

“It is our Ubuntu philosophy, deeply rooted in us, that keeps us going today”

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

Professor of Political Science, Loyola University of Congo, DRC

rigomin@gmail.com

Interviewed by

Mame-Penda Ba

Professor of Political Science, Gaston Berger University, Senegal

Editor-in-Chief *Global Africa*

mame-penda.ba@ugb.edu.sn

Mame-Penda Ba

Dear Prof. Rigobert Minani Bihuzo, we have started a series of conversations around the Great Lakes region to untie this knot or solve this huge equation encapsulated in areas such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Professor Toussaint Kafarhire has opened these dialogues, and we are particularly pleased and honored to have the opportunity to explore these issues in greater details with you. Before we begin the discussion, which will focus on peace, war, democracy and reconciliation, could you please introduce yourself to our readers?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

My name is Rigobert Minani Bihuzo. I am a researcher at the [Centre d'études pour l'action sociale](#) (CEPAS), a think tank based in Kinshasa, DRC, which has been in existence for over sixty years. The center publishes the journal [Congo-Afrique](#), which is, in my opinion, the only lasting publication in the whole of Central Africa that is offering social and political analysis. I am also a Professor of Geopolitics at Loyola University in Congo. My main area of research is the promotion of peace and democracy. I am interested in these subjects not only because of our troubled regional context, but also because the best-known and most developed exogenous initiatives in the region have all failed to date. In my [latest publication](#)¹, I explain why these initiatives have failed. A large part of my work involves collaboration with civil society, in particular accompanying youth movements, citizens' movements and women's movements. So I see myself more as a civic educator than a teacher or researcher.

¹ Minani Bihuzo, R. (2021). *Les défis de la construction de la paix en République démocratique du Congo et l'engagement de l'Église*. CEPAS.

How to cite this paper:

Bihuzo, R. M. (2024). "It is our Ubuntu philosophy, deeply rooted in us, that keeps us going today". *Global Africa*, (6), pp. 166-173. <https://doi.org/10.57832/7yvr-ye68>

Published: June 20, 2024

© 2024 by author(s). This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC 4.0](#) 

Mame-Penda Ba

Since colonial times, peace in the Great Lakes region, particularly in the DRC, seems to have been an elusive concept, an unattainable goal. Why is it so?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

Many researchers claim that instability in the sub-region is a consequence of colonization. This is a fact that applies to almost the entire African continent. The colonial period was violent, as in many other regions, and some colleagues argue that during the division of Africa, the DRC was treated as a free market, with ill-defined borders, which may have contributed to the persistence of the current pressure and tensions.

I reject this assertion, because the DRC has been independent for over sixty years, and the management of the country has not improved the situation. If, after six decades, a country is unable to resolve the fundamental problems underlying its instability, then there is a structural issue. Good governance and respect of democratic norms have been lacking since the country's independence in 1960. I think that political stakeholders use this argument to justify their failures. Intellectuals and leaders should address these issues in greater depth, especially as there have been periods of relative peace in the past. By building on these periods, it would have been possible to prevent the current conflict.

Mame-Penda Ba

You mentioned the notion of “relative peace”, i.e. a situation of “neither war nor peace”, while others speak of “negative peace”, referring to the absence of conflict or war. On that same note, some talk about “positive peace”, i.e. one that characterizes a situation where not only the risk of war is averted, but where individuals flourish, human rights are respected and people's potentials are freely expressed. What kind of peace are you talking about?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

As a stakeholder directly involved in mediation and conflict resolution, my first objective is to obtain a ceasefire, put an end to hostilities and initiate a dialogue between the different parties involved instead of resorting to war. My many years of experience in this field have enabled me to work at high levels of mediation, but I recognize that this represents only the beginning of a normalized situation.

Since I am a researcher, my latest publication aimed to understand the reasons behind the failure of several peace initiatives. By identifying the causes of these failures, we can gradually develop solutions adapted to the complexity of the conflict.

As a stakeholder in civil society and a supporter of social movements, my aim is to achieve what you described as positive peace, i.e. to go beyond the mere termination of conflicts to guarantee the fulfillment of individuals and fair access to local resources.

