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HEART OF DARKNESS: POLITICS IN ZAIRE*

The ongoing conflict in Zaire and the disintegration of that country's political and socio-economic fabric, have their roots in the legacies of colonial rule. Unlike the British and the French, the Belgians did not prepare Zaire for an orderly transition to independent statehood.

Political activity was outlawed until 1958. Moreover, the political energies of the *évolués* were directed at the formation of ethnic and cultural associations rather than trans-ethnic political formations. This has since spawned ethnic animosity and sub-national conflict.

Historically, the principal internal factor in the genesis of Zairian nationalism was the formation of a distinct politico-bureaucratic class – the *évolués*. Principally urban, the *évolués* are composed of the former African civil servants of the Belgian administration, teachers, the military and the urban middle class.

Shortly after independence in 1960, the political struggle for control of the new state erupted in open armed conflict, secession and political assassinations. Throughout this inglorious period, local politicians mobilised on ethnic lines and enlisted external political and military backing to serve exclusivist interests and concerns. The nature and degree of foreign penetration were often determined by the manner in which foreign patrons perceived the relationship between their economic and political interests and the social cleavages within the contending political formations inside the country. This was also the context of the Katanga secession and the assassination of the country's first president, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961.

* The title derives from Joseph Conrad's terrifying masterpiece on the low life in the former Belgian Congo.

ORIGINS AND GENESIS OF THE MOBUTU REGIME

The immediate beneficiaries of President Mobutu Sese Seko's coming to power, following a successful military coup d'état in 1965, was the politico-administrative or state class. Under Mobutu the Zairian state became a kleptocracy – a private preserve of the President. The state class also benefitted most from the regime's economic policies.

General Mobutu had been a member of Patrice Lumumba's *Mouvement National Congolais/Lumumba* (MNC/L) and had been appointed secretary of state in the first independence government. Following the outbreak of the mutiny of the Force Publique, Mobutu, who had been a sergeant in the army in the 1950s, was appointed chief of staff as part of an effort to Africanize the military. By September 1960, Mobutu became Lumumba's most powerful adversary – deriving his power from the military.

In the period 1960–1965, General Mobutu's control of the armed forces consolidated his position in the state class. Since the advent of his rule, the political importance and role of the military grew. This slide towards praetorianism and personal rule was underlined by the increasing use of force to deal with simmering conflicts and dissent. The general's vehement anti-communist stance, as well as the geo-political importance of Zaire in the region (especially in the context of the Cold War), endeared him to successive American and some European governments.

In retrospect, the 1965 coup d'état was, among other things, a clear illustration of the failure of the nascent state class to inculcate and sustain a basic societal consensus. This institutional and normative failure found expression in chronic governmental instability, an even greater reliance on force and coercion, and secessionist tendencies such as those in Kwilu and Katanga.

In an attempt to consolidate his personal power, President Mobutu set about co-opting part of the opposition into the ruling *Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution* (MPR). Even the general amnesty of 1971, ostensibly proclaimed to foster national reconciliation, served a similar purpose. Institutionally the Mobutu regime came to rest on three pillars – the military, the state class, and the ruling MPR. It is on the centralised and near-total control of these three institutions that Mobutu's personal power rests. Consequently, fission in any one of these would seriously undermine the continuation of his rule. President Mobutu's particular brand of personal rule, however, has resulted in three principal crises. These are – the participatory crisis, the legitimisation or accountability crisis and the marginalisation of civil society.

More fundamentally, the Zairian state was captured by the President and his state class. Thus, under his authoritarian personal rule, the state and the government became almost indistinguishable. This process of merging was justified in ideological terms, notably in terms of the precepts of authentic nationalism. In all its corrosive manifestations, the ideology of 'authenticity' exalts the authoritarian state and the president as the repositories of national independence, progress and peace.

Although President Mobutu succeeded in stabilising the state at some levels, the deeper and more profound crisis remained – the incapacity of the regime to satisfy the basic needs of the majority of the population for food, jobs, education and health care. With the current economic malaise the underlying structural conflicts once again surfaced.

The year 1974 can be regarded as the beginning of the present political crisis of the regime. In that year, two factors combined to undermine the Zairian economy. The first, the collapse in the price of copper on the international market, aggravated the country's economic plight. The second was the impact of an ill-conceived economic plan which led to a marked decline in the performance of the agricultural and commercial sectors.

The state class played a key role in effecting measures of Zairianization and nationalization. Through self-aggrandisement, luxury consumption and controlling of the key productive sectors of the economy, the repressive regime ruined the productive and debt-servicing capacities of the ailing economy.

