



## Electoral Promises in Democratic Republic of Congo: Hope, Anxiety and Ethical Responsibility

**Laurent Mputu Lopeka**

University of Kinshasa, D.R Congo

lormpulo14@gmail.com

### Abstract

Promises are integral to political life, functioning as moral commitments that shape trust and public hope. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, electoral promises often generate both expectation and anxiety, as they are frequently unrealistic, unfulfilled, or employed strategically without sincere commitment. In a context marked by insecurity, poverty, injustice, and institutional fragility, citizens long for social transformation, the rule of law, and political stability, yet remain skeptical of political discourse. This article examines electoral promises as ethically significant speech acts by drawing on John Searle's theory of promising. Through philosophical and ethical analysis, the study argues that electoral promises carry moral responsibility and should be evaluated not merely as political rhetoric but as commitments affecting the common good. From an ethical-theological perspective, the article highlights sincerity, responsibility, and accountability as essential conditions for restoring trust and integrity in political life in the Congolese context.

**Keywords:** *Promise, Election, Commitment, Propaganda, Demagogy .*

### Abstrak

Janji (Politik) merupakan bagian integral dari kehidupan politik dan berfungsi sebagai komitmen moral yang membentuk kepercayaan serta harapan publik. Di Republik Demokratik Kongo, janji-janji pemilu sering kali melahirkan harapan sekaligus kecemasan karena banyak di antaranya tidak realistis, tidak terpenuhi, atau digunakan secara strategis tanpa komitmen yang tulus. Dalam konteks yang ditandai oleh ketidakamanan, kemiskinan, ketidakadilan, dan kerapuhan institusional, masyarakat mendambakan perubahan sosial, penegakan hukum, dan stabilitas politik, namun tetap bersikap skeptis terhadap wacana politik. Artikel ini menganalisis janji pemilu sebagai tindak tutur yang bermuatan etis dengan menggunakan teori janji John Searle. Melalui pendekatan filosofis dan etis-teologis, studi ini menegaskan bahwa janji pemilu mengandung tanggung jawab moral dan harus dipahami sebagai komitmen terhadap kebaikan bersama. Kejujuran, tanggung jawab, dan akuntabilitas menjadi syarat utama untuk memulihkan kepercayaan publik dan integritas politik.

**Kata Kunci:** Janji, Pemilu, Komitmen, Propaganda, Demagogi.

### Introduction

Increasingly, probity is becoming a rare commodity among politicians, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They fail to scrupulously honor their duties, commitments, or promises. Promises made during election campaigns are

sometimes flawed and absurd. They generate mistrust among voters who, despite having held out hope, are showing themselves to be a fraud.

The hypothesis underlying this study is simple. Some election promises are too good to be true. They do not meet the conditions analyzed by J.-R. Searle for successful fulfillment, if any, in a democracy that aspires to be worthy. This theme has certainly been the subject of multiple readings and the subject of passionate debates. Furthermore, we will situate it as a complex speech act. We will try to reconsider it as a commitment that directs energies into the future for the purpose of its ethical and moral dimension. This study is intended as an awakening of conscience to escape being a victim of good or bad faith.

Therefore, an election promise constitutes a performative act. The candidate will have to maintain a relationship of commitment with his voters to achieve something in the future. As such, it is an action in itself, a commitment. To promise, therefore, would be to do tomorrow what one says today that one will do and thus bind oneself by this very word, and with others. To do this, our study unfolds within a four-part structure. First, we touch on the election, then we will identify the electoral campaign, then we will deal with the promise, marking it in politics and privileging its aspect of ethical-moral value before pointing it out as a complex speech act. Finally, we will indicate the rules that condition the success of a promise according to J.-R. Searle, an American philosopher known for his theory of speech acts.

From an ethical–theological perspective, the act of promising cannot be reduced to a mere political strategy or rhetorical device. In Christian moral thought, promise-making is intrinsically linked to truthfulness, responsibility, and fidelity toward others. Scripture and Christian ethics consistently affirm that words spoken publicly create moral obligations, especially when they concern the common good and the well-being of vulnerable populations. In this sense, electoral promises raise not only political but also theological questions, particularly regarding conscience, moral integrity, and accountability before God and society. This study therefore situates the analysis of electoral promises within a broader framework of ethical responsibility, where political speech is evaluated as a morally significant act that affects communal trust, social justice, and human dignity.