In discussions with fellow researchers from Western countries, it may seem that our approaches are varied, but this stems from the need to address a wide range of issues to make progress towards positive peace. We need to address issues of governance - promoting democratic principles, assessing what works and what does not - as well as climate issues that influence the overall cohesion of states. So we need to look at all these aspects, whether short, medium or long term, to achieve our ultimate goal.

Mame-Penda Ba

If I understand what you are saying correctly, you are involved in resolving very urgent, local issues, such as the halting of conflicts and the protection of civilians - including children and women - while at the same time participating in international movements such as the COPs and those concerning the impacts of climate change in the region. You also have a reflective and theoretical perspective on conflict and peace. In concrete terms, how do you manage to reconcile these different levels of intervention, interacting with various players while maintaining a coherent vision?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

The war in Congo began in 1994 in Rwanda. At the time, I was teaching in a secondary school in eastern Congo and never imagined that the conflict would cross the border. When it did, I had to interrupt my classes and send the students home. It was at this point that I began to take an interest in humanitarian issues, but I soon realized that these actions did not solve much of anything, because the stakeholders and interests of the war were elsewhere.

Throughout my career, I have initiated the creation of civil society groups: first human rights groups, then civil society coordination groups, and finally national platforms. This keeps me in direct contact with reality. When I say that I define myself first and foremost as a civic educator, it is because I spend my days debating with citizens' movements, organizing marches with women, and talking to displaced people. All this questions our commitment and challenges our academic knowledge, because we see the limits of our theories. For me, the civil society network with which I constantly interact is an integral part of my life, helping me to maintain a sense of commitment. I have always advised young people to stay connected to those who suffer from the inconsistencies of our governance, because that's what gives them the right and the duty to speak out: the right to raise their voice, because they too are affected, and the duty to speak out, because they have had the opportunity to access knowledge, decision-makers and international forums to carry the voice of these people.

As I progressed step by step, I also came to understand the limits of isolated actions carried out in one region of a country or continent. My conclusion today is that isolated actions are doomed to failure because they do not bring together all the elements needed to build a positive peace.

As an intellectual, I constantly evaluate the impact and energy I put into my work. Based on my experiences, I begin to write, to compare my points of view with those of other researchers from different regions and backgrounds, to determine points of agreement and divergence, and to identify areas for improvement.

Mame-Penda Ba

What role does religion play in your activism and defense of human rights?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

I am first and foremost a religious person, my faith is an integral part of who I am and I cannot detach myself from it. During my studies, I thought about how religion can provide answers to these kinds of questions. In the Catholic religion to which I belong, we have been developing an approach called the "social doctrine of the Church" for over a hundred years. This doctrine explores how, from our faith, we look at the world, and how our faith influences the solutions we propose. This approach teaches us that, to achieve transformation - which today might be described in terms of the politics of change - we need to start from what already exists in practice, and build on successes and failures. This also includes ethical issues and the principles of coherence in life. I work in a secular academic environment and often explain to people that what I bring through my faith enables me to persevere and hope beyond the usual. In other words, I see failures as points of departure towards new advances rather than ends.

My faith prevents me from harboring resentment or anger, even towards those who might cause me to fail. Rather, I see them as partners with whom I can work to achieve better coexistence. It is an elaborate doctrine, which I teach myself, that enables the Catholic Church to make an active contribution. That is why, in a country like the DRC, the Catholic Church has always played a leading role in social commitment, as many stakeholders draw their ideas from this doctrine that guides our vision of the world and our action in society.

Mame-Penda Ba

For those who are not Congolese, it is often surprising to note the central role played by the Catholic Church in the democratic process. In the DRC, the Church occupies a pre-eminent position. Can you look back at the history of the Catholic Church and politics in the DRC? What is it that has made this institution both so strong and so involved in the struggle for democracy?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

During the colonial period, Western missionaries came to the Congo and played a major role in development and education. They played a central role.

The networks of schools, hospitals and community development centers were run, to a large extent even today, by churchmen. This also means that today they suffer from the consequences of political instability, as their work is affected whenever the political situation deteriorates. This is a historical element that distinguishes our situation from that of countries where Christianity is not in the majority.

The second element is that the majority of our intellectuals come from such backgrounds. The first universities and institutes of higher learning were created by these religious stakeholders.

