The Politics of New Religious Movements in Benin Republic:
Christian Churches, Democratic Consolidation and Political Parties

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- Draft for discussion only -

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Presented for the past ten years as a good example of democratic transition and consolidation, Benin Republic is however undergoing a period of uncertainty following the March 2001 presidential elections as witnessed by the protestation against the first round of the elections, the prevailing confusion at the constitutional Court, the refusal of the second and third winning candidates to take part to the Second round of the elections etc... These uncertainties can not however succeed in disqualifying a process which, far from being perfect has nonetheless allowed the establishment and consolidation of a new regime: “the Democratic Renewal”, based on pluralistic and competitive principles.

Former French colony, Benin (Dahomey) became independent on the 1st of August 1960 and subsequently experienced a decade of political unrest characterised by several military coups overthrowing other military or civilian regimes including those reflecting a genuine pattern. In 1970, a system of rotational presidency has been adopted with a two-years term to be held respectively by the three main leaders: H. Maga, T. Ahomadegbé and S. Apithy. But this constitutional agreement has been annulled by M. Kérékou who came to power by staging a military coup on the 26th of October 1972. Two years later, while presenting a speech relating to government’s platform on the 30th of November 1974, he announced the adoption of the marxist-leninist ideology as the new orientation of his regime. In 1975 (30th Nov), the Republic of Dahomey became the Popular Republic of Benin and the one party system ushered in under the auspices of the Parti de la Révolution populaire du Benin (PRPB). The former heads of the State were arrested and later put under house arrest; political opposition prohibited and the militants of the Parti communiste du Dahomey, the only real and active opposition force, were severely repressed. The press was also controlled by the State and a wide program of nationalizing private enterprises was carried out. A Revolutionary National Assembly has however been elected, but the voters were to choose only in accordance with the list presented and ratified by the government.

The economic hardness of the 1980’s, propelled the growing unrest and demonstrations of civil servants and students which somehow urged Kérékou to grant

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amnesty for the first time to political prisoners, abandon the Marxist-leninist orientation and call on December 7th 1989 for the holding of the National Conference. Presided by the Cotonou’s Archbishop Mgr De Souza, the National Conference finally took place from the 19th to the 28th February 1990 and was attended by 500 persons mandated by associations, trade unions, religious groups, etc. At the end of the National Conference, N. Soglo was elected as the Prime Minister in charged of leading the transitional period which was established immediately after. So Kérékou remained just the president while Soglo was performing the executive functions and the High Council of Republic was playing the legislative role. A new constitution with a presidential setting and strongly based on the principles of the separation of the executive, legislative and judicial powers was also elaborated and adopted following the December 1990’s referendum. The legislative elections were also organised and later, Soglo defeated overwhelmingly Kérékou at the second round of the presidential elections, became President and sworn in on April 4th 1991.

Throughout the 1990 decade, competitive, peaceful and fear elections massively attended by the populations have taken place and the interest of the populations for political issues and discussions has considerably increased. Several cases of alternance have also been observed. In 1995 for example, the opposition to Soglo won the legislative elections and in 1996, Kérékou won the presidential elections against Soglo and came back to power. He later lost the 1999 legislative elections won by a coalition led by Soglo’s political party, La Renaissance du Bénin.


This relative success of the Benin’s experience can be attributed to several factors. But only two of them seem to be particularly determinants. We have on the one hand the commitment of the political actors to the rules of the game and their reference to elections as the unique means of accession and succession to power. And on the other hand we have the strength and mobilisation of the Benin’s civil society composed among others of NGO, an independent press and religious activist, constantly fighting for the establishment of democratic institutions through their implications in the socialization process of the populations, electoral observations and so on.

The recognition of pluralism has been a significant step in the advent of the Benin’s new political setting in the sense that more than hundred political parties have been created leading to a fragmentation of representation in the National Assembly and the formation of successive coalitions.

