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# The Politics of Democratic Transition in Congo (Zaire): Implications of the Kabila "Revolution"

Osita G. Afoaku

See table of contents

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## The Politics of Democratic Transition in Congo (Zaire): Implications of the Kabila "Revolution"

by *Osita G. Afoaku*

### INTRODUCTION

The impetus for recent public agitation for political reform in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DROC) came from three related sources: Congo's decline in strategic and economic importance at the end of the Cold War; withdrawal of Western support for the Mobutu regime and other African dictatorships; and an intolerable level of economic hardship which added fuel to domestic demand for democracy and accountability in the public sphere.[1] Although the late President Mobutu Sese Seko lifted the ban on partisan politics on 24 April 1990, his government embarked on a campaign of destabilization against the transition program. The government's strategy was centered on centralized control of public institutions which assured Mobutu the resources to co-opt, intimidate, torture and silence opposition leaders and popular constituencies. In addition, Mobutu and his acolytes resuscitated the defunct Popular Movement for the Revolution (Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution, MPR) -- the party's name was changed to Popular Movement for Renewal (Mouvement Populaire pour le renouveau, MPR) as well as sponsored the formation of shadow opposition groups. Finally, the government attempted to undermine the democratization program by instigating ethno-political conflicts among the opposition groups.[2]

Unfortunately, Laurent Kabila's Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (Alliance des Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire, AFDL) brought only temporary relief to the Congolese masses when it ousted Mobutu in May 1997. Congo is among four cases identified as dissolving nation-states in a recent study of democratization in Africa. Not only has it failed to make the transition to genuine democracy, the political impasse has degenerated into national disintegration and total breakdown of law and order since the outbreak of armed conflict in August 1998 between the Kabila regime and the Congolese Rally for Democracy (Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie, RCD).[3] As events increasingly point to the possibility of democratic retrenchment and state collapse in more African countries,[4] holistic study of seminal cases such as Congo has become necessary in view of their richness in critical lessons and insights.

The formation of the Sacred Union in 1991 presented a unique opportunity for the Congolese people to transcend traditional divisions and concentrate on what was supposed to be the final phase of a protracted struggle to rid their country of internal colonialism. Like similar opposition coalitions established in Africa during the early 1990s, the Sacred Union was partly inspired by post-Cold War declarations on democracy and human rights by Western governments. Accordingly, its leaders embarked on a public relations campaign with the intent of securing international support for their cause. However, their expectations were largely misplaced, if not counterproductive, in view of the growing marginalization of Africa in the foreign policy

of the US and its European allies.5 Ironically, the political irresponsibility displayed by Mobutu's principal rivals helped sustain the thinking, which was popular during the Cold War in Western foreign policy establishments, that a strong man (i.e., Mobutu) was indispensable to ensure domestic stability and unity in Congo.

Notably, the leaders of the Sacred Union embarked on a democratizing agenda within the framework of the Mobutuist system instead of focusing on the creation of an alternative system. Their ambiguous strategy and Mobutu's considerable success in co-opting several of them can be understood in the context of the prebendal political tradition in post-colonial Congo or the inclination of the elites to treat politics as an avenue to personal power and wealth.6 Ultimately, the lack of a coherent agenda on the part of the leadership of the Sacred Union, their misplaced expectations relative to Western support, and the dysfunctional state of Mobutu's military machine formed the backdrop to Laurent Kabila's ascent to power. On 17 May 1997, Mobutu bowed to popular demand for change and went into exile. His military generals subsequently surrendered power to the AFDL, an obscure coalition of local and foreign opponents of the Mobutu regime, instead of the Sacred Union. This development signaled the demise of the Mobutu regime which for three decades relied heavily on the support of local cronies and foreign patrons. Furthermore, it underscored the irrelevance of the Sacred Union in the eyes of both the Congolese military and the general population. Unfortunately, as a result of the ineptitude displayed by the Kabila regime the threat of state collapse and national disintegration assumed alarming proportions in post-Mobutu Congo.7

