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## African Churches and Good Governance in Africa (141)

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## (141) AFRICAN CHURCHES AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA

### Titus Ogalo Pacho

#### Introduction

The issue of governance is at the centre of the biggest challenges Africa is facing today. Bad governance, including corruption, has become a cancerous growth in many African countries. It has seen proceeds from natural resources and revenue from taxation being diverted to serve a few individuals to the detriment of the many, instead of developing common goods such as education, health services and infrastructure. The 1989 World Bank report on sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, characterized the crisis in the region as a 'crisis of governance'.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the question of governance becomes one of Africa's most important needs. Even though Africa is not one country, many countries on the continent have common problems related to governance, coupled with a startling lack of accountability among politicians, church leaders, civil servants and other individuals, amounting to widespread moral decay. However, the details, nuances and practical dynamics of the problem can vary from place to place. The church cannot afford to be quiet on the issues of governance. Both church leaders and the congregations are citizens who are affected directly or indirectly by those responsible for governance. In what follows, I shall examine the concept of good governance in the context of African churches and their role in promoting or hindering it. I do not mean to suggest this section exhausts the discourse but it serves as an introductory discussion on the topic. What ought to be the role of African churches in the realm of good governance? To answer this question, we need to understand first the concept of good governance and distinguish it from its opposite – bad governance.

#### The Concept of Good Governance

While there might not always be a common view of what governance entails, it operates at every level of human interaction including household, community, national, regional and global levels. A fundamental element of governance includes an interactive process by which individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their common affairs. It permeates economic, social, and environmental spheres.

Good governance is in itself a normative principle which determines what *ought* to be done in connection with governance issues. It holds that individuals and institutions are obliged to perform their functions in a manner that promotes good values of efficiency, public honesty, transparency, and responsiveness to society.<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) describes good governance as, among other things, participatory, transparent and accountable, effective and equitable, and it promotes the rule of law. It ensures that political, social, and economic priorities are based on broad consensus in society and that the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are heard in decision-making over the allocation of development resources.<sup>3</sup> In considering good governance, democracy which refers to the legitimacy of government is an important component.<sup>4</sup> The above parameters can be viewed as the 'principles of good governance' although they might not be exhaustive. Conversely, bad governance

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<sup>1</sup> World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa, From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Chowdhury, N. and C.E. Skarstedt, "The Principle of Good Governance, A Draft Working Paper" (Oxford, 2005), 4.

<sup>3</sup> UNDP, "Reconceptualizing Governance: Discussion Paper 2" (New York: Management Development and Governance Division, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Akpogena, "The Church and Good Governance" (2012).

could entail, but may not be limited to, oppressive systems, rules and policies; corruption; political or social instability and conflict, unjust structures; and ineffective structures and systems.

### Role of African Churches in Good Governance

African churches can serve as role models of best practice of good governance if they adhere to its principles. They should intervene in political and economic matters and advocate human rights protection, human freedom, dignity and socio-economic justice. Once they practise the principles of good governance themselves, they can have the moral authority to offer viable opposition to oppressive and corrupt governments while emphasizing values of good governance, servant leadership, transparency, responsibility, honesty, accountability, justice, love, integrity, generosity, industriousness and self-giving even amidst intimidation.

In many parts of Africa, Christianity has always been a factor in Africa's democratic processes.<sup>5</sup> African churches have a moral duty to contribute to the development of a social, economic, political and cultural order that facilitates the growth and fulfilment of every person. This order should be extended to the natural environment so that humans are to exercise responsible and caring stewardship of the earth and its resources. The view that the church can have no authority in the operation of the state is contrary to the objectives and vision of progressive society. It is clear in the Bible that besides Joseph being a man of God, he also served as a prime minister in Egypt; Moses was a liberator who led the people out of bondage to their Promised Land; and Daniel played a role in politics while in exile.<sup>6</sup>