The authoritarian decay of the mid 80’s which paved the way to the democratic establishment process, has also been followed by the expansion of religion as witnessed by the increase of the number of Christian movements registered of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the establishment of other movements imported from US, Nigeria and Ghana, the multiplication of crusades and the development of new methods of preaching more and more taking place even in public places such as Palais des sports or Hall des Arts. The Evangelical ant Pentecostal Churches have been more affected by the religious revival than the Catholic Church, the Vodun and Islamic religions even though they are still dynamic too. The most important thing here, is not just the religious expansion but the way in which some religious forces have succeeded in changing their indifferent attitude towards politics and developed strategies which enabled them not only to politically emerge but also to play important political roles during the transitional period and throughout the 90’s.

The aim of this article is to put into relation these two concomitant dynamics: the process of democratic establishment in one hand and the emergence of Christian movements in the other by studying political parties. The observation of political parties will thus help us to analyse the interactions taking place within them between politics and religion or more specifically between partisan organisations and Christian movements elements of the ...
society i.e. Christian movements in order to show why and how these Christian movements got to the political arena.

I am first of all going to introduce the Benin’s political parties and more specifically their characteristics which will enable us to access the impact of the system of parties, as it has been structured since 1990, on the democratic transition and consolidation. I will then in the second place study the interactions between religion and politics in the democratic context by showing how the religious factor appeared in the process and how it has been used in way or the other by the political elite. I am finally going to show why the Christian movements adopted new attitudes towards politics and the political power and how they invaded the political scene.

I Political Parties in the process of democratic consolidation

The advent of pluralism has been the major claim of the mid 1980’s in Benin. The 1990’s Constitution clearly recognizes in this regard the role of political parties and advocates the application of an integral pluralism, exempted from any form of constraints. It thereby offers the background for the creation of parties and nearby 30 parties registered at the Ministry of Internal Affairs before its ratification and several others were later created. This process of creation of parties has however been influenced by some constitutional provisions seeking to avoid the reappearance of the political use of regionalism. In fact, politics in Benin during the first decade of independence has been dominated by the regional rivalries of the three main leaders: H. Maga (North), S. Apithy (South-East) and T. Ahomadegbé (Centre, South), each of them relying on his strong regional support. So it has been decided to exclude the former presidents from the presidential competition by using the age criteria which should be more than 40 and less than 70. The proportional system has also been adopted for the legislative elections and the parties are constrained to present candidates in all the country’s constituencies. This specifically aims at promoting the development of parties with national dimensions. So it is according to this constitutional setting that the Beninese political parties have been created since 1990. And these newly created parties have several characteristics.

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6 « Les partis politiques concourent à l’expression du suffrage. Ils se forment et exercent librement leurs activités dans les conditions déterminées par la Charte des Partis politiques. Ils doivent respecter les principes de la
- Many political parties

In 1990, 54 persons have been mandated at the National Conference by political organisations, which have later been transformed into political parties. From 36 in 1991 their number grew to 72 at the end of 1994 and then reached 92 in 1997 and in 1998 they were up to 115. This inflation of parties is mainly observed during the few months preceding elections due to the creation of others political parties. In 1993 for instance, 4 parties have joined the existing ones and in 1994, 22 more parties have registered, few months before the 1995 legislative elections.

Thus, many political parties participated to the 1991, 1995 and 1999 legislative elections including the small ones which have not been hindered or affected by the fact that the large parties are bound to present candidates in all the constituencies. In march 1999 for example, 35 lists presented by 57 political parties (some of them competing alone and others within coalitions) have been proposed to the voters.

- Personalised parties

Beninese political parties can be said to be highly centralised and personalised. They are created by, for and around a leader with the ultimate aim of putting him to power. The political survival of the party is in this regard dependent on that of the founding leader, and may be problematic in case of the disqualification of the leader or his disappearance. Many famous individuals including higher international officials, former exiled politicians, the 1960’s political elite and even some repented actors of the authoritarian regime, took advantage of the collapse of the one party system and rushed into politics by creating their political parties. But these political parties can be divided into two different categories.

The first category is composed of parties having a large electorate, considerable number of seats at the NA and leaders capable of contesting presidential elections. This set of parties include the Parti du Renouveau démocratique of Adrien Houngbedji (who was the President of the NA from 1991-1995, PM between 1996-1998 and got the 3rd largest number of scores at the 1996 and 2001 presidential elections); the Renaissance du Bénin of Nicephore Soglo (Head of the State from 1991-96) and the Parti social démocrate of Bruno souveraineté nationale, de la démocratie, de l’intégrité territoriale et la laïcité de l’État ». Article 5, Constitution of 1990.