## 1. Election

There are five important requirements for the functioning of a democratic state, including elections <sup>1</sup>. Today, elections are essential as a means of expressing the opinions of individuals and groups of individuals. In short, they are a way of appointing leaders or governments by those they lead or govern. The underlying idea is to prevent people from appointing themselves and exercising functions without the consent of other citizens. Through elections, a choice is made by means of a vote (vote, approval) in which every person with the right to vote, the electorate, is called upon to participate. Undoubtedly, elections provide everyone with the moral satisfaction of expressing their point of view and participating, even indirectly, in the management of public affairs by designating their representatives.

In the DR Congo, the constituent echoes this in the fifth article of its Constitution <sup>2</sup>. Thus, paragraph 1 stipulates that: "National sovereignty belongs to the people. All power emanates from the people who exercise it directly by referendum or elections and indirectly through their representatives". Referring to the status of elector and eligible, paragraph 4 of the same article specifies: "All Congolese of both sexes, aged eighteen years or over and enjoying their civil and political rights, are electors and eligible, under conditions determined by law." Ultimately, voting is based on the principle of equality of electors.

As a result, in a so-called democratic country, voting becomes a right, a civic act. It is therefore a fundamental right of participation that allows one to exercise one's citizenship. As a result, voting is not about letting things be: it is the accomplishment of the gesture, both splendid and limited, of determining oneself as a subject who wants. That being said, the election constitutes a popular consultation allowing citizens to decide on the choice of candidates and political parties (or groups) that propose different visions and programs. It is a means of acceptance, political change and legitimization of those in power and the power they exercise <sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>P. Ngoma-Binda, *Political participation. Elements of political training*, Kinshasa, IFEP and FKA, 1995, 85-92

<sup>2</sup>The Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Congo of 02/18/2024, as amended on 01/20/2011

<sup>3</sup>Incidentally, elections should not be considered a panacea. Thus, it will be necessary to anathematize the danger of the phenomenon of 'electoralism', which consists of relying solely on the organization of elections to confer legitimacy in public life on the 'proclaimed winners', whatever the organizational and practical irregularities in fact.

At the very least, adopted or sometimes imposed, elections are an outcome that allows the people to take responsibility and to give themselves new representatives. Thus, elections must take place in a regular, peaceful, fair, loyal dynamic and whose results are honestly proclaimed and accepted by all <sup>4</sup>. The voting subject identifies himself by a voice, the quality of which can be reduced by the number of voters. Moreover, the voice of the majority is not necessarily that of reason or justice. The electoral period is punctuated by a series of stages, notably the electoral campaign.

## **2. Election campaign**

This is the period leading up to an election. It provides the candidate or party with the opportunity to promote themselves in order to maximize their chances of garnering the largest number of votes possible. In politics, therefore, during this precise time, an action is exerted on public opinion to bring it to have and support certain ideas. In other words, during this period a psychological action is discovered which implements all means of information to propagate a doctrine, create a movement of opinion and bring about a decision.

Political figures go out into the field, particularly to make themselves known, inform people about their programs, and explain their social project or the party's/individual's ideas regarding the management of public affairs. This generally takes place through targeted communication activities, documents, posters, leaflets, or meetings during which an exchange takes place between the candidate and the population. It's as if the candidate is trying to indoctrinate future voters. During those months, a lot of things happen in the DR Congo: on the one hand, rallies, carnivals, donations, distributions of food, T-shirts or money; on the other hand, insults, sabotage, closures of certain channels and programs, very generally those close to the opposition. Strangely, recent history in this area tells us that this period is often marked by many excesses, clashes or derogatory remarks between supporters of the candidates.

Finally, in defending their ideas, politicians bribe and promise the earth to voters, a source of hope and anxiety. In other words, elections are a circumstance that encourages promises.

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<sup>4</sup> In many supposedly democratic countries, the results proclaimed (provisionally or definitively) do not reflect the freely expressed will of the electorate.

