

Church-State Relations in Cameroon's Postcolony: The Case of the Roman Catholic Church

Piet Konings
University of Leiden

Abstract

The socio-political role of mainline Christian churches in the African postcolony tends to be more complex than a number of pessimistic and optimistic scholars originally assumed. There is growing evidence that the relations between church leaders and the authoritarian and corrupt elites, who seek to exercise hegemony in the African postcolonial states, cannot simply be reduced to either cooperation or conflict. This study of the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the postcolonial state in Cameroon provides proof of a remarkable shift from relative harmony in the one-party era to frequent conflicts in the current political liberalisation era. And, even more significantly, it shows that church leaders failed to come to a united stand on socio-political issues in both periods due not only to personal rivalries but also to various ethno-regional cleavages.

Introduction

Two distinct views have emerged of the socio-political role of mainline Christian churches in the African postcolony in the past decades. The first seems quite pessimistic. Several Africanists look upon these churches as vestiges of imperialism and allies of authoritarian rule (cf. Mbembe 1988; Bayart 1993; Gifford 1993, 1994; Haynes 1996, 2004). They allege that, in the wake of their widespread support for colonial rule, these churches have become increasingly appropriated by the postcolonial state, in effect, providing it legitimacy either tacitly or explicitly. They advance the following main arguments to uphold this view.

It has been claimed that church and state leaders in Africa show common

interests and sentiments, and form, with other well-positioned social groups such as businessmen, an informal coalition of elites who seek to exercise hegemonic control over society. Bayart (1993), in particular, maintains that Christian churches are governed in a similar way as African postcolonial states. Like the political elite, church leaders are driven in their search for power, wealth and status by what he calls “the governmentality of the belly”—a predatory style of governance characterised by clientelist relationships and corruption. Due to similarities in governing style, it has been relatively easy for the state to co-opt churches and encourage them to support the status quo by way of favours and privileges.

Others argue that church leaders have rapidly become convinced that they could protect institutional interests more expeditiously in a climate of good rather than poor relations with the authoritarian postcolonial state. In a situation where the churches were eager to retain what they had, including a prominent role in the provision of education, medical facilities and, more generally, religious freedom, social influence and material prosperity, it appeared sensible not to challenge government policies in the open but instead choose the route of discreet lobbying to effect desired policy changes (Haynes 1996: 117). Church leaders were well aware that the increasingly authoritarian political elite had already restricted the operations of non-religious civil-society organisations that could endanger their position of power.

The other view of the socio-political role of mainline Christian churches in the African postcolony tends to be more optimistic. It regards churches as the masthead of civil society, pointing to their proven capacity to challenge authoritarian regimes, urging reform, advocating socio-political change and even presiding over change itself. Various Africanists refer to the central leadership role of mainline Christian churches in the democratisation movements that emerged on the African continent in the era of global neo-liberal reforms (cf. Gifford 1995; Constantin and Coulon 1997; Phiri 2001; Sabar 2002). Like the pessimistic school of thought, they advance divergent arguments in support of their position.

In his earlier work on state-church relations in Cameroon, Bayart (1972, 1973) concludes that when the state suppresses political opposition groups thus creating a vacuum in the system. Churches tend to assume the functions of these organisations, leading to confrontation between the state and the church. He argues that the churches are the only civil society organisations that enjoy relative autonomy from the postcolonial hegemony: they remain “zones of freedom” in an otherwise oppressive political environment. According to him, churches are virtually a “state within a state” since authoritarian African regimes appear reluctant to strive for their subordination. While this particular claim seems a little exaggerated, it makes the point that churches in many African countries effectively rival the state in the delivery of social services. Phiri (2001) has attempted to show the relevance of Bayart’s model in his study of church-state relations in Zambia, Zimbabwe and

South Africa. The relatively autonomous churches in these countries did confront the state after it had subordinated civil-society groups that would have otherwise played this role. Once civil society had been liberated, however, these churches tended to withdraw from the political arena, and reverted back to their less visible, more traditional, pastoral functions.

Other authors try to show the key role of the mainline Christian churches in civil society in a different way from Bayart and Phiri. They stress that these churches are the only civil-society organisations that enjoy a high level of legitimacy in society. Moreover, they have the institutional and organisational structures, communication resources, leadership capability and transnational contacts necessary to resist or even rival the state (Médard 1997; Buijtenhuijs and Reynierse 1993).

Clearly, these contrasting views are ideal types. In reality, the contrast may not be as stark, and the situation in each country may be considerably more complex than a simple reduction to church-state alliances or conflict might suggest (Longman 2005). The existing body of literature also indicates that the role of mainline Christian churches has varied over time, within the country, and within the church itself.

In this study, I focus on the socio-political role of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) in Cameroon's postcolony. The RCC was introduced into Cameroon in 1890 and is now the country's largest mainline Christian group. It has been estimated that about 25 per cent of Cameroon's population identify with this church (Episcopal Sub-Commission for Church History 1995). Significantly, while all other mainline Christian churches in the country tend to have a regional base, the RCC is truly a national church. At present, it is divided into five ecclesiastical provinces (Bamenda, Bertoua, Douala, Garoua and Yaoundé) with twenty-three dioceses.

