Chapter 12

Pentecostals and Politics in Nigeria and Zambia
An Historical Perspective

Richard Burgess

1 Introduction

In 2011, an unprecedented fifteen African countries held presidential elections, among them Nigeria and Zambia. The institutionalization of regular multiparty elections in the African political landscape is evidence of the progress that has been made towards democratic consolidation on the continent. However, only four of the 2011 elections brought about a change of regime and many were marred by violence and allegations of election fraud. In Nigeria, post-election violence followed the victory of the Christian President Goodluck Jonathan over his Muslim rival Alhaji Muhammadu Buhari. In Zambia, violence also erupted following accusations of vote-rigging against the two leading contenders, the incumbent President Rupiah Banda and the opposition leader Michael Sata. The persistence of election fraud and ethno-religious violence in Africa threatens to undermine the gains made over the past decades towards establishing sustainable democratic institutions.

Significantly, three of the candidates who contested the presidential elections in Nigeria and Zambia were Pentecostals. Historically, Pentecostals have a reputation for having an “other-worldly” spirituality which eschews political engagement in favour of getting people “saved” before the return of Christ (Dempster 1993:59; Miller & Yamamori 2007:213; Petersen 1996:229). However, a more nuanced assessment shows a diversity of Pentecostal political postures, ranging from the apolitical to the more politically engaged. In between there are ways in which they are indirectly political, adopting strategies that are more implicit or covert (Yong 2010). In the case of Africa, an historical perspective is important, which takes account of changing socio-political contexts and shifting relationships between church and state. In a recent study, Terence Ranger (2008a:8–9) divides Africa’s democratic history into three “revolutionary” phases. The first involved the anti-colonial struggle that brought independence. In most countries this was completed by the 1960s. The second, occurring during the 1980s and early 1990s, involved the challenge of one-party states and military rule. The third “democratic revolution” involves the struggle for sustainable democracy: “the struggle against presidential third termism; the struggle for incorrupt ‘transparency’; the struggle not only to develop
electoral institutions but also to achieve a democratic culture and practice.” The role of the churches was different during these three transition periods. According to Paul Gifford (1995:5), the mainline churches have generally opposed Africa's dictators, while “the newer evangelicals and Pentecostal churches” have provided support for pragmatic reasons. However, Ranger (2008a:15) suggests that Pentecostals are playing a more central role in the struggle for sustainable democracy.

This chapter examines Pentecostal contributions to the second and third “democratic revolutions” and the influence of political culture and changing church-state relations on Pentecostal political theology and practice. The choice of Nigeria and Zambia as case studies enables an exploration of Pentecostals and politics in two regions of Africa. In both countries, Pentecostal political engagement has been closely entwined with national political history. As Ogbu Kalu (2008:187) notes, “Pentecostal political theology and practice reflect its responses to African political cultures.” Thus, the chapter pays close attention to the political trajectories followed by both countries since gaining independence. While there are similarities between Nigeria and Zambia, there are also significant differences in the way that Pentecostals have negotiated the political terrain. The chapter begins with an historical overview of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and Zambia. It then examines the shift to Pentecostal political engagement during the second “democratic revolution” and Pentecostal contributions to democratic transition in the two countries. Finally, it explores Pentecostal political theology and practice following the return to plural politics. While there is a strong Charismatic sector in the mainline churches, the chapter focuses on the political engagement of Pentecostal denominations and churches.1

2 Pentecostalism in Nigeria and Zambia

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation with an estimated 167 million people in 2011, according to the National Population Commission of Nigeria.2 It also

---

1 Part of the research for this chapter was conducted under the auspices of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Research Initiative, sponsored by the Center for Religion and Civic Culture (University of Southern California) and the John Templeton Foundation. See http://www.usc.edu/prci.

2 http://www.population.gov.ng/index.php/84-news/latest/106-nigeria-over-167-million-population-implications-and-challenges (accessed August 8, 2013). This figure is a projection from the last national census (2006), when the estimated population was 140 million.