

A PRECIS OF THE HISTORICAL SECURITY CONTEXT IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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The political/military landscape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is highly fragmented and volatile, almost to the point of absurdity. The very complexity of the context is in fact daunting enough that many are put off from trying to achieve a working knowledge of it. While there are few current and concise analytical documents available to aid humanitarian workers in gaining a quick understanding of this sometimes baffling topic, a short précis is given below.



Mobutu Sese Seko

The DRC is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in both Africa and the world, with over 400 recognized ethnic groups living within its borders. Its early pre-history is not well known, although it is believed that waves of Bantu settlers began to inhabit the region beginning in 2000 BC, co-existing with the existing pygmy population. Many other groups migrated into the region in the following centuries, creating a broad mix of cultures and ethnicities that continues to be reflected today.

Complex societies existed in the area that is now known as the DRC, including the Kuba Federation and the Kingdom of Kongo. A pseudo-western style state was established by Belgium in 1877, under a corporation known as the “Congo Free State.” This company, initially owned by King Leopold II of Belgium, became known for the brutal regime of exploitation that was put in place to ensure profitability. By 1908, the public

relations aspects of the Congo Free State had become such that the territory was annexed by Belgium itself, falling under the governance of the Belgian parliament, and becoming known as the “Belgian Congo.” This system lasted until independence was granted in 1960.

With independence came chaos, and a quick succession of crises as the army mutinied, two provinces (Kasai and Katanga) attempted to gain their own independence, serious opposition to the constitution emerged amongst various groups, and a power struggle ensued within the government itself.

The early government was dominated by a major political party, the *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC). Internal strife within the MNC did not take long to develop, with its two main figures, Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President Joseph Kasavubu each seeking to remove the other from influence.

Mobutu Sese Seko was also an influential member of the MNC in the late 1950s, and so was connected to those who succeeded to power when the Belgian Congo gained independence in 1960.

Mobutu, a Colonel in the *Force Publique*, was a key figure in the coup that forced Lumumba from power in favour of Kasavubu. Backing for the coup from both the CIA and Belgian intelligence agents is alleged and also quite likely, as Lumumba was seen as pro-Soviet at the time.

Mobutu continued to rise through the ranks in the military and gain wider influence, with the army acting increasingly as a power broker in Congolese domestic politics. In 1965 as a Major General he staged a coup against Kasavubu and seized power. He quickly solidified his hold on power, executing a number of potential rivals. He did so in a highly public manner – shortly after taking power, three cabinet ministers were tried and then hanged in front of a stadium of onlookers on what amounted to trumped up conspiracy charges.

The gross mismanagement for personal gain that came to characterize the Mobutu period spawned the term “kleptocracy” – a “political theory” that can be seen in practice today across the Congo by many in positions of even minor power. The state essentially ceased functioning - during this period there was a saying that “civil servants pretended to keep working, while the government pretended to keep paying them.” Western governments and organizations such as the International Monetary Fund continued to support the Mobutu regime because of his anti-communist stance, and because there appeared to be no other viable alternative.

Mobutu held elections in 1970 in which he was the only candidate, which he (unsurprisingly) won. He changed the name of the country to Zaire in 1971, and changed his own name to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga,

which translates loosely as "The all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest, leaving fire in his wake." Both of these actions were part of a broader campaign on his part of increasing awareness of African culture within Zaire, and were also coupled with measures aimed at bringing the populace in line. Western attire was banned in favour of the "abacost" tunic, and people were prohibited from using "Christian" names. Like most things in Zaire, these bans were imperfectly enforced.

During the latter period of Mobutu's rule, there was somewhat of a renaissance of internal opposition movements, spawned by his misrule and gross human rights abuses. Mobutu's response was the promise of democratic institutions, which largely went unfulfilled. Never the less, the formation of political parties was legalized in 1990, many of whom formed into a coalition of opposition groups the following year that was known as the "Sacred Coalition." This group came to form the core of the National Council which in turn generated the High Council of the Republic. This body elected a prime minister, Etienne Tshisekedi, who quickly came into conflict with Mobutu who unsurprisingly refused to share power. The result was instability, political conflict, a duplication of governmental structures and general paralysis amongst the government bodies.

A UN sponsored initiative in 1994 saw a 780 member legislative body being formed, which was to generate a constitution within the following year. This effort was again thwarted by Mobutu, causing a further drop in his popularity as he refused to share the reins of power.

Long standing policies of ethnic discrimination put into place by Mobutu with the intention of distracting attention from the methods of his rule further exacerbated tensions in the east. Nationality had been stripped from certain Congolese of Rwandese background (*Banyarwandans*) by government decree in 1989. The conflict in Rwanda in 1994 caused approximately 1.5 million Hutu refugees to enter the Kivus, at the same time that *banyarwandans* were being targeted by some Congolese for expulsion from the country. Included amongst the refugees were elements of the *Interahmwe* militia implicate in the genocide in Rwanda.