7 See Lazare Séhouéto, La démocratie commence à la maison... La question de la démocratie au sein des partis et des associations au Bénin, Cotonou, Fondation Friedrich Ebert, 1997, 134 p. ; Cédric Mayrargue, « Les élites
Amoussou (NA President from 1995 to 1999 and State Secretary from 2000). The Kérékou’s case is different from these three leaders in the sense that he did not rely on a party but on a coalition of personalities and parties when he came back to power in 1996.

The other category or set is composed of parties having a tiny electorate and lacking solid organisation and leaders of great political ability. The majority of the beninese political parties fit this category and their participation to the legislative elections is based on their hope of getting a seat (out of the 83 drown from 18 constituencies) for their respective leaders which can be used to bargain favours (or even ministerial post) in exchange of their allegiance to a dominant party or coalition. They are nonetheless important in the sense that their supports may prove determinant in the context of a very tight competition reinforced by the fluidity and fragility of coalitions and parties.

- Weak parties

The fluidity of the Beninese’s system of parties, the formation of unstable coalitions and alliances due to fluctuating attitudes of small parties whose support is decisive make it very hard to stabilize and structure the political parties. The political parties are frequently affected by the rivalries of their members, leading in some cases to the splitting of the parties concerned and the creation by the dissident members of new parties. The Beninese qualify the fact of moving from one party or coalition to another of « transhumance politique ». And it has been observed that in most of the cases this political transhumance is less based on ideological considerations than being dictated by the opportunist logic of always wanting to be on the sides of the winning coalition i.e. being as closer as possible to power, the logic of getting at all means to power.

- Lacking ideological dimensions

Even though the political parties are claiming to have ideological orientations, the study of their respective platforms does not reveal ideological cleavage between them. Their platforms and attitudes towards some issues are interchangeable with the exception of the Communist party, which refused to participate to the National Conference in 1990 on the ground of their disagreement with the implied mode of political change and boycotted the

1991 elections. It however came back to politics in 1995 and participated, though not successfully, at the legislative elections.

They make almost the same political speech, centred on the rejection of the precedent regime and the promotion of democratic principles. This is also true of their opinions on economic issues with a mere exception of minor differences relating to how the SAP should be implemented. The themes relating to the fight against corruption erected as their major priority are frequently used in their political campaign.

So, the interactions within and among parties are mainly not based on ideological considerations but on the circumstances, opportunities and interest at stake. In 1993 for instance, some members of parliament supporting Soglo joined the opposition because he has not given them ministerial posts while effecting the cabinet reshuffle. The use of ideologies as a means of partisan mobilisation and interactions is thus not really developed in Benin unlike the regional factor.

- Strong territorial and regional dimensions

Politics in Benin have a strong regional dimensions. The fact of belonging to a region can be used to explain or understand the electoral behaviour. The 1990’s constitutional provisions have not really contributed in resolving this issue. The political parties still have their best scores in the home region of their leaders. A Hounbedji is for instance having his electorate in the South west, Soglo in the Centre and South around Cotonou, B. Amoussou in the South west and Kérékou in the North.

The necessity of contracting alliances in order to get the majority required for acceding to power enabled however to avoid what could be the pernicious effects of this regional configuration of parties and politics.

II/ Religion, democratic consolidation and politics in Benin

Before moving to the analysis of the new attitudes of the Christian movements, let us have a look on how the relationship between politics and religion has been reconstructed in Benin during the transitional period. The main concern will be on how the religion factor reappeared in the Benin politics and how it has been used by the political actors.

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The impact of religion on the process of democratic transition and consolidation

Religious actors have no really contributed to the mid 80’s collapse of the military regime. They were rather strictly controlled and affected by its antireligious policies observed in the nationalization of religious schools, portrayal of traditional beliefs as retrograde, repressive against traditional priests on the ground of sorcery, etc… In the mid 1980’s however, the government adopted a more pragmatic attitude towards the religious sphere including the cooptation of religious elite and given them some seats at the ANR. Throughout this period, the religious actors stayed as far as possible from the political sphere, and maintained an attitude of reserve or hardly referred to political power. So, they have never issued even a verbal condemnation of the abuses of the regime.