There has been a gradual shift in the RCC's socio-political role in the postcolonial state from cooperation to conflict. Relations between the RCC and the state seem to be highly polarised in contemporary society as a result of their differing perceptions and interpretations of what constitutes a viable road map for the much-hoped-for democratic and social transformation. However, church-state relations remain complex because they tend to reflect the country's unresolved ethno-regional contradictions. In fact, there are various ethno-regional cleavages within the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon (NECC) that regularly prevent the bishops from taking a united stand on socio-political issues (Bayart and Mbembe 1989; Gifford 1998; Konings 2003; Médard 2004). Bayart and Mbembe (1989) allege that these ethno-regional conflicts among church leaders are essentially "shadow theatre" and hide the "politics of the belly". The ethno-regional element masks the church leaders' search for an increase in their power position and their share in what Cameroonians call the "national and ecclesiastical cake".

At present, the principal ethno-regional division within the NECC is between bishops of Beti ethnic origin who are regarded as being sympathetic to the Beti-

dominated regime, and bishops of Bamileke and Anglophone origin who are seen as hostile to the regime (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). The Bamileke, who are renowned in Cameroon for their high degree of mobility and entrepreneurial spirit, form the major economic power bloc and are viewed by the Beti as a threat to their political power. Anglophones feel marginalised in the Francophone-dominated postcolonial state in socio-cultural, economic and political terms and are striving for a return to a federal state or outright secession.

This study is based on extensive reading of primary and secondary sources, close observation of church activities since 1985, and interviews with church members and their leaders.

RCC-State Relations in Cameroon during One-Party Rule, 1961-1990

The relationship between the RCC and the authoritarian one-party state came to be marked by cooperation and complementarity after some initial frictions (cf. Bayart 1972, 1973, 1979; Médard 1997). This relationship can undoubtedly be partly explained by reference to its colonial roots.

Although it would be a grave error to simply identify the missionary project with colonialism, it is certain that both enterprises were basically supportive of each other. The RCC needed colonial rule for the successful implementation of its evangelising mission, while the colonial administration relied to a large extent on the RCC to carry out tasks such as education and health and to create a sense of moral order. In the case of Cameroon, it is interesting to observe that, following the post-First World War partitioning of the former German Kamerun Protectorate into French and British mandate territories, the new power holders expelled the German missionaries and replaced them with missionaries from their home countries (Messina and van Slageren 2005). They apparently felt that missionaries of the same nationality as the colonial rulers would be more reliable partners in the new political constellation.

The usual cooperation between the two partners did, of course, not prevent tensions and frictions entirely. In Francophone Cameroon, for example, there were fierce disputes between the missions and the mandate authority on the issue of matrimonial law and educational policies. The 1930 decree on the installation of secondary mission posts under the command of indigenous catechists, which aimed to slow down the growing influence of the missions among the local population, and the 1933 decree that tried to control religious practices, both created tensions (Ngongo 1982; Messina and van Slageren 2005). In some cases, the churches also acted as the "spokesmen of the ordinary people", denouncing abuses like forced labour. Such conflicts, however, never disturbed the generally good relations between the two partners.¹

In sharp contrast to the Protestant mission, the RCC appeared to support the colonial regime when it vehemently opposed the radical nationalist party, the *Union des Populations Camerounaises* (UPC), which started guerilla warfare in the mid-1950s (Joseph 1977). In an Episcopal letter in April 1955, RCC leaders strongly condemned the UPC for its allegedly communist doctrine and its violent actions, some of which were directed at church property and church members.

Following independence and reunification in 1961, the RCC was faced with the authoritarian regime of Ahmadou Ahidjo, a Muslim Fulbe from northern Cameroon, who introduced a highly centralised administration, a one-party system, and a repressive security machinery. Initially, there were some mutual suspicions. RCC leaders feared a forced Islamisation of southern Cameroon by the northern Muslim president but such fears soon proved to be without foundation since Ahidjo was by no means a Muslim fanatic. On the contrary, he highly respected the constitution that promulgated a separation between state and religion. Ahidjo, in turn, was unsure of the RCC position towards his regime since most of the RCC leaders had supported one of the main opposition parties, the *Bloc Démocratique Camerounais* (BDC) led by prominent Catholics such as Dr Aujoulat and André-Marie Mbida. His suspicions increased when, in February 1962, *L'Effort Camerounais*, an RCC weekly publication, revealed the so-called "train affair", in which a number of political prisoners had died from asphyxiation while being transported by train from Douala to Yaoundé. Father Fertin, a Frenchman and the journal's editor, was subsequently expelled from the country. Archbishop Jean Zoa of Yaoundé protested but this turned out to be his last protest action during the one-party era.

