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CONGO-BRAZZAVILLE -

The deep end of the Pool

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INTRODUCTION

Congo-Brazzaville lies at the heart of one of Africa's most unstable regions. To the south, Angolan conflict remains in flux between pretences of peace agreements while the war continues to rage on. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) experienced a rebel takeover, only to be constantly threatened by rebels with a further takeover. Gabon seems relatively stable, but conditions in the Central African Republic continue to boil underneath the surface. With Congo-Brazzaville in the throes of skirmishes between guerrilla fighters and a combination of government and Angolan forces, a full-blown eruption in this country will severely compromise what little peace is to be found in the entire region.

Congo-Brazzaville's history since independence in 1960, throws light on the country's relentless woes. It has scarcely known a time when political power did not depend upon the sanction of armed force. Samuel Decalo has summed up the situation most pithily: "*The complex political strife so characteristic of Congo is ... in essence a straightforward tug-of-war between ambitious elites within a praetorian environment ... power and patronage are the name of the game.*"¹ His argument is convincing: what we have in Congo is a competition for scarce resources, made more desperate by the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) insistence on budgetary austerity and cuts in the numbers and pay of civil servants. More than half of the country's three million people live in the towns of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire, many in shanty suburbs defined according to the ethnic and regional origins of their inhabitants.

Congo adopted a multiparty constitution in March 1992. The elections of that year were dominated by the *Union panafricaine pour la démocratie* (UPADS) of sometime Prime Minister Pascal Lissouba, centred in the Bouenza, Niari and Lekoumou regions (collectively known as the Nibolek) in the area between Pointe Noire and Brazzaville, and the *Mouvement congolais pour la démocratie et le développement intégral* (MCDDI) of veteran anti-Marxist Bernard Kolélas, whose base was in the Pool region adjacent to Brazzaville. In the north of the country, the political scene was still dominated by the *Parti congolais du travail* (PCT) of ousted dictator Colonel Denis Sassou-Nguesso. A former PCT ideologue, Jean-Pierre Thystère-Tchikaya's *Rassemblement pour la démocratie et le progrès sociale* (RDPS) established its political fiefdom around Pointe Noire.²

Kolélas and Sassou-Nguesso came second and third to Lissouba in the 1992 presidential elections, but although Sassou-Nguesso pledged his support to Lissouba in parliament, he subsequently withdrew this in dissatisfaction over the cabinet posts offered. This left Lissouba without an overall parliamentary majority and eventually necessitated the holding of new elections in May 1993, though not before there had been a great deal of constitutional wrangling, a campaign of civil disobedience and threats of a military coup.

Lissouba's UPADS and its allies took 62 of the 125 contested seats in the first round of

voting, causing Sassou-Nguesso, Kolélas and their allies to boycott the second round, which delivered Lissouba an overall majority. By June, violent exchanges had broken out between the party militias and the security forces, and Kolélas had raised the political stakes by forming his own cabinet and calling for another campaign of civil disobedience. Mediation by France and Gabon led to a truce, and the rerunning of the second round of legislative elections in October 1993. Lissouba again secured an overall majority, albeit by a narrow margin.

Serious fighting resumed in November that year, and by the end of 1993, some 2 000 people had lost their lives. A cease-fire was negotiated at the end of January 1994, but sporadic fighting continued to occur throughout the year and into 1995.³

THE MILITIANISATION OF POLITICS

The immediate cause of the 1997 upheavals in Brazzaville was a rather crass attempt by President Pascal Lissouba to disarm the 'Cobras', an armed militia loyal to his political rival Denis Sassou-Nguesso, ahead of presidential elections due for 27 July. Lissouba was doubtless aware of the precedents set by Benin and Madagascar, where erstwhile dictators were returned to office by voters after only one term in the political wilderness. Sassou-Nguesso described the move as an assassination attempt, while Lissouba accused his predecessor of attempting a coup.

Elements of the Congolese army, ranged on both sides — Lissouba's 'Zulu/Cocoye/ Mamba' militiamen and Sassou-Nguesso's 'Cobras' — now began to exchange artillery and rocket fire from their respective strongholds in the capital, and Sassou-Nguesso made deep inroads into the city. The 'Ninjas', another militia, loyal to Brazzaville mayor Bernard Kolélas, remained neutral in this round of the conflict. The outbreak of fighting was even more destructive than that which erupted after the disputed legislative elections of 1993, causing as many as 10 000 deaths.