It was only with the rise and development of social movements that the Catholic Church also mobilised itself. In 1989 for instance, the archbishop published on Easter’s occasion a pastoral notice : “Repent, for the survival of Benin”. Far from being an interpellation of the regime or a claim for democratisation, this moderate document which was just a call upon everybody caused later however a considerable stir. Thus, the engagement of the Catholic Church has not only been late but also moderate. The reflections on political change emerged only later around certain catholic laity organised around Mgr De Souza who later played important role in the democratic process to the extent that there has been attempts in some francophone African countries of copying him but less successfully.

In 1990, the representatives of the main religious groups (Catholics, Methodist, Muslims, vodun, celestial church) also attended the National Conference and Mgr de Souza has been chosen to preside over the conference presidium. He contributed to the success of the Conference and most importantly in convincing Kérékou to accept the sovereignty of the forum. These achievements derive more from the De Souza personality and the efforts of the laity around him than the Church’s commitment to democratisation.

At the end of the Conference, Mgr De Souza became the president of the High Council of Republic. And the Catholic Church multiplied its social activities through the civic sensitization of population in concert with schools. They also pray, hold special services during electoral periods and call for peaceful attitudes and orderly elections.

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The other religious groups did not actively take part to the liberalization process and the construction of the new political order. They however adopted a legitimist attitude as they can freely carry out their activities in the new political setting.

Apart from the speeches and actions of the religious actors, the whole democratization process is commonly perceived in a rather religious manner as being miraculous. The peaceful transition, the holding of successive elections and the peaceful alternances have further strengthened this belief and reinforced the religious interpretations of the events.

- Political actors and the use of religion

This refers to how religion has been strategically used by political actors in their search of legitimacy or how it has been incorporated in their assets in order to maximise their chances of acceding to power and (or) consolidating it. They consequently more and more attend religious ceremonies (Christmas services, Tabaski, The 24-25th December Sémé beach’s pilgrimage, etc..) or indirectly finance religious activities by contributing to the building or renovation of religious centres especially few months before elections. This propensity of using religion at political ends can also be observed in the way in which Soglo, while loosing his support especially at the NA, developed from 1991 an active policy towards the religious sphere. Centred on the search of intermediaries, this policy aims at avoiding or resolving political tensions in his advantage and thereby increasing his popularity and electorate weight. The fact of inviting the representatives of different religious groups to meetings of sensitization preceding the implementation of delicate polities such as the SAP is thus a way of legitimising these policies and securing their peaceful implementation. Appealing to religious actors for mediating over his conflict with the assembly in summer 1994 or the close relations he tied with the adepts of Vodun including assisting them to set a national structure and organise the festival of the Vodun arts and culture at Ouidah are just a clientelist devices for comforting his position and increasing his supports and votes. Kérékou who succeeded him in March 1996 also played this religious card. He multiplied his reference to the Bible and even quotes it in his speeches. In 1997, for example he asked one of his ministers to read publicly a prophecy announcing a radius future for Benin sent to him by an American prophet. It is interesting to note that, former catholic, confirmed

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Marxist atheist converted to Islam while visiting Libya, surrounded by marabouts and fetishists in the 1980’s, Kérékou is today claiming to be a Born again.

The policies carried out by his successive governments are not however seeming to be affected by his newly adopted faith. This is because, religion is just a resource and not a stake in the Beninese politics. There have never been for instance public debates on the place or role of religions in the country nor the manifestation of will of questioning the secularism of the State or adjusting the constitution by taking into account the religious factor. Political parties do not even have propositions for the religious groups. And none of the political parties is claiming to have a religious orientation.

III Christian Churches, democratic consolidation and political parties

This part is not a study of evangelical or Pentecostal churches per se but the analysis of the dynamic of the development and emergence of Christian movements in the public space and political arena during the period of democratic consolidation. So we are going to describe their attitudes before and after 1990 by explaining why they stayed for a while out of the political sphere up to the process of their political awareness as well as the strategies they have since then been adopting.

