

CHAPTER 13
TRUTH IN POLITICS, AND THE POLITICAL SPHERE IN CONGO
(BRAZZAVILLE)

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ABSTRACT. This paper attempts to unravel the consistencies and inconsistencies in the Congolese public's conceptions of truth in politics. In pursuing this approach, the author also employs his personal experiences as a major player in the national conference of Congo in order to reveal the problems related to the invention of pluralist democracy in a polity as complicated as Congo-Brazzaville.

Introduction

Since 1989 and in particular since the fall of the Berlin wall and the acceleration of the social movements on the African continent, sub-Saharan African societies have been undergoing political and religious reconstitution linked to situations of crisis. One-party political systems crumbled during the national conferences which were then seen as a panacea for the socio-political crisis. Most of these national conferences, led by men of the cloth and in particular the Catholic Church, were based on a political register (including the public denunciation of former leaders who failed), as well as a religious register (including the public acceptance of their faults and their being forgiven), and aimed for a regime based on political truth. The Sovereign National Conference of Congo (Brazzaville)¹ occurred after its counterpart in Benin (1990), and lasted five months.

The aims of this paper are:

- on the one hand, to understand the points of agreement and disagreement in the public statement of truth in politics,
- and, on the other hand, to point out the difficulties related to the invention of pluralist democracy within a political sphere as heavy as that of Congo-Brazzaville; here my argument will be based on my own experience as a member of society and as a key player² in the national conference of Congo.

¹ After a few decades of being in use, Mobutu's designation "Zaire" (for Congo-Brazzaville's eastern neighbour state) was reverted to "Democratic Republic of Congo"; however, in the present paper, "Congolese" will exclusively refer to Congo-Brazzaville. (Eds.)

² I myself acted as adviser to the Conference as delegate of the Congo Society of Philosophy.

The Sovereign National Conference and the rites of politically-related institutions

To speak about politics in today's Congolese society presupposes that there are epistemological, historical and cultural implications on which that society is based. The epistemological basis resides in the apprehension of Congolese society marked, firstly, by the endogenous evolution process being blocked and, secondly, by colonial over-taxation. With the cultural basis appears the double relation of interiority and exteriority, characterized by the combination of two different cultures, i.e. Congolese post-colonial and European. The many consequences resulting from the clash and confrontation of the different social and cultural forces allow us to measure the restricting effects of colonial over-taxation and the effects of the demands brought about by the newly created situation, i.e. the situation of the Congolese production of political modernity.³

Whether we refer to the political, economic, social or cultural domain, the existence of a hybrid area of material and spiritual activities results in a situation where a social endogenous logic is permanently present within Congolese production of political modernity. This endogenous logic is based on the primacy of the group and of kinship relations over the individual. But equally there to stay is an exogenous social logic characterized by the primacy of the individual over the group. The organization of material and spiritual activities, which is often a difficult and tumultuous process, in most cases involves considerable oscillation in the positions that political subjects take vis-à-vis these two logics, as brought out in their behaviour and mentality. With the disorganization of identity-related markers, the renewal of social and symbolic representations entails making selections from foreign cultural elements and from ancient Congolese cultures. Management of politics and democracy cannot therefore avoid the many consequences of the combination resulting from the uninterrupted process of endogenous production of political modernity in Congo.

The National Conference of Congo was organized in favour of mass movements by the then President of the Republic, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, on the 25th of February 1991. It took place at the convention centre of Brazzaville, with 1100 delegates representing political parties, workers' unions, civil organizations (i.e. development NGOs, scientific associations and learned societies), as well as the various religious denominations, representatives of the state, and political and administrative personalities.

³ Eboussi-Boulaga 1993.

The desire to break away from the former system had informed the role played by intellectuals, syndicates, the army, Youth and Women's Movements, as well as churches and religious sects. Thus, the means to apply political legitimacy, with a view to installing a democratic state, were validated through a general national Congolese convention.

