

# report PUBLIC JUSTICE

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## Strike Politics in Guinea, West Africa

by  
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*Joyce Ribbens Campbell and her husband David have been serving as missionaries of the Christian Reformed Church in Guinea, West Africa for nearly two decades. Guinea, which borders Senegal, Sierra Leone, and several other small coastal countries, was ranked by Transparency International in 2006 as the most corrupt country in Africa. It is the world's largest exporter of bauxite, the raw material used to produce aluminum. One third of the world's bauxite is believed to be within its borders. Guinea is also 90 percent Muslim.*

*In 1984, Guinea's current president, Lansana Conté, came to power through a bloodless coup. Now in his 70s, he is ill and increasingly distrusted. His corrupt practices and the country's economic decline have outraged more and more of Guinea's 10 million people. On January 10, labor unions began their third strike in the last 12 months to try to drive the president from office. The strike forced the closure of the port of Kamsar, and violence in Conakry, the capital, and in other parts of the country threatened country-wide fighting. At least 130 people were killed and more than 300 wounded.*

*Nevertheless, the worst that could have happened did not happen, and a partial resolution of the crisis was reached in early March, due in part to the work of civil-society groups that include some remarkable Christian leaders. That is the story that Ms. Campbell tells.*

—The Editor

**I**t was the evening before the general strike was to begin in early January when Pastor Samuel Kamano, president of the Evangelical Protestant Church of Guinea (EPEG), received a phone call from a Catholic deputy in Guinea's National Assembly. He asked Samuel and his two counterparts on the *Conseil Chretien* (Christian Council) to help resolve the political and economic crisis gripping this largely Muslim nation. The next day, Samuel and his Catholic and Anglican colleagues sat at the roundtable at the *Palais du Peuple* alongside the heads of the labor union syndicate, representatives of the Council of Civil Society Organizations, the Imam of the Grand Mosque, and representatives of Guinea's

“Republican Institutions”—the Supreme Court, the National Assembly, and the Economic and Social Council.

That was the first of many meetings in which these leaders would formulate the platform they would later present to President Conté, the terms he would have to meet before they would call off the strike. Throughout the two-month crisis, the Christian Council played a mediating role between those at the roundtable and the presidential regime. In doing so, it wielded significant political power and brought a reconciling blessing far out of proportion to the small percentage of Christians in Guinea’s population.

Over the past several years, the value of Guinea’s currency had plummeted, causing severe inflation; Western development organizations had withdrawn; and electricity, water, and transportation services had seriously deteriorated. But it was not the opposition political parties that took the lead in organizing the protests of January and February. The people do not regard them as offering real alternatives, and the parties are not allowed to campaign freely in any case. Instead, it was the labor unions and civil-society organizations that led the way. Earlier strikes had forced the government to promise changes, but those promises went unfulfilled. This time, the unions were upping their demands, and Lansana Conté’s regime was threatened as never before. Civil war was a distinct possibility.

Right from the start, according to Kamano, the parties at the roundtable charged the religious leaders with the job of communicating the group’s platform to the president. The religious leaders were the three members of the Christian Council plus the Imam of the Grand Mosque, later joined by the president of the Islamic League. However, according to Kamano, the two Imams played a secondary role in the negotiations because they did not have the trust of the other parties at the roundtable. They were regarded as part of the corrupt presidential regime because they routinely received money from the government and had been accused of keeping, for personal use, money paid for airline tickets for Muslims to travel to Mecca for the pilgrimage.

By contrast, the Christian Council, which receives no money from the government, is regarded as independent and impartial, and it also continues the tradition of the Catholic Church in Guinea, whose former archbishop, Robert Sara, risked his life to speak out against Guinea’s former socialist dictator Sekou Touré when his rule turned brutal. The Catholic Church retains the good will of many people because of Sara’s courageous stand.

The mission of the Christian Council is to unite the churches to speak and act together in the public square on political and social issues. It is not a political party, nor a special interest group, nor a direct arm of the institutional church. Yet what the council does and how it does it can be described in terms that combine all three of those kinds of influences.

The Christian Council’s periodic declarations on political and social issues resemble the pastoral letters that Catholic bishops have issued in many African countries in periods of national crisis. They speak for the common good, for public justice and righteousness,

for human rights. They call leaders to account, as the biblical prophets did. They offer a political program for public justice.

The Christian Council acted more as an interest group when Guinea's national university system began scheduling classes on Sundays. The council met with the academic authorities and informed them that Sunday is a day of rest and worship for Christians; holding classes would violate their rights. The university heard them and ended Sunday classes.

The council acted more like an arm of the institutional churches when it received funding from Church World Service to offer trauma counseling for victims of the Sierra Leonean and Liberian wars who were living in refugee camps in Guinea in the 1990s.

The fact that the Christian Council is led by clerics, not by lay Christian political leaders, illustrates that the council is not a Christian-democratic political party in nascent form. And the fact that the roundtable leaders who were involved in the recent crisis trusted only a non-political organization to stand for justice and the common good (because it had no personal or economic interest at stake) illustrates that those involved were thinking in interest-group terms. After all, why should only a "religious" group be expected to act out of moral principle and for public justice?

During the two-month upheaval in Guinea that claimed so many lives, disrupted the economy, and led to the imposition of martial law, the Christian Council participated regularly in the roundtable discussions and met with President Conté on four different occasions to convey the demands of those at the roundtable. In the end, the president agreed to the major demand of the roundtable when he appointed Lansana Kouyaté as prime minister with the powers of head of state. The strike was called off and martial law was lifted.

The ongoing role of the Christian Council, says Pastor Kamano, is one of surveillance, to see that all sides keep their promises. "We'll be meeting Prime Minister Kouyaté on Saturday," Kamano told me, when I interviewed him on a recent Thursday.

In Samuel Kamano, I see an emerging Christian leader of francophone West Africa with the stature of the remarkable Dutch pastor and political leader, Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). Kamano is finishing his doctorate at the Reformed Seminary in Aix-en-Provence, France. He is the pastor of a church in Conakry. And he is the president of the main evangelical denomination in Guinea, and its representative on the Christian Council. Several years ago he and his wife, Anne, who studied education in France, founded a Christian school in Conakry that now has 1500 students in grades K-12, most of them from Muslim families who want their children to receive a quality education. When I discussed with Samuel my plans to promote civic education for public justice, he welcomed the idea and said that he was thinking of doing something similar and would be interested in receiving a copy of the course materials I write.

Certainly God has blessed Guinea and answered the prayers of many people through the timely and faithful service of the Christian Council. With the council's track record and with a pastor/educator/public servant like Samuel Kamano, there appears to be great potential for a public-justice dynamic to take hold and have even greater influence in Guinea.