

The Catholic Church in the DRC

A Neutral Arbiter or at the Heart of Protests?





The [Congo Research Group \(CRG\)](#) was founded in 2015 to promote rigorous, independent research into the violence that affects millions of Congolese. This requires a broad approach. For us, the roots of this violence can be found in a history of predatory governance that dates back to the colonial period and that connects the hillsides of the Kivus with political intrigue and corruption in Kinshasa, as well as in the capitals of Europe, China, and North America. Today, CRG's research aims to explain the complicated interplay among politics, violence, and political economy in the Congo to a wide audience.

[**Ebuteli**](#) is a Congolese research institute and partner of the Congo Research Group. Our analyses focus on politics, governance and violence. Ebuteli's mission is to promote, through rigorous research, an informed debate to find solutions to the challenges the DRC is facing. In an environment that is often clouded by easily spread rumors, we hope that our work will contribute to progress on the multiple challenges the Congo faces.



This report was made possible thanks to funding from the European Union's Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights and the Swedish International Development Agency.

Cover photo: The Bishop of the diocese of Butembo-Beni during a celebration in the territory of Beni. ©Wartoy



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About the “Mukalenga wa Bantu” Series

On October 3rd, the [Congo Research Group \(CRG\)](#) and its research partner Ebuteli are launching a series of reports on democracy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This project will focus on structures of mobilization as a means of scrutinizing conduits of accountability in the country.

Congolese overwhelmingly believe in electing their leaders—in our recent poll with BERCI, 77% said this was the best form of governing; very few would like to return to the days of single-party or military rule. And yet, most Congolese are not happy with what democracy has provided. Only 37,5% express some degree of trust in the central government; that same figure is 32% for the national assembly.

What explains this gap between democracy’s popularity and dissatisfaction with the government and elected officials? There are many factors that contribute to the country’s democratic weaknesses. Much of the focus has been on the electoral process itself—the electoral commission, the court system, and allegations of vote rigging. Indeed, CRG and Ebuteli will soon be publishing such an analysis in preparation for the upcoming 2023 polls. Other analyses have highlighted the need for civic education and the dysfunctions of the media ecosystem in the Congo.

This series of reports takes a different approach, focusing on the various channels of popular mobilization in the country that influence the government’s behavior. The title of this series—“*Mukalenga wa bantu, bantu wa mukalenga*” (the leader exists thanks to the people, and vice versa)—a saying from Kasaï, indicates the need for leaders to be accountable to the people, while at the same time citizens have a duty to mobilize and make themselves heard.

Political parties themselves are the most obvious example of this kind of structure—we will soon be publishing two reports in this series, on the *Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social* (UDPS) and the *Parti du peuple pour la reconstruction et la démocratie* (PPRD), the two most important parties to arise since democratization began in 1990. The argument here is clear: the degree to which political parties can forge internal mechanisms of accountability and a coherent ideology will influence how they govern.

Our first report will examine the role of the Catholic Church in the country’s democracy, while another will analyze the state of civil society in this current democratic moment. The Congo is a plural society, and these kinds of institutions—and we will highlight their strengths and flaws—have contributed to the vitality of its democracy: protestors have ensured term limits had to be respected, and a majority of parliamentarians are not reelected when citizens go to the polls.



Glossary of Acronyms

CALCC	<i>Conseil de l'apostolat des laïcs du Congo</i>
CECD	<i>Commission épiscopale Caritas-Développement</i>
CENCO	<i>Conférence épiscopale nationale du Congo</i>
CENI	<i>Commission électorale nationale indépendante</i>
CEPAS	<i>Centre d'études pour l'action sociale</i>
CERN	<i>Commission épiscopale pour les ressources naturelles</i>
CEVB	<i>Communautés ecclésiales vivantes de base</i>
CLC	<i>Comité laïc de coordination</i>
CNS	<i>Conférence nationale souveraine</i>
CRG	Congo Research Group
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
MPR	<i>Mouvement populaire pour la révolution</i>
MSR	<i>Mouvement social pour le renouveau</i>



Executive Summary

The Catholic Church has had an enormous impact on the politics and society of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) since colonial times. Today, it remains an important actor in the Congolese political sphere, playing a central role in the protests related to the electoral process that rocked the nation between 2015 and 2018. During this period, the church was able to mobilize tens of thousands of protesters in the streets on numerous occasions, providing the leadership and moral guidance for these rallies. More than probably any other institution, in recent years the Catholic Church has provided a moral and political challenge to the ruling elites, and has helped to reinvigorate a political opposition weakened by the tactics of patronage and co-optation.

In this first in a series of reports by the Congo Research Group (CRG) and Ebuteli on mobilization structures in Congolese politics—ranging from political parties to soccer clubs—we analyze the importance of the Catholic Church, in particular the *Conférence épiscopale nationale du Congo* (CENCO) and the *Comité laïc de coordination* (CLC), in Congolese democracy.

There is no doubt that between 1990 and 2018, the Church has been able to articulate a strong critique of governance by the ruling elites and has been able to mobilize its faithful and other segments of the population, particularly when it comes to issues concerning elections. We argue here, however, that this political activism—at least when it comes to mobilizing its followers in the streets—has focused relatively narrowly on political rights. Although security, poverty and public services are often mentioned in the bishops' speeches and letters, the mobilization of their followers has been focused on holding democratic, credible and transparent elections. This represents a missed opportunity. The weakness of the Congolese democratic system goes beyond just electoral fraud. Once in power, elected officials rarely deploy a programmatic vision of progress for which voters can hold them accountable. The Catholic Church, especially with its focus on social justice and poverty, has the potential to mobilize the electorate and generate discussion around these political priorities in the Congo, something that NGOs have had difficulty doing outside of a narrow elite.

In addition, despite its courageous activism for democracy, the church has its own internal democratic challenges. This is expressed on two levels. First, the decentralization of the church means that different bishops sometimes

take contradictory positions—this was on clear display during the 2015–2018 protests, where some church leaders were much more supportive of Joseph Kabila's government than others. CENCO, which is supposed to provide a space for coordination and debate, has struggled to unite its bishops behind a common point of view.