Although Christianity cannot be equated with any system of government, it must remain critical of all social orders.<sup>7</sup> It is part of Christian witness within the political sphere to evaluate all the political systems prophetically from the perspective of the reign of God.<sup>8</sup> It is the prophetic duty of African churches to discern whether the systems that govern a country are in alignment with that of the kingdom of God. The establishment of a democratic order will not usher in the kingdom of God, but it is considered the best form of government that human beings are able to construct given the constraints of our ability and the extent of our fallibility.<sup>9</sup> Larry Diamond emphasises that Africa will not develop economically unless it develops institutionally a capacity for democratic governance.<sup>10</sup> In situations where democracy is limited and civil society is underdeveloped, the churches are sometimes the only civil organisations that can inspire and support a movement towards true democracy and development of a civil society which can counteract and change a monopolising one-party system which usually abuses power.<sup>11</sup>

It is the duty of the church to be committed to the holistic mission of combining preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments with a deep commitment to social justice. The church has always embraced a theological position for social justice but it should refrain from delving into partisan politics which divide rather than unite. 'The church must be the unifier not divider, to shepherd the flock despite different political orientations.'<sup>12</sup> The role of the church in the promotion of social justice is quite biblical as evidenced by the whole credo of the book of the prophet Amos, and even by the generality of the

<sup>5</sup> Munetsi Ruzivo, "A Mapping of the Church Groups in Zimbabwe," in *The Role of the Church in the Struggle for Democratic Change in Zimbabwe* (2008), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Edwin Mwase, "Church and Politics are Inseparable" *Sunday Mail* (29 July to 4 August, 2012), D3.

<sup>7</sup> John W. Gruchy, "Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa," in *The Christian Churches and the Democratisation of Africa*, edited by Paul Gifford (New York: E.J. Brill, 1995), 48.

<sup>8</sup> Gruchy, "Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa," 48.

<sup>9</sup> Gruchy, "Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa," 48.

<sup>10</sup> Larry Diamond, "The Second Liberation," *Africa Report* 32, no. 6 (1992), 41.

<sup>11</sup> Frans J. Verstraelen, *Zimbabwean Realities and Christian Responses* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1998), 75.

<sup>12</sup> World Council of Churches (WCC), "Churches in Africa Hope for Good Governance and Stable Democracy" (2013).

teaching of Jesus Christ himself.<sup>13</sup> However, ‘neither justice nor freedom can flourish without the development of appropriate social structures’.<sup>14</sup> The role of African churches in enabling this to happen is part of the church’s mission. African churches must therefore develop appropriate strategies based on a sound theological reflection to promote democracy and good governance, first among themselves and second in particular contexts and Africa in general. This role places the church as ‘the conscience of society and the heartbeat of morality’.<sup>15</sup> African churches must emphasize and promote the kingdom values for democracy and good governance through seminars, training, workshops, sermons, press release, sensitization and community mobilization.<sup>16</sup>

Five trajectories may help the African churches to play their role in the democratisation process and good governance, namely, prophetic, personalist, covenantal, liberal and socialist.<sup>17</sup> The prophetic trajectory arises out of the experience of liberation, affirms human equality and seeks social justice. Theological reflection on democracy must of necessity continually return to this prophetic source of Christian faith which finds its focus in Jesus and his proclamation of the reign of God. The personalist trajectory focuses on an understanding that human beings are created in the image of the triune God. This agrees with the concept of *Ubuntu* where personal identity is relational rather than individualist.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore the role of African churches to emphasize human sociality, interdependence of persons and the common good which are central to democracy. The covenantal trajectory reminds people that they have a covenant with God and all their actions are therefore accountable to God. It stresses the need for human responsibility before God and towards others on the basis of God’s reign in Jesus Christ. This leads to a strong emphasis on accountability not only to an electorate but also to God. The liberal trajectory focuses on the promotion of human rights based on their God-given dignity, which implies that all human beings are created the same and are endowed with the same physical and spiritual components.<sup>19</sup> The socialist trajectory is mainly concerned with economic justice and democracy. It emphasises that there can be no democracy without economic justice and responding to the plight of the poor. The above trajectories bring about a Christian theological contribution to the democratisation process and good governance.