The present study takes its cue from Richard Joseph's tripartite model which recognizes "the dynamic interplay among three intersecting factors and forces" in African democratic transitions -- autocratic regimes, domestic oppositions and external agencies.8 The actions (or inactions) of the relevant forces in Congo -- Mobutu dictatorship, the Sacred Union of Radical Opposition and Western states -- during the first half of the 1990s formed the background to the Kabila-led revolt and the collapse of the Mobutu regime. In principle, the US and its European allies could have lent more support to the struggle for democracy in Congo. However, given the long-standing pattern of neglect that has characterized their approach to dealing with Africa, it is unrealistic to assign much weight to their failure to impose stiff sanctions on Mobutu or use their leverage on international financial institutions to reduce the negative impact of structural adjustments on the Congolese people. Against this background, it is argued that the ongoing impasse in Congo is primarily the result of a crisis of leadership in the oppositions, including the Sacred Union, the Kabila opposition and the RCD. Notably, the domination of the politics of democratization in Congo by undemocratic forces is partly a function of the fractured character of the civil society.

**Western Rhetoric and Misplaced Expectations**

Following the collapse of the Soviet empire, the United States and its European allies could no longer invoke the threat of international communism in their foreign policy. Instead, their public pronouncements began to include frequent references to the inception of a "new world order" characterized by international cooperaion on economic

development, security, democracy and human rights.9 Although the post-Cold War rhetoric of Western officials was interpreted by some analysts as a ploy to deflect criticisms of their traditional approach to dealing with African concerns,10 it raised the hopes of pro-democracy groups in Congo and elsewhere for international support. Consequently, long before the Kabila revolt, the Sacred Union and its sympathizers called on the United States and its European allies to take drastic measures to ensure Mobutu's commitment to democratization.11

Without doubt, there is some merit in the thinking that the West should support the cause of democracy in Africa; external support to Mobutu and other African dictators during the Cold War is partly responsible for the dismal political and economic conditions in their countries during the 1990s. Therefore, it is logical to expect that the success of political reform in those countries will partly depend on the international environment in which the West continues to play a decisive role. Beyond verbal exhortations to African democrats, the West could conceivably exert its leverage through bilateral relations with African regimes and through its influence on multilateral institutions, such as the Internatioinal Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.12

Apart from receiving financial and logistic support from Western governments and NGOs, African pro-democracy activists have been granted permission to visit or take refuge in Western countries since the end of the Cold War. As a result, they have been able to promote their cause through symposia, public lectures and protest marches in host countries. Similarly, African pro-democracy activists have been granted opportunities to promote their agenda abroad through press interviews and presentations before legislative committees, human rights organizations and academic communities in their host countries. While it cannot be denied that these measures have helped to educate the international community about the nature and scope of the African crisis, it is difficult to assess their impact on the political and economic well-being of the African masses. Overall, Western policies appear to have had minimal impact on the consolidation of deomcracy on the continent. Like other pro-democracy groups on the continent, the Sacred Union was unable to convince Western governments to impose tougher sanctions on the incumbent regime in Congo. Nor would the West heed the opposition's demands that Mobutu's foreign asssets be frozen.13

Western strategy for encouraging Mobutu to undertake political reform was predicated on political conditionality. Notably, this policy has always been applied in some form to Western relations with Africa and the Third World generally. In recent years, it has become only more explicitly extended beyond the issues of friendly relations and human rights to democratization. But the new version of political conditionality has actually allowed the West to circumvent controversial policy options. At the core of the Western approach to dealing with the Mobutu regime in the 1990s was the assumption that dictatorships could be reformed or relied upon to champion transition to multiparty democracy, an assumption which has no basis in the Western experience. As Claude Ake rightly argued:

Democracy cannot be obtained by trying to convert undemocratic regimes through bribery and coercion. Democracy . . . may prevail with minimal conflict in those rare instances in which the rulers, recognizing the inevitable, concede gracefully. More often than not, it is won amidst considerable turmoil against the determined opposition of those in power. There are no easy paths to democracy, and offering incentives to autocrats is not the way to democratize.14