The first visible signs of the political quest for meaning were, on the one hand, the affirmation of individual and collective expression and of the respect for discussion ethics, and, on the other hand, the elaboration of procedures of political truth under the chairmanship of a man of the church, Mgr. Ernest Kombo, in charge of the Charismatic revival movement and member of the Catholic Church. The quest for political truth required locutors not only to display logically coherent thought in accordance with the principles of reasoning, but also, where the substance of their verbal contribution was concerned, to remain in touch with unfolding past events which were actualized for the circumstances.

To prepare the ground for the unfolding of the political subjects' discourse and that of civil societies, and to guaranty their immunity while speaking publicly to tell the truth, the first part of the national conference was devoted to internal regulations, proclaiming the sovereign character of the conference. The reports which were simultaneously given on the radio and television, were to include the assessments of the various delegations concerning the political, economic, social and cultural situation of ill-gotten assets, embezzlement and political assassinations.

During the subsequent sessions of the various commissions set up, including those on ill-gotten assets and political assassinations, the speakers, under oath, were to tell the truth. Most of the members of the various commissions were young intellectuals (lawyers, civil servants and academics). Already during the first days of the commission, Mgr. Kombo, who was elected unanimously as chairman, sought to channel the violence of political denunciation into a pacifying space, by putting before the Convention the following triptych:

- Denunciation
- Recognition of one's faults
- Asking for, and accepting, collective forgiveness.

All this took place while a variety of rituals were performed, rituals which came from ancient Congolese as well as Christian culture. It was on the seventh Sunday of the beginning of the national convention that, through the radio and television, Mgr. Kombo called on the whole of Congo to clean

cemeteries and make offerings to the dead. A second event was then to take place when the 1100 participants were to plant a tree bearing the name of the commission, in a public area baptized “Garden of National Unity” for the occasion. By symbolically including the dead in the process of national reconstruction, Mgr. Kombo wanted to prepare the people to accept, before “invisible but present witnesses”, the statements on political truth which were to be made during the following weeks, including those on political crimes committed by former Presidents of the Republic Marien Ngouabi and Alphonse Massambat-Débat, as well as those of Cardinal Emile Biayenda. The tree could then symbolize resurrection through religion as well as return to life by the renewal of political institutions and individuals who were to be elected subsequently to ensure new governmental responsibilities. Finally, the third major ritual event was to unfold during the Sovereign National Convention’s closing ceremony, with the rite of washing one’s hands in a fountain. All the participants were asked to perform this act including the President of the Republic, Denis Sassou Nguesso, who remained in power during the time of the Commission. The hand-washing fountain took place inside the convention centre itself. The rite was supposed to mark national reconciliation after five months of political discussions which had become violent at times.

The Sovereign National Conference had been, from the start, a moment of high hopes for the Congolese population, a place in which to introduce the basics of pluralist democracy and the founding of a constitutional state. To the advantage of the people, lessons were to be drawn from the experience of the political, economic, social and cultural management of the one-party system; and it was time to democratically examine and redefine collective and individual responsibilities so as to eliminate all forms of exclusion and political violence from the new political order which was to be installed during the transitional period. The Convention was about rewriting symbolically a new social world that included all concepts, such as people’s sovereignty, the constitutional state, and respect for human dignity (beyond the visible material aspects of politics, economics and culture). The Sovereign National Convention undertook to fix this symbolic rewriting in the collective memory, by adopting a Fundamental Act. The Preamble of this Act, used subsequently in the Constitution which was enacted on the 15th of March 1992 by popular referendum, stipulated the following:

Dignity, freedom, peace, prosperity and love of the country were, under the one-party state in particular, hindered or held up by totalitarianism, confusion of the authorities, nepotism, tribalism, regionalism, social inequalities and the violation of fundamental rights. The *coup d’état*, justified in Congolese history as the only way to regain power, has destroyed all

democratic life. Intolerance and political violence, violation of individual and collective rights, the summary execution of real or assumed political opponents, the cowardly assassination of peaceful citizens for political ends have plunged the country deeply into mourning, have maintained and increased hate and division between the various ethnic communities making up the Congolese Nation.