- Churches up to 1990’s: silence and indifference

Churches’s engagement in social activities have been up to 1990 very little in Benin with the exception of the Eglise protestante méthodiste du Bénin (EPMB), involved in the educational and sanitary activities since the colonial period. They also kept themselves out of politics and its evolution.

During the revolutionary period, they were grouped inside the Conseil interconfessionnel protestant du Bénin (CIPB), which helped to secure their activities and gave them the opportunity of having an official status (representatives of the CIPB had some seats at the ANR). With the CIPB being dominated by the EPMB, the other Christian movements became dependent on this Methodist movement which remained the predominant Christian movement throughout the revolutionary period. Meanwhile, the nationalist and revolutionary stands of the government have been used by some evangelical churches in

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order to get rid of the foreign tutelage of the SIM (Sudan Interior Mission) and nationalize their activities. They later took the name of UEEB.

So, Churches stayed aside from politics from the beginning to the end of the revolutionary period and refused to take position or make comments on the these power abuse. Some representatives of the CIPB, essentially composed of the members of EPMB participated however at the National Conference. The leaders of evangelical movements did not thus attend the National Conference and remained outside of the political process throughout the transitional period.

According to Pastor Michel Alokpo, 3 main reasons can be used to explain this culture of silence and indifference that prevailed in the Beninese churches for years. The presence of foreign pastors who were not directly concerned by the national affairs; the low level of formal education of the local religious leaders; the widespread opinion that Christians have nothing to do with politics. The third argument is obviously important and can be interpreted in at least two different ways. The first one has to do with the negative conception of politics perceived as being somehow corrupt and therefore dangerous and incompatible with the Christian faith. The second interpretation implies the idea that, Christians should not interfere into politics and leave it for those chosen by God for it. So they don’t have to participate but to just obey and respect those chosen by God for it.

- From indifference to political awareness

As mentioned early, the political transition engendered a shift in the Christian movements’ conception of politics. From indifferent they became more and more interested in politics. Several factors can help explain this situation:

We have first of all the liberalization of the regime which reduced the administrative hindrances and most importantly minimized government’s control over the religious sphere. This made the creation of churches without getting the ministry of I A’s authorization as well as the development of new forms of proselytism possible.

The role played by Mgr De Souza in the democratic transition has promoted the catholic church which gained in prestige and opportunities of having access to media and soon. This urged somehow the evangelical churches which were traditionally critic towards the Catholic Church to go into politics in order to get the favours obtained by the Catholics.

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The conversion of Kérékou and the way he constantly displays it publicly even since he came back to power in 1996 have not only been appreciated (approved) by the evangelical movements but also further stimulated their interest in politics.

The establishment of new religious groups, added to the high increasing members of the already existing churches, and most importantly the emergence of a new generation of well educated pastors often trained in anglophone countries such as Nigeria have also contributed to this changing attitude of Christian movements towards politics. These pastors in fact advocate unambiguously the participation of Christians into politics. Their main argument is that, Christian should go into politics in order to change through their honesty its corrupt and pervasive aspects and promote social justice which is another way of preparing the coming back of Jesus. The Church is in this regard invested with the prophetic role of realising the will of God on earth.

It has to be noted however that the evangelical and Pentecostal beninese community is divided into many churches and movements with variable sizes and different opinions over the churches’ engagement in politics. Two main associations can be identified : the Conseil des églises protestantes évangeliques du Bénin (CEPEB) and the Fédération des églises et missions évangéliques du Bénin (FEMEB). Resulting from the marginalization of Methodists and the transformation of CIPB from 1990, the CEPEB represents the nearly 30 evangelical and Pentecostal churches, some of them advocating the participation of Christians into politics. Created in 1991 by the Assemblies of God and Baptist churches, the FEMEB is on its part composed of nearly 15 churches and some affiliated missions sceptical about this issue.