Further aggravating the situation was Lissouba's refusal to allow the formation of an independent electoral commission ahead of a contest that would have resulted in the winner enjoying a term of office, during which he could expect to benefit from Congo's offshore oil discoveries, and an agreement with foreign banks to alleviate the country's debt burden.

France, the former colonial power, which backed Sassou-Nguesso in 1992 only to side with Lissouba later, was again considering its options, evidently having been upset by the then Congolese president's overtures to American oil companies. Lissouba was also in bad odour with the Kabila regime in Kinshasa because of his protracted support for Mobutu, and with Luanda over his friendliness towards Savimbi. France was anxious to back the eventual winner in Brazzaville and repair the regional damage caused by its former dalliance with Savimbi and Mobutu, especially with West African oil contracts looking ever more lucrative. In the event, having evacuated as many foreigners as wished to leave the country, France announced its own military withdrawal from the capital in mid-June. The fighting intensified around the airport as both sides attempted to gain possession of this strategic asset.

Other Francophone African leaders were now enlisted in an attempt to halt the bloodshed. Gabon's Omar Bongo led the peace initiative, which was reinforced by the heads of state of the Central African Republic, Mali and Chad. Bongo was in a unique position to play honest broker, as he is both Sassou-Nguesso's son-in-law, but also a close friend to Lissouba.⁴

A number of cease-fires were arranged, only to be violated. Disagreements about the electoral process continued to dominate such discussions as could be arranged. Lissouba sought a revision of the electoral timetable, while Sassou-Nguesso continued to protest against the incumbent running the election. Despite Sassou-Nguesso's objections, a constitutional council was sworn in on 23 June to decide whether elections should proceed on 27 July.

On 13 July 1997, Bongo secured the signature of a new cease-fire agreement, but a week later the decision of the constitutional council to postpone the elections indefinitely and extend Lissouba's term of office again shattered the temporary calm.⁵

Only on 25 July in Libreville did Sassou-Nguesso and Lissouba meet face-to-face for the first time since fighting began. The following day, international mediators presented a plan to the warring parties suggesting they form a government of reconciliation and bring in an inter-African peace force to monitor the truce. Sassou-Nguesso's radio station subsequently rejected the proposal as a *"forced march to genocide"*, describing Lissouba as *"unpredictable and elusive"*. Sassou-Nguesso's counterproposal was the establishment of a reconciliation government headed by a neutral figure. He also wanted a consolidation of the peace process and a cease-fire as agreed to on 14 July.⁶

At the end of the month, matters were at an impasse, as Lissouba rejected Sassou-Nguesso's proposal for a transition period as an attempt to legitimise a failed coup on 5 June. Sassou-Nguesso still refused to recognise the decision of the constitutional court. But on 3 August it appeared that a breakthrough might have been achieved, and Kolélas, as head of the national mediation committee, announced that both sides had made concessions. The new accord provided for a national unity government for a period of no more than seven months. Other sections of the agreement provided for the monitoring of the accord by an African force.⁷

By 8 August, however, heavy weapons were again in use in Brazzaville, and the United Nations had pulled back from the idea of despatching a peacekeeping force in view of the attendant dangers.⁸ Less than two weeks later, the talks in Gabon had stalled, and fighting resumed in earnest.⁹

It was at about this time that the first claims were aired that Sassou-Nguesso had reinforced his militia with foreign troops. These were described as mercenaries from the former Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and mutineers from the Central African Republic.¹⁰

At the beginning of September 1997, there were hopes that renewed attempts in Libreville to broker some kind of settlement might prove successful, in that there appeared to be a willingness to consider genuine power-sharing as an alternative to continued and increasingly destructive fighting.¹¹

