



## **Elections and the Common Good:**

### **A Political Analysis of Democratic Consolidation in West Africa**

#### ***1. Introduction***

West Africa comprises the western part of Sub-Saharan Africa, expanding from Nigeria in the east to Senegal in the west, and from the Atlantic Ocean in the south to Mauritania, Mali and Niger in the North. It is composed of a variety of peoples and cultures, and is known for its historical empires such as Ghana, Songhai, and Mali, and the kingdoms of Dahomey and Benin. It is composed of former French colonies such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Togo; the former British colonies of Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone; and the two former Portuguese colonies, Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau. Besides the traditional religion of 'animism', Islam and Christianity are predominant in the region, respectively in the north and in the coastal regions.

Since attaining their independence mostly in the early 1960s, the various countries have achieved different degrees of political progress: from military regime, dictatorship, one party state and despotism on the one hand, to democracies with free elections and popular participation by right on the other. In the early 1990s, as with most of the African continent, successive West African countries opted for a democratic system as their model of governance, an option that created a new environment for socio-political life and progress in the region. Since then, these countries have advanced with variable success towards democratic consolidation. The way elections are held, and their outcomes, may be a good indicator to assess and evaluate this democratic consolidation and to understand how the new political option contributes to a common good which transcends the sum of individual goods. In 2010 and 2011 legislative and presidential elections were held, or are planned to be held, in countries such as Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Niger, and Nigeria. Not only the political leaders or the members of parties are involved in these civil and political acts; through the elections, the populations are given the right to vote for the leaders who will be in charge of the common good.

The peaceful conduct of elections is, then, a sign of democratic consolidation in West Africa. They are "not only the life of democracy; they are also the death of dictatorship."<sup>1</sup> But a two-part question arises: to what extent do these elections contribute to the common good; and what attitude or spirituality is needed to accompany the elections? This paper explores this question by analyzing elections in three countries, each drawn from a different category: firstly, consolidated democracies; secondly, countries with a restricted form of democracy; and, thirdly, countries in transition from military dictatorships to a

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Huntington in Michael Bratton and Nicolas Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 (2002)), 204.

democratic system. The paper goes on to propose a 'spirituality of elections' which indicates the spirit which should accompany elections in order to ensure that they promote the common good.

## ***2. Elections in a (frail) consolidated democracy: the case of Benin.***

The Republic of Benin, a West African country, achieved independence from French colonization on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1960. The country experienced considerable political instability, with successive military putsches, very short presidential mandates, and at one time, three 'valid' presidents serving simultaneously. This political instability characterised Beninese political life until a Marxist-Leninist model of government was put into place by President Mathieu Kérékou in 1972. By 1990, however, the economic crisis and repeated strikes by workers and students forced the government to renounce the socialist dictatorship and to open the way to a multi-party democracy. The adoption of a Constitution following the national conference in 1990 allowed Benin to embrace a democratic presidential system with Parliament as a counter-power of the executive, and a Constitutional Court as the highest authority in the country with respect to constitutional matters and electoral disputes. The new Constitution instituted a five-year presidential mandate (limited to two terms), while the members of the Assembly serve four-year terms. The Constitution placed executive power in the hands of the President, who appoints three of the seven members of the Constitutional Court, while Parliament elects the other four members. As a counter-power, Parliament may request the prosecution of the President before the High Court of Justice. Press freedom, trade unions and civil society, encouraged by the democratic system, constitute other countervailing powers which contribute to the consolidation of Beninese democracy, as they are able to challenge the government's political agenda and economic and fiscal policies through denunciations and strikes. The practice of executive control tends, however, to lead to civil unrest and severe economic losses.