The second challenge consists of accountability: church leaders are not elected by their parishioners and are only tangentially accountable to them. The bishops are appointed by the pope after a process involving other bishops and the papal nuncio. While the bishops are deeply influenced by the concerns of their congregations, CENCO's decision-making process is opaque and relatively unaccountable to the faithful. The drive for greater accountability, initiated by the Second Vatican Council, could be strengthened in the Congo by using synods, pastoral councils, and presbyteral councils.

With regard to the street protests, which have been essential to the democratic process, it is primarily the lay organizations—the *Comité laïc de coordination* (CLC) and the *Conseil de l'Apostolat des Laïcs du Congo* (CALCC)—that have been able to mobilize the faithful. The former organization is largely led by strong, charismatic individuals, with few internal structures or bylaws, and with a focus on the city of Kinshasa; the CALCC is more institutionalized and formally part of the church, but is not very active throughout the country. To strengthen accountability and also prevent political capture, these secular structures need to further encourage the use of internal direct democracy so that their members can participate and hold their leaders to account.

Part I: A Brief History of the Catholic Church and its Relationship to Congolese Politics

In 2018, following a wave of brutally repressed protests, President Joseph Kabila declared, "Jesus Christ never presided over an electoral commission. Let us render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and unto God what belongs to God. When you try to mix the two, it is dangerous." And yet, the Catholic Church has been a key player in Congolese politics since the country's inception. More recently, it has played an important role in the often turbulent population mobilizations that are an essential feature of the democratic process.



The Catholic Church has been present in the western part of what is now Congo since the 16th century, due to links between the Vatican and the Kongo kingdom, and in the rest of the country since at least the creation of the independent state of Congo in 1885. It was when the Belgian government took over the administration of the country in 1908 that the church became a key partner of the colonial government, receiving grants to run schools and health care. In the early days of the Belgian Congo, the majority of Westerners were Belgian Catholic missionaries; most of them were also colonial officials.¹ They had a dramatic impact on local societies, participating in the essentialization of identities through the cataloging of ethnic communities and the translation of the Bible into local languages, as well as the partial eradication of local religions and spiritualities. As the first Congolese cardinal, Joseph-Albert Malula, said, "for our people, the church was the state, and the state was the Church."²

The Church and the Independence Movement

The 1960s saw a dramatic reversal in the role of the Catholic Church. It went from being a partner of the government to a fierce opponent. This change began before independence, with the formation of a small group of Congolese intellectuals in Kinshasa, who in 1956 published the manifesto *Conscience africaine*, calling for the gradual emancipation of the Congo from Belgium. The manifesto, organized by Malula, then vicar of Christ the King parish in Léopoldville (Kinshasa), helped crystallize the nascent independence movement. Malula, along with other intellectuals, sought to distance the church from the state while strengthening its ties to the population. These tensions intensified dramatically after Mobutu came to power in 1965. At first, Malula, who had become the archbishop of Léopoldville, condoned the coup by declaring, "The church recognizes your authority, because authority comes from God. We will execute the laws you want to establish."³

However, relations between the new power and the church quickly deteriorated as Mobutu's authoritarian tendencies became evident. In 1971, in an effort to centralize power and crush any potential opposition, he nationalized the country's three universities, including the Catholic University of Lovanium (now the University of Kinshasa). At the same time, he tried to install branches of the youth wing of his *Mouvement populaire pour la révolution* (MPR) in Catholic seminaries. Then, in 1972, Mobutu issued a decree stating that "any priest who, at the time of the baptism of a Zairian national, gives him

a foreign-sounding name, will be punished by a prison sentence of six months to five years."⁴ This measure effectively banned Christian names in the country. Later, the government abolished the official Christmas holiday, banned religious education in schools and ordered that crucifixes and images of the pope be removed from public buildings. When Malula protested against these decisions and refused to implement them, he was forced into exile for three months in 1972 and his residence was turned into the headquarters of the MPR's youth wing. Throughout this period, the Catholic Church remained among the main sources of criticism of the regime. For example, in 1976 Mgr Eugène Kabanga, archbishop of Lubumbashi, published a pastoral letter denouncing a system under which, "Whoever holds a morsel of authority, or means of pressure, profits from it to impose on people and exploit them, especially in rural areas. All means are good to obtain money, or humiliate the human being."⁵

The mismanagement of the economy, combined with the OPEC oil crisis of 1973-74 and the collapse of copper prices, finally led Mobutu to change course. Although he was furious with the church, in the face of the state's financial crisis, he returned back to the bishops the management of the thousands of primary and secondary schools.

Despite its opposition to Mobutu, the Catholic Church had to reconcile its criticism with the need to maintain internal cohesion in the church, as well as its material interests in the country, including its many properties and its investments in education and health care. As a result, it did not take the lead in the pro-democracy movement. Rather, that impetus came from the political opposition—particularly the *Union pour la démocratie et le progrès social* (UDPS)—student organizations and Catholic lay groups.

The National Sovereign Conference and the Church

Under extreme international and domestic pressure, Mobutu opened the country up to multiparty democracy in April 1990, and finally agreed to organize a National Sovereign Conference (CNS) in 1991 to plan the transition to democracy and draft a new constitution. The Catholic Church played a crucial, but ambiguous, role in the CNS. Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, the archbishop of Kisangani and the head of the *Conférence épiscopale nationale du Congo* (CENCO) at the time, was appointed to lead the CNS, following the example of Catholic prelates who had



presided over similar exercises in Benin and the Republic of Congo. Although Monsengwo brought with him the legitimacy of the church, the decisions he made led many in the political opposition and civil society to criticize and reject him. For example, he blocked hearings on reports of political assassinations, political affairs and ill-gotten gains, apparently for fear of embarrassing Mobutu.⁶

It was at this time that the *Comité laïc de coordination* (CLC), a lay group of Catholics formed to protest the suspension of the CNS, was born. In a sense, its creation was the result of a confluence of national and international currents. As discussed below, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had called on church leaders to encourage, and to some extent delegate power to, secular organizations. As Julien Lukengu, one of the founders of the CLC, recalls, Pope John Paul II built on these resolutions. "It was during his time that things fell into place. He was in tune with both spiritual warfare and social action. He greatly inspired the CLC through Cardinal Malula, who is the father of the Church in Kinshasa."⁷

