

Black Continent

Turkson-Ambongo: two cardinals, two visions for Africa

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Since the end of European colonization, African leaders — whether elected or in power through coups — have used the same tricks to secure and maintain popular consent despite broken promises, failures, and persistent problems. One of these tricks

is to divert dissent and discontent onto others. They have accused minorities of foreign origin, such as Asians in Uganda, as well as certain ethnic groups, such as the Tutsis in Rwanda. Virtually all of them have focused primarily on blaming the West for the past—the transatlantic slave trade and European colonization—and the present—the neocolonial system of exploitation and climate change.

They continue to do so. Some still use expressions and slogans learned from Marxist propaganda during the Cold War.

"How is it possible that a continent so rich in resources is now so poor?" This rhetorical question comes from Ibrahim Traoré, the military leader who seized power in Burkina Faso in two coups in 2022. He recently announced his intention to remain president for the next five years for the good of the people, of course. According to Traoré, poverty is the result of centuries of foreign domination, denied dignity, and exploitation. The solution, he says, is to revolt against Western imperialism. "We must break the chains, rebel against our oppressors, and drive out those who exploit and humiliate the entire continent once and for all," he says. Then, he says, Africa will be reborn stronger and prouder than ever and will be able to liberate all of humanity.

Once upon a time, such appeals inflamed the crowds. They still work, and there are those who continue to absolve their leaders because they are convinced that all the continent's problems stem from new forms of foreign domination after centuries of oppression. However, many Africans, especially young people, no longer believe this. In Kenya, for example, young people of Generation Z have been organizing demonstrations against corruption for over a year. They rightly identify corruption as the root cause of all problems and are demanding accountability from the head of state and the government. In Togo, where the same family has ruled since 1967—first Gnassingbé Eyadéma, then his son Faure Gnassingbé—young people have been marching through the streets of the capital, Lomé, since June. They are protesting not some remote entity but the despotic family that has held the country in its grip for nearly 60 years.

The Catholic Church often reminds those in positions of power of their duties. Africa is the continent with the fastest-growing Catholic population, in terms of both the number of faithful and vocations. It is estimated that there are currently 230 million Catholics. The Catholic Church's positions and example play an important role in many of the continent's 54 countries.

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson must have been aware of this when he

delivered a memorable speech on July 1, Ghana's first National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving. Once held up as an example of democracy and good governance, Ghana has experienced a severe economic crisis for years. This crisis is reflected in the population's conditions and raises fears for the future. Recognizing the challenges his fellow citizens face, Cardinal Turkson encouraged them to persevere and affirmed the need for a radical change toward "virtuous thinking" that transcends personal gain and selfishness. He warned that without this change, "greed will continue to rule our country, and if that is the case, we will all suffer the negative consequences."

He did not blame climate change or the interests of foreign powers. "We in Ghana live in a land rich in resources and wealth, for which we prayed and thanked God again this morning. This land's wealth, with all that it contains, belongs to Ghanaians. It must therefore serve our common needs and goals," he said. Then, addressing the issue head-on, he denounced the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, which is the result of the unbridled greed dominating the country. He spoke of the resulting environmental degradation and its already tangible effects: "Our rivers no longer produce shrimp and prawns. Our religious hospital in the center of the country reports an increase in children born with malformations due to exposure to cyanide and mercury."

Cardinal Turkson then reminded his compatriots, especially the "people of God in Ghana," that the country's transformation depends not only on its leaders but also on the conscience and character of every citizen. "Change depends on us. This task cannot be left to a president, no matter how good his intentions may be."

Just two days later, on July 3, Monsignor John Baptist Attakruh, the bishop of the Sokondi-Takoradi diocese in Ghana, gave a lecture at the Cathedral of Our Lady Star of the Sea. During the lecture, he spoke at length about global warming, climate change, and the especially severe impact on the poor. On July 1, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu presented a joint document of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), of which he is president. The document is entitled "*A Call for Climate Justice and the Common Home: Ecological Conversion, Transformation, and Resistance to False Solutions.*" The document was drafted in anticipation of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP30), scheduled for November 10–21. It is possible that other conferences and homilies in other countries will follow suit.

Speaking on behalf of the churches on the African continent, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu denounced the injustices suffered by the second-largest and most populous continent, which has been marked by centuries of extractive exploitation and

slavery. He condemned the rush to exploit African mineral resources and said it was at the "root of the proliferation of armed groups" on the continent. He called for "an economy that is not based on the sacrifice of African peoples to enrich others." The SECAM president explained to the media that the joint document reaffirms the Church's commitment to climate justice and is a call to action for nations and governments.