Since the beginning of its democratic era, Benin has enjoyed political peace with regular presidential, legislative and municipal elections. For twenty years there has been no *coup d'état*, no civil war and no armed conflict. The country has successfully organised five presidential elections and six legislative elections. The most recent ones took place in March and April 2011. Benin can thus be taken as an example of a country with democracy and good governance. Benin's first democratic election indeed "marked the first instance on mainland Africa when a national leader was peacefully supplanted as a consequence of the expressed will of the people."<sup>2</sup> The success of the different elections, especially the presidential elections, depends however on unstable coalitions of fragmented parties which create opportunities for change at every election. This possibility of change is a sign of the consolidation of democracy, since authoritarian regimes concentrate power in the hands of a President, or favour a one-party system, with various mechanisms in place to avoid the incumbent being voted out of office.

Although the elections in Benin until now have gone well, and express the consolidation of democracy in the country, a deeper analysis reveals that the socio-political peace has always been frail, with much concern about the public good. The legislative elections of February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1991, were the first democratic test of the country. They went well, with great competition among the different parties to be represented in Parliament. The presidential elections, which took place the following month, resulted in the victory of Nicéphore Soglo with 63% of the votes against 37% for the former president Mathieu Kérékou.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Bratton and Nicolas Van de Walle, *Democratic Experiments in Africa: Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 (2002)), 7.

However, the stability of the democratic system, of the public good, and of national peace, relied on an amnesty which was approved by the National Conference for the former President. A personal immunity was also offered to him on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1991 by the High Council of the Republic for all the crimes he had committed during his presidency. These measures were effective, since they allowed him to step down without fear, and preserved the democratic transition. With regard to the common good, these decisions made for peace and were fruitful, but they indicated that the democratic transition could not be taken for granted – powerful individual interests could potentially threaten the public good.

Subsequent Beninese elections were also peaceful, and confirmed the democratic evolution of the country; however, they were marked by strong political rivalries. The governing party lost its majority in the legislative elections in March 1995; and the 1996 presidential elections saw the return of the former President, due to parties' coalitions and political maneuvers. The same parties which had campaigned against Mathieu Kérékou now praised his return, as their interests had not been served by the election of Nicéphore Soglo. Some partisan violence affected the elections, and some attempts to prevent opponents from voting were noted; various disputes and contestations were expressed about the results; and there were many requests to cancel the elections and to organize a new round. However, the Constitutional Court rejected most of these requests, and Kérékou won the election with 52.49% of the vote against 47.51% for Nicéphore Soglo, who strongly rejected the results. Nearly all the parties which had backed Nicéphore Soglo in the previous elections turned against him. Kérékou served two further presidential terms, up to 2006, since the opposition was divided and could not come together with a common objective or a shared social and political program. This electoral context, with its various temporary alliances and the two presidential terms of Kérékou, indicate the unstable political environment and the frailty of democratic consolidation in Benin. Personal and party interests are held ahead of the common good.

By the end of Kérékou's two presidential terms in 2006, it was far from certain that democracy would continue in the country. Although the President had promised not to attempt to cling to power, his supporters marched and requested that the elections be delayed until 2007, when they could be coupled with legislative elections. The National Independent Electoral Commission (CENA – *Commission Electorale Nationale et Autonome*) was not given all the resources it needed to prepare properly for the elections, which thus became uncertain. The President's intention to step aside became doubtful, and some alarming statements were expressed. It was clear that party and personal interests were put before national interest. Finally, the election was organized and Yayi Boni won on a ticket of commitment for change and an end to corruption. Now, however, only a few years after he was sworn into office, his own government is accused of corruption and is being challenged by repeated strikes by public servants, teachers and university personnel.

The presidential and legislative elections in 2011 were affected by tensions among the parties and the credibility of the institutions. The opposition parties and the government disagreed about the Computerized Electoral Permanent List (LEPI – *Liste Electorale Permanente Informatisée*). There was uncertainty regarding the voters' roll, and a good part of the population, especially Beninese living outside the country and those who were traveling, have been denied the right to vote. The political class was divided about voters' list: While the opposition rejected it, the government saw no need for corrections. Thus, the elections were full of uncertainty, and resulted in an unexpected situation which could have jeopardized the consolidation of democracy.

