

ZIMBABWE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE (ZCBC) POSITION ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN INCLUSIVE GOVERNMENT IN ZIMBABWE

"How good it is, how pleasant, where the people dwell as one!" (Psalm 133)

Introduction

On 11 September 2008, ZANU PF led by Robert Mugabe and the two Movement for Democratic Change formations led by Morgan Tsvangirai and Arthur Mutambara respectively signed an agreement aimed at forming an inclusive administration that would help to resolve the Zimbabwean social, political and economic crises.

The text of the agreement has many important and good things in it. The principals to the agreement dedicated themselves "to putting an end to the polarization, divisions, conflict and intolerance that has characterized Zimbabwean politics and society in recent times". Yet there are also areas of serious concern. Areas in which we as the church will need to work hard on in order to avoid the failure of the process. The process being used to bring about an inclusive government does not seem to be as inclusive as is desired. On 15 August 2008, we, the Catholic Bishops in Zimbabwe, published a public statement in which we pointed out that "In order for the recent development to be sustainable there will need to be much more inclusive than they have been so far. They will also need to be transparent and to be actively supported by all the people of Zimbabwe, especially those that have been brutalized, traumatised, marginalized and impoverished. Therefore, while we think that the ongoing negotiations are positive, we also think that there could be more inclusive in order to enhance their legitimacy and acceptance."

We believe strongly in the values that have been emphasized in Catholic social teachings and popularized in Christian social teachings and by many people of good will working in civil society. In this spirit, we hope that the recent agreement is only the beginning of a comprehensive national transformational process seeking to establish a just, peaceful and prosperous society. We are committed to the establishment of a society inspired by a sense of the common good and characterized by universal social solidarity. Zimbabwe must be built into a humane society in which the dignity of every human person is respected and enhanced. Zimbabwean society must encourage the participation of every human being in the economic institutions, political organizations and social institutions that affect their lives. We hope that the key participants in this agreement realize the gravity of their social responsibilities in building such a society. Therefore the agreement should secure more than just the interests and personal aspirations of a few privileged politicians. It must not merely seek short term political ambitions and interests but sustainable and long-term solutions to the Zimbabwean problems. In order to do so, the processes used to arrive at a just and peaceful society must

themselves be just and peaceful. The methods used to create an inclusive and participatory society and administration must themselves be inclusive and participatory. While we acknowledge the importance of creating a sovereign Zimbabwe and patriotic Zimbabweans, we follow the advice of the Second Vatican Council which stated that “Citizens should cultivate a generous and loyal spirit of patriotism, but without narrow-mindedness, so that they will always keep in mind the welfare of the whole human family which is formed into one by various kinds of links between races, peoples, and nations”. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965) We believe that the open and active participation of the church and other non-governmental and civil society organizations in the social transformation of the nation is crucial if the process is to succeed.

Framework of the Agreement

In 2006 we published *The Zimbabwe We Want: Towards a National Vision for Zimbabwe*. In this discussion document which we prepared in collaboration with the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, we provided a diagnosis of our crisis and outlined a framework for dealing with it. We provided a historical background of the crisis and described the situation in which “The quality of life, generally, has suffered immeasurably. There is evidence of rapid growth of numbers of rural poor, as well as the unemployed. In addition, the insidious HIV/AIDS pandemic is having a catastrophic effect on the country’s social, economic and moral fabric. This turn of events has led to disillusionment, which translates into a sense of national despair and loss of hope”.

Since 2006, the situation has grown even worse. Acute levels of food insecurity have been reported in all provinces especially Zaka, Chivi, Gwanda, Beitbridge, Matobo, Binga, Buhera, Gokwe and Mberengwa. Most vulnerable are child headed households, widows, HIV/AIDS infected and affected and internally displaced persons. The National NGO Food Security Network (FOSENET) which involves 17 organizations that cover all districts of Zimbabwe report that, “As a result of price increases, income-generating activities are diminishing...casual labour has declined in about 80% of the villages and 90% report decrease in the flow of remittances from urban to rural areas”. Cash shortages are a major problem and source of humiliation for people wanting to buy food.

We observe, as pointed out by the Zimbabwe Teachers’ Association (ZIMTA) that “the education system is on the verge of collapse because of a critical shortage of teachers, teaching and learning materials, poor remuneration and low moral”. Teachers earn between \$15 000 and \$250 000 per month and are some of the lowest paid professionals in the country. Schools have found it impossible to reopen this term. Most universities remain closed because they are underfunded, they have no water and electricity and the staff are on strike.

The health care system has virtually collapsed. 16 cases of cholera have been reported and some cases may have gone unreported. Shortages of water, electricity and other essential commodities have greatly undermined business activities and have reduced most people to untold indignity and spending so much time doing nothing.

It is not clear to us that the framework of the agreement takes into account the urgency of this situation. With inflation officially put at 11.2 million % and with other analysts placing it at way beyond that – even up to 1 billion per cent, the principals to the agreement are still arguing about cabinet posts and having the luxury of travelling, in droves, to the United Nations to make cheap political points.