The composition of the group's core leadership reveals its diverse nature and critical mix of civil society leaders, church leaders, and political operatives:

- Pierre Lumbi, from South Kivu, founder of one of the first and most important NGOs in the country, *Solidarité paysanne*;
- François Kandolo, former student leader at the University of Kinshasa and founder of the development NGO *Centre de perfectionnement des techniques de développement* (Cepetede);
- Benjamin Buana Kabwe, journalist and writer, founder of one of the first human rights NGOs, the *Ligue zaïroise des droits de l'homme* (Lizadho);
- Marie-Thérèse Mulanga, a consecrated Catholic laywoman and founder of *Aide à l'enfance défavorisée* (AED);
- Marie Bapu, a consecrated laywoman from Kananga;
- Julien Lukengu, vice-president of a small political party, *Parti des démocrates nationalistes* (PDN), and a lay member of the church;
- José Mpundu, a Catholic priest, founder of the lay *Groupe Amos* and secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of CENCO; and
- Modeste Bahati Lukwebo, a native of South Kivu and the coordinator of civil society in Kinshasa in 1992.

Pierre Lumbi was perhaps the key figure in the CLC. After studying clinical psychology in France, he returned to Zaire and founded a development NGO called *Solidarité paysanne* in South Kivu in 1978. After the opening of political space in 1990, he moved to Kinshasa and was appointed minister in the short-lived government of Étienne Tshisekedi in September 1991. Given his stature as co-founder of the civil society movement in the country, he played a leading role in organizing the large civil society component of the CNS. He was also close to the Catholic clergy, particularly Bishop Tharcisse Tshibangu, who was auxiliary bishop of Kinshasa and responsible for the lay apostolate. This meant that he interacted frequently with the many lay organizations in the church.⁸

Among others, it was Lumbi who, in February 1992, when Mobutu closed the CNS, launched the initiative to organize demonstrations throughout the country, using the Church as a means of mobilization. The most memorable moment of Catholic opposition to Mobutu's regime was therefore not organized by the Church hierarchy.⁹ In fact, the archbishop of Kinshasa, Frédéric Etsou, reputedly close to Mobutu, had clearly indicated that he did not approve of the march.

The CLC core organized secret preparatory meetings, involving Protestant churches, civil society organizations, the *Association générale des étudiants de Lovanium* (AGEL), the *Centre de perfectionnement aux techniques de développement* (CEPETEDE), and other citizen movements that were already present. For example, the organizers called on the expertise of the *Groupe Amos*, an association of intellectual Catholic priests under the leadership of Father José Mpundu and Denis Kialuta, who had been trained in nonviolent activism.¹⁰

On Sunday, February 16, 1992, tens of thousands of worshippers left mass to join the "March of Christians" demanding the reopening of the CNS. The CLC was the main organizer of the demonstration, but it had the support of Bishop Tshibangu. Julien Lukengu, the co-founder of the CLC, remembers: "When the CLC wanted to organize this march, they shared the message with the archbishop of Kinshasa and the president of CENCO."¹¹ They then gave their support, asking the bishops to spread the word and encourage the faithful to join the CLC. It was probably the largest public demonstration against the Mobutu regime. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets throughout the country. It ended in bloodshed: in Kinshasa, security forces opened fire on the demonstrators, killing between 13 and 49 people.¹² But the initiative paid off: the ensuing outcry prompted Mobutu to reopen the CNS.



The role of the Catholic Church hierarchy in the conference was ambiguous, however. Tensions arose between the desire of the more radical parish priests and lay organizations for transformational reform and the more conciliatory senior clergy. Archbishop Monsengwo was a particularly controversial figure. As chair of the CNS, he negotiated an agreement between Tshisekedi, the main opponent, and Mobutu outside the national conference, causing an outcry from many delegates, and when Mobutu reneged on that agreement, Monsengwo was forced to close the CNS. For Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, a professor and delegate to the CNS, Monsengwo did not fight to defend the gains of the CNS. "[H]e showed his true colors by embracing the West's call for more negotiations" outside the framework of the National Sovereign Conference.¹³

The Catholic Church and the 2015-2018 Protests

The other moment when the Catholic Church interfered in the political field to such a degree—probably even more—was during the last years of the Kabila regime, around the electoral process between 2015-2018. The context was radically different. The country had become more democratic and the political space had opened up. Hundreds of NGOs and political parties were now operating; the country had gone through two national electoral processes in 2006 and 2011. Why then did the church find it necessary to become so involved in politics again?

By 2015, the political institutional framework that had been put in place during the transitional government of 2003-2006 had largely fallen under the sway of the Kabila government. After an election campaign marked by repression and state manipulation, the 2011 elections were widely considered rigged: about 1.6 million ballots were not counted, the collection and processing of results was chaotic, and the voter registry had major flaws. Monsengwo, now a cardinal, declared that the results proclaimed by the *Commission électorale nationale indépendante* (CENI) were "neither fair nor true."¹⁴

The social and political divisions forged by the elections were compounded by the M23 rebellion, which occupied the city of Goma in November 2012. In order to simultaneously resolve the crisis arising from the M23 rebellion and the lingering dispute over the 2011 elections, Joseph Kabila convened a national dialogue (*Concertations nationales*) in September 2013. This forum was supposed

to promote reconciliation, but itself was also proof of the inability of state institutions to resolve political conflicts. Meanwhile, the main opposition parties, the UDPS and the *Union pour la nation congolaise* (UNC), feared that the talks would be used as a tactic to delay the electoral process, amend the constitution and co-opt some opposition members to participate in power sharing. In the end, these fears proved to be largely justified.

Political tensions eventually escalated around the possibility of a third term for President Kabila. Following the 2011 elections, the question of succession was raised by members of his fragile political coalition. Professor Évariste Boshab, former president of the National Assembly and Minister of the Interior, wrote a book (*Entre la révision de la constitution et l'inanition de la nation*) in favor of amending the constitution to allow Kabila to serve a third term, following the example of leaders in neighboring countries. Others, such as Pierre Lumbi, who had become Kabila's special national security advisor and leader of one of the largest political parties in his coalition, the *Mouvement social pour le renouveau* (MSR), wanted Kabila to appoint a successor from within their coalition.