### 3. Promise

This concept as a commitment to perform an act in the future. That is, it is a manifestation of the intention to do or not do something in the future. Through the promise, man compensates for the unpredictability and uncertainty of the future. At this level, we consider the promise as being at the border between politics, law, morality and the philosophy of language. And so, we posit it as a speech act corresponding to a commitment made by the speaker by virtue of the very word he utters, and in doing so, it comes closer to the legal contract, at the same time as it is distinguished by an aspect closer to morality.

Moreover, in its manifestation, the promise can take either the tacit form, such as that made to the newborn to love him forever and unconditionally..., or also explicit, solemn, such as the promise of religious or political people before the voters. What about this type of promise, called political?

#### 3.1. Promise in politics

In the introduction to V. Peillon's *Promesse*<sup>5</sup>, and especially in its summary, the reader becomes aware of the key idea that in politics, promises have a bad reputation and a bad press. Can we understand this to mean that politics is an art of lies, cunning, seduction, and betrayal? Despite his unfortunate reputation, the politician makes promises to conquer power, even if he betrays it in the process. In the process of retaining or reconquering it, he will make new ones. Stubborn to achieve an end, the politician promises, sometimes without sincerity. He does it maliciously to obtain the vote of the population, but once in power, it is rare to keep his promises<sup>6</sup>. He uses demagogy, understood by Aristotle as "an artifice of lies that politicians use, promising the earth to the people and which are moreover illusory"<sup>7</sup>. However, it should not be this way. Because politics constitutes the bulwark against the stupefaction of existence. It is based on the recognition of human plurality and mainly concerns what relates to the collective, to a sum of individualities.

Better still, politics is conceived on the ethical model. Habermas therefore believes that "politics was conceived as a doctrine teaching life according to Good and

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<sup>5</sup> V. Peillon, *The Promise*, Paris, PUF, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Not being considered as an end by the political actors, the voter is abandoned to his sad fate, especially after the proclamation of the results. Those who had claimed or sworn to speak about him, or in his name, only care about themselves, about their positioning.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1964, 188-189.

Justice; it continued ethics" <sup>8</sup>. In reality, politics is in no way in a situation of autonomy in relation to the economy, to the social. As a result, politics is expressed as power, and not as violence. H. Arendt thinks that "violence is linked to manipulation, instrumentation, strategy - in a word, everything that distorts and distorts the free expression of opinion through speech freed from constraint" <sup>9</sup>.

Feeding on passions, politics always needs promises. This means, one might say, that the promise is consubstantial with politics. So that in politics, the promise is the only one "able to mobilize energy and hope, to orient time toward the future" <sup>10</sup>." Because in politics, one exposes oneself, one decides, one justifies one's decisions by words. If we look more closely, there is a paradox. Even if broken promises generate a loss of confidence among voters, at the same time, it is they who demand them. Presumably, between the one who makes promises and the one who says nothing, the people prefer the former, even if it means being labeled a demagogue or perfidious. The latter will be quickly swept aside by the people. That being said, it is better to make promises, even if they are unrealizable or fantastic, than to refuse to make them in the name of a certain rectitude. Is this why in our political scene in the DR Congo, there are more irresponsible, greedy, and unreliable political actors and fewer conscientious, sincere, and reliable ones?

In any case, there's no point harboring malicious resentment against politicians who make promises. Besides, let's remember that people are hostile to anyone who doesn't share their passions, illusions, mistakes, expectations, and hopes. A major misunderstanding. A politician who promises is someone who can be held accountable, who will have to keep their commitments and be accountable for their word. Apparently, voters demand it in order to have material on which to judge the capacity and integrity of their representative. Because it serves as a kind of summons for the promise-maker to take responsibility for their actions, and allows potential beneficiaries to react when promises have been broken.

What must be condemned is the logic of basing politics on a clearly demagogic basis. In search of positioning, politicians present themselves to voters with a discourse of a certain coherence, in the manner of the sophist, to convince, persuade and even charm certain sensibilities. The political demagogue exploits opportunities to obtain the

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<sup>8</sup>Quoted by J.M Ferry, *Habermas. The Ethics of Communication* , 61.

<sup>9</sup>H. Arendt quoted by J.M. Ferry, *oc*, 81.