Pascal Lissouba's unilateral appointment of Brazzaville's mayor, Bernard Kolélas as Prime Minister on 9 September, effectively ended the Libreville process, and was taken by his opponents as signifying an open declaration of war. It also meant that Kolélas's own militia from the Pool region would align themselves with Lissouba.¹² Though attempts were made to revive the process on 14 September it was already apparent that Sassou-Nguesso would accept no arrangement implying the continuation in power of Lissouba.¹³ Lissouba and Kolélas continued to emphasise their willingness to sign a cease-fire, but to little apparent effect, and the fighting continued to spread.¹⁴

By now the exasperation of UN Special Envoy Mohammed Sahnoun was becoming apparent. He informed the Security Council that he was at a loss to define the nature of the conflict:

"There is hardly any antagonism between communities or ethnic groups or regions. The violence here is largely the result of conflict between leaders whose ambitions know no limit and no decency. These leaders have around them some hard-core followers, armed to the teeth. They have made the entire people of the Congo hostages of their blind ambition. It is not the people, their communities or even their political parties who are driving this confrontation. They are!"¹⁵

The conflict spread to include other actors as well. Shells landing in Kinshasa were attributed to Lissouba's forces, and Laurent Kabila despatched 300 troops to assist Sassou-Nguesso against a man who had also been close to Mobutu.¹⁶ On 12 October, a decisive intervention by Angolan troops confirmed the advantage that was being won by Sassou-Nguesso. These forces entered Lissouba's home area of Nibolek from the Cabinda enclave, ostensibly in retaliation for militia attacks, but more likely in an attempt to disrupt UNITA's supply lines through Pointe Noire. The intervention was also calculated to counter evident collaboration between Savimbi and the Cabindan secessionists. By 14 October, Sassou-Nguesso's Cobras

had taken the presidency, and were preparing an attack on the southern suburbs where Kolélas's militias were based.¹⁷ On 15 October Sassou-Nguesso and his allies were in control of both Brazzaville and Pointe Noire.¹⁸

The victor soon established that he was opposed to reconciliation with his former opponents, both of whom soon fled into exile. He also pledged to disband the private militias and reconstitute the national army.¹⁹ The next week saw the ransacking of the capital by the victorious Cobras, with Sassou-Nguesso returning to Brazzaville only on 23 October to have himself sworn in as President two days later.²⁰

On 2 November, Sassou-Nguesso appointed a 33-member government of national unity, whose task was to rebuild the nation and prepare for the eventual holding of transparent and fair elections. He took some pains to see that all provinces were represented in this government, though he also made sure that the key positions were filled by his own loyalists.²¹

Lissouba's followers rejected the idea of a national reconciliation forum under Sassou-Nguesso's supervision, and gave clear indications of their ability to strike into the region between the country's economic capital, Pointe Noire and Brazzaville, having cut the railway between the coast and Brazzaville for three months.²² December 1997 saw the resumption of heavy fighting in the capital's southern suburbs as Ninja militia loyal to Bernard Kolélas clashed with Congolese and Angolan troops and Cobra militiamen. As many as 1 500 may have been killed in the fighting, and thousands more fled their homes to escape the violence. Army blockades of the southern suburbs were lifted only on 19 January 1998, but sporadic clashes continued.²³

Sassou-Nguesso's attempts to mollify international opinion by insisting that the Angolan troops were to leave soon were unconvincing, given the unreliability of other forces at his disposal and the growing signs of continued armed resistance. Nor were there many who were willing to take at face value his expressed desire to move towards genuine peace and reconciliation. He insisted that his government was in the process of preparing a national debate to be held in January 1998.²⁴ His continued dependence upon foreign troops was re-emphasised in late January 1998 when a senior policeman was killed during an attempt to disarm former militiamen. This incident illustrated the unreliability of Cobra militias once they had discovered they were not to be incorporated in the new army. On 9 February, another group of Cobras went on a looting expedition in northern Brazzaville, protesting their non-inclusion in the reformed army.²⁵

The forum for unity and national reconciliation decided upon a transitional period of three years, to be followed by elections under a new Constitution, which would introduce a presidential system of government.²⁶ Yet the omens were not good, for little could be done to address the underlying socio-economic causes that made continued violence attractive to so many young people, of whom the bulk of the militias consisted. As Clark has pointed out:

*"Many of the malefactors in the ethnic violence were unemployed urban youth who had little hope of finding jobs. Recruits to the ethnopolitical militia in Congo found not only adventure but also economic sustenance and a sense of belonging in the armed groups that they joined."*²⁷

By April 1998, militias opposed to Sassou-Nguesso were operating throughout southern Congo, with clear indications that their operations were being co-ordinated. Once the rebellion broke out in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), matters became infinitely worse, and there were allegations of collaboration both with the rebels and with Jonas Savimbi.