Failing to reach a consensus on a third term, the government tried to play for time by delaying the electoral process. In January 2015, the National Assembly hastily passed an amendment to the electoral law providing for a general population census. Analysts suggested that in a country the size of Congo, without a strong and solid administrative system, this could take three years, effectively pushing the elections scheduled for 2016 to 2018.¹⁵

This proposed change to the electoral law led to the beginning of a long season of protests that eventually drew in the Catholic Church. Demonstrations were organized—some spontaneously, others by political parties and civil society organizations—in Kinshasa, Goma, Bukavu and Lubumbashi between January 19 and 21, 2015. Encouraged by the opposition, the demonstrations quickly escalated in a decentralized and ad hoc manner. Groups of 20 to 50 protesters, mostly from university campuses, clashed with security forces. The security forces used brutal tactics to suppress them, killing at least 43 people.¹⁶ In the end, the Senate did not pass the bill in the same terms as the National Assembly, removing the paragraph requiring a general population census.

Increasingly, the institutional avenues of opposition seemed to be dead ends. This led organizations, such as political parties and NGOs, to bypass the formal channels of politics and seek pressure through direct action, civic education, and popular mobilization. The most notable



and the first such group to emerge during this period was *Lutte pour le changement* (LUCHA), which was formed in 2012 by youth in Goma. While it initially formed to protest the lack of public services—water, roads, and electricity—the movement quickly began to mobilize around the electoral process. At a workshop in which another citizen movement, Filimbi, was launched in March 2015, the government arrested 30 pro-democracy activists, prompting a concatenation of other social movements to be formed. These included Enough, *Jeunesse d'indignés*, ECCHA (*Engagement Citoyen pour le Changement*), *Le Coq-éveil du Congo*, *Telema ekoki* (get up, that's enough), *Jeunesse espoir*, *Dynamique des jeunes*, *Debout Congolais*, and *Congolais debout*. In response, the government began to ramp up repression starting in 2015, locking up some leaders of these movements and expelling foreign journalists and researchers.

At the same time, the coalition around Kabila began to unravel. When Kabila wavered at the nomination of a dauphin, several of his most important allies broke away from him. Powerbrokers like Pierre Lumbi, Charles Mwando Nsimba, Olivier Kamitatu, and Moïse Katumbi eventually formed their own opposition coalition, the Group of Seven (G7). However, attempts to unite the opposition had limited results.

It is in this context that many of the actors who participated in the 1992 "March of Christians" returned to the scene, albeit in a different configuration, highlighting the importance of confluences of political party and social movement activism at moments of great popular discontent. As it became clear that elections would not take place as constitutionally mandated before the end of 2016, various initiatives took place to find a compromise among the political elite. The African Union mediator, former Togolese Prime Minister Edem Kodjo, failed in his attempt; the political opposition and the Catholic Church eventually withdrew. Finally, on December 31, 2016, CENCO succeeded in securing an agreement between the government and the opposition, the Saint-Sylvestre Agreement, which allowed Kabila to remain in office on the condition that elections be held before the end of 2017 and that a new prime minister be appointed from within the opposition.

The faltering implementation of this agreement, however, quickly revealed the government's bad faith. As a result, the church officially withdrew from its role as mediator in March 2017. CENCO then issued a statement on June 23, 2017, calling on the Congolese to stand up for their rights: "We urge you: we must not give in to fear or fatalism. A minority of fellow citizens has decided

to take the lives of millions of Congolese hostage. This is unacceptable! We must take our common destiny in hand."¹⁷ This statement was followed by another similar statement on November 28, 2017, after the electoral commission announced a further postponement of the elections.

These delays and statements by CENCO set the stage for a new wave of protests. Some of the same actors as in 1992 were involved. The initiative to reconstitute the CLC—which had not met since 1992—was once again taken by Pierre Lumbi. As one priest who worked closely with the CLC confided: "Lumbi was the mastermind behind it all, he knew how to mobilize the priests (...). He gave some logistics to make posters, banners. Lumbi was always there."¹⁸ Other interviews confirm this.¹⁹ He was now the leader of the MSR political party, which left the ruling coalition in September 2015. According to Isidore Ndaywel, the prominent historian turned member of the new CLC and very close to MSR,²⁰ Lumbi contacted him in 2017 to discuss the relaunch of the CLC. They then contacted Thierry Nlandu and Julien Lukengu, two of the 1992 CLC members, as well as Justin Okana, the former director of the National Airport Authority (RVA) and a university professor.²¹ The other initial members were Léonie Kandolo, Jonas Tshimbela, Gertrude Ekombe, and Franklin Mbokolo. This time, Lumbi himself would remain in the shadows, due to his prominence as an opposition leader. The CLC was officially registered with the archdiocese of Kinshasa in November 2017, another difference with 1992.

They organized three major marches, calling for elections and Kabila's renunciation of a third term: on December 31, 2017, January 21, 2018 and February 25, 2018. The CLC initiated all three demonstrations, although it coordinated closely with social movements, as well as with opposition parties (although all political insignia were banned from the marches). The various structures of the Catholic Church played a key role in mobilizing people in Kinshasa and some other cities: at the local level, the protests were announced and discussed in the *Communautés écclesiastes vivantes de base* (CEVB), a lay structure created in Latin America in the 1940s and 1950s and present in all parishes. Other key structures for mobilization within the Church were the *Commission Justice et Paix*, (Peace and Justice Commission) and the *Conseil de l'Apostolat des Laïcs du Congo* (CALCC).