<sup>10</sup>J.-R. Searle, *oc* . 50.

positions he covets. Sometimes naively, the people vote for the one who says what they want to hear. But we believe that whoever lets himself be taken in by such deception has decided to establish himself as the true subject of the deception of an electoral argument . It is tempting not to note the lack of jubilation of the informed crowds who believe that these corrupt hopefuls do not treat man as an end; their political ethics are of the order of utilitarianism <sup>11</sup>.

This is why we ask the population to sharpen their awareness in order to distinguish the true from the false, the wheat from the chaff. It is said that promises only bind those who listen to them. Individuals must enter this game to detect what is pure demagoguery and what is a circumstance of life. It is demanding, certainly, but it is ideal for being able to provide the voter with the paths to a possible and real liberation from the grip of the sociological, the natural, tribalism, fanaticism and the irrational. We must stubbornly seek the inscription of reason in socio-political action in the DR Congo.

This is how an exchange can be established, or rather a frank dialogue for a win-win contract between voters and elected officials in a representative democracy. The former would find themselves in their basic and legitimate desires, and the latter would enjoy their political prestige. It is only in this way, it seems to us, that everyone will be able to build and consolidate living together or rather "living well together" as Mbolokala Imbuli pertinently suggests <sup>12</sup>.

There is no need to recall that in Africa in general and in the DR Congo in particular, the ideological clientele is notable for a certain gaping fanaticism with a strong sociological or tribal dose. This attitude, without a doubt, makes one irrational to the point of silencing criticism of everything promised by this or that power seeker. And yet, it is delicate to be cautious when faced with politicians' speeches punctuated by promises. The voter must know what a promise is. Because he is required to support and relay the promises for which he voted.

Against this backdrop, one can allow oneself to demand from voters a critical spirit that would prohibit any identification with demagogic models. Seriously, in our country, plagued by disastrous wars and extreme poverty, the quarrels of the partisans after the election should focus on the obligations of the promisor with regard to his

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<sup>11</sup>O. Hoffe, *The State and Justice - John Rawls and R. Nozick* , (Paris, Librairie J.VRIN, 1988), 68.

<sup>12</sup>N. Mbolokala Imbuli, *For a good living together of Humanity. Platonic anthropology and the problems of a just society* , (Kinshasa, Cerdaf, 2010), 67.

commitments and on knowing what attitude should be adopted towards this type of person. The people should be demanding and not political fanatics<sup>13</sup>. This will require the government, or rather the elected officials, to be accountable to the voters. Generally, the population is abandoned to its sad fate. These unfulfilled promises cause unease that can even lead to panic. Let's not misunderstand. Fulfilling promises implies the effective and efficient implementation of the concept of commitment. The use of this concept makes sense because it focuses attention on the means and the action rather than on the goal to be achieved. It therefore calls for political skill and prudence.

Truly, caution is required to assess the opportunity to keep one's word, if the promisor cannot harm himself or when circumstances still remain. Time is sometimes unpredictable. Although an actor in history according to H. Arendt, man cannot control its course. In other words, the future cannot be locked into the present, at the risk of claiming rigorous determinism without keys. Also, it is important to emphasize the existence of things that are beyond man, despite his good will. No one knows exactly what the future holds for us. There are natural or environmental causes that can prevent the fulfillment of a promise. This is the case with war, epidemics, death... It is in this context that the excuse is understood. It will therefore not be insignificant to point out that only man is capable of promising. This means that the promise appeals to Nietzsche's will, with implications for morality.

### **3.2. Promise, Conscience, and Christian Moral Responsibility**

If one has been attentive, one could notice that the promise as evoked is not a contract with judicial value, but rather with ethical-moral value. Otherwise, it is drawn as if there is an obligation to keep one's promises. The sanctions that follow are of an order of approval or disapproval, therefore moral. Promises have no representatives or magistrates, they are counted and realized differently and elsewhere, in this elsewhere which is not confused with the sum of particular interests. We know the distinction that Ricœur establishes between morality and ethics. The latter is concrete and teleological. It deals with the good life. Deontological and universal, the former deals with obligation. Complex, or rather more dialectical, is the connection between the two. On the one hand, Ricœur is of the opinion that all ethics must pass through the critique or

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<sup>13</sup>One who is driven by excessive polarization to the point of considering the opponent as an enemy; unreceptive to divergent opinions.

sieve of the universal norm. On the other, he speaks of the primacy of ethics over morality and finds that morality must resort to ethics, because ethics envelops morality<sup>14</sup>. Let's return to the promise to (re)emphasize that it brings about a form of experience with the other. And as a result, a firm commitment is required for others to occupy a prominent place in the promise. Ultimately, the promise represents the most powerful form of commitment, made face to face. It is an act that maintains intersubjectivity. The commitment is made with an interlocutor. That said, promissory commitment is social, not personal.

