament reconvenes this month, let the opposition MPs demonstrate leadership in offering alternatives to government programmes (e.g., agricultural policies, labour regulations, social services, etc.) when they can, or be supportive of government programmes when this seems best for all the people.

One thing that would surely bring hope to the country is for officials in the Ruling Party to stop asserting – directly contrary to both good law and good morals – that development will only come to those areas that vote for them!

I think (I hope!) that we will have a good Budget for 2007. Surely the Minister of Finance and National Planning will have listened to the experts that acknowledge that there can be no “economic growth” without “equity.” This means that the Budget must be pro-poor not simply in providing needed social services but also in up-lifting the sectors of society that enhance the lives of the majority of the people. For example, agriculture, rural development, employment generation, etc. If each line of the Budget is evaluated on the basis of “What does this mean for the poor?” we can have a good Budget and a good year. (Obviously, the anti-poor tax suggestions from the IMF will not enter into the Budget!)

In our struggle to deal with HIV/AIDS, I see a better year ahead of us. There is growing recognition that HIV/AIDS is not simply a medical-pharmaceutical problem or a behavioural change issue. It is a profound development challenge. Poverty, education, nutrition, gender, housing, etc.: all of these factors can and must be addressed to build up prevention of the pandemic in Zambia. And there are positive signs that our churches have become more alert to condemning the sin of stigmatisation and our youth more committed to life styles that are life-preserving.

COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

The last indication of a good year ahead of us is what I sense is a growing appreciation of the African value of community. And this can have strong consequences. Zambia has no future if we keep up attitudes, structures, policies and practices that divide community and weaken solidarity.

Let's be blunt. In moral terms, the presence of affluent and wasteful life styles in the midst of widespread poverty is a sign of sin. Hunger alongside lavish spending is inhuman. Zambian street children begging outside of foreign-owned expensive malls makes no sense.

Our churches, our civil society, our political parties and our government leaders should not be shy or afraid to speak out against this anomaly, this distortion, in the national consciousness and conscience. Community and solidarity bind the national fabric together. When these are strengthened through education, popular sensitisation (such as done by many civil society groups), examples at the personal and corporate level, and some strong prayer and sacrifice, then the potential for a good 2007 is indeed very real.

Will the year 2007 be a good year for Zambia? Today I say YES! Ask me again in twelve months time....

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