

South Sudan clergy stand up for peace

by [Jason Patinkin](#) in the [January 21, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Wearing a white cassock, Catholic bishop Paride Taban strides through the mud and tents of the Jebel displaced persons camp in South Sudan's capital, Juba, on a recent Sunday.

Taban is here to conduct mass at this camp, where thousands of ethnic Nuer live under United Nations peacekeeper protection and in fear of Dinka soldiers outside.

"The church is to be with the suffering people, wherever in the world," the 78-year-old bishop said.

Taban has no trouble crossing South Sudan's ethnic lines to preach on Sundays. That's because in South Sudan church leaders are held in higher esteem than perhaps anyone else.

They earned that position through 50 years of struggle. Priests and pastors brought humanitarian relief to civilians during the heaviest fighting in South Sudan's long wars for independence from the hard-line Islamist government in Khartoum, Sudan. They lobbied the international community to support the southern cause and, crucially, brokered peace between communities torn apart by war and ethnic strife.

Yet in South Sudan's latest civil war, which just entered its second year, church leaders have been unable to seriously influence politicians and generals. Instead, they've been attacked by militants, sidelined at peace talks, and silenced at home.

It's a shocking change for South Sudan, a country whose existence in many people's minds is founded on the idea of religious freedom for Christians, who form the vast majority of the population. Now church leaders are saying they have to escalate their efforts to be a neutral, trusted force that can bring politicians in line and lead the divided populace to reconciliation.

South Sudan's latest war began December 2013 when government troops began massacring Nuer in Juba. In response, the national army, called the Sudan People's Liberation Army, split along ethnic lines and a violent uprising began in the country's

northeast, pitting Dinka loyal to President Salva Kiir against Nuer led by former vice president Riek Machar. Both sides have committed atrocities.

From the start, church leaders were shards of light in the grim conflict. Priests, pastors, and nuns protected civilians from extremists on either side, at times standing up to armed men with little more than a cross necklace for protection.

Yet in Juba and in the flash-point towns of Bor and Malakal, which saw some of the heaviest fighting, churches and clergy came under attack. Priests were murdered, and in some instances, civilians were slaughtered in churches where they sought refuge. The Presbyterian Church alone lost nine clergy. By May, civilians were leaving church compounds, saying they no longer felt safe inside.

“In this situation, like in Rwanda, the blood of the tribe has become thicker than the blood of the Christ,” said Episcopal bishop Enock Tombe, who leads a religious delegation at the peace talks.

By mid-year, as the fighting died down with the onset of rains, so did direct violence against churches. But another problem arose. The churches could not get their voices heard.

The warring parties refused church participation in peace negotiations until June and repeatedly boycotted the talks afterward to prevent religious groups and other unarmed actors from participating.

In government-controlled areas, Catholic radio stations have been censored and shut down and staff thrown in jail. There are reports of rebel hard-liners threatening or even attacking pastors for preaching moderation.

Government security agents even attempted to shut down a Catholic church-led peace march held in Juba December 16 to mark the war’s first anniversary.

But the attacks have not stopped South Sudan’s religious leaders from speaking out. Clergy have condemned the violence as “evil,” calling the country’s leaders “dry bones” in need of spiritual renewal. They’ve urged civilians not to follow the warlords like “cattle” and lamented that politicians view those who die as “just grasshoppers,” not caring.

Meanwhile, leaders like Taban—known for his nonjudgmental approach to peace building in previous wars—have used more conciliatory approaches, attempting to

consult and advise. But the politicians have not changed course.

“Has it fallen in a dead ear?” asked Taban, who said he has been trying for months to have a private meeting with President Kiir without success.

“The political leaders think that their side of the story is always correct—they don’t want contradiction,” said Tombe. [They ask us] “Why do you speak as if you are with the rebels?”

To some, the churches’ struggle to be heard is a sign of their weakened influence since the last war. John Ashworth, a longtime adviser to South Sudan’s churches, said clergy are less united than they were during the long wars as each denomination has focused on rebuilding its own.

Important clergy left the cloth when presented with other opportunities in peacetime.

“Some of our good people, because of money, salaries, they join the government,” Taban said.

Others lost focus. At a recent synod of one church in Juba, the main issue on the agenda was not peace, but pornography.

But to others, disrespect for the church by top politicians is a sign of a deeper problem, one that strikes at the heart of the nation’s history.

South Sudan’s independence struggle was often considered a fight for religious freedom for the mostly Christian south against the Islamist government in Khartoum.

SPLA propaganda perpetuates this story, referring to the churchgoing President Kiir, for instance, as the Joshua who took South Sudan to the promised land of independence after the 2005 death of the Moses, SPLA founder John Garang.

But this story never accorded with the facts. The SPLA began as a Marxist-influenced movement backed by Ethiopian communists. Taban points out that during the long war, the SPLA—ostensibly fighting for southerners like him—imprisoned him for 100 days after he broke through a siege to bring food to civilians under attack.

Tombe said the atrocities of the latest war fully explode the myth of the SPLA as Christian liberators.

“These politicians cannot claim” to be Christian, he said. “Even if they go to church on Sunday, they are not guided by Christian values only. They may be Christian by name, but Christian values have not really penetrated.”

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