It is also not clear that the agreement provides an adequate framework for dealing with the priorities that we set out in the National Vision Discussion Document. As we point out below, the present agreement does not make reference to an unambiguous and unequivocal national vision. The principal parties involved are still making reference to their narrow partisan interests and suggesting that they are not prepared to hold serious discussion on the issues that we identified as critical. These include:

- Steps towards finalizing the land reform and agrarian reform
- National economic and social transformation
- Towards a home grown constitution and
- National reconciliation and forgiveness

Although officially, Zimbabwe is supposed to be without a government because, since national elections, a cabinet is yet to be sworn in, the old government ministers still operate as if elections never happened. People who lost in the parliamentary elections are still acting as government ministers and making decisions and public pronouncement. Recent public statements by President Mugabe after his visit to the United Nations clearly indicate that he is not convinced by the spirit of the agreement. The press still operates on the basis of the old oppressive laws and the state-media still churns out the old hateful and partisan language. It is therefore not surprising that hate speech and political intolerance still continues to exist in the country.

Government of National Unity and Inclusion

The Zimbabwean crisis is a crisis of exclusion and marginalization. It has resulted in the undermining of the sense of national unity, national inclusion and the human common good. Political ambition, economic greed, social selfishness and the desperate need to survive under

conditions of corruption and poverty have undermined most social institutions and processes that could have been used to encourage Zimbabweans to collaborate and work towards unity and solidarity. Poverty, conflicts and natural disasters have left the marginalized and impoverished exposed without any help or support. As Catholic Bishops in Zimbabwe, we are immersed in the society through our schools, hospitals, social institutions and parishes. Through these institutions we see clearly how people have been exposed to the ravages of hunger, disease, ignorance and various forms of poverty both in the rural and urban areas. The situation has reached such desperate proportions that almost everyone is beginning to admit that we cannot go on like this. Even those who used to refuse to admit that Zimbabwe is going through a social crisis now openly admit it as it threatens to divide societies in the southern African region and the world at large. The crisis is of what happens when a nation loses a sense of the common good. It is therefore clear that the agreement of the 11 September 2008 is a belated national, regional and international recognition that we cannot do without a sense of the common good and solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

Each of the parties to the agreement went to the negotiating table after realizing that they could not effectively govern alone or proceed without seeking accommodation with other political players. Several forces, both internal and external put pressure on them to recognize the need to take a national approach to the crises. Internal economic collapse and the consequent collapse of the health delivery system, educational systems, general poverty and food insecurity have all contributed to the ZANU PF government's recognition that it can no longer continue with a business as usual approach. This was made worse by the deep political polarization caused by political and state sponsored violence which reached dangerous levels in the so called presidential run-off elections of June 2008 in which one of the presidential candidates, Morgan Tsvangirai, had to withdraw because of the high levels of violence against his supporters. International isolation, negative publicity and lack of international financial support have put pressure on the Zimbabwean authorities to begin talking the language of dialogue. And yet, as we pointed out above, the process leading to the present agreement does not show complete adherence to the spirit of the agreement and neither does it demonstrate an awareness of its urgency.

Upholding the Spirit of the Agreement

At the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for the unity of his followers because he wanted them, to be identified as his disciples by their love for one another. He encouraged them to promote unity within the church community and in society as a whole. "How good it is, how pleasant where people dwell as one!" (Psalm 133) Our hope, like that of the rest of the Zimbabwean people is that the recent agreement seeks to establish lasting and sustainable solutions to the problems

of Zimbabwe. We are given hope by the principals' expressed commitment "to putting our people and our country first by arresting the fall in living standards and reversing the decline of our economy" and their declaration that they are "determined to build a society free of violence, fear, intimidation, hatred, patronage, corruption and founded on justice, fairness, openness, transparency, dignity and equality".

We are however disturbed by evidence which shows that the spirit of the agreement has not fully been embraced and that the culture of anger, suspicion and revenge still exists. The delay in the appointment of a new cabinet is a sign that acquisition of and maintenance of political power is still being regarded as more important than people's lives, health, education and social welfare.

In our last public statement, we recommended that if the spirit of the Memorandum of Understanding were to be followed then the following should be settled;

- All intimidation and violence must stop immediately otherwise it is to be punished swiftly in accordance to transparent and impartial justice
- All non-state institutions of violence should be dismantled
- All political prisoners should be vetted and released immediately
- Hate speech and hate language should cease
- Immediate freeing of media space and promotion of access of that space by all parties and stakeholders
- Assistance to all internally displaced persons and assurance of their safety
- The immediate lifting of the ban on the activities of NGOs and other civil society organizations to enable them to operate freely in order to help the people in various areas of need and to assist in monitoring the progress of the Parties in implementing the MOU.
- Reparation for losses incurred as a result of politically motivated violence

We note with regret that these recommendations are still urgently relevant and necessary today because so far, little effort has been made to implement them. This is a clear sign that the spirit necessary for the establishment of an inclusive administration and society is still to be fully embraced and established. We wonder if there is political will to implement this agreement.