Indeed, we can even say that the promise constitutes, as much as forgiveness, the condition of existence of a democratic society where everyone can fully exercise their freedom. The point here is the fact that tomorrow is unknown. Thus, collectively and democratically, people can or even must project themselves into the future. To the extent that we commit to what we want to do and we strive to respect this obligation (or even oath) we might as well do it. Very wisely Ricœur says: "the promise is the ethics of initiative. The heart of ethics is the promise to keep my promises"<sup>15</sup>.

Which means that men, if applicable, political candidates, or rather "excellences, honorable people," should not promise if they know from the outset that it is useless. Aren't virtue and excellence inseparable from ethics according to Machiavelli? Man is called to keep his promise. Keeping one's promise can mean fidelity to oneself, a way of being true and sincere. It is played out in trust towards others, but also in the obligation that binds you to the other. In this way, keeping one's promises is not far from being the key to professional success. Thus, it is commendable to be faithful to one's word and to always act frankly and without artifice.

In Christian ethical reflection, the promise is inseparable from the notion of conscience and moral responsibility. To promise is not merely to express an intention but to bind oneself morally before others and, ultimately, before God. Christian tradition understands truthfulness and fidelity as virtues that sustain social life and protect communal trust. When a political actor makes a promise, especially in contexts marked by poverty, violence, and institutional fragility such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the moral weight of that promise is significantly heightened. From this perspective, broken electoral promises are not simply political failures but ethical

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<sup>14</sup>P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, (Paris, Seuil, 1991), 201. (Henceforth, SM).

<sup>15</sup>P. Ricoeur, *From Text to Action. Essays on Hermeneutics III*, (Paris, Le Seuil, 1998), 301.

ruptures that undermine trust, deepen cynicism, and weaken the moral fabric of society. Christian social ethics insists that political authority exists for the service of the common good, and therefore political speech must be governed by sincerity, responsibility, and concern for justice. Electoral promises, when made without intention or capacity to fulfill them, contradict the ethical demand for integrity and contribute to structures of deception that disproportionately harm the most vulnerable.

In Ricoeur's work, there is promise with ipseity. Indeed, according to P. Ricoeur, identity is the place of passage between narrative identity and ethical-moral identity. There is therefore, for this author, a narrative identity of the self (ipse) and a substantialist or formalist identity of sameness (idem). Thus, he writes, the promise "is found in ipse or identity-ipseity where the self maintains itself in its own right (...) without the support of the idem" <sup>16</sup>. From then on, the promise shares this space with commitment and fidelity. By citing the Levinasian example of the promise kept, Ricoeur therefore confirms that "narrative identity is equivalent to a true ipseity only by virtue of this decisive moment, which makes ethical responsibility the supreme factor of ipseity" <sup>17</sup>.

The theme of narrative identity is followed and amplified by that of self-esteem that the good life should make possible. The resolution of this problem is in the ternary structure that the author proposes to us: "the aim of the 'good life' with and for others in just institutions" <sup>18</sup>. Ricoeur, it seems to us, attempts to root the subject of moral imputation in the aim of the good life that precedes any obligation or norm. It is in this invocation of the good life that the link between the ethical and moral dimension is made. When we make a promise, we must be careful to understand this because the other than me to whom I promise this or that is not limited to the present 'you' of the dialogical dimension. Ricoeur thinks that 'The other is also the other than the 'you' <sup>19</sup>. The promisor carries on his shoulders, beyond interpersonal relations, the reputation of the institution, the community, the family in which he relates to other faceless people, if applicable the political party, the ethnic group... of which he is a member. The Congolese must internalize this aspect of things which is related to dignity. Elsewhere, the ruler presents an honorary resignation because such and such a thing said or

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<sup>16</sup>P. Ricoeur, *Reflection made*, (Paris, Esprit, 1995). 355-356.