Networks of parish priests gave their blessing to the initiative; in many parishes, priests announced marches during mass and led their faithful out of the church doors. Father Vincent Tshomba, the priest of St. Joseph Parish in Kin-



shasa, where the 1992 march began, was a key figure as coordinator of the *doyenné* (deanery) network—the 15 parishes that oversee Kinshasa's 167 parishes. As Father Patrick "Nina" Ikalaba of Christ-Roi Parish in Kasa Vubu recalls, "There were messages from the CLC that were read during mass. Without the support of the priests, the CLC could not succeed. There was also the participation of political actors like Vital Kamerhe [leader of the political party UNC] who came here to our parish and Félix Tshisekedi was at St. Joseph's Parish."²²

This official blessing of the church, essential for mobilizing the masses, was in sharp contrast to the 1992 march. Then, the parish priests had mobilized against the will expressed by Cardinal Frédéric Etsou. This time, CENCO supported the CLC, partly because of its participation in the negotiation process, but also because it felt betrayed by the government. Personalities also played a role: Laurent Monsengwo was now a cardinal, the highest-ranking member of the Congolese church, and was increasingly pugnacious towards President Kabila. In 2011, he had openly declared that Kabila had rigged the elections.²³ And after the repression of the first CLC demonstration, Monsengwo ranted: "It is time for the mediocre to leave and for peace and justice to reign in the DRC. Monsengwo was very close to the members of the CLC, in particular Isidore Ndaywel and Pierre Lumbi, and was active behind the scenes to encourage his priests. However, by mobilizing through the CLC, Monsengwo could also avoid the difficult work of building consensus among the bishops, who did not all agree with the tactic of popular mobilization to confront the regime. This is why Monsengwo, as archbishop of Kinshasa, registered the CLC with the Catholic Church, instead of pushing for action through CALCC or CENCO.

The mobilization was historic. At each demonstration, tens of thousands—perhaps hundreds of thousands at the second march—took to the streets. There are moving images of barefoot priests marching past thousands of men and women in their Sunday best, waving palm leaves and holding Bibles. The government resorted to its usual repression. According to Human Rights Watch, security forces killed at least 18 people, including the activist Rossy Mukendi and aspiring nun Thérèse Kapangala. More than 80 people were injured, many by gunfire.²⁴

These demonstrations, along with others organized by social movements like LUCHA, put pressure on the government and most likely prevented further delays in the elections. The threat of an even larger march by the CLC on August 12, 2018, likely precipitated Joseph Kabila's decision not to seek a third term and to eventually nominate a candidate to represent his party in the election, Emmanuel Ramazani Shadary.

The election was finally held in December 2018; the Catholic Church sent 40,000 election observers and conducted a parallel estimate of the results. The electoral commission announced that Félix Tshisekedi was the winner; CENCO said this did not reflect its own count and that Martin Fayulu was the winner. "The bishops have clearly said that, according to their observers, Fayulu won the elections," Monsengwo revealed to the press.²⁵ It was widely believed that Tshisekedi had made a deal with Kabila to share power in exchange for being named the winner of the elections. Nevertheless, the church eventually recognized Tshisekedi as president and did not support Fayulu's mobilization to overturn the election results.

Part II: The Catholic Church and Democracy in Congo

The Catholic Church is one of the most important actors in Congolese national politics. At critical junctures in the country's political system, it has played a key role in promoting democracy. In the late 1950s, some of its priests amplified calls and participated in the struggle for independence; in the 1990s, Catholic priests helped lead the marches and petitions to establish a multiparty democracy. Then, between 2015 and 2018, the Catholic Church took center stage in politics as never before, taking the lead in mobilizing people in the streets, facilitating political dialogue and conducting strident diplomacy in the press and behind the scenes.

The church, however, has not always been a catalyst for democracy. During the colonial period, it was a partner with the colonial government in its often brutal and oppressive extraction. Archbishop Malula initially supported Mobutu Sese Seko's coup in 1965 before fiercely opposing it. And during the National Sovereign Conference, Archbishop Monsengwo was criticized for his handling of a process that ended up being manipulated by Mobutu.

Given its importance, but also the controversies surrounding his involvement in politics, it is important to examine the church's strengths and weaknesses. Two aspects are highlighted here: the focus of its political activism, which is mainly limited to the electoral process, and the degree of democracy within the Catholic Church itself.



The Focus of the Church's Activism

Global trends in Catholic Church theology have had a significant impact on the perspectives of Congolese priests. Shortly after the Congo gained independence in 1960, the church convened the Second Vatican Council, which focused on updating (*aggiornamento*) the church in order to better communicate with not only its faithful but also men and women in an increasingly secularized world; some of the church's practices needed to be improved and its teaching presented in a more understandable way. Hence the need for, among other things, the use of vernacular languages, and the inclusion of non-Western cultures. This also led to structural changes in how the church engages with its lay followers. As Julien Lukengu told us, "Since the Second Vatican Council, the church is no longer pyramidal, the pyramid is inverted. Socio-political problems are treated from the bottom up."²⁶ This impetus gave rise to the spread of CEVB and other lay associations that gave more voice and responsibility to the laity.

The pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005) also inspired some, with its support for human rights and social justice, although some Congolese bishops were also influenced by Latin American liberation theology, which John Paul II had criticized for its defiance of the church hierarchy and its proximity to Marxism. Rigobert Minani, a Jesuit priest, points out, "People of my generation were very influenced by Latin American bishops: I have a picture of Oscar Romero [the Salvadoran bishop murdered for opposing the dictatorship] in my office. We were trained in liberation theology."²⁷

In the Congo, these theological influences have largely translated into a focus on political rights, including the electoral process. The church also often speaks out against corruption, poverty and the unjust exploitation of natural resources. It has the *Commission épiscopale Caritas- développement* (ECDC), which is responsible for the influential and well-funded Caritas development organization, and the *Commission épiscopale pour les ressources naturelles* (CERN), which focuses on mining and forestry. However, these commissions rarely come up with statements or campaigns that lead to action by CENCO as a whole, and their preferred mode of action is through NGO-type statements and projects.

The reason for this is unclear. Some clergy interviewed suggested that it was because political rights and elections are more sensational injustices and therefore easier to galvanize CENCO's actions. Others, less critical, believe

that the way to address socio-economic issues is through the political sphere: "Who else can eradicate corruption if not the government? That's where it starts."²⁸

It is also possible that this reluctance to engage in an economic critique of Congolese elites is due to the fact that the church itself is a powerful economic actor. The church is one of the largest landowners in the country and runs thousands of schools and health centers. Today, about 30 percent of the country's public schools and 40 percent of the country's health facilities are run by the church.²⁹ The church receives significant tax exemptions for these and other businesses it operates in the country. As one priest told us, "the fact that the church has things to protect—land, schools—means that it is risk averse."³⁰

The church's focus on elections is thus a missed opportunity for civic education and popular mobilization. As this series of reports by CRG/Ebuteli will highlight, there has been too much focus on the strictly electoral aspect of democracy in Congo—the act of voting, the presentation of results, and the integrity of CENI—to the relative exclusion of other key aspects of democracy and social justice: a population that understands its interests, mobilizes around them, and holds its leaders accountable. The Catholic Church, along with other interest groups, could play a key role in providing the physical space, social networks, and moral impetus for this kind of mobilization.

