

Is Juba going back to Khartoum?

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By Zechariah Manyok Biar

October 28, 2012 - What I heard from my Church on Sunday, October 28, 2012, sent chilly air down my marrows. It made me worry about the future of our country. What I heard was that our pastor had been called by many people, asking him to advise preachers against criticizing the government on the pulpit. I would have ignored these alleged calls had it not been mentioned that the pastor was lastly called from the Office of the President, telling him the same thing.

This news which I heard from the preacher on the pulpit is not the only concern for my writing of this article. Earlier this month, I was told by the journalist of one of the most popular radio programs here in Juba that he had repeatedly been called by security people, telling him that any topic that he wanted discussed must first be licensed by the National Security. I could not believe this because I thought such a thing could not come from our President. I trust our President in two areas: patience and tolerance. I did not expect him to order security people to silence those who criticize him. I believe and still believe that he would be the last person to do this.

However, I could be wrong if his Office can call pastors to stop them from preaching biblical chapters which criticize leaders. The Bible I know talks about good and bad leadership, military ethics, service delivery, corruption, social issues, and many other ethical issues. Where did the Office of the President get the Bible that does not criticize these things?

Those who think Bible should not touch anything on good governance are trying to give us a Bible we still do not have. Even if verses on good governance were absent in the current Bible, then why are preachers prevented from talking about good governance today when we know they were encouraged by the same leaders to talk about it during the North-South civil war? Or is it because the leaders then were in Khartoum and not in Juba?

Not only that, the President himself does speak politics before the congregation in his Church. Why would pastors be the ones regarded as stepping outside the teaching of Jesus when they mention politics inside the Church? Are we being honest to ourselves?

I am now afraid than before that Juba is going back to Khartoum. It is in Khartoum where we hear of security people examining news to see which ones to allow and which ones not to allow to be published. It is also in Khartoum where we hear leaders not accommodative of criticisms. How different are we from Khartoum now if these practices could be extended to Churches to silence preachers from telling the truth?

If my whole life was spent in the bush from the age of 12 years to the age of 30 years, then I will say this: dictatorship starts with the fear of criticism, if our leaders are not aware of this fact. Criticisms are means through which bad practices are exposed to be corrected. A leader who wants to improve in the areas of leadership weaknesses does not silence criticisms. That is the only way people respect him or her. People respect leaders because of how they show their areas of strengths not because of covering their leadership weaknesses. We cannot respect leaders if we think they want to keep us in the dark on issues affecting our lives.

Silencing of critics is not going to work in South Sudan. History tells us more in this area. Philosophers like Socrates were forced to drink hemlock in Greece thousands of years ago because they criticized vices in their government. Socrates died but philosophy did not die. Pastors who used to tell the truth in the early Church were killed in Europe by other Church leaders. They died, but reform in the Church did not die. We must know this fact.

Today, how can preachers stop talking about current issues and still regard themselves as authorities on ethical issues? How can preachers of Churches like Emmanuel Jieng stop advising political leaders, civil servants, army leaders, and leaders of organized forces when these Churches are full of these people as members?

If good governance is addressed in political rallies (which I doubt), then most of the above mentioned groups are not members of political parties. Civil servants, army and leaders of other organized forces are not obliged to attend rallies of political parties, even though it is commonly taken for granted here in South Sudan that they belong to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). It is only in places like the Church where they can be taught about the importance of ethical behaviors in their offices. A credible Church cannot shy away from teaching these leaders that it is wrong to abuse their offices.

Not only that, Churches, philosophers of ethics, and the media act as check and balance in a setting like ours where opposition parties exist in names only. A political leader who wants to lead without check and balance would be the one to feel comfortable in our current affairs.

Those of us who grew up in the SPLM/A know very well that one of the reasons why we took up arms against the government in Khartoum was to change it from dictatorship to democracy. But now that we have a country of our own we seem to behave like the current Muslim Brotherhood led government in Egypt which was known for criticizing former President Mubarak for not respecting the rule of law. But when they got the power, they did exactly the thing they were against when President Morsi attempted to suspend the Prosecutor General Abdul-Megeed Mahmoud simply because officials under Mubarak accused of orchestrating violence against demonstrators last year were acquitted in court in line with the rule of law. Is this the way we want to behave in South Sudan?

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