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DEMOCRACY AND THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

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As predicted by just about everybody, chaos broke out after the Mobutu dynasty left Kinshasa and 'government' troops laid down their arms when Laurent Kabila's rag-tag army sauntered into the city without meeting any serious opposition even from the much-vaunted Presidential Guard.

The involvement of South Africa and other lesser actors was meant to prevent Kinshasa from sliding into chaos and lawlessness. In Kinshasa, unlike far away towns such as Kisangani and Lubumbashi, the masses were daily exposed to Mobutu's dictatorial rule and the ostentatious life-style of those who surrounded him for his favours. The hatred for Mobutu and the élite was undisguised.

External intervention was necessary to effect a violence-free transition from Mobutu's dictatorship. There was a perceived need to form an authority to oversee the transition of the country from a personal dictatorship to a democracy so that the country would not slide into chaos. However, events on the battlefield were not 'in sync' with the political negotiations. Events on the battlefield moved too fast for the politicians to keep abreast with.

Much as Kabila has to share the blame for the violence and looting which erupted in Kinshasa, the person who has to take the lion's share of the blame is Mobutu. After the first round of talks brokered by South Africa and held on a ship off the coast of Congo, it was thought that Mobutu had agreed to step down and transfer power to a transitional authority. Mobutu hedged - and it became difficult to understand what he had agreed. It actually seemed he had not agreed to anything at all. On the other hand, Kabila, only a few kilometres away from Kinshasa, did not want to be robbed of victory. He was simply not keen on power being transferred to a broad-based transitional authority.

Transferring power to an all-inclusive transitional authority would have brought its own problems. Most of the politicians and leading figures in the country were associated with Mobutu. Even up to the last days, they were not only dancing to Mobutu's tune, but they were singing the same tune as him. They were still confident that Kinshasa would be defended by Mobutu's prestigious Presidential Guard.

It would have been expecting too much from Kabila to compromise with the same people that were not prepared to reform the country, many of whom lacked the credibility to serve in a transitional authority. They were, however, also not keen on a transfer of power to *anybody*. They were content with the situation as it pertained, wanting to hold on to power for as long as possible while making arrangements to flee the country.

While Kabila was still on the march towards Kinshasa, doubts were already being cast on whether he was a democrat. He was categorised as a Marxist, and the suggestion was that he would not hold elections. However, few people knew who he was, as little had been written about him, and there was a lot of guesswork about what he stood for. What was written was rather sketchy and second-hand. Then he made what was regarded as a blunder by the media and western politicians, when he said that no elections would be held in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Everybody turned against him, even those Western countries which had been secretly supporting his crusade to oust Mobutu. He suddenly became an ogre - more so since his campaign resulted in the deaths of Hutu refugees who were caught in the crossfire. He was held responsible for their deaths. It was forgotten that these refugees were given a chance of going back to Rwanda when the conflict started in eastern Zaire. But

they had instead opted to go further into Zaire at the behest of the *Interhaumwe* who were responsible for the Rwandan genocide.

To the West, elections are important, as they are supposed to bring stability to a country. Through democratic elections, people are afforded the opportunity to vote for the people whom they prefer to govern. Those who govern would be accountable to the people. The idea of Kabila - who succeeded where the West failed, by taking on Mobutu - not holding elections was seemingly unthinkable. It was speculated that he would turn out to be another ambitious and power-hungry dictator like Mobutu.

Just as is the case with Kabila, when Museveni overthrew Obote in Uganda, not many people knew about him. Museveni was also urged to hold elections soon after his victory, but he was determined that nobody was going to take away his hard-earned victory through elections. He steadfastly ignored the west's democrats. To him elections were not a priority; the priorities were rather the reconstruction of the country and national integration. These enormous tasks, he felt, should not be interrupted by the holding of elections which could have resulted in more regional- and ethnic-based conflict.

Museveni's first priority was to seek consensus from the entire population on the kind of constitution that would be suitable for the country. After this exercise was completed, 'no-party' elections were held. Individuals who took part in the elections were not supposed to do so on the ticket of a political party. They did so on their own strength. Museveni's type of democracy was not acceptable to Western democrats. However, the elections went off without much complaint from the Ugandans. (This does not mean, of course, that all of them were satisfied with this type of democracy.)

Museveni was still being urged to hold Western liberal-type elections next time round. He again refused, and was consequently threatened with financial sanctions by financial institutions and Western countries. While the debate for Western liberal democracy continued, the Ugandans went quietly about their task of reconstructing their country's economy, institutions and infrastructure. They succeeded; slowly order returned and Uganda moved towards three percent growth (which by African standards is an achievement).

Certainly, it would be difficult in any country to hold elections without a constitution - and the Democratic Republic of the Congo still does not have a new constitution. Even if the first post-independence constitution could be retrieved from the archives, it would be hopelessly outdated. The Democratic Republic of the Congo would therefore first have to draft a new constitution before it could start thinking of elections.

Such a constitution would have to take cognisance of the diversity of the people and the size of the country. Constitutions are not written in a week; it is a laborious process, as was seen in the case of South Africa.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo does not have institutions that one could talk about. Who will organise the elections? Were there any functioning departments in the country during Mobutu's reign to organise them? What about the infrastructure? The Democratic Republic of the Congo does not have many passable roads, hence the use of planes for travel. If elections were to be held, political parties would have difficulty campaigning in remote areas.

Another problem about holding elections is that no proper elections were held in Zaire during Mobutu's reign. What were held could more accurately be described as plebiscites to confirm Mobutu and those whom the party had chosen. As in South Africa, many of the people simply do not know how to vote. A massive voter education campaign is necessary to equip them appropriately. But then roads have to be constructed and transport organised to take those who will be engaged in this exercise into the furthest corners of the country.

Instead of emphasising 'democracy', Western countries should be preparing themselves to help in the reconstruction of the country. Instead of condemning Kabila at every turn, they should urge him to recruit the best men and women, rehabilitate a few from the former opposition, and knuckle down to the task of rebuilding the country. Western countries are obliged to assist the (Kinshasa) Congolese, as they share responsibility for its present condition, having done little to force Mobutu to democratise. They had, instead, helped him to entrench himself, by allowing him to steal aid meant for the people. France, for its part, could redeem itself by training the public servants. Without a public service with a culture of responsibility and accountability, the country will continue to fall prey to kleptomaniacs and will not function properly. France could assist in training civil servants - and even politicians - to prepare them to run the country efficiently. A massive task lies ahead which is far more important than elections. It is a futile exercise to hold elections under conditions of under-development and chaos simply for the sake of choosing a government. An interim arrangement could be worked out. Let all the best men and women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, those in and outside the country, go back to help their country. There are many skilled (Kinshasa) Congolese in other cities of Africa (including South Africa) who should heed the call.