The third element is linked to the theory of change and the Church's social doctrine, which I mentioned earlier. Today, the political activism of the Catholic hierarchy can be explained by this prophetic mission to denounce what is not working. That is the role of a prophet. The dangers of bad governance are also highlighted: when politics takes control of public spaces, everything collapses in our countries.

The Church therefore represents a significant social force thanks to the services and structures it manages. Drawing on its expertise and social commitment, it strives to improve governance. It often takes part in discussions on electoral processes, as these are becoming a means for states to confiscate power from the people.

Mame-Penda Ba

What did the Church say, for example, under Mobutu's dictatorship?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

It is a long story, documented by numerous publications. The fight against dictatorship and authoritarianism is an ongoing battle, which continues to this day with the current archbishop. Mobutu had to exile the archbishop of Kinshasa, Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula, to Rome for several months, forbidding him to stay in his own country. The fight to end Mobutu's dictatorship was accelerated by the memorandum of the Sovereign National Conference (CNS) proposed by the Church. The Church played an active role throughout the CNS, even if the results fell short of expectations.

In every period of our history, the Church has had to act, because it is also affected by political inconsistencies. It has works to flourish and community service to maintain. For those in the education sector, state dysfunction is disastrous. Inconsistent government decisions cause major problems. Because of these responsibilities, and because our faith calls us to serve, we must speak out. The Church has the right to speak out because it provides services to the people by being present in schools, hospitals, villages and everywhere else. Secondly, it has a duty to speak out because of its training and knowledge of the issues; to remain silent would be tantamount to renouncing service to the nation.

Of course, politicians do not always share this point of view, and may react with threats. Today, for example, Cardinal Ambongo has been summoned by the courts for commenting on the management of the war. However, this kind of situation has been part of our reality for some time and does not impress or frighten members of the Church.

Mame-Penda Ba

You mentioned the Archbishop of Kinshasa under Mobutu, but as academics, we recognize another outstanding figure: that of Professor Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, who eventually had to go into exile. So it was intellectuals and the religious people who embodied critical thinking and resistance in the face of the dictatorial regime and that of the post-colonial state in general?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

Intellectuals have always represented a danger for authoritarian regimes. Under Mobutu, all the universities were nationalized, including the University of Kinshasa, previously owned by the Catholic Church, and the University of Kisangani. The University of Lubumbashi, a secular institution, was also nationalized.

Mobutu's regime particularly targeted universities and faculties of philosophy, literature and political science, for fear of the emergence of critical thinkers. Political power sought to control intellectual thought, but without much success. As a result, intellectuals like Mudimbe, who were not yet involved in active resistance or citizen movements, chose exile and continued their struggle by writing. Several intellectuals were forced to leave the country during the Mobutu era, such as [Father Boka](#), who composed the Congolese national anthem.

Today, many scholars prefer to stay in the country and get involved in citizen movements, taking risks and protesting in the streets. Their work fuels important struggles, sometimes at the cost of their lives. For example, our magazine has served as a platform for intellectuals to publish their thoughts, giving the public the tools to understand and solve problems.

Intellectuals who do not resist may end up supporting the ruling power, accepting its material support. In this way, some brilliant university professors have chosen to use their intelligence to reinforce dictatorship and bad governance. This shows the two possible faces of intellectuals in difficult political contexts.

Mame-Penda Ba

As the coordinator of the electoral observation process in 2006, you supervised tens of thousands of people. How important is it for the Church in general to get involved in the electoral affairs? Why is it so crucial?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

In 2006, there was a great mobilization due to a particular circumstance: it was the first time we had organized elections after more than thirty years of interruption. Under the Mobutu regime, no elections had ever been held. In 2006, we were emerging from four years of war, with a country divided into zones controlled by different rebel groups. It was crucial that these elections be held properly, to minimize disputes and obtain results that were acceptable and applicable to all.

We worked hard to ensure that the elections ran smoothly. It involved the whole of civil society, all the religious denominations and numerous organizations, with support from the international community. At the time, many international players still believed in elections as a means of promoting democracy.