The investment policies of the kleptocratic regime, too, were designed to satisfy the desire of the state class for foreign exchange, affluence and personal prestige as quickly as possible. Thus, the Zairian government preferred to invest in the strategically-important mining sector – often to the detriment of other sectors – and in grandiose prestige projects such as the Inga-Shaba hydro-electric scheme. This preference for developmental gigantomania has been actively encouraged by foreign bank loans, investment and bribes. Consequently, the Mobutu regime accumulated sizeable short- and medium-term external liabilities that needed considerable debt servicing in the form of foreign exchange. The collapse of the international copper market in 1975, rendered the state bankrupt.

The Angolan conflict, too, compounded the economic and political crisis of the Mobutu regime. One of the immediate consequences of the civil war in Angola was the closure of the Benguela railway, which had been an arterial lifeline of the strategic Shaba mining and industrial region. The defeat of Holden Roberto's *Frente*

Nacional de Libertação de Angola (FNLA), as well as the president's support for the *Uniao Nacional Para Independência Total de Angola* (UNITA) and the deployment of expeditionary forces, undermined Mobutu's political stature. The president's links with apartheid South Africa and the United States, were also harmful.

Not surprisingly, the political and economic difficulties faced by the regime gave encouragement to the rising tide of opposition. Opposition came from within the Forces Armées Zairoises (FAZ) – seven officers (including three generals) were subsequently sentenced to death in an attempted coup d'etat in 1975. Opposition also came in the form of industrial action in the important Shaba and Kinshasha industrial centres, and from the national student movement. Exiled opponents invaded the Shaba province in 1977 and 1978 from neighbouring Angola only to be driven back by French and Moroccan troops. The 1978 invasion was preceded by the execution of a number of army officers who were accused of having plotted yet another coup d'etat.

REFORMS

In the wake of the first invasion of Shaba, President Mobutu announced various political reforms. These ranged from direct elections to the Political Bureau, the Legislative Council and municipal councils, to the creation of the office of *Premier Commissaire d'Etat* (prime minister). Another innovation was that members of the Political Bureau had to come from designated regions.

In retrospect, however, the 1977 political reforms were not won by the Zairian people – they had been decreed in top-down fashion by the imperial presidency and were intended to perpetuate his personal rule.

President Mobutu's rule has also been undermined by developments on the continent. Principal among these – demands for multi-partyism and democratisation, the end of the Angolan war, and a change in United States' policy. Washington has become less supportive of the president for he no longer serves US designs in neighbouring Angola. The president's announcement in April 1990 that he wished to reinstate multi-partyism, has also not brought the country closer to a political settlement. May 1990 saw the revolt of students on the campus of Lubumbashi and its brutal suppression by the regime.

In July this year, President Mobutu named his main opponent, Mr. Etienne Tshisekedi, as Prime Minister. Mr. Tshisekedi, leader of the Union for Democracy

and Social Progress (UDPS), spent many years in exile in Belgium, having parted company with the president in 1980.

Since then a fragile coalition of opposition forces, known as the Sacred Union, was cobbled together. In September some 3000 paratroopers mutinied, forcing the closure of the country's main international airport and pillaging stores in the capital city. French and Belgian troops intervened after 30 people were killed in rioting and looting by mutinous soldiers. Hundreds of foreign nationals fled the country.

In October Zaire's crisis government was finally sworn in. The cohabitation between Mobutu and Tshisekedi came apart at the seams, when the president sacked the Prime Minister. Later in the same month he appointed a minor opposition figure, Mr. Bernardin Mungul-Diaka as his new Prime Minister. This resulted in renewed violence and rioting in Kinshasha.

Most recently Mr. Mungul-Diaka was also sacked and replaced by Mr. Nguza Karl-I-Bond as Zaire's fifth Prime Minister this year. President Mobutu also agreed that the newly established National Conference on Democratic Change could consider further constitutional reforms. The basic political crisis, however, is still unresolved.

OUTCOMES

Zaire is staggering under a US\$8 billion foreign debt burden – half of it owed to the United States – hyper-inflation of over 1000%, crippling currency devaluations, and ongoing social unrest and lawlessness. President Mobutu's options are closing fast.

In considering possible outcomes to the present crisis, it seems that there are essentially three: first, agreement on a new constitution and the holding of multi-party elections under international supervision with the opposition winning such elections; secondly, the total collapse of the Mobutu regime bringing further instability, conflict and misery in its wake; and finally, the prospect of a coup d'etat orchestrated by the military, followed by the imposition of military rule and a transition to civilian rule shortly thereafter. Whatever the outcome, the country faces a perilous road towards regaining its self-respect and international respectability.

Jan Smuts House
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Zaire: Political Sub-Divisions