Democracy in the Church: Who Makes the Decisions?

The church is both hierarchical and decentralized. The structure of the Catholic Church in Congo, as well as its lay organizations, is presented in [Annex 1](#). Although the church is not democratic in the popular sense—the bishops are appointed by the pope in consultation with the other Congolese bishops, who then appoint most of the other church leaders—there are many internal checks and balances that hold it accountable.

The main source of authority in the Catholic Church is the bishops, who act with considerable independence. The Pope himself, while being the head of the Catholic Church, is the Bishop of Rome and addresses his fellow bishops as "Venerable Brothers." In most countries, the bishops are organized in an episcopal conference—CENCO in the Congo—which makes decisions by consensus. While many countries have at least one cardinal, that



position does not mean he is above his fellow bishops in terms of hierarchy; his main prerogatives are with the Roman Curia, the governing body of the Holy See, including the election of a new pope. In the Congo, the cardinal has often been considered the head of the church and has had symbolic importance, even though he does not make decisions on behalf of the Congolese episcopate; he is chosen and appointed by the pope, unlike the bishops, who are proposed by their fellow bishops at the local level and then appointed by the pope. The Congo has had four cardinals since independence: Cardinal Joseph Malula, Cardinal Frederic Etsou, Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo, and Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo.

While church doctrine is set by the Vatican, decisions regarding involvement in national politics are largely directed by CENCO and its leadership. Since independence, the church in Congo has been divided into six archdioceses (Bukavu, Kisangani, Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Kananga, and Mbandaka), each with an archbishop; and a total of 47 dioceses, each with a bishop. Each of these bishops and archbishops is a member of CENCO, for which the general assembly is the supreme organ. Ordinarily, the general assembly meets once a year, while the permanent committee meets twice a year and the general secretariat provides continuous follow-up and preparation.

In practice, while all bishops are supposed to have equal weight, the cardinal, the members of the general secretariat, and the members of the standing committee are largely able to set the agenda of CENCO and represent it in public. For example, in the run-up to the 2011 elections, Cardinal Monsengwo made numerous public statements about the electoral process and the constitutional review that took place in January 2011. Although he was not speaking on behalf of CENCO, much of Congolese public opinion mistook him for a representative of the Catholic Church, given his rank; Joseph Kabila's government even complained that he was arrogating to himself the mandate of CENCO. As CALCC president Jean-Bosco Lalopkasha told us, "The dynamics of lay mobilization in Kinshasa vary depending on the cardinal, because each bishop is autonomous. Cardinal Monsengwo was very political, he understood the wishes and aspirations of the population. He was at the forefront of mobilizations."³¹

Since Monsengwo's retirement in 2018, Archbishop Fridolin Ambongo, the archbishop of Kinshasa and cardinal since 2019, has played a similar role. Ambongo, however, has been more ambivalent in his criticism of the government. Immediately after the 2018 elections, he clearly denounced the official results, stating, "this result is a denial of truth. And we are convinced that you cannot

base the future of a nation on lies."³² He refused to attend President Tshisekedi's inauguration, responding that "an invitation is not a summons."³³ This attitude was not surprising, especially since the church's electoral commission had sent 40,000 observers, covering more than half of the country's voting locations. This allowed them to conclude that Martin Fayulu was the true winner of the 2018 election, by a wide margin.

By November of that year, however, under pressure from other CENCO bishops and in the face of the stubborn political reality that new elections were unlikely, Ambongo had changed his tune: "We must not always go back to the past. (...) There was a crisis but the situation changes afterwards.... We must not go back to the ballot box issue. (...) We must evolve."³⁴ Ambongo was also appointed to the pope's Council of Cardinal Advisors in 2020; since then, according to several church officials, he has been encouraged to be less active in Congolese political debates.³⁵ He also sparked controversy by accepting, like other bishops, the gift of an SUV on the occasion of his appointment as cardinal in 2019.

This is the result of the nature of CENCO, which often privileges solidarity among the bishops over other considerations. As Rigobert Minani, an ordained priest and head of research at the Centre d'études pour l'action sociale (CEPAS), told us, "If there is dissension, you have to find the lowest common denominator. When the bishops of the Kasais opposed the 'truth of the ballot box,' the church decided to continue to commit itself to democracy, but not to demand the departure of Félix."³⁶

The general secretariat is the permanent body of CENCO, with an office in Kinshasa, headed by Bishop Donati Nshole since 2016 and including two deputies. It is able to set the agenda for each of the general assemblies and commission studies that can help CENCO in its work. With the permanent committee—which includes the six archbishops, as well as the president and vice president of CENCO, and the heads of the various episcopal commissions—the secretariat has had considerable leeway in framing the conversations that take place during general assemblies. Nshole, for example, along with members of the standing commissions, played a key role in placing elections at the center of CENCO's agenda during 2015–2018. "The first thing the justice and peace commission does before the general assembly is to provide a briefing on the situation in the country. I used to do that in the past. It sets the tone for the discussions," recalled Rigobert Minani.³⁷



This does not mean that the church is able to reach consensus on all issues. For example, even though all CENCO members signed the 2017 call to arms (“The country is doing badly. Rise up, Congolese!”) issued by CENCO, some of its members clearly opposed the popular mobilization led by priests elsewhere. In particular, the bishops of Butembo, Goma, and Lubumbashi gave little encouragement to the mobilization during this period, and sometimes dragged their feet. This was all the more striking when these bishops were based in dioceses where the population was largely opposed to the regime. Gertrude Ekombe, one of the leaders of the CLC, recalls: “The CLC was not established in the provinces, we were organizing through the bishops, but some of them were not involved in this struggle. In Goma, for example, the CLC focal point was suspended for initiating a march without the support of the church.”³⁸ The bishop of Butembo, Sikuli Paluku Melchisédech, known for his ties to the Kabila government, also did not endorse any mobilization. The same is true of the archbishop of Bukavu, François-Xavier Maroy. An unnamed bishop in eastern Congo was quoted as saying, “It’s true that we don’t all agree with the CLC. It was set up without consultation with CALCC, the lay structure set up by the bishops’ conference. To be frank: we think that the CLC is an instrument in the hands of Monsengwo that allows him to bypass the CALCC and the CENCO.”³⁹

This criticism of the CLC comes from other parts of the church, as well. Given Pierre Lumbi’s importance in its operations, and Ndaywel and Lukengu’s affinities with the MSR political party, some considered the organization to have been manipulated politically. A priest in Kinshasa told us: “For me, the CLC was a tool for Moïse Katumbi,” a popular opposition politician who at the time was closely associated with Lumbi.⁴⁰

Similar tensions within the church arose after Tshisekedi’s election, which was openly and immediately challenged by Ambongo. The bishops of his native Kasai region made it clear within CENCO that the church should recognize Tshisekedi, even though their own electoral mission had concluded that he had not won the election.