Today, in the light of my recent experience in 2023, where I coordinated 10,000 people in the field, I have observed that the state and political power have learned to organize fake elections while giving the impression that everything is going well. I collected almost 8,000 results sheets, but none of them were accurate, as they did not correspond to polling stations or locations. It was a total sham. I could not even publish the results because the database was corrupt. For us, democracy is dead as a result of what happened, because the electoral process is totally corrupt. Recently, the leader of the ruling party, who was involved in the bribery of MPPs for the gubernatorial election, justified his actions as motivation. The presidential party orchestrated this whole political farce.

This situation raises many questions in various African think tanks. Senegal offers us some relief, because there, justice allows things to be rebalanced. This year, 19 elections are scheduled in Africa, but it is difficult to anticipate how they will unfold. Currently, with other colleagues, we are thinking about ways to create more transparent and democratic elections. In June 2024, my department at CEPAS is organizing a think-tank entitled “How to revive Congolese hope in democracy”, to discuss these crucial issues.

Mame-Penda Ba

You mentioned electoral justice, but more generally, the tragic history of the Great Lakes region, marked by successive misfortunes since colonization, raises crucial questions. How can we approach reparation, truth and reconciliation, while completely transforming governance?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

We draw our strength from the principles of language, preaching and teaching derived from the history of non-violence. It is obvious that anyone who thinks they can use violence to fight it is mistaken. This creates a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape. Studies have shown that countries that have opted for non-violent approaches - i.e. approaches that attack the evil and not the doer of evil, an approach aimed at raising awareness rather than neutralizing the perpetrators of evil - can make a difference. So reconciliation, reparation and the quest for truth can emerge from this approach, although it is not easy. In a country like ours, where 10 million people have died since the start of the war, and where this year's figures show that since January, there have been 10,400 cases of sexual violence against women, the challenge is immense.

How can we achieve reparation? Our path is one of forgiveness, reconciliation and justice for the victims. It is crucial to continue the work of humanizing the other, instead of demonizing, so as not to perpetuate this cycle of violence.

Mame-Penda BA

How can Bantu philosophy, Ubuntu, and other forms of relatedness specific to this region of the world be mobilized beyond the Church's discourse for the work of reconciliation and, as you say, humanization or re-humanization of the other?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

I think it is our deep-rooted Ubuntu philosophy that keeps us going today. It may sound naive to some Western cultures, but this approach is precious to us. We can see it in the way we manage our ethnic diversity, settle conflicts within families or clans, even in the most serious situations.

We should take greater advantage of our ability to dialogue and harmonize these differences to build our states. It is partly thanks to this Ubuntu philosophy that Africa remains resilient. Our traditions teach us to allow our opponents to retreat, rather than crush them completely. This approach contrasts with other civilizations where the complete annihilation of the other can be seen as a goal. Our vision of life is influenced by Ubuntu, which is an integral part of our identity and culture.

The task ahead is to transform these values into constructive elements for fostering social and political cohesion, and for establishing solid systems of governance in our countries. A case in point is the way we have approached the drafting of our constitutions. These have failed to take into account the diversity of our societies, particularly in terms of representation and power-sharing between different groups. Ignoring the diversity of cultural mosaics and questions of identity leads people to withdraw into these issues, which complicates the situation. There is a need for an intellectual re-examination of the way in which institutions have been built, including the question of democracy, by reorganizing them according to the representation of power, the role of customary chiefs and traditional power. Few countries have taken the risk of tackling these issues in depth, but it is clear that much remains to be done to resolve these problems in detail.

Mame-Penda Ba

Professor, I would like to come back to a question you raised concerning the violence suffered by women and girls, as well as children in general, in a country where some areas are still marked by conflict. These two population groups are particularly vulnerable. What needs to be tackled as a priority if we are to improve their situation?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

For me, the situation is clear: as long as the war persists, the weakest will be made the battleground, and women and children will end up being the main victims. It is crucial that people get out of this state of belligerence and build a form of governance that respects human dignity, in order to rectify this situation.

In my sub-region, gender-based violence is another way of waging war. Every time a woman is raped, it is not just the woman who is targeted, but often to destroy her partner by weakening him and rendering him incapable of playing his role in society. So it is essential to grasp the symbolism behind this violence, which did not exist in our societies until recently. It is crucial to understand the symbolic significance of rape, which is used to destroy and weaken a society, shattering its soul. Traditionally, as you mentioned with Ubuntu, women are often the guardians of civilization and children. Their destabilization weakens the resilience of an entire people.