So far, this agreement is being directly discussed and implemented by the three principals to the agreement. We have not seen any significant desire to include the interests of other stakeholders including civil society organizations, businesses, NGOs and churches. There is a mistaken assumption that all the various crises of Zimbabwe will be solved through a narrow political settlement. The agreement is a political deal that has not prioritized the needs and the will of the people. This form of political reductionism, where complex social, economic, political and cultural problems are reduced into a simple party-political question is at the center of causing the whole crisis in the first place. The principals to the agreement should avoid the mistake of perpetuating the culture of suspicion, mistrust and contempt of the Zimbabwean people. In our last public statement, we advised and continue to do so now, that, “in order for the recent developments to be sustainable they will need to be much more inclusive than they have been so far. They will also need to be transparent and to be actively supported by all the people of Zimbabwe, especially those that have been brutalized, traumatized, marginalized and impoverished”. And yet, today, we still wait anxiously for the announcement of the new cabinet which is negotiated in secrecy and the negotiations themselves are focused more on political power than on respecting the will of the people and creating conditions for a socially and culturally healthy society that is politically mature and economically prosperous.

The Inadequacy of the Agreement

For as long as the agreement is based on the interests of the principals in the agreement rather than on the will of the people of Zimbabwe as a whole, its results will always be faulty. It is clear from the acceptance speeches of the principals and the language used in the text of the agreement that there are a number of fault lines in the agreement. Some fault lines are based on the divergent ways of reading the history of Zimbabwe and on the visions of the future of the nation. It is not difficult to identify the respective vocabularies used and favoured by each of the Principals that have been included in the text of the agreement. Other fault lines are to do with the failure by the agreement to address fundamental needs of social transformation into a democratic nation state. These include failure to urgently, clearly, adequately and unequivocally deal with media freedom, the process of developing a new people-driven constitution, the empowerment of women and the youth, humanitarian assistance, and how to deal with the perpetrators and victims of political violence including sexual violence in the spirit of national healing, reconciliation and transitional justice.

Church Commitments

As the Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, we have in the past made several commitments to contribute to the transformation of Zimbabwe into a more humane, more democratic, just and peaceful society. We continue to make those commitments today and urge our political leaders

to facilitate rather than hinder that process which will involve transformation at the personal, institutional and cultural levels. As in our last statement, we commit ourselves to the following:

- Providing emergency and humanitarian aid unhindered by obnoxious legislation
- Helping to develop a national ethos that cultivates a culture of love and life and to fight the negative culture of hatred, violence and death
- Encourage transparency and accountability to the people of Zimbabwe especially the marginalized and impoverished
- Teaching the practice of national and international solidarity
- National healing, reconciliation and rehabilitation
- Prayers for peace and justice

Church as Watch Dog

We recognize our role as complementary to the government of the day. As non-partisan we are committed to the development of truly national institutions and processes that respect all citizens and work towards their flourishing. In this spirit, we wish to contribute to the position of being a watch dog to government. We recognize that the parties to the political agreement have formed a Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC) that will help in the implementation of the agreement. To help the government avoid the dangers of self monitoring, we commit ourselves to contribute to the monitoring and assessment of the progress of the agreement. We hope that the new government will appreciate our role and our contribution towards the following:

- Cultivating and strengthening the political will to implement the agreement
- Widening and deepening the terms of the agreement in order to enhance the sustainability of the agreement
- Encouraging and supporting audits of all unjust laws and institutions in order to support the development of a new people-driven national democratic constitution that will inform comprehensive national transformation
- Economic recovery, food security and the improvement of social services
- Domestication of regional and international legal instruments that have been ratified by Zimbabwe and ratifying those that have not yet been ratified

- Lobbying for public acknowledgement and recording of all injustices from since colonialism to the present in order to contribute towards holistic national trauma healing, psycho-social support and the restoration of social and economic prosperity.
- Transformation of national consciousness and reform of social/political/legal/economic institutions in the interest of truth, transparency, accountability, democracy, justice and peace

Conclusion

Today we stand at the threshold of a transformed society. Yet the possibilities of total and disastrous failure are still real. As the church, we cannot afford to stand aside and watch. We, in accordance to our faith and values have to work for God's kingdom of truth, justice and peace to be established on earth as it is in heaven. We call upon the principals to this agreement to treat it with more urgency and to recognize that the agreement is not merely about political power or political security but also, and more importantly, about people's lives and welfare. We urge them to treat the Zimbabwean people with more respect and greater consideration. We therefore pray for the national commitment to the common good and universal social solidarity that will facilitate the transformation of Zimbabwe into "a society free of violence, fear, intimidation, hatred, patronage, corruption and founded on justice , fairness, openness, transparency, dignity and equality". "How good it is, how pleasant where people dwell as one!" (Psalm 133)