Such initial suspicions gradually disappeared when both sides sought to come to a rapprochement by cementing personal relations. One essential precondition for this warming of relations was that RCC leaders were to abandon the church's prophetic and moral mission in society and stop openly criticising the authoritarian regime. That the RCC leaders were prepared to do so could be attributed to the fact that they had come to highly value Ahidjo's determined pursuit of nation-building and national development. As Archbishop Zoa once declared in an interview:

Despite the dictatorial tendencies of Ahidjo's policies, his concern with national unity and his attachment to peace were fundamental factors for national construction. The church must help him and encourage him in this option. (Messina 2000: 224)

Clearly, this rapprochement was to mutual advantage. On the one hand, it enabled Ahidjo to avoid open conflict with the RCC, being well aware that churches occupied a potentially powerful position in society. To reassure RCC leaders of his

good intentions, he surrounded himself with influential Christian leaders and established diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1966. On the other hand, the rapprochement also benefited RCC leaders in the sense that it forestalled a total integration of church associations in the one-party state, similar to what had happened to other civil-society organisations. In addition, it allowed them to focus on the defence of church interests. In this respect, two problems were of particular concern to the church authorities, namely schools and the position of the church in northern Cameroon.

In 1968, a crisis developed in state-RCC relations regarding confessional primary schools. For various reasons, the majority of the political and bureaucratic elite urged the regime to abolish confessional primary education or, at least, to tighten its control over it. RCC leaders themselves appeared to be divided on the issue. Archbishop Zoa of Yaoundé was in favour of a partial transfer of Catholic primary schools to state control, mainly for financial reasons, and in return for this offer, he demanded an extension of religious education to all public schools. Bishop Mongo of Douala and Bishop Ndongmo of Nkongsamba were opposed to Archbishop Zoa's stand. They tended to look on free confessional primary education as an obstacle to totalitarianism, a safeguard for better-quality education and, above all, an instrument of evangelisation. They therefore pleaded for the preservation of confessional education through an increase in public subventions and parental fees. Eventually Ahidjo intervened and proposed a compromise that forestalled a rupture between the RCC and the state. The state would not nationalise confessional primary education and state subventions to confessional schools would even be raised somewhat. Ahidjo fixed a minimum wage for Catholic teachers who had been on strike demanding higher wages, as well as the conditions and modalities for a partial transfer on the request of one or both parties. RCC leaders, in turn, dropped their demand for an extension of religious education to public schools (Bayart 1972, 1973, 1979).

A second problem in RCC-state relations was the position of Christianity in northern Cameroon. The regional state apparatus in northern Cameroon was dominated by the Muslim Fulbe minority, President Ahidjo's own ethnic group. It was trying to promote Islam and the use of Fulfulde among the majority Kirdi (non-Muslim) population and suspected the Christian churches of strengthening anti-Fulbe feelings among the Kirdi. All kinds of administrative measures were taken to prevent the church's growth but it would be wrong to classify these anti-Christian activities as manifestations of systematic religious persecution. Cameroon was designated as a lay state in its constitution, which means that, by law, no religious group could receive privileges. The harassment depended entirely on the intentions and feelings of individual regional administrators. Hence, the degree of pressure put on the churches and their members varied considerably from one district to another. In several parts of northern Cameroon, tensions resulted in

open violence. In some areas, Christians were forced to convert to Islam, catechists were threatened, molested or chased away, and churches burnt down (Schilder 1994). RCC leaders, like Archbishop Zoa, lodged complaints with Ahidjo about the situation of Christians in the north and in an attempt to maintain cordial relations with RCC leaders, Ahidjo intervened when violence broke out. He didn't, however, endeavour to bring about real change in state-church relations in the north (Bayart 1972; Médard 1997).

Another issue that put relations between the RCC and the state to the test was the so-called "Bishop Ndongmo affair". Enthroned as bishop of the Nkongsamba Diocese in 1964, Albert Ndongmo was to become the only member of the National Episcopal Conference of Cameroon (NECC) who continued to oppose the authoritarian Ahidjo regime. Ndongmo was a Bamileke who later confessed that he had supported the goals but not necessarily the methods of the radical nationalist party, the UPC, which, by the time of his enthronement as bishop, was still continuing its guerrilla warfare in the Bamileke region. He persistently championed the defence of fundamental liberties and a certain degree of pluralism, and disapproved of Cameroon's support for the Nigerian military junta in the Biafra war. He regularly castigated the regime and the national security apparatus for their repressive activities, and undertook initiatives to have political prisoners released. In one of his sermons, for example, he threatened that he would urge his diocesan faithful not to pay taxes if "diabolical" torture and repression persisted. He created a journal, *L'Essor des Jeunes*, which defied the 1962 subversive decree and censorship with its political criticisms. In August 1970, he was arrested on charges of being associated with Ernest Quandie, a Bamileke tribesman and one of the last remaining leaders of the UPC rebellion, and of being implicated in a plot to overthrow the Ahidjo regime. In January 1971, a military court sentenced him to death by firing squad.

Shortly after his arrest, on 8 November 1970, there was a meeting of the NECC in Bamenda, during the course of which the internal divisions between the bishops on this issue became manifest. The papal pro-nuncio Gallina exhorted all bishops to support their arrested colleague unconditionally. Archbishop Zoa of Yaoundé vehemently disapproved of the pro-nuncio's stand, claiming that the latter was not entitled to impose any position whatsoever on this delicate matter upon the NECC. He continuously stressed that the Bishop Ndongmo affair was not a manifestation of any antagonism between the RCC and the state, but was about an individual crime (which implied that he was convinced of Bishop Ndongmo's guilt). He is generally believed to have left Bishop Ndongmo to his fate because of ethno-regional and personal rivalries.