In light of the difficulties besetting these elections, the consolidation of democracy in Benin still appears frail. Promotion of the common good is not always the primary concern of either voters or candidates; choices are sometimes based on regional and partisan interests, with people voting for the candidates of their region and village. Thus, candidates from the north tend to get the majority of voters in that region, and so too the candidates in the south. An effective consolidation of democracy in Benin requires a democratic culture which leads to a vote based on political agendas. Education of the population is fundamental to the entrenchment of a democratic culture. People should be equipped to contribute to public debate and to hold their political leaders accountable. There is also a need to set down strong institutions which are free and independent of parties and governments.

Other countries that may be considered as being in the process of consolidating democracy reveal the same weaknesses during election time. In Nigeria, the most populous African nation, there have recently been deadly clashes between supporters of rival politicians, in the run-up to the 2011 elections. This bloody political violence imperiled free, transparent and fair elections, and shook the Nigerian democratic consolidation. In addition, clashes between Christians and Muslims have killed hundreds in 2010 in some parts of the country, and these clashes are being fuelled by rival political factions.<sup>3</sup> This kind of intimidation and rigging cannot but raise the question, to what extent are African elections and campaigns informed by a search for the common good. And similar questions can also be raised about other consolidating democracies such as Senegal, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali.

### ***3. Elections in a restricted democracy: the case of Côte d'Ivoire***

Côte d'Ivoire is also a former French colony, which reached its independence on August 7<sup>th</sup> 1960. For more than three decades the country was known as a very good example of political stability and economic prosperity. Under the leadership of its first president, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire was, at least on the surface, a prominent and flourishing model of political, religious and ethnic harmony, with a well-developed economy based on agriculture, especially cocoa and coffee exports. Houphouet-Boigny, thanks to economic prosperity, managed to stay in power until his death in December 1993. During his presidency he encouraged immigration from neighboring countries to boost agricultural production; thus the country became a land of hospitality where Malians, Burkinabè, Ghanaians, Togolese, Guineans and Beninese dreamed to go for a better political and economic environment. Houphouet-Boigny was effectively ensured of victory in all elections, especially against his long-time opponent Laurent Gbagbo. But the same factors behind the country's flourishing during his lifetime turned out to be the cause of instability and social and political unrest after his death. The long reign of Houphouet-Boigny had not allowed a new political class to emerge and a smooth democratic transition to take place. Immigration, which had been welcome for agricultural development, became a political target.

After the death of Houphouet-Boigny, the sociopolitical consensus fell apart. Ethnic discord, religious clashes, regional misunderstandings, the questions of nationality and 'Ivoirité' all increased under the presidency of Henri Konan Bédié and led to a putsch organized by the late Robert Guei. The once-peaceful country became a military regime. In late 1990s, sociopolitical unrest was fuelled by ethnic divisions and by the definitions of nationality and 'Ivoirité', which involved constitutional limits being placed on the validity of presidential candidatures. Political instability escalated when military violence

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=68&art\\_id=nw20100828100616656C163021&newslett=1](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=68&art_id=nw20100828100616656C163021&newslett=1)

broke out in 2002 with the emergence of rebel groups that took over the north and western parts of the country in spite of many attempts at ceasefire negotiations. In 2002, Côte d'Ivoire was practically divided in two with the north controlled by an armed rebellion aimed at ending the marginalization of people from that part of the country. Although the United Nations Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ONUCI) was set up to oversee the implementation of the 2003 peace agreement, no presidential election could be organized at the end of the Gbagbo's presidential mandate. After several unsuccessful attempts, Charles Konan Banny was named Prime Minister in order to prepare for a return to democracy. However, regular ethnic outbursts and political violence were observed and disagreements were noted between President Gbagbo and Prime Minister Konan Banny. A final peace agreement between Gbagbo and Guillaume Soro, named Prime Minister in March 2007, gave signs of hope for peace in the country and for a better organization of the elections. Eventually, after several cancellations and delays, presidential elections were set for 31<sup>st</sup> October 2010.