When governments in Africa act or speak contrary to their own laws and international norms and standards, it is important for the churches to remind them of their responsibilities.<sup>20</sup> They must speak out boldly in cases of corruption, abuse of office and bad governance as ‘guardians of public ethics and morality and to hold the government accountable to its citizens and to the law’.<sup>21</sup> The churches should also speak against draconian laws that are enacted to oppress citizens at the expense of a few powerful leaders’ who act and speak with immunity. Furthermore, Africa churches should remind governments that they are not masters, but servants of the people who elected them to serve the electorate.

Nevertheless, African churches themselves face challenges in democracy and good governance. First, there is the problem of contradiction. African church leaders have often been told by secular leaders to clean the huge backlog of injustices, corruption, leadership struggles, poor succession plans, tribalism and mismanagement of resources before they dare to speak against the issues in politics and governance.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Mwase, “Church and Politics are Inseparable,” D3.

<sup>14</sup> Gruchy, “Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa,” 47.

<sup>15</sup> Mwase, “Church and Politics are Inseparable,” D3.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis Akpogena, “The Church and Good Governance” (2012).

<sup>17</sup> Gruchy, “Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa,” 53-54.

<sup>18</sup> Gruchy, “Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa,” 53.

<sup>19</sup> Pacho, *Critical and Creative Education for the New Africa*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Mkaronda et al., eds. *Prophetic Witness in Zimbabwe: Critical Voices Emerging in Times of Crisis* (Harare: Ecumenical Support Services), 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Mkaronda, *Prophetic Witness in Zimbabwe: Critical Voices Emerging in Times of Crisis*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis Akpogena, “The Church and Good Governance” (2012).

African churches therefore ought to demonstrate a good example of good governance so that they can have the moral authority to challenge bad governance in other sectors. Second, we live in religiously pluralistic societies. Modern democracy began with the rejection of the church's temporal power and the affirmation of religious tolerance. This does not mean that churches do not have a vital contribution to make to the renewal of democracy both at the level of values and functionality.<sup>23</sup> Third, 'the affinity of Christian faith to democratic values' has been severely compromised by the 'historical distance of churches towards democracy'.<sup>24</sup> The church has too often been ambivalent about human equality, freedom, rights and justice. Theological reflection must, of necessity, critically examine the extent to which Christian belief has become perverted, and the extent to which the praxis of the church has been unfaithful to the gospel. At the same time, theological reflection needs to exercise a critique of democracy and the democratisation process in terms of the norms of justice, equality and freedom.<sup>25</sup>

### Conclusion

The churches in Africa have a moral obligation to address governance issues on the continent. To accomplish this task, they must first and foremost embrace the principles of good governance themselves and address their own internal governance problems if they are going to have moral authority and relevance in addressing the subject on the continent, and in their respective regions, countries and communities. African churches must be the prophetic voice to the continent. Their role in good governance can be more effective and productive if they live what they preach by practically proclaiming and demonstrating the principle of good governance in their policies, values, processes, behaviour and institutions. They should help combat the problem of bad governance at all levels of society in Africa, perhaps by emphasizing values of good governance, transparency, responsibility, honesty, accountability, justice, industriousness and self-giving. From the beginning of the Christian movement, the role of the church in society has not only been to proclaim the message of the reign of God, but to seek to be a sign of that reign within its own ecclesial life and structures. Today there is much debate on whether or not the church should itself be more democratic in its own structures. The issues are complex because for some, hierarchy is of the essence of the church whereas for others the goal is an egalitarian community. We need to recognise that from the beginning, the idea of participation has been central to all forms of church government. This is symbolised most dramatically by the sacrament of baptism which declares that all those who are baptised, irrespective of gender, social class, or ethnicity, are united as equals within one body and share together in the mission of the church in the world.<sup>26</sup> However, since a human project cannot be achieved in isolation but demands collective responsibility, promoting a culture of good governance in Africa should be the collective responsibility of all stakeholders at the individual, household, community, national, regional and global levels.

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<sup>23</sup> Gruchy, "Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa," 49.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfgang Huber, "Christianity and Democracy in Europe," *Emory International Law Journal* 6 (1992), 35.

<sup>25</sup> Gruchy, "Theological Reflections on the Task of the Church in the Democratisation of Africa," 49.

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