Strikingly, the Bishop Ndongmo affair fuelled existing Fulbe Muslim hostilities towards the RCC in northern Cameroon because the regional authorities accused the church of being involved in an attempt to murder President Ahidjo and seize power. Ahidjo himself did not take advantage of the Bishop Ndongmo affair and

attack the church and bring it fully under state control. Instead, he once again tried to avoid conflict with the RCC and granted the bishops audiences to discuss the matter. He discreetly expelled the pro-nuncio from the country for alleged partiality in the affair. And, most significantly, he commuted Bishop Ndongmo's sentence to life imprisonment. Bishop Ndongmo was sent to the notorious concentration camp for political prisoners in Tchollire but was released after five years, just before an election (Mukong 1985). This gave Ahidjo the opportunity to show himself in a good light but the pardon was probably part of an agreement between the state and the Vatican that allowed Bishop Ndongmo to leave Cameroon for Rome. After living in Rome for a few years, he moved to Canada where he adopted Canadian citizenship. He died there in 1992 but his body was taken back to Cameroon and was buried amid much pomp and ceremony in Nkongsamba Cathedral (Bayart 1979; Gaillard 1994; Gifford 1998).

After the Bishop Ndongmo affair, there was a long and peaceful coexistence between the RCC and the state. RCC leaders and associations merely focused on evangelising and their social tasks—a situation that was promoted by fear of the growing repression on the part of the authoritarian Ahidjo regime. Church activities and services came under the close supervision of the secret police, and the Catholic press, which had enjoyed a larger measure of freedom than other press organs, also gradually became affected by state censorship. The editor of *L'Essor des Jeunes*, Mr Lingo, was imprisoned for his critical articles. In September 1974, two issues of *L'Effort Camerounais* were seized: the first because it carried a picture of Colonel Ojukwu, the leader of the breakaway Republic of Biafra during the Nigerian civil war, and the second because it contained an article denouncing the seizure of the previous issue. Eventually, both journals were forced to stop publishing.

It was not until the end of the Ahidjo regime that the Anglophone bishops in Cameroon lodged protests against long-standing socio-political evils. That these bishops dared to openly protest against the regime was not altogether surprising. Anglophones held the regime responsible for the growing “marginalisation, assimilation and exploitation” of their region in the Francophone-dominated postcolonial state—the so-called Anglophone problem. Since the late British trusteeship period they had come to highly value the autonomy of civil society and political freedom (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003; Ndi 2005). In 1977, however, the two leaders of the newly created Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda in Anglophone Cameroon, Archbishop Paul Verdzevov of Bamenda and Bishop Pius Awa of Buea, issued a pastoral letter in which they publicly denounced the rampant bribery and corruption prevalent in the country.² Following his enthronement as Bishop of Yagoua in northern Cameroon, Christian Tumi, an Anglophone, began to condemn Christian persecution in the region, which he perceived as a blatant violation of the constitutional provisions on religious freedom. This brought him into conflict not only with the regional state authorities but also

with Archbishop Zoa of Yaoundé who feared that Tumi's actions would disturb existing peaceful relations with the state (Tumi 2006).

The sudden transfer of power from Ahmadou Ahidjo to Paul Biya in November 1982 raised expectations among the Cameroonian population in general and the Catholic population in particular. Paul Biya was a Catholic, an ex-seminarian, who entertained close relations with a number of RCC leaders, especially those from his own ethnic group, the Beti.³ Moreover, his message of "Renewal" that aimed at introducing a limited measure of political liberalisation, moralisation and rigour (Takougang and Krieger 1998) strongly appealed to RCC leaders since it appeared to directly attack the two main vices of his predecessor's regime: authoritarianism and corruption. In addition, following an attempted coup in 1984 by the presidential guard which was then mainly under the command of Fulbe Muslims from northern Cameroon, President Biya put an end to Muslim Fulbe domination and Christian persecution in northern Cameroon.

For some time after, RCC leaders regularly expressed their support for the new government, despite the fact that it became increasingly evident that the regime was only ready to bring about marginal reforms in the existing political system (Konings 1996; Takougang and Krieger 1998). For example, in their pastoral letter of 15 January 1988 on "the commitment of the laity in the life of the nation", the bishops saw the introduction of a competitive system in the one-party state, which allowed more than one candidate in electoral constituencies to run for party positions or legislative seats, as notable democratic progress. They called upon the faithful to cast their votes during the 1988 parliamentary elections, arguing that political involvement was a biblical obligation for every Christian. They maintained that voting in compliance with the gospel would result in the right people—honest and competent citizens who were ready to use their talents in the service of the common good—being elected.⁴

A prelude to the development of antagonistic relations between the RCC and the state during political liberalisation was the RCC leaders' growing discontent with the government's inconsistent policies on subventions to Catholic schools. The 1976 and 1987 laws on private education had abolished the existing government's grants-in-aid to approved voluntary agencies and replaced them with government subventions to all private agencies, confessional and non-confessional alike, all of which came under the umbrella of "private education". The problem was that the government unilaterally and arbitrarily decided the amount of annual subventions. Moreover, following the severe economic crisis in 1986/87, public subventions to Catholic schools had witnessed a significant reduction and payments tended to be irregular, creating enormous difficulties for the Catholic education authorities to continue financing Catholic education. As a result of the new laws, glaring inequalities emerged between public and private education with free education for students in public schools and fee-paying education for students in private education. In spite of similar

qualifications, teachers in public schools enjoyed much higher salaries than those in private schools (Ecclesiastical Province of Bamenda 1991; Ndongko and Tambo 2001). Given this situation, the NECC produced a pastoral letter in January 1989⁵ in which it drew attention to the various problems facing Catholic education and called upon the government and the faithful to help rescue Catholic schools from collapse. RCC leaders intensified their protest action against these deplorable government policies on private education during the era of political liberalisation. Political liberalisation, in fact, enabled the RCC to use its relative autonomy to resume its prophetic and moral role in society in response to the long-standing socio-economic and political grievances of its members and other Cameroonians and their clamour for change.