By the beginning of 1999, the violence had again resumed in the capital itself, and though Sassou-Nguesso's forces were claiming some successes against their enemies in the south of the country, there was still no sign of a convincing victory. Indeed, all indications were that the Angolan contingent remained essential to the regime's survival.²⁸

Against this background, it was scarcely surprising when claims emerged that the government was actually engaged in secret negotiations with the very leaders it was labelling war criminals.²⁹ In an interesting development, Ambassador Henri Lopes, the Congolese Ambassador to Paris, confirmed that there had been contact with the opposition in exile in August 1999. He said that there was even a possibility of a meeting between the parties within the near future. Kolélas and an adviser to Lissouba, Paulin Makita, reacted positively to the Ambassador's statement, and stressed that they had been calling for dialogue for the past two years.³⁰ Three weeks later, however, Sassou-Nguesso was again ruling out any discussions with former leaders in exile, and his government was claiming to have the security situation under control, even though large parts of the south were still inaccessible to the administration.³¹

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

The situation in Congo is bound to be affected by developments in the unstable region, of which the country is part. A rebel takeover of Kinshasa or the withdrawal of Angolan soldiers from the country are merely two instances of circumstances that would have a direct influence on the situation in the Congo. A third possibility, of course, would be a negotiated settlement between Sassou-Nguesso, Lissouba and Kolélas.

The most threatening scenario for Sassou-Nguesso would be if Luanda decided to withdraw its troops from the Republic of the Congo as a result of UNITA activities in Angola. It is widely accepted that the Angolans are actually the military force keeping Sassou-Nguesso in place. Should they leave the country, his forces would be unable to contain the rebels. UNITA would in all likelihood then increase its support to the rebels, seeing the opportunity to open up harbour facilities for its logistics lines. There have been rumours of approaches to mercenaries to relieve the Angolan contingent, but the terrain and support from the local population make it unlikely that the rebels can be defeated decisively, in any event.

A more positive scenario would be a negotiated settlement between the key players in the present conflict: Sassou-Nguesso, Lissouba and Kolélas. Such a scenario would probably include an interim government of national unity. The establishment of a national army would also be necessary. The key element would be the disarmament and demobilisation of all the militia groups. The militias could be given the opportunity to be integrated into the army or police. Support by government or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to those who choose a civilian life would be important in order to prevent them from returning to their old ways. Elections in the medium term would probably follow to establish a democratic government.

Another scenario would be one in which the rebels in the DRC succeeded in overthrowing the Kabila government in Kinshasa. If this happened, it could lead to increased tension between the two countries as the new administration in Kinshasa would feel threatened by the presence of Hutu, Angolan and Chadian soldiers in Congo. Sassou-Nguesso's government, for its part, would also feel vulnerable to a hostile power in Kinshasa, and tension could escalate into armed conflict between the two countries should there be any indication of cross-river support to opposition rebel groups.

CONCLUSION

Indications are that neither the militia forces loyal to Lissouba and Kolélas, nor the government forces supported by the present Angolan contingent have the capability to win the civil war in the Republic of the Congo. At present, it seems that rebel militias will continue with a protracted guerrilla war in the rural areas while the government and Angolan forces will defend Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. However, should the situation in Angola deteriorate, the withdrawal of the Angolan forces could become a reality that could lead to the deployment of a mercenary force in order for the government to survive.

President Sassou-Nguesso seems to be increasingly under internal and external pressure to consider a political solution that would include Lissouba and/or Kolélas, as his support base is too small to resolve the conflict in the Congo. A continuation of the war will weaken the economic situation even more, prevent the reconstruction and development of infrastructure

in the country and end in a humanitarian disaster as more people are displaced or become refugees. A solution to the instability of the Congo is very important as further collapse in the country could lead to the destabilisation of the relative stable Gabon and the tense Central African Republic.

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