Consequently, the Congolese people:

- proclaim its firm desire to build a constitutional State and a united and brotherly Nation;
- solemnly proclaims to rightfully disobey civil duties and to resist any individual or group of individuals who seize or exercise power after a *coup d'état* or after any other form of violent act;
- reaffirm its attachment to the principles of pluralist democracy, to the rights as defined by the United Nations Charter of Human Rights of 1948, the African Charter of Human and People's Rights adopted in 1981 by the Organisation for African Unity and the Charter of Rights and Freedom adopted in 1991 by the Sovereign National Conference.

The Sovereign National Conference: Stating a principle of truth in politics by means of political denunciation

The process used for the democratization of political life occurred in such a way that analysing it has become a delicate matter today. Indeed, it was based on a difficult balance between, on the one hand, the desire for a clean break (marked by the sustained denunciation of former state authorities, condemnation of summary executions, and acceptance of one's faults), and, on the other hand, the former ruling class asking for forgiveness (followed by the unsuccessful end of the national conference). With the process of pacification of society and the political sphere, in the face of the crises of confidence and legitimacy of the former ruling class, the consensual search for trust, to maintain a public space for discussion, was effected through a third party: a man of the cloth. By adopting political ritualization with a reasoning based on denunciation, forgiveness and consensus in order to obtain political truth, the Sovereign National Convention was not able to achieve completely its ambitious collective goals. One reason for this has to do with political leaders' concepts of power and of the state. Being in the hot seat and having to articulate publicly a political truth that would disqualify them, appeared to them as the end of their political career in Congo.

By going, point by point, through the locutors' discourse, one is struck by the strong utilization of politics. First of all, one must understand politics on the basis of its double metaphysical dimension:

- as a given of human nature, and
- as the art of managing the city according to principles of equity and justice.

Then, beyond pure political theory, one must also understand politics in terms of a domain of action, in the sense of Max Weber, i.e. as a rational activity oriented towards a practical purpose. And because it calls for appreciation or discredit, and therefore assessment, the political act, as public action, refers, not only to meaning (thus revealing the particular dimension of human existence), but also and especially to the exercise of such power as is supposed to produce a new meaning having direct consequences for citizens' daily lives. Because of this, the act that consists in speaking at the Sovereign National Convention (seen as a space for public debate or palaver), in order to admit one's faults, was paradoxical in so far as conflict, denunciation, pluralism and consensus were coexisting.

Patrice Yengo, who had definite ideas on these matters, was of the opinion that

the end of a one-party system does not automatically result in democracy. In Congo, it gave rise to the partisans of the former dictatorship, who had spread out to various regional political parties, to recreate the dictatorship by regenerating the ideological basis of the ruling class; the latter having always ignored the principle of contradiction.⁴

One of the first tasks which the Sovereign National Conference imposed on the Congolese population was to progressively rid themselves of the totalitarian image which had taken over public, cultural and scientific life, as well as the private lives of individuals. Indeed, individuals had lost heart for personal effort, moral, political and economic transparency, as well as for intellectual and cultural creativity.

But the Sovereign National Convention has also been a place of violent expression, where violent words condemned armed violence. In Paulin Hountondji's opinion, speech, which is part of parliamentary culture, needs to be found not only within African cultures, i.e. palaver culture, but also within the French parliamentary culture of 1789, where speech was radical, exigent and rebellious. After recalling the Beninese experience of the "National Convention of *Forces vives*" for its exemplary merit and its true impact on the contemporary history of the sub-Saharan African region, Hountondji concludes that a conference is one way to conquer democracy among many others.

While the convention was a celebration of reason, it was also a celebration of true politics, where language prevailed, and where pluralist democracy was suddenly rediscovered.