However, despite this consensual decision-making process, the feedback and monitoring mechanisms within the church are largely between bishops. As Lalopkasha, the head of CALCC, said, “There is no democracy. The church is not accountable to the people. The bishop is appointed during his lifetime, and he appoints the parish priests. To dismiss a bishop, it is Rome that decides, not even CENCO.”⁴¹ There are exceptions to this: in 2002, numerous protests against Bishop Jerome Gapangwa, the bishop of Uvira, for his alleged proximity to Rwanda

and the Banyamulenge community, led to his resignation in 2002. However, these cases are rare. Grassroots mobilization has few mechanisms for shaping church policy outside of secular organizations, and CALCC—the main secular organization—has not considered this kind of active political engagement as part of its mandate. This is, in part, why the CLC was created.

This lack of transparency and accountability is also present in the financial matters of the church. In discussions with priests and church lay members, there was palpable resentment over the opaque management of weekly offerings; revenues from the diocese’s schools, workshops, farms, and health centers; and the donations made by politicians. In this vein, for example, President Tshisekedi has acted much like his predecessor, offering SUVs to many bishops—at least ten bishops, including Cardinal Ambongo, have received such vehicles directly from the presidency since 2018, sometimes accompanied by cash gifts.⁴² This kind of patronage, while customary since Mobutu’s time at least, raises doubts about the political independence of the bishops and reinforces suspicions of corruption within the church.

Father José Mpundu, the well-known former parish priest of Saint Alphonse in Kinshasa, criticized the church for this lack of democracy and transparency. In addition to the financial opacity, he criticized the lack of engagement with churchgoers. “When I was head of the Justice and Peace Commission, I broke down one of their documents into easy French, so that the general public could read it. They criticized me for that, they said it wasn’t my job.”⁴³



Conclusion and Policy Considerations

There is no guarantee that the church will remain a progressive force in politics—it has not always been so. As we have seen, members of the church—and, during the colonial era, the church itself—have been complicit in widespread abuses.

However, the struggle for democracy between 1990 and 2018 reveals a church that is largely invested in the promotion and consolidation of democracy. This did not have to be this way—there are many countries in Africa and elsewhere where the church has remained apolitical or even supported authoritarian leaders. The dynamism of the Congolese church is most likely the result of strong leadership, but also of an invested lay community that remains inspired by the legacy of Cardinals Monsengwo and Malula, as well as the pre-colonial mystic Béatrice Kimpa Vita and the beatified martyrs Isidore Bakanja and Marie-Clémentine Anuarite Nengapeta.

The present state of the Catholic Church is uncertain. During the 2015-2018 period studied here, a large part of the population was united against the government of Joseph Kabila. The election of Félix Tshisekedi, however, divided the population as well as donors and civil society. Many NGO leaders, especially those from his native Kasai region, were seduced by his promises of reform. Likewise, some Catholic bishops in the same region pleaded for patience and forbearance. As Gertrude Ekombe, a CLC leader, put it:

During the 2018 mobilization, the population was tired of the old regime. With the advent of the new regime, the population is divided because of partisan interests, even within the church. The reflection is at this level whether to continue to organize the marches knowing that the population will not stand together.⁴⁴

Many in the church are unhappy that Tshisekedi did not, by their own electoral observation mission's clear count, win the 2018 elections, and many also fear that the upcoming 2023 elections will be marred by fraud and manipulation. One priest told us, "If the elections are held under these conditions, they will be a charade."⁴⁵ The way Tshisekedi made appointments to the constitutional court and the electoral commission, and the lack of serious reform of the electoral law, point in this direction.

At the same time, the church itself is divided and the CLC has been weakened by the deaths of Pierre Lumbi and Cardinal Monsengwo, as well as by internal divisions. Lumbi, in particular, had been instrumental in building bridges between the CLC, civil society, and political parties, and in providing much needed funds. As Ekombe points out: "Today, the CLC suffers from a lack of resources, especially logistical resources; Lumbi was very important in this dynamic. The CLC doesn't even have a functional office, we meet on a rotating basis at members' homes."⁴⁶ Lumbi had helped fund the printing of posters and banners, as well as transportation and communication costs for CLC members. The CLC is currently trying to set up offices around the country but does not have the resources to do so.

Meanwhile, the CLC has also suffered from internal divisions and from the alleged politicization described above. Thierry Nlandu, a prominent professor and one of the CLC's main leaders, fell out with Isidore Ndaywel, in part because of what he perceived as the excessive influence of Pierre Lumbi and Cardinal Monsengwo, as well as the alleged influence of presidential candidate Moïse Katumbi. He and Léonie Kandolo have taken some distance from the CLC since the 2018 elections.

Several factors will determine whether the church can continue to serve as the backbone of the pro-democracy movement. Visionary and courageous leadership will remain essential. But neither the 1992 nor the 2015-2018 mobilization came from CENCO; it was lay members of the church who organized, sometimes with the strong support of the bishops, but often on their own. For the moment, these lay organizations suffer from a lack of organization and resources and are led mostly by aging leaders.