<sup>17</sup>P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative III*, (Paris, Seuil, 1989), 359.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 202.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 227.

promised is not carried out. If ridicule could kill! It must be said that the action accomplished by the promise is through enunciation. Searle says that "A promise implies that an intention, sincere or not, is expressed <sup>20</sup>." A promise is expressed. So, let's talk about it.

### 3.3. Promise as a speech act

Since Austin and Searle, it has been established that language has not only an observative dimension, but also a performative dimension, including force and an effect on the recipient of speech. These theorists postulate that utterances can accomplish actions, not just convey information. To put it bluntly, the Oxford school had, among other things, the merit of developing the theory of speech acts, the starting point of which undoubtedly remains Austin's discovery of performative statements <sup>21</sup>.

That being said, the promise understood as the commitment to contract an obligation is nonetheless a speech act in the Austinian sense. It represents a performative by which the speaker constitutes himself as a subject responsible for his actions. In this regard, the author of *Réflexion faite* comforts us when he says: "As a speech act, to promise is to say that one will do tomorrow what one says today that one will do and thus to bind oneself by this very word" <sup>22</sup>. The promisor makes a commitment to perform a certain act in the future or commits to doing something. Philosophically, the promise is that necessary illusion which is established between an "I" and a "you", or between an "I" and a "we" <sup>23</sup>. It is therefore an almost solemn formula by which the person commits to doing what he says, to keeping his word and by which the force increases. Thanks to it, there is hope that our words will have more weight. Because, by the promise we commit ourselves to someone to whom we give our word; to give them hope. With this conviction, it is easy to say with Searle that the promise is substantially dependent on a circumstance, a situation that provokes it, or rather on its realization. Thus he writes: "one of the essential characteristics of these circumstances or these situations is that the one to whom something is promised wishes (needs, desires) that this thing be realized, and on the other hand, the one who promises

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<sup>20</sup>J.-R. Searle, *oc*, 104.

<sup>21</sup>Read with interest L. Mputu Lopeka M., "Presupposition, speech act with illocutionary value in enunciative knowledge", in "Akofena" Varia, n°13, Vol.6 (September 2024), Ivory Coast, CRAC, 387-398.

<sup>22</sup>RF, p. 30.

<sup>23</sup>V. Peillon, *The Promise*, (Paris, PUF, 2019), 25.

is aware of this wish (of this need or this desire)" <sup>24</sup>. Every promise should be an island of security.

From this perspective, an election promise constitutes a performative act. The candidate creates a relationship of commitment with his or her voters by committing to achieving something in the future. As such, it is an action in itself, a commitment. The subtlety of time is perceived insofar as promising is an act of speech which, in the present, engages faith, trust, belief in a future act. In the twists and turns of this logic, we can clearly see the tension that is experienced between the present, where the promise is made, and the future where the promise is kept, or not. We are therefore betting on the future. The promise is far from being a forecast, but a bet. It is a challenge to the random nature of time, because it ignores what awaits it, as well as to the temporal passivity of its author. This is why, presumably, Searle will describe the promise as a complex act <sup>25</sup>.

In this gallery, the promise falls within the illocutionary act of intention <sup>26</sup>. Through the illocutionary force of an expression, a speaker can motivate a listener to accept the offer of his speech act, and thereby, to engage in a rationally motivated bond <sup>27</sup>. We can risk saying that the promise then consolidates the fiduciary dimension of language, the current practice of the latter encompassing a tacit clause, on the one hand, of sincerity and on the other, of trust. In doing so, in the speech act called promise, two dimensions complement each other. There is, on the one hand, the linguistic dimension of the act of promising as a speech act and on the other hand, the moral characteristic of the promise which comes to the fore. We see that the promisor (speaker) places himself under the obligation to do what he says, but he also holds a commitment to the promisee (interlocutor). It is as if there is a certain obligation which arises from the injunction not to betray one's own word, to be faithful to others who count on me. P. Ricoeur said therefore to keep one's promise is not to betray it. F. Armengaud says it well: "The point

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<sup>24</sup>J.-R. Searle, *Speech Acts*, (Paris, Hermann, 1972), 100-101.

<sup>25</sup>JR. Searle, oc, p.98.