On September 9<sup>th</sup> the presidential candidates agreed about the permanent electoral list of 5.7 million voters produced by the electoral commission.<sup>4</sup> This was a significant step towards a peaceful climate and the fulfillment of the repeatedly delayed elections, since the electoral list had been the main sticking point between Gbagbo and the opposition. Earlier lists had been rejected by Gbagbo and his party, who claimed that ineligible voters, namely migrant workers from neighboring countries Burkina Faso and Mali, were included in the list.<sup>5</sup> For the opposition these objections were attempts to deny voting rights to opposition supporters. Thus, the electoral list was the center of a violent crisis which escalated with the dismissal of the previous electoral commission by the President. But once agreement had been reached on the list, the candidates immediately began to claim an advance victory in the election: Alassane Ouattara assured his supporters that they would win;<sup>6</sup> in response, Laurent Gbagbo stated that "no election is won in advance."<sup>7</sup>

Even though these statements were understandable in a competitive campaign, they were likely to raise tension once they became rooted in personal and party interests. As we have now seen, the outcome of the election remains unsure: Ouattara has been declared the winner by most observers and multilateral institutions, but Gbagbo – alleging irregularities in his opponent's northern stronghold – has refused to give up the presidency.<sup>8</sup> This stalemate illustrates how, in a restricted democracy such as Côte d'Ivoire, an unstable political situation calls for the consideration of the public good in order to reach and preserve peace. More overtly than in a consolidated democracy, the national interest should be the reason and the common point which brings the political leadership to the table for the good of all through honest and sincere debate.

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<sup>4</sup> La Lettre du Continent 595, Paris, September 16<sup>th</sup> 2010 : 5.

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.abidjan.net/h/374483.html> accessed on 2010/09/13

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.fratmat.info/> accessed on 2010/09/13

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.abidjan.net/h/374547.html> accessed on 2010/09/13

<sup>8</sup> Since this paper was initially drafted, Gbagbo has been arrested and Ouattara has been sworn in as President thanks to international support. But this political crisis validates the question about the credibility of institutions in African democracies. What credibility can be given to a high democratic institution such as the Ivorian Constitutional Court, which proclaims the victory of a candidate and a few months later validates the victory of his opponent in the same election? Are African democratic institutions independent? To what extent can the international community challenge the decision of the Constitutional Court in a democracy? Above all, can force of arms legitimate a president and his government?

#### *4. Elections in a transition to democracy: the case of Guinea-Conakry*

Guinea – called Guinea-Conakry to distinguish it from its neighbor Guinea-Bissau – is a former French colony which was once known as French Guinea. Rich in minerals such as aluminum, uranium, gold and diamonds, the country reached its independence on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1958. This autonomy was only possible after the historic “No” of Guinea to the referendum proposed by France on September 28<sup>th</sup> 1958 to bring the former French colonies into a single West-African Francophone community. Led by Ahmed Sékou Touré, Guinea was the only country to refuse this referendum, which was seen as an attempt to keep Africans and African countries under the leadership of France. This decision was a direct political act for freedom, autonomy and dignity. “We are Africans,” said Sékou Touré, who became President upon Guinea's independence, “and our countries cannot be an extension of France.”<sup>9</sup> Displeased with the autonomy option of Guinea, France stopped all relationships with Guinea. For his part, Sékou Touré installed a dictatorship and ruled by violent repression against all opposing leaders, parties and demonstrations. He is alleged to have incarcerated, tortured and exterminated thousands of his opponents in the infamous Camp Boiro prison in Conakry. When Sékou Touré died on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1984, a Revolutionary Commission for National Reconstruction, which included military officers, elected Colonel Lansana Conté as President.

