

pg 4, Doc. 28-02-94 4073 C.P.K

Kuria, the CPK and two controversial bishoprics

By DANIEL KAMANGA

When the principal of the Maseno Bible College, the Rev Simon Oketch was elected the new bishop of the Maseno North Diocese of the Church of the Province of Kenya (CPK), his supporters went wild with jubilation.

What the new bishop-elect did not know is that his election would spark off bitter acrimony between the diocese and the head of the church in Kenya, Archbishop Manasses Kuria.

The Rev Oketch was elected on November 13 last year after trouncing three other contestants. The CPK provincial chancellor, Mr Paul Kihara Waweru, supervised the election at the Christ Church in Kakamega.

After the church ratified the Rev Oketch's election, it was agreed that Archbishop Kuria would enthrone the new bishop on November 28; but two days before the enthronement, the House of Bishops made a curious about-turn; it caught everybody unawares.

The Rev Oketch had left Kakamega for Nairobi several days earlier to attend a meeting of the House of Bishops. Back in his diocese, Christians had identified the chicken to be slaughtered. Some had brought cows, others goats. "We were planning a big, big feast," a supporter of the Rev. Oketch says. "But it was not to be".

At the House of Bishops' meeting, the Rev Oketch was informed that the church had discovered he was under-age. The church's constitution requires one to be 40 years of age in order to vie for bishopric.

The Rev Oketch contested this "new finding" and immediately went back to his diocese to inform his flock of the House of Bishops' position as well as arm himself with evidence that indeed he was of the right age when he vied for bishopric.

The soft spoken bishop-elect recently told the *Nation* that he is not bitter about the happenings in diocese. "We do not want confrontation, we are Christians and we believe in seeking peaceful solutions to problems". Indeed, the Rev Oketch told the Press soon after his election in November last year that he would work for peace and unity.

Today, he is still firm on the ideals he holds dear. He declined to draw a parallel between his trials and tribulations and those of the Kajiado Diocese bishop-elect, the Rev Bernard Njoroge. The latter had to seek court arbitration after the House of Bishops reversed a decision to enthrone



Kuria: Can he retire with honour?



Njoroge: Resign from what position?

him. Despite several clear wins against the church, the Rev Njoroge is still battling it out in church.

"Sometimes I wonder whether I should forget about this fight, but I cannot give up because I did not elect myself," the Rev Njoroge says. "I do not mind swallowing my pride, but I do not belong to myself. Christians in Kajiado Diocese would never forgive me if I gave up".

Like Rev Njoroge, the church has tried to prevail upon the Rev Oketch to resign. "But what do I resign from? I have not been enthroned as bishop. I cannot do that," the Maseno North Diocese bishop-elect says.

The two dioceses may be miles apart, but the problems they are facing could ignite a dramatic revolution in the CPK as it celebrates its 150 years in Kenya this year.

The celebrations and the retirement of Archbishop Kuria come at a time when the church faces pockets of problems; most of them linked to what observers see as autocratic administration by the House of Bishops. The Kajiado and Maseno North dioceses are unique in that they involve a reversal of the House of Bishop's decision to enthrone duly elected bishops.

The two dioceses have managed to capture the media's interest because of the growing militancy of the Christians involved. In Kajiado, the Rev Njoroge swears that every time he is visiting his flock, "the police, the Special Branch are following me". Recently, police arrested the principal of a theological college the Rev Njoroge had opened; but the Rev Samuel Kimuhu was acquitted by a court on a charge of "failing to obey a lawful order

from Archbishop Kuria".

At Maseno North Diocese, Christians have vowed to have nothing to do with an acting bishop, Archbishop Kuria plans to send there. The acting bishop (a newly elected bishop who has not yet been enthroned) is expected to take charge, pending a decision on the Rev Oketch.

However, a delegation from the diocese met Archbishop Kuria last week and warned him that "the diocese will not accept anybody imposed on them". The Archbishop promised he would withhold the decision to send a care-taker bishop after the Christians told him that he (the care-taker bishop) risked death "if he dares enter our diocese".

Although alot of water has passed under the bridge, the real issues for the Kajiado and the Maseno North dioceses remain. The most pertinent among them is that both the Rev Oketch and the Rev Njoroge had been duly elected as bishops of their respective dioceses.

In both cases, charges were brought against them after Archbishop Kuria agreed to enthrone them. Again, in both cases, the two managed to defend themselves against the accusations. Some of the charges cannot be put in print, they are as wild as they are malicious.

It is appears obvious that the CPK needs to take a hard look at the manner in which it has handled the two dioceses. The two bishop-elect had been elected after a rigorous procedure.

The CPK constitution requires that those vying for bishopric get clearance from their parishes and dioceses. Their names are then sent to the House of Bishops where there are dispatched to all CPK churches in the country.

Here, their names are read out to Christians so that, if there is any reason why they should not view for the bishopric, the House of Bishops is informed. The Rev Oketch and the Rev Njoroge passed the test.

They may have erred after election, but the CPK constitution requires that they be enthroned and then, if necessary, a court convened to try them. This court can, if it finds them guilty, dethrone or even defrock them.

On analysing the happenings in Kajiado and Maseno North Diocese, one cannot rule out the role of power politics in the CPK, especially against the background of Archbishop Kuria's pending retirement.

One theory is that the Archbishop wants to ensure the election of bishops who will provide continuity to his work. While this may be well intended, one has to realise that the politics of the day have changed and Christians are as political as anyone else.

The church has been accused of being passive in matters that affect the country. Indeed, there have been accusations that the church has been infiltrated by the political establishment.

In the run-up to the multi-party elections of December 1992, the Government was scared that they church would use its country-wide network to support certain candidates. Although this may have happened in isolated cases, there was no unified support for any individual candidate or political party.

Many Christians feel that the entry of young and non-conformist bishops such as the Rev Oketch and the Rev Njoroge could challenge the status quo at the House of Bishops.

The two could even galvanise the CPK church into a formidable force against alleged malpractices by the State. Little wonder politicians in Kajiado claimed that the enthronement of Rev Njoroge would spark off tribal clashes between the Kikuyu and the Maasai.

As Archbishop Kuria retires from the CPK, it will be interesting to see how he resolves the Kajiado and Maseno North Diocese problems. It is a paradox that the Archbishop, who took over CPK's helm in controversial circumstances, now faces the challenge of resigning with honour.

It would be unkind not to recognise the able manner in which Archbishop Kuria has steered the church, especially during difficult but the two dioceses threaten to mar his good work with hate and blind anger.