RCC-State Relations in Cameroon during Political Liberalisation, 1990-2007

By 1990 Cameroon was marked by a severe economic and political crisis. The majority of the population was inclined to hold the increasingly corrupt and authoritarian Biya regime responsible for the deepening economic crisis, resulting in a further loss of legitimacy. And with the end of the Cold War and the move towards democratisation in Eastern Europe, Cameroonians “like Africans elsewhere” looked upon these changes as an added incentive for demanding greater political reforms, including the introduction of multiparty democracy (Konings 1996; Takougang and Krieger 1998). Given these circumstances, one could observe not only a growing dissent within the ruling class but also a more critical attitude towards the state on the part of the RCC (Akoko and Oben 2006).

Strikingly, although RCC leaders attempted to present a united front in public, they could not totally conceal their internal divisions, particularly those along ethno-regional lines where the Anglophone-Francophone divide seemed to dominate. Like other members of the Anglophone elite, Anglophone bishops became even more critical of the regime during political liberalisation, which created space for Anglophones to voice their long-standing grievances about Francophone dominance and organise in associations and political parties (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). Many Francophone bishops originated from the Beti region and thus tended to be more favourably disposed towards the regime in which their tribesmen dominated.

Students of Cameroonian politics agree that two Anglophone RCC leaders, Cardinal Christian Tumi and Archbishop Paul Verdzevov of Bamenda, have played a prominent role in the country's political liberalisation process. This made them frequent targets of vehement government attacks. The appointment of an Anglophone, Christian Tumi, the then archbishop of Garoua, as the first Cameroonian cardinal in 1988 appears not to have been well received by the

regime and many of the faithful and clergy in the Beti region, including Archbishop Jean Zoa of Yaoundé who had been the leading figure in the RCC during the post-reunification period. Tumi's new appointment proved to be a turning point in RCC-state relations: a growing shift from cooperation to conflict. The outspoken cardinal soon became one of the most notable figures in public life, especially after his transfer in 1991 from the distant Garoua archdiocese to Douala archdiocese, which had become a hotbed of rebellion against the regime (Takougang and Krieger 1998). Although an Anglophone, Tumi studied in France and is completely bilingual. Even outside the RCC he has exerted considerable moral authority. He was constantly being tipped as a potential chairman whenever a national forum on politics or the constitution seemed imminent. He came to be widely perceived as a formidable challenger to President Paul Biya were he to stand as a presidential candidate and has been regularly urged by the opposition to stand as their joint candidate. Compared to Cardinal Tumi, Archbishop Verdzev's demeanour is quiet but his convictions are just as forceful and he is, therefore, contentious in the eyes of the government. Archbishop Verdzev is reputed to be one of the leading defenders of human rights in Cameroon (Atanga 2001) and, with Cardinal Tumi, he has continued to engage the church in public life, to the discomfort of the state.

The internal divisions within the NECC were particularly visible during the early phase of political liberalisation. Following government suppression of an attempt to create a multiparty system in early 1990, the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), organised marches against a "precipitate introduction of multiparty democracy" that ended on 30 March with a mass in Yaoundé Cathedral. According to the CPDM organisers, this mass was intended "to pray for peace" and was celebrated by Archbishop Zoa. The media and the opposition, however, immediately interpreted the event as an expression of the archbishop's support for the regime and the one-party system, and in an interview given afterwards, Cardinal Tumi seemed to agree with this interpretation, stating that he himself would never have officiated at such a service. Obviously irritated by the cardinal's statement, Archbishop Zoa accused him of interfering in matters of the Yaoundé diocese, which were out of his jurisdiction (Titi Nwel 1995; Messina 2000).

Apparently, the Anglophone bishops welcomed the official launch of the country's first opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), in Bamenda in Anglophone Cameroon on 26 May 1990. However, they deeply regretted the killings on that occasion of six SDF supporters by state security forces. Significantly, the events of 26 May created political awareness among Cameroonians and increased demands for the legalisation of a multiparty system in Cameroon.

While RCC leaders still seemed to disagree on the preferred political system for the country, they agreed about the causes and effects of Cameroon's economic crisis. On 3 June, a week after the 26 May events, the Catholic bishops published a

historic pastoral letter on the economic crisis.⁶ It was quite critical of the regime and noted that the church could no longer remain silent in the light of the ordeal that the nation's economic crisis had placed on innocent individuals and families. The prelates attributed the crisis to "structures of sin". These entailed not only the unjust economic world order but also the predatory behaviour of the political elite: the notorious embezzlement of public funds, individual tax arrears amounting to hundreds of billions of CFA francs, and the egoism of the rich and powerful who were working against the "smallest of the small" in Cameroon and elsewhere.