Under intense international pressure to hold elections, and influenced by the wind of democracy blowing in many West-African countries, Conté initially hinted at a democratic transition and a multi-party political system. Fundamental freedoms pertaining to the media and political activity were restored, but Conté won the presidential elections organized in 1993 and stayed in power despite allegations of corruption. Then the political stability of the country and its democratic transition became shaky. Ethnic violence increased, especially between Fula, Mandinka, and Susu, and the Guinean government was accused of violating human rights, torture and imprisonment without trial. Colonel Conté clung to power until his death on December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2008.

A military regime was immediately established which installed Moussa Dadis Camara in power, who promised to end corruption and hold democratic elections in which neither himself nor any other military man would compete. However, on September 28<sup>th</sup> 2009, the military violently repressed people marching and protesting against Camara, whom they accused of planning to stay on in power. Some 150 pro-democracy protesters were killed, further increasing social unrest. Camara himself was injured in a putsch in December 2009 and flew to Morocco for medical care. Vice-President Sékouba Konaté ran the country in Camara's absence. On January 21<sup>st</sup> 2010, Jean-Marie Doré was appointed Prime Minister to lead a six-month transition government to the elections, set to take place on June 27<sup>th</sup> and July 18<sup>th</sup> 2010. The first round was held as planned and was seen as the first free and fair Guinean election since independence in 1958. It raised hope for an end to military regime and for a democratic political system in the country. The former Prime Minister Cellou Dalein Diallo and his rival Alpha Condé emerged for the second round. However allegation of electoral fraud forced the government to postpone the second round to September 19<sup>th</sup> 2010. The campaigns for the second round were marked by deadly ethnic violence among supporters of the candidates, and on September 15<sup>th</sup> the second round was postponed again to October 10<sup>th</sup>. A further complicating factor was the lack of preparation of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) whose president, Ben Sekou Sylla, died on September 14<sup>th</sup> after a long illness.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, on 7<sup>th</sup> November, the second round of voting was held,

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/afrique/guinee\\_franco.htm](http://www.tlfq.ulaval.ca/axl/afrique/guinee_franco.htm) accessed on 2010/09/17.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11310302> accessed on 2010/09/16.

and Condé was declared the winner with just over 52% of the vote. The vote was largely peaceful and credible, and though the losing candidate, Diallo, initially complained of irregularities, he subsequently announced that he would respect the outcome. By early 2011 the state of emergency had been lifted and the political situation was calm and relatively stable; the chances of a successful transition to democracy for the first time since independence in 1958 were encouraging.

Some general characteristics can be drawn from these analyses: most elections in Africa are conducted relatively peacefully, but the process is usually regarded by outside observers and losing parties as being of doubtful credibility. Few African elections enjoy an unqualified “free and fair” endorsement. Electoral processes tend to be more peaceful in consolidating democracies, even though competitive campaigns may raise tensions and even spill over into violence. In restricted democracies there is a need for clear and public agreements between the various candidates that they will accept the electoral outcome; this is a key point in making progress towards legitimate elections and full democracy.

In all three categories of political regime, electoral campaigns are characterised by continuing disputes over procedural rules and struggles for control of electoral lists; this was especially the case in Benin and Côte d’Ivoire. Usually, the governing party works through the Department of Home Affairs to maintain direct control over the appointment of the electoral commission and the poll procedures. Public resources are often also deployed by the governing party for partisan or campaigning purposes; and political campaigns are generally more focused on personalities than on policies, and support for candidates is based on personal or ethnic interests. Democratic institutions in charge of the legal process and transparency of the elections are not always credible and can be affected with partisan interest.

At election time, political leaders request the vote of all sectors of the electorate. However, in most cases there is little indication that the winners actually govern with the good of the whole electorate in mind. Instead, priority is usually given to regional, sectoral, ethnic or other interests, leading to widespread disappointment, frustration, and lack of satisfaction with the government.

