Chapter 5

“The Bishop Is Governor Here”: Bishop Nicholas Djomo and Catholic Leadership in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*

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After a century of colonial rule, political instability, dictatorship, and war, the Congolese people eagerly anticipated the 2006 parliamentary and presidential elections. Although the eastern Kivu districts remained embroiled in conflict, a modicum of peace and stability had returned to much of the rest of the country after the 2002 signing of the Sun City Accords. The 2006 elections signified the incipient return of democratic institutions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) after a 35-year interlude, offering a ray of hope amidst the overall gloom of the post-Mobutu era.

In the small town of Tshumbe in the Sankuru district of Central Congo, local residents lined up to vote for their new parliamentary representatives. Two elderly women scanned the ballot. Flummoxed at not seeing their desired candidate’s name, they confronted one of the supervising election officials. “Where is Djomo?!” one woman demanded. “We are here to vote for Nicholas Djomo!” The election official calmly explained that Mgr Nicholas Djomo, the Catholic Bishop of Tshumbe, was not running for office. The women threw up their hands and walked out. “If Djomo is not on the ballot, we do not vote!”

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This brief anecdote reveals much about the state of political leadership in contemporary Congo. In summary, the welcome return of democratic institutions cannot mask the dysfunctional nature of public services. In the state’s absence, other actors have stepped into the void. The Roman Catholic Church, Congo’s largest religious institution comprising half of the nation’s 60 million people, has emerged as an especially prominent sociopolitical actor in postwar Congo.\(^2\) Whether monitoring elections, providing the lion’s share of healthcare and educational services, or providing civic education through the church’s extensive grassroots network of small Christian communities, the Catholic church has an unparalleled social influence in twenty-first-century Congo.\(^3\) Whatever its ambiguities, power has clearly migrated from state to church.

An important if understudied symbol of this migration of power is Mgr Djomo of the Diocese of Tshumbe. Now in his second term as president of the Conference Episcopale Nationale du Congo (CENCO), Djomo has emerged as a key international liaison and national bridgebuilder for the Catholic church in DRC. At the same time, Djomo’s footprint is even more evident in his home region of Tshumbe. In the words of one local observer, “the official state governor never comes here. The bishop is governor here.”\(^4\)

In explaining how Djomo came to be seen locally as the “governor” of Tshumbe, I first offer a brief overview of the history of church and state relations in colonial and postcolonial Congo. Seen as one of the “Holy Trinity” of colonial forces under Belgian rule, the Catholic church emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a rival to Joseph Mobutu’s authoritarian pretenses. After a relatively quiescent decade in the 1980s, church leaders like Archbishop Laurent Monsengwo emerged as national facilitators of the democratization process in the early 1990s. After serving as “midwives to democracy,” church leaders in the late 1990s became midwives to resistance, reconciliation, and reconstruction in the midst of DRC’s brutal 1996 to 2002 conflict, a struggle often dubbed “Africa’s World War.” This historical overview reminds us that Mgr Djomo is not an isolated case of a Congolese Catholic political leader; the church has served a central political role since the beginning of Catholic evangelization in Congo.\(^5\)