The media perceived the pastoral letter as a vitriolic attack on the government and accused the bishops of interfering in activities beyond their competence, namely the economy. Although that letter made no reference to multipartyism, Cardinal Christian Tumi used a press conference on 11 June to condemn the Bamenda killings and call for the creation of a multiparty system.⁷ He also appealed to the administration for an end to censorship and a change in the policy that had led to the country's economic crisis. In reaction, Archbishop Zoa indicated in an interview with the state-owned *Cameroon Tribune* that Cardinal Tumi was only expressing his personal opinion and not that of the RCC in Cameroon.

Following mounting internal and external pressure, President Paul Biya introduced political liberalisation measures in December 1990 that included the introduction of a multiparty system and a certain degree of freedom of association and the press. Despite such measures, the first phase of the political liberalisation process was characterised by violence between the regime and the opposition, all the more so because the government constantly refused to give in to the radical political opposition's major demand for the holding of a national sovereign conference similar to those held in some other African countries (Eboussi Boulaga, 1993; Takougang and Krieger, 1998).

Given these circumstances, RCC leaders started calling for peace, dialogue and reconciliation. On 12 April 1991, the NECC condemned "the hardening of attitudes and the acts of provocation and repression which would only aggravate an already grave situation" and the bishops urged all believers to pray for peace in Cameroon.⁸ In response to the bishops' message, RCC communities organised special prayers for peace on the last Sunday of April 1991. Cardinal Christian Tumi contacted the opposition parties in an attempt to persuade them to enter into dialogue with the government. His conciliatory efforts contributed to the start of Tripartite talks between the state, opposition parties and representatives of civil society on 30 October 1991 that were aimed at breaking the political impasse and halting the violence by reaching a consensus. During the Tripartite talks, he was subjected to verbal assaults from the regime for his position on certain issues, for example the lowering of the voting age from 21 to 18 years, and he, like several other political and religious leaders from Douala, later deplored the way the Tripartite talks had been manipulated and abused by the regime (Titi Nwel, 1995: 178).

In the period leading up to the presidential elections in October 1992, Cardinal Tumi issued a pastoral letter in which he said he deeply regretted the lack of free and fair elections following independence and called upon the people to vote competent and morally upright people into power.⁹ Despite his appeal receiving wide publicity, these elections did not turn out to be either free or fair. And, even more importantly, after the elections the government imposed a state of emergency in Bamenda, the home base of John Fru Ndi, the SDF's charismatic chairman who claimed that Paul Biya had stolen victory from him. On 29 November 1992, the Archbishop of Bamenda, Paul Verdzekov, strongly condemned the government for the mass arrests and torture of SDF militants during the state of emergency.¹⁰ He then came under severe attack from the Minister of Communication, Augustin Kontchou Kouomegni, but he received the firm support of the NECC.¹¹

With Archbishop Zoa from Yaoundé, Cardinal Tumi participated in the 1993-94 constitutional talks but, unlike Archbishop Zoa, he disagreed with most of the proceedings and finally walked out. Since then, the RCC prelates have frequently addressed burning socio-political issues in sermons, press interviews and pastoral letters signed by the NECC or bishops. By so doing, they have filled a lacuna left by the political opposition, which either became more or less incorporated into the regime or proved ineffective. They focused in particular on corruption, tribalism, justice and peace, good governance, criminality and security, elections and poverty reduction.

The RCC leaders have addressed corruption on several occasions. In September 2000, the NECC issued a pastoral letter arguing that the economic problems facing the country were being compounded by the dishonesty of corrupt government officials who were diverting national resources for their own benefit and transferring public funds to private accounts in foreign banks.¹² During their *ad limina* visit to the Pope in March 2006, the bishops demanded the restitution of all pillaged funds.¹³ Strikingly, they also tried to eradicate corruption among the faithful. For instance, on 12 January 2004, they launched a programme in "the fight against corruption through schools" (FACTS) that was targeted at primary and secondary schools.

In a pastoral letter in November 1997, the bishops exposed tribalism as a means to achieving political ends at a time when the regime was attempting to incite the "autochthonous" ethnic minority groups against "settlers" with the aim of winning votes and consolidating power. They referred to "anonymous tracts, bearing clearly tribalistic messages, sometimes supported by biblical quotations, circulating in the country inciting one group to rise up against another under the pretext of self-defence and the protection of minorities".¹⁴

In their Episcopal letters of 1997 on "Justice and Peace" and that of 1998 on "Good Governance", the bishops raised the issue of the concentration of executive power and the judiciary's lack of independence. They argued that the concentration

of power was responsible for the weakening of the administration, the legislature and the judiciary, and advocated a judicial system that would function freely without intervention from the executive. They also asked the state to ensure the moral integrity of those who administered justice. In 2003, the bishops expressed concern over the way the government was managing the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) funds. For want of transparency, they called on the government to involve the church in the management of these funds, stressing that HIPC policies demanded the participation of civil society in this initiative. The bishops made this call amid allegations that top government officials were embezzling money from the funds.