Fortunately, there is progress in the political life in some African countries, Guinea being a good example. If such progress is to be fostered, and if the negative trends mentioned above are to be countered, then a consideration of the ‘spirituality of elections’ – based on the principle of the common good – could provide useful insights.

### ***5. Towards a Spirituality of Elections: ‘For the Good of Individuals and of Society’***

In the analytical approach to the countries examined we have focused on the persons who put themselves forward to be chosen to hold a public position. The candidates who compete for these positions have indeed expressed the will, and show a commitment, to fulfill their responsibilities efficiently and for the good of all. This goodwill should be highlighted, since it shows concern for the public good. But on the other hand, regional, ethnic and partisan violence, personal attacks, and the frauds which affect so many campaigns and electoral processes, suggest that narrow interests actually feature more strongly than the candidates’ commitments to the public good. The question arises: to what extent is a citizen still committed to the common good when he opts for violence to win elections or to claim ‘justice’? Is the common good safeguarded when a citizen can prevent his opponents from enjoying their political and civil right to vote?

A consideration of the deeper meaning of what an election is may contribute to the incorporation of the common good as a key value to be served by the electoral process. Deeper than merely a civil and political act, in the Christian perspective an election refers to the divine choice of persons for salvation.<sup>11</sup> It is a vocation, a call to receive God's saving grace and to share his divine life. Such a meaning is rooted in the divine call both to a single person such as Abraham, or to a community like Israel. In spite of the singularity and preference attached to the act of election – which may in political terms express an *exclusion* of 'the other' – elections in the Christian perspective *encompass* others. God's elections are usually made beyond any economic or social deservedness. They are made out of God's love for a particular person, in order to extend the same love to the rest. Thus, Abraham was chosen for the birth of the community, and Israel was chosen to extend God's love to the whole humanity. This incorporation of the community in the election of a person is strongly highlighted in the election, or choosing, of Jesus. The Son of God is seen in the New Testament to be God's Elect One, in whom the believers are chosen.<sup>12</sup> The election of Jesus is humanity's destiny, for through Jesus divine life reached humanity and was given to every single person. From this Christian perspective, the singularity advances the universality to which it is oriented. An election, then, is not focused on the person to be chosen; it is focused on the responsibility and the task to be fulfilled.

This Christian approach to elections shifts the focus of the political and civil electoral act. When a nation or a community holds political elections, individual interests should give way to the common good. From this perspective, the common good transcends utilitarianism and expresses the communion in good living of individuals and communities.<sup>13</sup> It is "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily".<sup>14</sup> The common good is about how to live well together, how to enable individuals and groups to flourish and to live a decent human life.<sup>15</sup> To respect and uphold this common good requires a particular attitude, a 'spirituality for elections'.

Spirituality in this context is not limited to the question of a religious life. Rather, it expresses the interior movements and reflections that enlighten and guide the voter to elect with responsibility, and thus confers a deep value to his or her act. "For religious people this immediately appeals to their faith in God or the Divine. It is a challenge to embrace the very essence of life to the full and not let limiting human situations be the defining edge of one's life. For non-religious, it is a commitment to discovering within the interior self deep-lying spiritual movements that guide the soul to interpret disabling human experiences within a much greater realm beyond the human limitation."<sup>16</sup> This spirituality of the elections includes personal, interpersonal and public dimensions. It shapes our relationship with ourselves, with others and with God.

From the perspective of this spirituality of elections and the common good, some essential attitudes are required. Firstly, there must be respect for the dignity of every human person involved in the elections, since the right to vote is a right that attaches to any qualified citizen, and the choice of the elector should be carried out freely and without fear. These rights and freedoms are usually guaranteed in the

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<sup>11</sup> J. D. Douglas, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids. (The Zondervan Corporation), 336.

<sup>12</sup> Eph. 1:4

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 50-51.

<sup>14</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1906.