But according to Hountondji,

what is essential is precisely the conquest itself and the fact that it unfolds and becomes

⁴ Yengo 1994: 9.

generalized in front of our own eyes. For, we undoubtedly live at the end of the 20th century in what is a great era, marked by a global process of democratization whose importance we are only beginning to understand. In the East as in the South, dictatorships are crumbling, and together we rediscover, with regained joy and fraternal feelings, the great principles of freedom and equality (...). Thus true politics was regained, a politics to be understood as a celebration of reason, as the happy rediscovery of great principles, as a forceful return of ethical exigency leading to the final condemnation of the continuous violations of human rights which form the basis of dictatorships. It is also to be understood as the emergence of morality into a domain that pretended to ignore it until then: the domain of human management (...). Morality is claiming its legitimacy, freeing the power of thought that had been humiliated, that no longer dared making itself heard and that had become content to mutter in the loneliness of the individual conscience and the isolation of confessionals (...). Reason, which was choked by the sound of weapons and the ideological drone of the dominant thought, is finally and again going to express high and loud its reprobation and, in the name of a few standards and universal rules, going to say *no*.⁵

During our philosophical discussions which took place during an international conference organized by UNESCO, in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast, on Philosophy and Democracy in Africa (March 1999), Paulin Hountondji was less categorical about the general impact of his first proposal, and he invited participants to question the reasons justifying the return of contested, former political leaders on the political scene during democratic elections – elections that in themselves were sometimes questionable, as was the case with the first post-national conference elections of 1992 in Congo-Brazzaville.

The search for truth in politics over a period of thirty years came up against the refusal of political players to tell the truth about their own politics, despite the political and religious rituals engaged in. Indeed, neither truth nor the pacification of the political space were reached by the mere act of the “raising of the moral standards” of Congolese political life, by the rituals of collective cleansing, by the cleaning of cemeteries and by having 1,100 persons plant a peace tree in the newly established “Garden of National Unity”. Access to political truth became a game of permutation, submitted to the complex combinatorial analysis of norms: those issued from ancient Congolese community-based cultures and those inherited from individual and contractual modern Congolese and European cultures. As soon as these norms made it possible to access truth in politics by seceding from democracy-related conflicts, they excluded democratic undertakings in the sense that certain events, and the most crucial events at that, once more were allowed to pass as indescribable and as “politically sacred”.

Yet, in political democracy one needs to invoke the social logic of the exercise of power. Political democracy implies the judicial equality of all

⁵ Hountondji 1991: 5-7.

citizens in the eyes of the law. The ideology of representation consists in establishing rightful equality, and making such equality to be respected, despite the given of natural, physical inequalities; and such equality, and the respect it receives, depends on the pluralist and harmonious management of existing differences and identities that, each individually, bear on the representational or imaginary form of social homogeneity.

The Congolese nation-state has inherited two reference systems from two logics that are contradictory, both in their production and distribution systems, and in their socio-cultural framework of membership. As it happened, socio-economic and pre-capitalist practices based on family units, were combined with those governed by a capitalist form of production. As a result, in the state, individuals identified themselves in two ways: sometimes by claiming membership of a social class based on their position within the production process; and sometimes by referring to ethnic identity. Based on this, and largely dependent upon people's political aspirations and involvements, differential importance was attached to different organisatory principles within of the structure, such as ethnic affirmation, class consciousness and religious belonging. In most cases, if individuals in power or in search of political power were using ethnicity for their own political ends, one could understand the purpose of their practice more easily by taking into account their ideologies of representational power and those of ethnic, religious and identity-related forms of reference. In actual fact, the Congolese nation-state is the inevitable result of an endogenous and an exogenous legacy:

- on the one hand, the logic used for running and managing the political power of pre-colonial politically minded Congolese communities, characterized by the interpenetration of temporal, spiritual and religious power, and governed by the notion that ultimately, power is not a human attribute but a prerogative of God;
- and on the other hand, a legacy based on the fact that this contemporary nation-state is the result of the logic used for running and managing the colonial power that was based on the institutional separation of politics and religion, as well as that of public and private spheres, among others.

