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Liberian Baptists against "Christian nation" label

Evangelical Focus (12.04.2015) <http://wwrn.org/articles/44377/> - Baptist leaders in Liberia have spoken against a proposed constitutional amendment declaring the West African republic a Christian state. The proposal was adopted during a five-day conference (March 29-April 2) of Liberia's Constitution Review Committee, and was promoted by a clergy-led group, the Liberia Restoration to Christian Heritage Committee, which counted with 700,000 signatures in its support. They recommended 19 constitutional changes. The most controversial, approved by around 400 delegates, according to media reports, would declare Liberia a "Christian nation." It will be submitted to the country's president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, before passing on to the national legislature for approval, and being put to a referendum about a year later. A representative of the Christian community at the conference called on all delegates to vote for the proposition because the country was "built on Christian principles." When the result of the vote was announced, the meeting hall went noisy with Christians shouting and singing hymns, while members of the Muslim faith walked out in anger.

Baptist Church Opposition

However, the proposal has been denounced by the leaders of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention, the nation's oldest Christian denomination, who say that it is inconsistent with Liberia's constitution and plural nature. A statement signed by its president Olu Menjay said that Liberian Baptists have "no room for sectarian arrogance within the country's diverse Christian persuasions and in a progressively more pluralistic world where Liberia is for all persons regardless of faith persuasion or affiliation". The statement emphasised the importance of religious freedom: "A nerve center of our denominational sensibility as Christians called Baptist is not merely religious toleration, but religious liberty, not merely sufferance, but freedom not just for us, but for all people. As such, we affirm our stance against making Liberia a Christian nation." It stated that Baptists "have persistently refused to bend their own necks under the yoke of suppression," and the same time "have meticulously withheld our hand and heart from placing such yokes up others." "We do not support any legislated domination of any group or individual, because we strongly are driven by the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 7:12 to 'treat others as you want them to treat you.' This is what the Laws and the Prophets are all about", the statement concluded.

Other faiths reactions

Members of other faiths have also protested the decision: "Liberia is not for Christians, Liberia is not for Muslims, Liberia is for everybody. We do not want Liberia to be for only one group of people," protest leader Hajah Swaray told the Anadolu news agency. "It would not be fair to see one group marginalised. We have 16 tribes in Liberia. Some people are Muslims, while others are Bahai or embrace traditional religions. Let's just live as we are", he added. The National Muslim Students Association of Liberia also denounced through a statement issued and signed by 70 representatives. They declared that if it passes, territories that are predominantly Muslim could secede. The influential Archbishop Lewis Zeiglier of Monrovia expressed his opposition to the move too.

Liberation Constitution

About 85 percent of Liberia population is Christian; it was founded as a colony for freed American slaves. Many of the emigrants were Christians too. Liberia's Declaration of Independence and 1847 constitution were both signed in Monrovia at Providence Baptist Church, built in 1822, and the country's oldest church. The original constitution recognised God's goodness that "grants to us the blessings of the Christian religion", while affirming the right of all people to "worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences." "No sect of Christians shall have exclusive privileges or preference over any other sect, but all shall be alike tolerated," the 1847 document said. That constitution remained in effect until 1980, when a military coup ended the presidency of William Tolbert, a Baptist minister active in leadership of the Baptist World Alliance, setting up a secular state followed by civil war. A new constitution adopted in 1986 affirmed that "all power is inherent in the people." The article that the Liberia Restoration to Christian Heritage Committee wanted to change, says: "No religious denomination or sect shall have any exclusive privilege or preference over any other, but all shall be treated alike. Consistent with the principle of separation of religion and state, the Republic shall establish no state religion."