<sup>15</sup> Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *Choosing the Common Good...*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Elias Omondi Opongo, sj, *Making Choices for Peace: Aid Agencies in Field Diplomacy*. (Nairobi: Paulines, 2006) 150.



traditional democracies (where sometimes levels of voter participation may be low), but in many African countries where people are eager to exercise their rights and fulfill their duties, they are too often denied these rights.

Secondly, the fundamental right of the human person to conditions that enable a society to exist in peace, with security and justice, must be upheld.<sup>17</sup> Respecting these rights entails the principles of subsidiarity and participation, which deny to any single person or institution the exclusive authority to control the organization of the social and political life; rather, it requires that each and every citizen be enabled to make a contribution. This calls for dialogue and respectful debate to build and advance the societal life of the nation.

This perspective of elections has inspired Catholic leaders to raise their voices in a call for the vote to be taken more seriously. The Catholic Bishops of Benin, for example, have issued a letter at every election to exhort the population to participate fully and peacefully. Though Catholics represent 27.1% of the population (while other Christians are 15.7%, Muslims 24.4%, Vodoun 17.3%, and 'other' 15.5%,<sup>18</sup>) the messages and letters of the Beninese Bishops' Conference are usually welcomed and appreciated even outside the Christian community. Catholic leadership was recognized especially when Bishop Isidore de Souza was appointed the chairperson of the National Conference, and presided over the debate and dialogue of the Assembly which made the decision for a democratic model of government. In addition, Bishop de Souza ran the High Council of the Republic, which carried out the responsibility of the Constitutional Court during the democratic transition. In a country where people and political leaders decide matters mainly on the basis of economic power, which is acquired largely through illegal means,<sup>19</sup> the Beninese Bishops have issued messages which call for a change of mind and which direct people towards the common good. The first letter published in 1989 made an historic impact and was entitled "Change your mind and Benin will flourish."<sup>20</sup> These letters, based on a political analysis of the country, advocate for an improvement in the political environment for the good of the entire nation. They are built on themes such as the common good, peace, national unity, solidarity and brotherhood.<sup>21</sup> In the same peace-building spirit, the Bishops organize and participate in religious dialogues which focus on the role of religions and religious leaders in peace-building. One such peaceful action was the International Workshop on Religious Dialogue, which reflected on religious values that contributed to peace-building.<sup>22</sup>

The same awareness-raising role is played by the Guinean Bishops in a country where Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, account for only 10% of the population. Following the September demonstration which was violently repressed, Catholic leaders issued a message appealing to the conscience of the population to carry out the protests peacefully. They invited the whole nation to rely on the tradition of cultural and peaceful dialogue inherited from their ancestors: the *palaver* procedure

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Francis Pennock, *This Is Our Faith*, ..., 261.

<sup>18</sup> INSAE (2003): Troisième Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitation. Cotonou.

<sup>19</sup> Marc-Laurent Hazoumè « Quand l'indécence politique tue la démocratie », *La Croix du Bénin* N° 1064 du 17 septembre 2010 : 11.

<sup>20</sup> Conférence des Evêques du Bénin, *Convertissez-vous et le Bénin vivra*. (1989). Another one is entitled « Pour un nouvel essor de notre Pays » ( "For a new growth of our country", 1996)

<sup>21</sup> One of the Bishops' letters concluded with this prayer: "Lord, turn off the flame of sin, and the ardor of anger. Fill our heart with your love and may your peace unite us" Cf. Emmanuel Adjovi, *Une élection libre en Afrique: L a Présidentielle du Bénin*, (Paris: Karthalla, 1998), 70.