However, in this light, the democratic process obeys as much to the internal subjective causes of the dynamics of the social movements of each country, as to the external objective causes that result from the global democratic rush which has been intensified by the media.

Violence and the citizenship crisis

After the Sovereign National Convention, the main reason for the exacerbation of conflicts between the various Congolese political players, from 1993 onwards, can be understood through each player's conception of political power. Being a context for the accumulation of personal wealth, as well as for clientelist distribution of material and financial resources, the state became a stake between political groups which were fighting for exclusive control over it along the lines of ethno-regional rivalries. Yet, the two main political forces of the transition period (June 1991 to August 1992) already had in them the seeds of political violence, with Brazzaville as the main centre of activities. In April 1992, when both political parties won the municipal and legislative elections, they decided to give more importance to territorial as well as ethnic anchorage. In August 1992, the presidential elections were won by Pascal Lissouba, who was supported by Denis Sassou-Nguesso and his party (Parti Congolais du Travail, PCT). However, after signing the electoral and government agreement with the Union pour le développement et progrès social (UPADS) on 11th August 1992, the PCT denounced the agreement as it felt betrayed by UPADS; the latter had reserved, in Prime Minister Stéphane Bongho-Nouarra's government, only three ministerial posts for the PCT out of 27. Without delay, on 30 September 1992, the PCT then signed an agreement with Union pour le Renouveau Démocratique (URD) which included all the parties of the new opposition within the National Assembly, thus creating a change of majority. On 31st October 1992, a vote of no confidence was passed against the Bongho-Nouarra Government and the new majority asked for the resignation of the Prime Minister, as per the Constitution.

Since then, Congo-Brazzaville has entered a long period of instability as well as political and military crises. In January 1998, after Sassou-Nguesso's military victory, the country held a forum on National Reconciliation, Unity and Democracy, which did not bring back the peace for which citizens had hoped so much. The South African experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a source of inspiration for some of the Congolese political key players as well as those of civil societies.

Finally, while the complexity of the social and political fight for pluralist democracy in Congo should not be seen in a pessimist light, one must acknowledge the difficulties attending the realization of such a goal in the near future. As a result, one is left with two impressions:

- firstly, the Congolese nation-state in search of democratic legitimacy

remains powerless, in the face of the decline of Congolese institutions and political life, while political wars occur time and again (1993 to 1997, 1998 and 1999), and in the face of the implacable logic of international trade which imposes a negative sanction on all non-conformist national politics ;

- secondly, international trade (seen as an illegitimate co-sovereign), could end up as a complete substitute for people's sovereignty.

Despite the war situation which is still perceptible today, and despite the failed attempts for "political negotiations" between the protagonists, I think it is important to postulate the creation of a pluralist democracy for Congo in the immediate future. Such a democracy should then have the following characteristics:

- a plurality of political parties, professional and scientific associations, and development NGOs;
- freedom of opinion, associations and movements;
- the separation of the executive, legislative and judicial powers;
- free elections at regular intervals, thus allowing citizens from towns, municipalities and regions to take collective decisions;
- the acceptance of the alternation principle in government;
- the spreading of a culture of democracy by fighting ethnocentrism when promoting regional cultural diversity, and by decentralizing the means for cultural action;
- the spreading, among citizens, of a culture of democracy that is a culture of peace
- the latter being founded on universal values of the respect of life, justice, freedom, tolerance, solidarity, human rights and equality between genders.

This culture of democracy must truly be one of peace. Such peace has to spring from the fact that the behaviour of social and political key players' is based respect for others, for the cultural identity of other, for the spirit of equity and solidarity when distributing wealth, and for the promotion of environmental quality for all by using science and technology rationally and efficiently, in the name of peace and democracy. In this way, a democracy based on co-operation will complement a democracy based on peaceful confrontation. The peaceful confrontation of ideas, and co-operation in solving fundamental societal problems, will be the two main ingredients out

of which a viable democracy will be born in Congolese society in the near future.

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