In the wake of persistent election malpractices since the institution of multiparty democracy, the bishops, at their 2003 conference, called for a complete overhaul of the electoral process. They stated that the church stood for an independent electoral commission in which all political parties would participate freely and fairly. In 2006, the NECC's Justice and Peace Commission devised two draft proposals to amend the electoral laws. These proposals were subsequently sent to parliament. The bishops also regularly exhorted the faithful to vote. Seeing voting as a Christian duty, they decided to create an election observation force of their own to safeguard free and fair elections.

RCC leaders also continued to protest against the government's dwindling support for Catholic education, maintaining that there was a dire need for increased and prompt payment of public subventions.¹⁵ They were also forced to put pressure on the government because of regular strike actions by the Catholic Teachers' Association (CATA) for an increase in their low salaries, especially when compared to those of teachers in public schools.¹⁶

The bishops also made political statements on an individual basis. Anglophone church leaders, like Cardinal Tumi and Archbishop Verdzekov, have regularly voiced concerns about the "Anglophone problem" (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2003). In November 2001, Cardinal Tumi appealed to President Biya to enter into dialogue with the Anglophone secessionist movement, the Southern Cameroons National Council (SCNC) and, in accordance with the 1996 constitution, introduce a large measure of decentralisation in the country as a solution to the marginalisation of Anglophones. He predicted that the SCNC would become more militant should the government continue to ignore the plight of Anglophones.¹⁷ So serious was the prelate about the unenviable position of Anglophones that he said that if it was the prerogative of Cameroonians to choose a cardinal, it would not have been him.

Such interventions by RCC leaders in the economic and political domain regularly provoked severe confrontations with the regime, and the outspoken Cardinal Tumi was the primary target of government attacks (Tumi 2006). One such confrontation between the regime and Cardinal Tumi occurred in 2000 when the cardinal denounced the massive extra-judicial killings in Douala perpetuated by the infamous Operational Command, a military force installed by

the government to fight the city's mounting crime wave. In response, the Minister of Territorial Administration, Ferdinand Koungou Edima, accused the cardinal in an open letter of lying, being unpatriotic, wanting to run for the post of president in the Republic of Cameroon, supporting thieves and armed robbers, violating the principle of the separation between state and church, having little respect for those who governed the country, insidiously trying to mislead the Cameroonian people and the international community concerning efforts made by the government to pull the country out of its economic crisis and insecurity, questioning the organisation of elections, not being humble, and being tribalistic (Tumi, 2006).

Another such confrontation occurred in 2003 when the then Minister of Communication, Professor Jacques Fame Ndongo, tried to discredit the cardinal for having made a number of allegations: firstly, that power in Cameroon had been confiscated by one tribe (the Beti), and, secondly, that elections were so poorly organised that they could inevitably lead to civil war (Tumi, 2006).

As a result of regular confrontations between the regime and the RCC, most people in Cameroon hold the regime responsible for the murder of several RCC clergymen, nuns and other employees during the political liberalisation era. Since some of these murders occurred in the archdiocese of Yaoundé, Archbishop Zoá became increasingly critical of the regime before his death in March 1998 (Messina, 2000). Generally speaking, however, Francophone bishops have remained more reluctant than their Anglophone counterparts to condemn the corrupt and authoritarian regime. A clear example is the new Archbishop of Yaoundé, Victor Tonye Bakot. It is widely believed that the regime has wasted no time in trying to woo the new archbishop onto the government's side against the assumedly unrelenting hostility of Cardinal Tumi. While Cardinal Tumi, in an interview with *Radio France International*, condemned the 11 October 2004 presidential elections as being badly flawed due to the disenfranchisement of voters and multiple voting, Archbishop Bakot, the then NECC president, hailed the election as a major step towards the consolidation of Cameroon's democracy.¹⁸ On 12 May 2006, Archbishop Bakot again did not oppose the regime's prohibition of a press conference by Monsignor Patrick Lafon, Secretary-General of the NECC, on RCC proposals for an amendment to the country's electoral laws.¹⁹

Finally, it is necessary to stress that several clergymen and their followers have played a prominent role in raising people's consciousness and attacking the corrupt and authoritarian regime. Internationally well-known Cameroonian theologians, such as Engelbert Mveng, Jean-Marc Ela and Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, have written extensively on the need to liberate the African people from various forms of oppression.²⁰ Some have paid dearly for their role. Mveng was murdered in 1995 and Ela had to flee the country as a result of repeated death threats. Several priests, particularly in Anglophone Cameroon, have regularly been accused by the regime of being partisan and belonging to the opposition. For example, the

Minister of Special Duties, Peter Abety, an Anglophone and Catholic himself, declared on 23 June 1996 that a priest in his constituency was saying nothing about the gospel during his Sunday services but spent all his time attacking the government and himself. He warned that should the priest continue to attack the regime, he too would walk up to the pulpit and talk politics. He vowed to fight anybody who dared to stop him. Two days earlier, the CPDM deputy for Bui Division in Anglophone Cameroon, Evaristus Nsambam, had shouted at Father Charles Mbuntum during mass for allegedly campaigning for the opposition. He seemed to have been angered by the fact that the priest was reading the bishops' pastoral letter of 15 December 1995 that called for free and fair elections during the upcoming municipal elections in January 1996.²¹

A significant development was the emergence of a new kind of RCC laymen's association. In addition to the older associations, which were mainly involved in religious and socio-economic activities, new associations were founded that were geared at political activities. The most important ones were the Justice and Peace movement and the Movement of Christian Action against Torture (ACAT) (Atanga 2001).

