

The Archbishop of Sudan casts his vote in Sudan's historic referendum

Sunday 9 January 2011

Sunday 9th January marked the first of seven days in the historic self-determination referendum for the people of Southern Sudan. The Most Rev. Dr. Daniel Deng Bul Yak, Episcopal Archbishop of the Sudan, together with Archbishop Paulino Lukudu of the Roman Catholic Church advanced to Hai Jalaba Junior School polling station to cast their referendum ballots at four o'clock that afternoon. Unsurprisingly, there was heavy media attention ready to capture the two archbishops exercising their democratic right at the polling station. With the Archbishops were an accompanying entourage composed of a delegation from the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) who had come as an ecumenical body of referendum observers.



Archbishop Daniel Deng placing his vote in the ballot box

On arrival, and with big smiles and waves, the Archbishops greeted the crowd of fellow Sudanese citizens who had also turned up to vote. They proceeded inside the station and after a brief explanation of the process from the polling station officials, they finally voted.



Archbishop Daniel Deng and Archbishop Paulino Lukudu after voting.

Sharing his thoughts outside, Archbishop Daniel spoke of his elation at having finally cast his vote. 'We have been waiting fifty five years for this day,' he said. 'This is the day, this is our time.' He also remarked that southern Sudanese should unite if they had not already done so. He called the referendum a bridge to a new Sudan and added that this day marked the start of an important event in the history of the Sudan. He noted that all Sudanese had now proved to the world that they could reach this day peacefully. His statements come just a day after his return from Malakal where he had been at the forefront of a 21-day reconciliation process between Lt. Gen. George Athor and the Government of Southern Sudan

(GoSS) following the former's rebellion against the government after losing the Jonglei State gubernatorial elections in April 2010.

Archbishop Paulino spoke in a similar vein. He said he and others like him had been working tirelessly to promote the importance of this day. 'I vote as an Archbishop but also as a Christian and a Sudanese citizen.' He expressed joy at having done his duty and was thankful to God for the opportunity. He also stated that, 'voting is not an evil but voting is a blessing because it comes from the hand of God'.



L - R: Bishop Robert Aboagye-Mensah, Sheikh Saleh Habimana, Archbishop John Onaiyekan, Cardinal Wilfred Napier, Archbishop Paulino Lukudu and Archbishop Daniel Deng.

between the two archbishops instead of the two he had expected but was quickly reassured by the Archbishops that this was standard procedure, and not an indication that they had voted twice.

The first day in the week-long referendum process proved to be a pleasant afternoon of voting and reflecting on the future of southern Sudan. Earlier in the week, the Chairman of the African Union High Implementation Panel and former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, put the challenge to the Sudanese people, both North and South, to be pioneers of democracy and positive change in Africa and to contribute to the larger pan-African solidarity. This, of course, will be no small feat whether Sudan divides or remains united. Today however, there was a profound sense that at last, Sudanese destiny was being fulfilled and small steps towards democracy were being realised. Moreover, a peaceful referendum as the world witnessed the beginnings of today, and the very act of choosing, are of great significance and an indication

The ecumenical delegation of referendum observers were very optimistic about the future of southern Sudan as a new country. Bishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria spoke of the sorrow Africans had experienced watching southern Sudan go underdeveloped year after year but added that, 'many countries have been born. Africa has gone into labour many times and has sometimes suffered miscarriages. Now, we see a live baby being born.'

Just before the delegation were leaving, Former President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, along with former First Lady, Rosaline Carter made an appearance to greet the delegation. Handshakes and jokes followed as President Carter spoke of the work he and his wife do in their local church when they are not committed to work overseas. On inspecting the two archbishops hands he quickly noticed four inky fingers and thumbs



Former President of the United States of America and founder of the Carter Centre, Jimmy Carter joking with Archbishop Paulino and Archbishop Daniel

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that together the governments and the people of the Sudan are, at this stage, moving towards a democracy the rest of the world hopes will endure.

The Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS) fully supports a credible and peaceful self-determination referendum and remains behind the cause of national unity and democracy. The Church also acknowledges the challenges that lie after the referendum, especially if southern Sudan becomes an independent state. Knowing the challenges at this stage is an advantage but it is only if they are acted upon that an independent southern Sudan will stand a chance at escaping the dreaded epithet, 'failed state.' Archbishop Daniel believes it is particularly important for the church to lead in the teachings concerning the importance of one's nationality, unity and reconciliation with one another and the fights against corruption and tribalism, irrespective of the referendum result. Whether in the case of unity or succession then, the ECS is ready to lead again, as it has led throughout the years.

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