<sup>26</sup>F. Armengaud, *La pragmatique*, QSJ?, 5th<sup>ed</sup>. (Paris, PUF, 2017), 82-87. It must be said that Searle distinguishes twelve criteria for illocutionary acts including the expressed psychological states. These, capable of grouping the greatest number of illocutionary acts, are: belief (assertion, remark, explanation, etc.), desire or need (request, order, prayer), pleasure (congratulations, greeting) and intention (promise, wish, threat).

<sup>27</sup>J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action . Rationality of Action and Rationality of Society*, Vol. 1, (Paris, Fayard, 1987), 288.

of a promise is that the one who pronounces it takes upon himself the obligation to accomplish something" <sup>28</sup>.

It will be more demanding, as one might expect, when the promise is made before a witness or an audience. Faithfulness to the given word will have to offer a guarantee that the beginning will have a continuation and that the initiative will actually inaugurate a new course of events. For greater dignity and success, electoral promises should be the subject of reflection and study by the promising candidates to analyze the conditions of feasibility before being kept. From a theological standpoint, the performative power of promise-making underscores the moral seriousness of language in public life. Speech is not morally neutral; it creates relationships, expectations, and obligations. In Christian ethics, language participates in responsibility, and the misuse of promises constitutes a form of moral failure that damages both interpersonal trust and institutional credibility. Thus, analyzing electoral promises as speech acts also implies evaluating them as ethical acts with consequences for social justice and communal hope.

#### **4. The Conditions for the Success of a Promise according to John Searle**

This last point traces the rules as proposed by philosopher John Searle for a promise to be considered successful, which is referred to as a sincere promise <sup>29</sup>. For a promise to be considered successful, it must first be situated within a shared moral and communicative horizon between the speaker and the listener. A promise presupposes not only linguistic intelligibility but also the ethical capacity of both parties to assume responsibility. In theological terms, this capacity is rooted in conscience and moral agency, whereby the speaker recognizes the weight of words spoken publicly and the listener receives them in trust. The promise thus begins with the inner disposition of the promisor, who must sincerely intend to act, and reaches its completion in the expectation of the promisee, whose hope is oriented toward the fulfillment of what has been pledged.

A promise must also be articulated with clarity and integrity. Ethical–theological reflection insists that truthfulness is a fundamental moral virtue, especially in public discourse. A promise that is vague, ambiguous, or rhetorically inflated undermines the

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<sup>28</sup>F. Armenengaud, *oc .*, p.82.

<sup>29</sup>J. R. Searle, *oc .*, p. 98-104

moral bond it seeks to establish. Clear formulation respects not only grammatical and pragmatic norms but also the ethical demand to speak truthfully before others. In this sense, clarity is not merely a technical requirement but a moral obligation that safeguards trust and protects the dignity of the listener. Moreover, the promissory act necessarily refers to the future. Theologically, this orientation toward the future reflects human openness to hope and responsibility in an uncertain world. A promise binds the speaker to future action and invites both parties into a shared anticipation of what is yet to come. By contrast, references to past actions cannot sustain a genuine promise, as they fail to engage the ethical commitment that gives the promise its meaning and force.

A genuine promise further presupposes that the speaker prefers its fulfillment to its non-fulfillment. Ethical theology emphasizes that promising must be ordered toward the good of the other. When a promise is used to threaten, manipulate, or coerce, it ceases to be an act of moral commitment and becomes an instrument of domination. In this respect, the ethical quality of a promise is measured by its orientation toward beneficence, justice, and respect for the other as a moral subject. It is also essential that the fulfillment of the promise not be perceived as automatic or inevitable. The moral significance of a promise lies precisely in the fact that its realization depends on the free and responsible action of the speaker. From a theological standpoint, this highlights the human condition as one of freedom and contingency. Promising is meaningful only where the future remains open and where the speaker assumes responsibility for acting within that openness.