Conclusion

RCC-state relations in Cameroon's postcolony have turned out to be more complex than the pessimistic and optimistic schools of thought originally assumed. This study has argued that these relations cannot be simply reduced to either alliance or conflict for two main reasons.

First, RCC-state relations have changed over time. There has been a remarkable shift in the church's socio-political role from apparent cooperation in the one-party era to growing conflict in the political liberalisation era. The RCC refrained from criticising the regime in public during one-party rule to forestall its total subordination to the state, as had happened to other civil-society organisations, and to safeguard its relative freedom to execute its "basic"—religious and social—functions. It instead opted to settle any institutional conflicts by meeting the Head of State, with whom several bishops had come to maintain close relations. It was not until political liberalisation that the church started to use its relative freedom to play a central role in the ongoing struggle for the establishment of a truly democratic society, all the more so because other civil-society organisations and even many opposition parties were silenced by the state's persistent clientelist and repressive tactics.

Second, RCC-state relations have remained marked by some of the major "evils" in society: ethno-regional cleavages which, as some pessimistic scholars with extensive research experience in Cameroon like Mbembe (1988) and Bayart (1993) have persuasively demonstrated, tend to be closely connected to the "politics of the

belly". Such evils have regularly prevented church leaders from taking a united stand against the corrupt and authoritarian regime both in the one-party era and during political liberalisation. The most important ethno-regional divisions have been those between Francophones and Anglophones in the country as a whole and between the Beti and Bamileke in the Francophone part of the country. Although the actions of some moral authorities among RCC leaders, notably the Anglophone Cardinal Tumi and Archbishop Verdzevov, have undoubtedly helped create socio-political awareness among the church community and even beyond, the NECC's failure to arrive at a common stand has contributed to the fact that democracy in Cameroon is still predominantly characterised by cosmetic rather than substantial changes.

Notes

- ¹ Bayart (1972) and Ngongo (1982) speak of the *fonction tributienne* of the churches during colonial rule.
- ² P. Awa and P. Verdzevov, Joint Pastoral Letter on Bribery and Corruption, Bamenda, 1977.
- ³ In fact, the RCC is the dominant Christian church in the Beti region (Ngongo 1982; Mveng 1990). As a result, the Biya government expected the RCC to maintain cordial relations with the state. Some of the leading Beti ideologues, such as Professor Mono Ndjana, even pleaded for the RCC and the state to merge (Pokam 1987). Indeed, until political liberalisation in 1990, the RCC leaders broadly identified with the regime. Archbishop of Yaoundé Jean Zoa, himself a Beti, became the personification of the entente between the RCC and the regime in this period.
- ⁴ Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Cameroon to all their Faithful and to all their Fellow Citizens of Goodwill on "The Involvement of Lay People in the Life of the Nation", Ngaoundere, 15 January 1988. All the pastoral letters of the NECC and individual bishops can be found in various issues of *Catholic Panorama and L'Effort Camerounais*.
- ⁵ Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Cameroon on the Plight of Catholic Education, 1989.
- ⁶ Pastoral letter of the Episcopal Conference of Cameroon concerning the Economic Crisis which the Country is Undergoing, Whit Sunday, 3 June 1990.
- ⁷ Cardinal Christian Tumi, *Texte Intégral de la Conférence de Presse Donnée à Yaoundé*, Yaoundé, 11 June 1990.
- ⁸ NECC, Appeal of the Bishops of Cameroon to all Cameroonians concerning the Present Situation of the Country, Yaoundé, 12 April 1991.
- ⁹ Cardinal Christian Tumi, To all Christians and Men of Goodwill, Douala, 2 September 1992.
- ¹⁰ Archbishop Paul Verdzevov, Message to all Christians, Bamenda, 29 November 1992.
- ¹¹ NECC, Statement of the Standing Committee of the Bishops of Cameroon, Mvolye-Yaoundé, 11 December 1992.

- ¹² Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Cameroon to Christians and all People of Goodwill on 'Corruption', 3 September 2000.
- ¹³ See *Mutations*, 30 March 2006 and *Le Messenger*, 27 March 2006.
- ¹⁴ NECC, Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Cameroon to Christians and to all Men of Goodwill on Tribalism, Yaoundé, 6 November 1997. For the regime's attempts to fuel feelings of autochthony, see Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000); and Konings and Nyamnjoh (2003).
- ¹⁵ See, for instance, *The Post*, 30 March 2006 and 23 April 2007.
- ¹⁶ See, for instance, *The Herald*, 24 November 1993 and 17 April 2004.
- ¹⁷ *The Herald*, 28-29 November 2001, pp. 1 and 3.
- ¹⁸ *The Herald*, 1 November 2004.
- ¹⁹ *Le Messenger*, 15 May 2006.
- ²⁰ For a summary of their ideas, see Zalot (2002).
- ²¹ *The Herald*, 3-5 January 1997, p. 8.

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