This situation is exacerbated by the presence of armed groups, including militias and ill-trained or foreign armies. This is an extremely serious issue. Although some efforts at justice have been undertaken, they remain marginal and must be pursued if they are to become a deterrent.

Mame-Penda Ba

This brings us back to the burning question of justice when neither traditional nor modern mechanisms are designed to deal with disasters of such magnitude and depth...

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

I think that each society should define its own approach to justice to deal with these situations. Modern justice, with its large number of cases and complex procedures, has its limits. My career in human rights at the International Criminal Court has shown me that it is very often a waste of time, energy and international financial resources, because only a limited number of cases are dealt with, which is not an adequate solution to our problems.

On the traditional side, we had never anticipated a situation of such gravity, so our justice system cannot respond in a satisfying way in terms of predictability. We need new approaches to mitigate consequences, rather than to focus solely on punishment.

I worked in South Africa for a year, and although this country is often presented as a model of transitional justice, my experience as a parish priest in Soweto, where I was in contact with the black populations there, showed me that this model is not necessarily duplicable or satisfactory for everyone.

I think every society has to find its own way, and the DRC will have to define its own model of justice if it wants to progress. It is impossible to build a state on the terrible frustrations of a significant part of the population. It will be difficult, but it is necessary to move forward.

Mame-Penda BA

Can the “wazalendo” phenomenon, particularly in the eastern part of the country, help reduce the intensity and virulence of conflicts and prevent these massacres that are almost impossible to manage?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

Wazalendo is nothing new. Ever since the Rwandan and Ugandan armies crossed the Congolese border to the east, local populations have organized themselves to protect their villages. These groups, formerly known as the “maï-maï”, have transformed themselves into wazalendo - “patriots”, and continue to define themselves as defenders of the country against the invaders. Today, faced with a weakened national army, these local groups are in demand because they have clear motives for fighting: to protect their families, their lands, their villages and their territories. In comparison, the national army is scattered and lacks coherence in its sub-regional alliances. Contrary to popular belief, the DRC’s army is not as weak as people think. However, military leadership has been disrupted by mismatched alliances and a lack of clarity in understanding the conflict. When a soldier does not understand why he is fighting, it is hard to get good results. In this confusion, the wazalendo are the only ones to bring some coherence by locally defending areas they know well.

As a result, the national army has to rely on them to achieve victories. This reflects the current situation: when the army can no longer defend the population, the latter takes matters into its own hands and creates its own local dynamics.

The wazalendo exist whenever an external danger threatens, and they disappear when the danger recedes, returning to their daily activities. However, when conflicts last too long, violence becomes more difficult to control and eradicate.

Mame-Penda Ba

The DRC is one of the continent’s main green centers, if not the biggest. Why do you consider the issue of climate change so crucial, and why are you involved in this fight in addition to your other activities?

Rigobert Minani Bihuzo

Pope Francis’ Encyclical², whose ninth anniversary we will soon be celebrating, is an often overlooked text that underlines the fact that everything is interconnected. It has become clear that it is impossible to work on questions of national organization and governance without taking into account the major problems that threaten this space. This is why I became involved in ecological issues, not out of opportunism, but out of rational reflection showing that if we do not reconcile these issues with our struggles for civic education, democracy and good governance, our field of work will disappear and our fight will no longer make sense.

My commitment to environmental preservation is an extension of my ongoing political, academic, social and civil engagement. It is crucial to recognize that we cannot turn a blind eye to these issues if we really want to talk about governance. Living in a capital of 20 million inhabitants where the surrounding forest is disappearing at an alarming rate exacerbates flooding and the catastrophic consequences of climate change.

This is a complex issue because, if we engage with it even a little, we realize that the problem is not limited to poor governance by the state, but also includes the interests of foreign powers. This leads us to engage in dialogue with players from other continents and backgrounds, to understand forest management strategies and the solutions proposed at global level.

For me, everything is linked. I do not make a difference when I mobilize young people to clean up the streets or organize a march against electoral fraud, it is all the same: I am working for a better managed environment where future generations can enjoy what the nation has to offer.

² [Encyclical letter *Laudato si'* of the holy father Francis on care for our common home](#)