Central to the ethical–theological understanding of promise is the sincerity of intention. A promise presupposes that the speaker genuinely believes in their capacity to fulfill what is promised and is resolved to do so. Without sincerity, the promise becomes morally empty, even if it is linguistically well formed. In Christian ethics, such insincerity constitutes a failure of truthfulness and a violation of the trust placed by others in the speaker’s word. By making a promise, the speaker places themselves under an obligation that is both moral and social. Theologically, this obligation reflects the understanding that human beings are accountable not only to one another but also to a higher moral order that calls them to fidelity and responsibility. In the political sphere, this means that promising entails concrete action, sustained effort, and perseverance in the face of obstacles. A promise is therefore inseparable from praxis. Furthermore, the speaker must intend that the listener recognizes the promise as binding. Ethical

responsibility emerges fully only when the promisee understands that the promisor has assumed an obligation and can therefore be held accountable. This dimension underscores the relational nature of promise-making, where trust is created and sustained through mutual recognition. The illocutionary force of the promise establishes commitment, while its perlocutionary effect shapes hope, expectation, and moral judgment.

Finally, the language of promise must be used with care, seriousness, and sincerity. From an ethical–theological perspective, language participates in moral action; words do not merely describe reality but help to shape it. When language is misused or manipulated, the moral fabric of social life is weakened. Clear and responsible speech is thus essential to preserving the integrity of the promise and to maintaining trust within the community. The principles outlined above can be distilled into three interrelated elements: the content of what is promised, the individual who makes the promise, and the recipient to whom it is addressed. The authenticity of a promise emerges from a genuine alignment between the expectations and interests of the hearer and the promisor’s conviction that the promised action can and will be realized. Sincerity, therefore, is not an isolated intention but a relational dynamic that binds desire, trust, and responsibility. Although sincerity remains fundamental, the credibility of an electoral promise also depends on concrete conditions such as the speaker’s competence, capacity for foresight, freedom of action, orientation toward the future, and the presence of mutual recognition between the parties involved. To honor a promise, political actors must first ensure that their commitments are realistically attainable. This involves not only careful formulation but also prudent planning, gradual engagement, and sustained perseverance. Fidelity to one’s word thus requires both practical wisdom and moral resolve. As the author aptly observes, a promise that is genuinely sound is possible only when the promised outcome corresponds to the desires and interests of the listener, who prefers its fulfillment to its failure, and when the speaker clearly understands and acknowledges this expectation. In such a convergence of intention, understanding, and responsibility, the promise attains its full ethical and communicative validity.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>JR. Searle, *oc* . 100-101.

## Conclusion

Inseparable from politics, a promise is far from being a simple forecast; it is a bet. Politicians cannot fail to promise. The fact remains that a promise is an evaluative indicator of the probity, responsibility, culture, or prudence of the promiser. But when asked about the failure to keep promises, politicians stray into justifications and sophistries whose secrets only they know. Making and keeping promises provides the opportunity to create certainty in an open and unpredictable life. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the contrast is striking. Electoral promises cause anxiety and reinforce the multifaceted crisis in which the country is mired. The solution would be to follow the conditions analyzed by Searle for sincere promises, understood as a speech act with ethical and moral value.

The field of promise, like any speech act, should be dominated by conscience, the fullness of the conscience of both the speaker and the recipient. Every promise must be clearly stated. The promise-maker must ensure that their commitments are achievable. This is a sincere, genuine promise. The promissory commitment is far from being strictly personal, but rather social. In addition to adopting the above-mentioned Searlian recipes, promising politicians and potential candidates should follow Confucius' advice: "Examine whether what you promise is just and possible, for a promise is a debt." This way, *empty promises will be avoided*. It must therefore be said that the complexity of the act of promising requires any man capable of speaking and acting to be serious, critical, and rational. This is how the politician will avoid being called a fraud, a false token, or a perfidious person.

From an ethical–theological perspective, electoral promises must be understood as acts that engage the conscience of both the promisor and the community that receives them. Christian ethics emphasizes that political responsibility cannot be separated from moral integrity, truthfulness, and concern for the common good. In this sense, the failure to honor electoral promises is not only a political shortcoming but also an ethical failure that weakens social trust and undermines hope.

For Christian communities and religious institutions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, this analysis invites a renewed commitment to ethical discernment and prophetic responsibility in public life. Churches and faith-based actors are called to cultivate critical awareness among citizens, encourage moral accountability among leaders, and affirm that political authority must be exercised in fidelity to justice and

human dignity. Electoral promises, when evaluated through an ethical–theological lens, become a measure of both political credibility and moral responsibility in the pursuit of a more just and humane society.

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