The CEPEB has not only accepted the idea of Christian getting involved in politics but also organised several seminaries especially in the mid 1990’s in order to discuss about it and gather as much propositions as possible for effectively achieving this goal. In February 1996 for example, they organise a seminar on “the role of the Christian official in the society” and in February 1997, the Christian officials held a conference at Lokossa on “the role of the church in the development of Benin”. In August 2000, Pastor Oueounou, leader of the Mission internationale d’évangélisation et de réveil spirituel (MIERS), clearly confirmed this new orientation during a great meeting by arguing that Christians should no longer keep themselves out of politics and should not only vote but also and most significantly actively get involved in the politics of their country.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Bulletin Agence Bénin Presse, 8 aôut 2000.
- The new political strategies of evangelical actors and movements

The examination of some church’s documents and papers presented at the seminars organized by CEPEB highlights the strategies adopted by these movements. Whereas the participants of the 1996 conference failed to reach a large consensus over the issue of Christian involvement into politics, those of the 1997 conference appeared more determined and convinced by the prophetic role that the church should play in politics by leading the nation according to the will of God. The church thus has, according to this emerging opinion, a significant role to play in the development of the nation by urging and helping those on charge of the management of public affairs to carry out their function in accordance with biblical principles. There are several ways of carrying this mission out:

So there is first of all the need of developing new instruments and methods of evangelisation specifically directed to the executives. Apart from the conversion of Kérékou by a young pastor, several other important personalities including Captain Tawes, former responsible of the presidential guard of Kérékou, became born again.

It is then the duty of the church to help and pray for the Christians involved in the decision making process. The appointment of Christians in high state instances should be promoted, the argument being that this massive presence of Christians will have a positive impact on management of the State and on the public policies elaborated and implemented. One of the responsible of the Minister of Trade’s cabinet was an active laity affiliated to CEPEB and three members of the Kérékou last government before the 2001 elections attend the same church with Kérékou16.

The believers are thus encouraged to join political parties and the church is expected, according to the final report of the 1997 Conference not to make opposition to their political participation as far as they keep resisting through their honesty to the constant temptations prevailing in the political arena.

The issue of creating a Christian political party has been raised since 1996 and a final stand has not been taken during the discussions, the participants having different opinions over it. The pastors approving the idea were opposed by those thinking that the creation of religious political party may further divide the Christian community. And the 1997 conference participants have not discussed about this issue.

16 Luc Gnacadja, the Environnement Minister, Joseph Attin, the Transport Minister and Gaston Zossou, the government spokesman. See La Lettre du Continent, n° 356, 6 juillet 2000.
- Conclusion: Weaknesses and ambiguities of the political mobilization of Christian movements

Finally, what can be said about the religious actors’ involvement in politics in Benin is that, although they have succeeded in emerging during the democratisation process, their political mobilisation still has a long way to go. The Christian community as a whole became indeed more visible and specifically, the evangelical Christians have finally invaded the political elite which has been for a long time exclusively composed of Catholics. An evangelical Radio station has even been inaugurated in 1998 at Cotonou. The dynamism and achievement of this evangelical movements and actors should not however overlook their weaknesses and ambiguities which may stand as obstacles to their effective political mobilisation and involvement.

It is important in this regard to mention that rivalries still persist among churches despite the apparent unity of the Christian community. In fact, even in the CEPEB, churches still compete themselves in their search of additional members. Much of these churches are also fragile and affected by the conflict of their members or leaders over financial and leadership issues, resulting sometimes into scissions and creations of new rivalling churches from the initial ones.

Apart from these structural weaknesses there is a gap between the spiritual motivations of the members of these new movements and the political aspirations of their leaders. The point is that these members often move from one church to another with the hope of finding miraculously solutions to their personal problems (health, job, family …etc). They are therefore not really interested by their leaders projects or strategies of political sphere’s conquest.

Moreover, the claims relating to the need of the Christian presence in high positions of the decision-making process sometimes result from their will of positioning themselves at strategic places in order to easily get access to favours and resources required in founding the religious or entrepreneurial activities of their leaders.

The evangelical movements’ engagement, is not really propelled by the social or political motives. Their aim therefore, including when they ask their members to massively join political parties and their discussions over the creation of a political party with a religious orientation, is not to contribute to the development and, diffusion of democratic principles and values, unlike the Catholic church, but to expand their religious activities. These movements
do not however constitute a threat to the democratic consolidation. They may even perhaps and paradoxically contribute at the long run in strengthening the process.