While CENCO appears ready to send another large election observation mission, it is unlikely to be able to mobilize the population in the streets as it has done previously. This is not necessarily a bad thing; it could be a time for the church, and its associated lay groups, to invest in the civic education and debate necessary to inspire a new generation of grassroots organizations. There are two, potentially complementary approaches to this question. Lay Catholics could try on their own accord to institutionalize the CLC, implanting it across the country and creating internal checks-and-balances that would insulate it from outside political pressure. Or the CALCC could try to free itself from its current subservience to bishops, strengthening its ties with social movements and civil society, and engaging in civic education and mobilization.



With regards to the broader internal challenges faced by the Catholic Church: It has been working recently, especially since Vatican II, to introduce greater democracy within its own structures. This is reflected in the understanding of the bishops' ministry as service to the Christian people rather than authoritarian domination over them, in the integration of the bishop into his local diocesan church, and in the partial reintegration of the pope into the episcopal college.

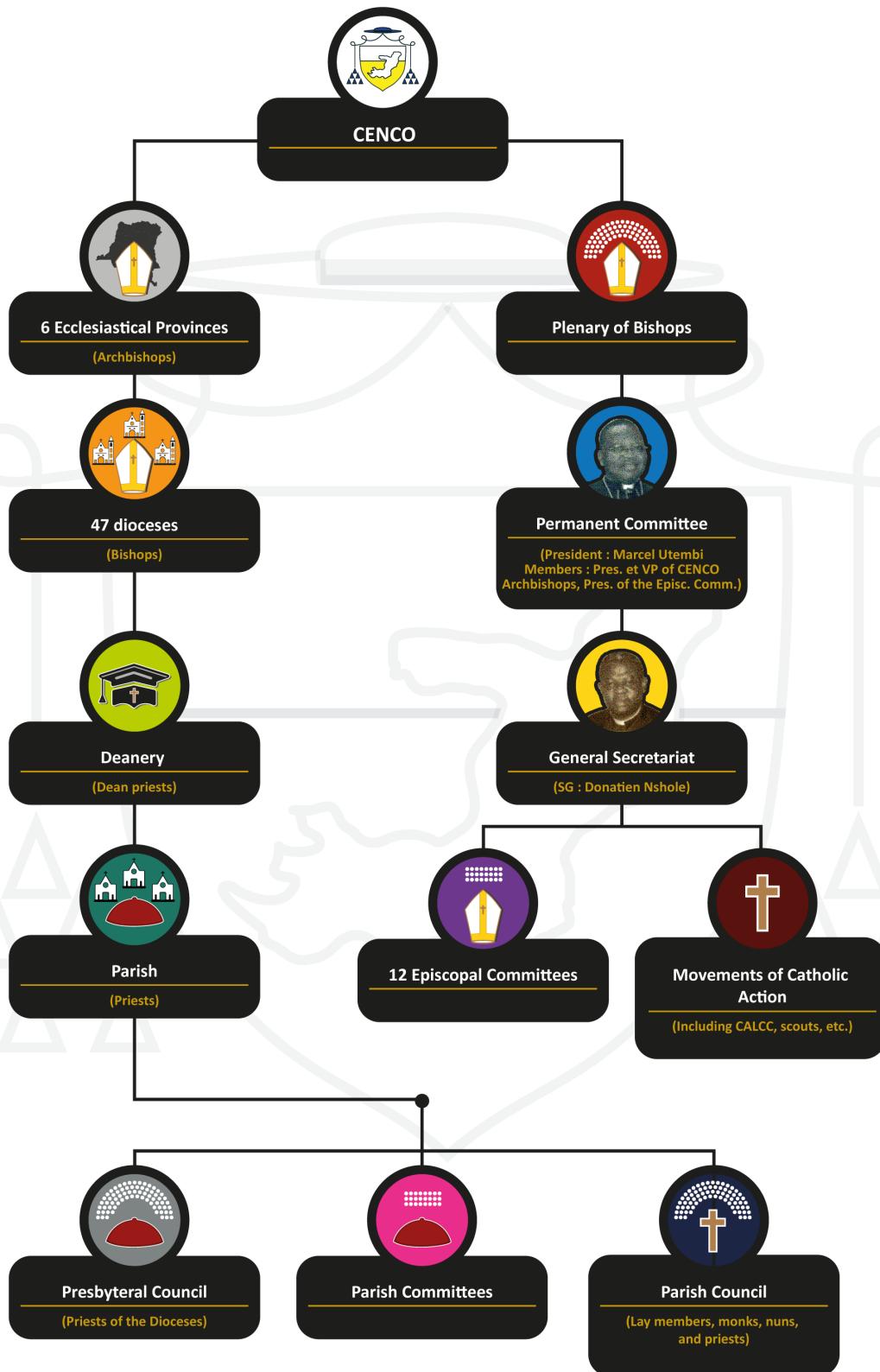
More can be done, however, to strengthen these democratic reforms in the Congo. In addition to the planned institutions of control within CENCO, there are bodies at the local level that could enable congregations to hold their priests accountable: synods, pastoral councils, and presbyteral councils.

Synods are used by the church to allow its members—at any level of the hierarchy—to freely debate important issues and to discuss them directly with the bishop. These synods are not mandatory, but could be used more often by the Congolese bishops to encourage open debate, also on political issues. Since the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis expressed his desire to render the church less hierarchical and more collegial, and he has argued for greater recognition of lay contributions. As part of this, he launched the 2021-2023 synod that will culminate in the synod of bishops in October 2023—this process is an opportunity to revisit the church's role in the pressing political and economic challenges facing the Congo today.

Pastoral councils are supposed to represent the diversity of the diocese, including lay people, monks, nuns, and priests. However, they play a purely consultative role and depend on the bishop for their creation and operation. Nevertheless, bishops could be encouraged to make their convening a regular and routine affair, thus providing a direct means for members of the diocese to lobby their ministers and provide feedback.

Finally, presbyteral councils are also advisory bodies to the bishops, composed of priests of the diocese. About half of the members are freely elected by the priests themselves and are meant to reflect the diversity and different regions of the diocese. Although the council has only an advisory role, the bishop must listen to it on matters of greater importance. However, in many dioceses in the Congo, these councils are not fully functional, rarely meet, and do not communicate with the wider congregation.

Annex: Organizational Chart of the Catholic Church in the Congo





Endnotes

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45. Confidential telephone interview with a priest, August 23, 2022.
46. Interview with Gertrude Ekombe in Kinshasa, August 26, 2022.



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