

Nigeria Must Choose Peace Over Graves

In 1999, Nigeria stood at the edge of something new. After years of military rule, we dared to believe that votes could speak louder than guns. By 2003, that belief was already bleeding. The democracy was still nascent, fragile, like a child learning to walk, and everywhere people fell. Politicians were cut down. Aspiring ones never got the chance to serve. Families buried sons and daughters who only wanted to campaign, to contest, to represent. The excitement of a new republic was mixed with fear in the streets, with whispers that to speak up or to run for office could cost you your life. I remember how the newspapers read then. Name after name. Constituency after constituency. It wasn't war in the formal sense, but it felt like it. And the worst part was how quickly we normalized it. As if losing lives to politics was just part of the process. Today, groups like the Advocacy Network on Religious and Cultural Coexistence, ANORACC, are asking us to stop and look at what we've become. They are not asking for grand speeches. They are asking for something simpler and harder: that Nigeria be peaceful, and that lives should not be wasted. ANORACC has been working quietly in communities where religion and culture are often used as wedges instead of bridges. Their message echoes what other faith leaders across the country have been saying in recent peace workshops: that in a time of increasing polarization, gatherings for dialogue are "a beacon of hope". The Christian Association of Nigeria has warned that while religion can be misused as a tool for division, it can also be "a powerful force for unity, healing, justice, and reconciliation". That is the heart of what ANORACC pushes every day — that our differences in faith, in tradition, in party, should not become death sentences. They remind us that the roots of conflict in Nigeria are rarely just about religion. More often it is about exclusion, about resources, about grazing rights and land and who gets to eat. About young people with no jobs who are handed a machete and told their neighbor is the enemy. About politicians who, even in 1999 and 2003, saw violence as a campaign strategy and walked away while mothers cried.

The pain of those years has not left us. A Muslim participant in one peace initiative in Wukari once stood up

and said through tears, "I said and did things in anger and pain that I am now sorry for. Now I must forgive and work for peace with my Christian brothers and sisters". That is the kind of honesty ANORACC is calling for nationwide. Not denial. Not revenge. A choice to stop the cycle. In 2022, CAN and the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs signed a pact ahead of elections, agreeing that Muslims and Christians must "shun violence, embrace dialogue and remain committed to building resilient communities that are free from fear". They declared that "the essential freedom and dignity of every person must be respected and protected" regardless of ethnicity or region. ANORACC is doing the same work at the grassroots — in markets, in schools, in local government meetings — telling people that to protect someone of a different belief is still to protect your own humanity. We cannot bring back those killed in 1999 and 2003. We cannot undo the funerals that happened in the name of democracy. But we can decide that it will not happen again. We can decide that an election will not be a season of mourning. ANORACC's appeal is emotional because it has to be. It asks leaders to preach peace from the pulpit and the podium. It asks us to confront intolerance where it emerges and to become champions of dialogue in our communities. It asks the government to integrate traditional and religious leaders into peace structures, because those are the people who are trusted when the police sirens are too far away. Every single life matter, regardless of faith.

That is not a slogan. It is a debt we owe to the men and women who died trying to build this democracy. To the aspirant who never made it to the ballot. To the voter who was shot for wearing the wrong party color. Nigeria is bigger than our divisions. We have lived together peacefully before, and as peace advocate Professor Usman Yusuf said, "What some people want to bring among us is division. We will not sit with our arms folded and just watch". Let 1999 and 2003 be the last time we count our politicians among the casualties. Let ANORACC's work remind us that peace is not the absence of disagreement. It is the presence of respect. It is choosing, every election season, that no ambition is worth a grave. Nigeria deserves that. Our children deserve that. And the dead deserve that we finally learn. Right now, mothers are choosing between food and medicine. Children are going to bed hungry. And we can't just look away.