<sup>22</sup> *La Croix du Bénin* N° 915 du 24 août au 06 septembre 2007, 10.

which their fathers passed on to them as a way of debating and solving communal issues. “In the *palaver*, the whole community sets in motion, questioning its own reference points, taking distance with itself, and establishing an uninterrupted dialogue with itself.”<sup>23</sup> As such, *palaver* is a dialogue, a tool for integrating diversity and pluralism and achieving complementarity and mutuality<sup>24</sup> within the political community. In light of this understanding of *palaver*, the Guinean Church leaders invited their country to dialogue in order to stop shedding the blood of their compatriots in the land of their ancestors; and they reminded all the population of their responsibility to protect human lives.<sup>25</sup>

At a regional level, the Bishops have raised their voices both about particular countries and about the entire region. In Côte d’Ivoire, where Christians, mostly Roman Catholics, account for 32% of the population<sup>26</sup>, the regional Bishops’ Conference of West Africa (CERAO – *Conférence Episcopale Régionale de l’Afrique de l’Ouest*) issued a message which invited the Ivoirian population not to succumb to political, ethnic, regional and religious manipulations, in order to safeguard national integrity and union. They also appealed to political parties and leaders to sensitize their armed supporters to refrain from violence.<sup>27</sup> At a regional level, the Bishops raised their concerns about the promotion of unity and peace in the West African community through a collective effort sustained by social justice, respect for common good, and the just and harmonious sharing of national goods. “Let us defend with determination,” they wrote, “respect for human life... The human person is created in the image of God and his or her dignity is sacred.”<sup>28</sup> They went on to call for better management of the public good, a spirit of service, good governance, and a real flourishing of solidarity between the various countries through free and transparent elections with outcomes that could be accepted by all.

From the perspective of the common good stressed in the Bishops’ messages, political communities may be understood as families and communities which promote diverse and complementary roles and contributions from all their members. The messages call for a new attitude towards political reconstruction which incorporates ethical perspectives, as well as a new dynamism and creativity which will bring awareness and empower the population against dehumanizing forces. Observing this ‘spirituality for elections’ will surely lead to a better political environment, where the leader will be able to focus on social issues such as poverty and the promotion of human dignity.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has emphasised that the peaceful carrying-out of elections is especially important when the democratic process threatened to become frail and unstable. The analysis of the three levels of democracy in West Africa reveals that electoral processes are usually carried to their conclusion, but not without tensions and delays, and ethnic, regional and partisan clashes, especially in restricted democracies and countries in transition to democracy. During election time, political leaders request the

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<sup>23</sup> Bénézet Bujo and Juvenal Ilunga Muya (ed.), *African Theology: The Contribution of the Pioneers*. Vol. 1. Nairobi: The Paulines, 2003: 130.

<sup>24</sup> Orobator E. Agbonkhanmeghe, *Theology Brewed in An African Pot*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008: 89.

<sup>25</sup> Appel de l’Eglise Catholique de Guinée, Conakry, le 23 Septembre 2009. Cf. [http://www.caritas-senegal.org/GUINEE-CONAKRY-DANS-LE-TROUBLE-Appel-des-Eveques\\_a135.html](http://www.caritas-senegal.org/GUINEE-CONAKRY-DANS-LE-TROUBLE-Appel-des-Eveques_a135.html)

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iv.html>

<sup>27</sup> CERAO, *Message au Peuple de Côte d’Ivoire et à tous les hommes de bonne volonté*, 15ème Assemblée Plénière de la Conférence Episcopale Régionale de l’Afrique de l’Ouest Bamako , 3 - 9 février 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Message of CERAO, Abidjan, le 08 Février 2009.

vote of electors and promise to dedicate themselves to the public good. But their promises are grounded on regional and political party interests which lead to disappointment and frustration once the elections end and the government is set up. While there are some indicators of progress in West Africa, a deeper consideration of the common good would strengthen this progress. An approach to elections which is oriented to the common good requires the development of a specific spirituality, and of an open and tolerant mind to accompany the practice of the elections. Where the purpose and process of elections are grounded in the common good, the diversity and complementarity of the roles and contributions of all members of the society can be emphasised. And this, in turn, will promote respect for the individual and communal rights and dignities of each member of society.

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