

Muslim Organizations in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Building on years of study and interest in the Democratic Republic of Congo, this summer I was thrilled to finally be able to travel there. I was primarily located in the eastern province of Maniema, where I spent two months conducting pre-dissertation research on the role of Islamic organizations in providing public services to the local population. Many Western political scientists classify the Congo as a "failed state" because the central government is unable to perform many of the tasks that the modern state is supposed to be able to carry out. However, in the post-conflict reconstruction phase of the Congo, these tasks are in fact largely being carried out by a burgeoning civil society.

During the months of June and July 2008 I was able to conduct numerous interviews with local, regional, national, and international organizations in the towns of Kindu and Kasongo. These interviews were in large part possible because of the three years of training in Swahili that I received as a FLAS fellow through the Center for African Studies at UF. What was most striking about these discussions was the extent to which they showed a high level of social mobilization among the population to undertake activities promoting development and reconstruction.

Even though the central government is still struggling to carry out its duties, ordinary people are forming non-governmental organizations to provide public services that the population desperately needs, such as schools, health care, orphanages, and facilities for the rehabilitation of both victims and perpetrators of the civil war.

The primary focus of my dissertation, and thus my trip this summer to Maniema, is on the role of Islamic organizations in the provision of education. The Congo has a long history of religious affiliation with the



education sector, notably by the Catholic Church, which has been in charge of schools for over a century. However, in the post-conflict reconstruction phase, the Muslim community, which constitutes a majority in this particular province of the Congo, has realized that for their own well-being they must become actively involved in activities that beforehand were seen as outside the realm of religion. As such, in order to improve conditions for the community, Muslims have seen a need to engage in development activities in addition to spiritual matters. Evidence of this can be seen all over the Maniema province as Islamic non-governmental organizations spring up by the dozens and the Congolese state officially recognizes Muslim schools that teach children the state curriculum.

My research demonstrates the vibrancy of Congolese civil society, even in the face of devastating civil wars and a malfunctioning central government. In addition, it highlights the expanding political activities of this minority Muslim community, a society that has received virtually no scholarly attention since the Congo was granted independence in the early 1960s. The summer provided exceptional preliminary information for my research, and I very much look forward to returning to the Congo next year to gain more nuanced information about the work and aspirations of Islamic organizations.

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