The influx of Rwandan militia also greatly changed the balance of power and demographics in the region around Goma and Massisi, with many local Tutsi fleeing. This influx of Rwandan Hutus was followed by an invasion by *Banyamulenge*, Rwandan/Congolese-Tutsis, from Rwandan territory. This invasion was justified by their loss of Congolese citizenship under the 1989 decree and also by the presence/actions of the *Interahmwe*.

There is a point that should be made in all discussions of Tutsi or Hutu groups, as well as of *banyarwandans* and *banyamulenge*. These classifications are essentially ones of personal identity rather than definable ethnicity, physical

characteristics, religion or language. While some have attached physical stereotypes to the different groups, these stereotypes are not really borne out in practice. The question of identity is complex, and of course also intensely personal.

During this period there were four major Rwandan armed groups:

- the *Alliance Democratique des Peuple* (ADP)
- the *Conseil National de Résistance pour la Démocratie* (CNRD)
- the *Mouvement Révolutionnaire pour la Liberation du Zaïre* (MRLZ)
- the *Partie de la Révolution Populaire* (PRP)

These four groups were eventually unified under the umbrella of the *Alliance des Forces Democratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaïre* (AFDL), led by Laurent Kabila. Interestingly enough, although all four component groups are dominated by Tutsis, Laurent Kabila himself does not identify as a Tutsi. Laurent Kabila also began his political career in the *Mouvement National Congolais* (MNC), though unlike Mobutu, he was a supporter of Lumumba. Fleeing into the jungle to continue a guerilla war against the government in 1960, Laurent Kabila met with mixed success. Originally an ardent Marxist, over time his political views strayed farther right and much closer into alignment with his own immediate self-interest. He famously received support from Ernesto “Che” Guevera and other revolutionaries sent by the Cuban government, all of whom quickly became disenchanted with what they regarded as a lack of “revolutionary spirit” amongst the Congolese guerillas.

Supported by the Rwandan government, the AFDL began a concerted assault against the Mobutu regime itself in late 1996. There are a number of reports that the AFDL committed mass killings of Hutus during this period, particularly in the Kivus.

As the AFDL advanced across the country, the armed forces of the central government essentially collapsed, with Mobutu fleeing into exile in Morocco on 16 May, 1997. Upon his departure, the AFDL seized Kinshasa with very little bloodshed, Laurent Kabila assuming the post of President on 17 May. Mobutu himself died of prostate cancer the following September, still in exile in Morocco.



Laurent Kabila

Upon taking power, Laurent Kabila changed the name of the country to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and promptly banned all political parties except for his own. Despite promises of a new constitution and democratic elections by 1999, his immediate actions included the abolishment of the transitional institutions put in place in the previous years. Positions in his cabinet went to members of

his own party.

Opposition leaders such as Etienne Tshisekedi were not included in the new government, and indeed were threatened or arrested. Tshisekedi himself was placed under house arrest up until the point that he fled into exile.

Laurent Kabila's grip on power worsened in the following year, as Tutsi elements within the army and the AFDL revolted and seized the north-eastern part of the country. The main armed group within this faction was known as the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD). This group itself split into two factions in early 1999 – one under Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, and a splinter group under Dr Emile Ilunga known as the *RCD-Goma*.

Wamba dia Wamba's group quickly became the weaker of the two, despite Ugandan backing, and was forced to move its base to Kisangani – becoming known as the RCD-Kisangani. At this point the Ugandans were supporting two dissident groups – the RCD-K, and the *Mouvement pour la libération du Congo* (MLC) lead by Jean Pierre Bemba and based in Equateur province. Ugandan troops accompanied both the MLC and the RCD-N during operations, and were in fact much more effective than the Congolese militias.

The RCD-Goma gained its name from its base of operations on the north shore of Lake Kivu. It retained much of the original RCDs resources, and enjoyed the support of the Rwandan government. Much like the Ugandan backed groups, the RCD-Goma were directly supported by Rwandan army units, who undertook much of the harder fighting.

All the various rebel groups in the north-east continued to fight the central government and each other, although attempts were made by their sponsors to broker a ceasefire between the groups themselves, as well as with the central government. The external sponsors of the rebel groups were using them for two main purposes – as a tool to influence their own domestic politics and pressures, and as a means to gain access to the natural resources within the Congo.

The ceasefire, known as the Lusaka Accord, signed by all rebel groups in August, 1999 was short lived – by the beginning of November, all rebel signatories had rejected the agreement, citing breaches by the Kabila government.

The escalation of fighting that followed the collapse of this agreement put Laurent Kabila on the defensive. The former President of Botswana, Ketumile Masire, was accepted by all parties as a neutral mediator to attempt to re-implement the peace agreement. Masire's work was hampered by Laurent Kabila, who did not wish to see the democratization of society as envisaged in the accord.

