

The moral authority of Congolese churches

Amid a chaotic political situation in the DRC, churches are fighting for human rights.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue



Worshippers at a church in Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo. [Some rights reserved](#) by [babasteve](#).

Through the years, Western media have sporadically covered the affairs of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), usually in a near-apocalyptic context of war, tyranny, disease, and disaster. American Christians are largely unaware that this country is home to one of the world's largest populations of both Catholics and Protestants and that these numbers are increasingly mightily. Those emerging churches are being forged in harsh conditions of persecution, and of heroic

resistance.

That numerical growth is largely a product of demography—the fact of having one of the world’s youngest and most fertile populations. A country that had just 12 million people in 1950 has 85 million today, and that number could approach 200 million by 2050. The population surge has occurred despite huge losses to AIDS and perhaps 5 million deaths in the horrific wars that raged between 1996 and 2003. Assuming the present distribution of religious loyalties remains true, by 2050 the country will have 100 million Roman Catholics and 60 million or so other Christians.

The DRC is one of the most poorly governed nations on the planet. Joseph Mobutu Sese Seko ruled the country in totalitarian fashion from 1965 to 1997, using his office as a mechanism to amass private wealth running into billions of dollars. He was briefly succeeded by Marxist revolutionary Laurent Kabila, who was assassinated in 2001. Kabila was in turn followed by his son Joseph Kabila, who ruled through 2018.

Total corruption at the national level echoes through the system, reaching all levels of bureaucracy and policing. Police and civil servants rarely receive their salaries, and when they protested, Joseph Kabila had a simple piece of advice: “You’re at home—just sort it out yourselves.” In other words, extract the money you need from the public, through extortion and by demanding bribes. Popular respect for law or government is close to nonexistent.

By default, in such dreadful conditions, Congolese churches—especially Roman Catholic ones—have emerged as the primary sources of authority, morality, and stability. In everyday life, Catholic churches have long been the principal suppliers of essential services of education and social welfare, but the churches acquire a special significance in times of crisis (and when has the Congo not been in crisis?).

During the Mobutu years, Catholic leaders spoke out bravely against the regime, at risk of their lives. In 1996, as the region’s wars were escalating, Bukavu’s Archbishop Christophe Munzehirwa was martyred while trying to protect his flock from massacre and rape. (He is currently a candidate for beatification.) As in the worst years of the European Dark Ages, the question constantly arises: If not in the church, where else can ordinary people find succor and sanctuary?

The DRC’s Christian leaders have become outspoken defenders of human rights. In 2016, Joseph Kabila’s unilateral decision to extend his elected term as president

sparked pro-democracy protests, mainly led by Catholic clergy. Protests segued directly from religious services, as legions of mass-goers surged out into the streets, singing hymns as they followed robed clergy. The most active centers of anti-Kabila militancy were Kinshasa's parish churches and the cathedral itself.

Besides engaging in street activism, Catholic churches regularly rang their bells to remind the regime that its time was up. That in turn inspired a cacophony of whistles, pan banging, and horn honking by enthusiastic lay supporters. Throughout the crisis, the de facto leader of the democratic opposition nationwide was Kinshasa's Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo, who has now been succeeded as archbishop by the equally determined Fridolin Ambongo Besungu.

Protesters remained undaunted despite the regime's efforts to suppress them by means of shootings and beatings and the arrest of priests. The church has combated antichurch propaganda campaigns launched by regime followers, who seek to demonize and intimidate the leading prelates. In such a propaganda war, the Catholic Church enjoys vast advantages in its own networks of preaching and information distribution. At the height of the struggle over the past two years, Catholics were joined by evangelical Christians as well as Muslims. It is not that the country lacks a secular sphere but rather that the churches (and mosques) have an overwhelming claim to credibility and popular respect.

Joseph Kabila has now renounced office, but it remains unclear whether he will continue to govern behind the scenes.

We might imagine a time in a few decades when the DRC's Catholic Church becomes a force in wider Christian affairs, both in Africa and in the world. In its pronouncements, that church will rely on the memory of so many martyrs and confessors, especially figures like Archbishop Munzihirwa—who by then will presumably be St. Christophe—and it will recall its long record of defying tyrants. Tested so often in the fire, those near-future churches are going to be indomitably tough institutions.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Congolese churches defy tyranny."