

Islamic Organizations & the Provision of Education in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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With generous support as an African Power and Politics Program Fellow in 2009, I conducted extensive dissertation fieldwork in the Democratic Republic of Congo on the role of the Muslim community in providing education. Public services are difficult to come by in a post-conflict setting with a central state that has been characterized as failed, weak, and corrupt. However, religious organizations in the Congo are the primary providers of much needed services, such as schooling and health care. The Catholic and Protestant churches have been functioning in this capacity for several decades. What this dissertation research has uncovered is that the Congolese Muslim community has, in the last few years, also taken up this vocation. Public schools run by Islamic organizations are blossoming at an accelerated rate in areas with a substantial Muslim population in order to provide a good education to children from all religious backgrounds.

This fieldwork built upon the two-month pre-dissertation research I did in summer 2008 in the eastern province of Maniema, where I explored the role of Islamic organizations in providing public services to the local population. In spring and summer 2009, my qualitative research was expanded to include four research sites. The majority of my research was conducted in the Maniema province, home to the majority of Congolese Muslims. Kindu, my primary site, is the provincial capital where most politically active Maniemans live. The second site of Kasongo is a large town in southern Maniema and the birthplace of Islam in Congo. The third site, Kisangani, is capital of the Orientale Province, includes the most significant Muslim population outside of Maniema, and the location of the University of Kisangani where I was able to meet with Muslim academics and conduct archival research in their libraries. In Kinshasa, the Congolese capital, I conducted interviews with



members of the national Muslim organization, COMICO, who have been very active in recent years to unite the Islamic community and get them involved in development projects.

During the pre-dissertation research phase I had discovered that despite the lack of support from governmental agencies, ordinary Congolese citizens, and more recently Muslims, have mobilized to form organizations that respond to the needs of the population such as schools, health care facilities, orphanages, and other post-war reconstruction projects. Building upon this finding, in the dissertation research I narrowed the focus to the education sector in an attempt to better understand the dynamic of the rapid recent involvement of the Islamic community in providing public goods. I observed in each kind of school: public, private, and those managed by each of the four main religions in Congo. I conducted

interviews with local groups of Muslim men and women, discussed issues with local non-governmental organizations of all types, and did elite interviews with government officials and heads of each religion. Because of my ability to meet with various actors in multiple settings and sites, I have pieced together a better understanding of the political history of the Congolese minority Muslim population and their reasons for becoming active providers of education in contemporary DR Congo.

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