Grassroots pro-democracy movements began to form, many based upon existing church groups, placing pressure on Laurent Kabila. He made two abortive attempts to institute a legislature, one composed of elected candidates from within ADLF aligned parties, and the second a body appointed by him. His increasingly desperate political manoeuvring ended when he was assassinated by one of his own bodyguards on 16 January, 2001.

An investigatory commission appointed after Laurent Kabila's death indicated that the assassination had been organized by the governments of Uganda, Rwanda and rebels from RCD-Goma. Although these parties have denied the accusations, this is a plausible explanation. That being said, there were numerous flaws in the investigation, and as the perpetrator died minutes after the murder, the truth will likely remain unknown. Over 60 people were imprisoned for involvement in the assassination, and 26 were executed. Eleven of these prisoners escaped from the Makala Penitentiary and Re-Education Centre on 24 October, 2006, though two were subsequently recaptured. There is some speculation that these escapes were orchestrated by the government as a means of placating certain armed groups essential to the smooth running of the elections.

Eleven days after the death of his father, Major General Joseph Kabila was made the President of the Republic. His initial actions greatly exceeded expectations, as he seemed intent on unifying the country. He removed many members of his father's cabinet, and appointed instead a large number of ex-patriate Congolese who could be described as "technocrats." The ban on political parties was lifted in mid-2001. Tshisekedi returned from exile, and Joseph Kabila invited Ketumile Masire to begin the process of peace talks once again. The main tenets of the Lusaka Accord seemed to be achievable.

This process of national dialogue began in late 2001 and was hosted first in Botswana, then Addis Ababa and finally in South Africa. Kabila stated clearly in these discussions that the removal of foreign troops, disarmament of all militias and the integration of rebel forces in a national army were all preconditions required before national elections could be held.

As these talks took place, there were numerous breaches of the cease fire agreement perpetrated by all sides. In particular, there were a number of battles fought between the RCD and pro-government *Mai-Mai* (self defence forces raised by villages).

Despite a number of factors that mitigated against there being any form of agreement, in April of 2003 the "Sun City Accord" was signed which provided for the establishment of a unity government and eventual elections. The Accord was rejected by two of the main opposition groups – RCD-Goma and the *Union pour la Démocratie et le Progress Social* (UDPS) under Etienne Tshisekedi.

These two groups formed a composite organization, the *Alliance pour la Sauvegarde du dialogue Intercongolais* (ASD) and pushed for further negotiations. Because of their intransigence, and that displayed by the signatories as well, the accord could not be properly implemented.

A final round of discussions were held later that year, resulting in all parties coming to agreement. Simultaneously, agreements were reached with those neighbouring countries that had been exerting negative influences on the situation in the Congo, and their troops began to withdraw.

Under the provisions of this accord, all of the main rebel groups as well as representatives of civil society would form part of the unity government. The division of power in many ways reflected the actual military power of the armed groups. Kabila retained the presidency, and four vice-presidents were appointed, one each from Kabila's party, RCD-Goma, the MLC and those unarmed opposition parties present at the talks. Notably absent from this list were the UDPS.

Concurrent with the wider conflict and peace talks during this period was a second "ethnic" conflict, in the Ituri region of northeastern DRC. The grievances between ethnic Lendu and Hema groups date back to the colonial period, but the influx of weapons, other armed militias and the "example" of the Hutu/Tutsi conflict all acted to increase the intensity of conflict between the groups. This conflict has still not been fully resolved, though aggressive operations by MONUC have caused a lessening of ongoing violence.

A transitional constitution was ratified in 2004, and elections were scheduled for mid-2005. Preconditions for the election remained the absence of foreign troops on Congolese soil and the disarmament and reintegration of armed groups. The date for the elections was eventually extended by 12 months due to a lack of progress on these issues.

Both a strength and a weakness of the transitional government was that it formalized the existing balance of power, maintaining a fragile peace by also maintaining the divisions within the country. Despite the efforts of Kabila, the real influence of the central government has not spread during his reign, though he has managed to centralize control over many state institutions including the *Force Armee de la Republic du Congo* (FARDC). During the transitional period, Kabila has been accused of setting up parallel bureaucratic structures that bypass the control of the other groups represented in government. The similarities between this situation and that of the government in 1960, 1990 and 1994 should not be missed.

Presidential elections were successfully held in late 2006, with Joseph Kabila being declared the victor in elections that were seen as being reasonably fair and

successful. Kabila defeated Bemba by a wide margin, making the results nearly indisputable. To date, further conflict between Kabila and Bemba has been confined to the political arena, and in fact the Kabila government has achieved some notable successes.

Continuing pressure on rebel groups in the East seems to be paying off, with the leader of the FNI, Peter Karim, surrendering 170 members of his forces to the government on 27 February, 2007. Although Karim himself remains in hiding as he waits for an expected amnesty from the government. The issue of amnesty for members and leaders of the many militias present in the DRC remains the biggest before Kabila's government, and will likely determine the course of future events in the still troubled country.