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Priestly politics

Can the Church save democracy in Congo?

By any measure, the church in the middle-class neighbourhood of Katindo 2 in the eastern city of Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, was not much to look at. The mud floor was barely concealed by sheets of tarpaulin; the stage was a raised platform of stone blocks with a spill of concrete. Wood frames were cut into the corrugated metal walls to allow sunlight to slip in.

But what the church lacked in structure it made up in spirit. Singers strode onto the stage and their voices swelled louder and louder to a euphoric crescendo. Coiffed congregants in their Sunday best joined in, eyes squeezed shut in song and prayer.

Much like Europe in the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church has an overpowering influence today in the daily life of Congolese, who comprise the largest Catholic population in Africa. From running schools to providing health facilities, churches offer a flicker of hope in the midst of poverty and instability in Congo. In June, Church officials released the most detailed report to date on violence in the Kasai region, holding security forces and a militia responsible for the deaths of at least 3383 people since October.

In post-independence Congo, which has never witnessed a peaceful transfer of power, the Church has demonstrated a stake in the struggle for democracy, whether it's by overseeing a fragile agreement that called for elections that are overdue or pushing for the return of a popular opposition leader who's been in exile. And with good reason: in a country first brutalised by the Belgians and then dominated by local dictators, few institutions have endured, if they existed in the first place.

The Catholic Church is one of the only institutions still trusted by Congolese. NGOs are seen as self-serving; the UN peacekeeping mission as woefully incompetent. One 2014 study in the restive region of North Kivu found that the Church as an institution had an 82 per cent favourability rating, far higher than ubiquitous international humanitarian organisations (56 per cent) and the gargantuan UN

mission (21 per cent). Could the Church then be the saviour of democracy in Congo?

Bishops have the roles of judge, peacekeeper and political dealmaker as the political crisis in Congo has dragged on. After the African Union's failed bid to broker talks between President Joseph Kabila – who was due to step down last December – and a coalition of opposition parties last year, it was a conference of bishops known as CENCO that stepped up to the task. It mediated an agreement that called for a vote before the end of 2017, one in which Kabila wasn't allowed to stand for a third term. It even offered to independently review cases against Kabila's political opponents. These moves to help resolve the crisis reflect just how intertwined the Catholic Church, an unelected institution that works behind closed doors, is in the struggle for democracy in Congo, and the future of the country. But are its hands still tied?

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A political impasse since the start of the year prompted even the peace-making bishops to bow out of negotiations in March.

'The lack of sincere political will and the inability of political and social actors to find a compromise have prevented an agreement from being reached,' said Archbishop Marcel Utembi Tapa of Kisangani, the president of CENCO, adding that the Church could not 'mediate endlessly'.

A poll conducted by Congo Research Group and the Bureau d'Études de Recherches et Consulting International found that most people didn't fault the bishops for failing to implement the agreement. Less than a fifth of respondents held the Church responsible; 72 per cent blamed the presidential majority and 65 per cent attributed it to Kabila.

Even as people retain faith in the Church, the political situation has further deteriorated. Last month, the country's electoral commission said a vote to replace Kabila will probably not be possible this year, violating the CENCO-mediated deal.

Politics in the pews

Although many churches don't preach about politics, it's hard to miss signs of the electoral crisis.

In the Katindo 2 church, a protestant outfit, Constance Vindu, wears a grey dress bearing the words 'National Independent Electoral Commission' in French. The fabric also contained more explicit messages: 'I have my new voting card. I will vote at the registration centre.'

Vindu, who works in the administration of the provincial government of North Kivu, says a friend gave her the outfit but she believes in its exhortation. 'It's necessary to vote. Without elections, nothing will ever work.'

Joyeuse Lumoo, one of the church singers, is clear where her loyalties lie. 'I trust the Church more than politicians because politicians have been lying to us.'

Political instability has in part fuelled economic turmoil – inflation is at 50 per cent and the value of the Congolese franc has depreciated 30 per cent – and it's palpable on the streets.

The owner of one 'malewa' – a type of cheap, unpretentious restaurant – in Goma, Stella Matuting, picks at her food with fingers tipped in red polish and complains about the rising prices. Matuting, who has an 8-year-old daughter and a 5-year-old son, sweeps her hand at a table bedecked with beer bottle, and plates of foufou and cassava leaves. 'There's no meat in what I'm eating.'

A patron sitting next to her, Dieudonne Baseme, says he's a regular as he works at the butcher shop next door. He used to charge about $4 for a kilogram of meat but now sells the same amount for $5.

'I used to slaughter 10 goats a day. Now I slaughter only three because people don't have any money,' he says.

Targeted killings

In previous decades, the Church was one of the staunchest voices against the kleptocratic regime of Mobutu Sese Seko. Recognising this, in 1992 the administration of US president George H. W. Bush gave a high-level welcome to Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo of Zaire (now Congo) when he arrived in Washington for talks with top government officials.

Earlier that year, police had attacked a pro-democracy march organised by Congolese churches in capital Kinshasa. At least 32 people were killed.

Now, once again, advocacy appears to have made churches targets. In March, the Office of the UN commissioner for human rights reported an attack by some 30 militiamen on a parish church.

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Last month, gunmen kidnapped two Catholic priests – Charles Kipasa and Jean-Pierre Akilimali – from a parish in eastern Congo. Three other priests were abducted from the same area in 2012 and haven't yet been freed.

'Whenever violence spikes in Congo, so too do attacks on Christian targets' noted a report in Crux, a Catholic media outlet.

Despite the assaults, some critics see the Church less as a selfless saviour and more as a vestibule of corruption, with accusations of pastors demanding petty bribes. Fidel Bafilemba, a former Mai Mai rebel who now coordinates a watchdog for the mineral trade, argues the Church has legitimised Kabila's government by mediating talks between the opposition coalition and the ruling party.

Political analysts say that CENCO is keen to compromise with the government as it doesn't want to be blamed for the accompanying violence escalating in the country.

Last year, Congo signed a bilateral treaty with the Vatican that will 'return property confiscated under Mobutu, give the Church customs exemptions and shield the Church from government,' according to a Reuters report. The government move appeared to be aimed at keeping peace with the bishops.

For the moment though, the Catholic Church still appears to be one of Congo's best shots at rallying for democracy. This month, their representatives were among civil society leaders who launched a manifesto to return constitutional order to Congo. They are also a quiet source of comfort to those fighting for rights in the country.

Rebecca Kabuo, an activist with the youth movement Lucha, says the Catholic Church feeds inmates at a women's prison with rice, beans, potatoes, plantains – and prayer.

The Church also offers counselling for political prisoners, says her friend Ghislain Muhiwa. 'They have revitalised our morale.'

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