Western ambivalence toward Congo's transition crisis further derived from long-standing concern that Mobutu's political demise would lead to national disintegration and anarchy. In order to prevent such a catastrophic outcome, the Sacred Union was pressured to accept a power sharing arrangement which allowed Mobutu to preside over the transition program. Of particular importance was the opposition's agreement to honor negotiations outside the sovereign national conference on the constitutional and institutional framework of the transition.15 Unfortunately, as will be shown later, the thinking in Western foreign policy circles that there could be no viable alternative to Mobutu was strengthened by the actions of his principal opponents.

Interestingly, the "Mobutu or chaos" syndrome in Western policy toward Congo gained further credence as a result of a growing perception of Africa as a peripheral region since the end of the Cold War. This perception helps to explain the general indifference of Western governments to the continent's problems. For instance, as an aftermath to the Gulf War, a major refugee problem emerged in the region when the Kurds were forced by the Iraqi regime to flee to neighboring countries. Their plight attracted unprecedented worldwide attention. Under the leadership of the American government, the United Nations, the European Economic Community (EEC) and Western countries responded promptly with massive aid and military support. In contrast, when civil war broke out in Somalia and Rwanda the Western response came rather too late -- after many horrendous atrocities against unarmed villagers -- and slowly.16 Similarly, following the 1993 annulment of elections in Nigeria, the unrelenting crackdown on pro-democracy activists, and the highly publicized November 1995 executions of Ken Saro Wiwa and fellow minority rights activists by Nigeria's military dictatorship, requests for international support to the cause of democracy and human rights in Africa's most populous country drew symbolic responses from the West.17

The failure of the Sacred Union to secure Western sanctions against the Mobutu regime can be further understood in the context of the lack of an American constituency for Africa or what Deborah Green described as "an actual social movement capable of wielding effective political power" on behalf of Africa.18 Generally, pro-Africa constituencies or those that advocate a constructive policy toward the continent are located outside the American mainstream whose values and preferences dominate the foreign policy process. The growing marginalization of the continent in American foreign policy is aptly illustrated by the following assessment of the post-Cold War international order. According to the author, Washington should respond to international developments in the following order of importance:

Regions and nations such as Europe, Japan, Israel, South Korea, and Taiwan which share so much in common with the United States economically, politically, and culturally; thus

their security is intimately bound with that of the United States. Regions and nations considered important because of their potential military threat to the United States (Russia), their control of vital resources (the Persian Gulf), the sheer size of their markets (China, India, Mexico, Brazil, Indonesia, and Russia), the threat they pose to the security of American allies (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea), their proximity to American borders (Haiti, Cuba, and Mexico), or at minimum because of the Americans living and doing business there.[19]

Notably, influential foreign policy activists who were indifferent to Washington's friendship with African/Third World dictators during the Cold War have lately become increasingly inclined to making distinctions between what they view as America's tangible/realistic interests (ensuring regional security and economic opportunities) and moral/idealistic interests (promoting democracy and human rights). Their opposition to American involvement in Africa is predicated on the argument that the United States must prioritize its international commitments on the basis of a rational and pragmatic conception of national interest. Given the ascendency of the conservative agenda in the Republican-controlled Congress, it would have been politically unthinkable for the Clinton administration (and, by extension, Washington's European allies) to justify American intervention on the side of the Sacred Union. The loss of American lives in what was supposed to be a humanitarian mission in Somalia made it all the more difficult for the administration to justify US involvement in African conflicts.[20]

Notably, despite the ongoing effort to increase American economic presence in Africa, or perhaps for that reason, a pattern of disengagement relative to democracy and human rights issues on the continent continues to dominate Western policy toward the continent. In fact, in the late 1990s Western policy has shifted away from initial emphasis on political conditionality and toward pragmatic endorsement of African regimes that have managed to attain "reasonable" levels of economic growth and political stability, regardless of their provenance and internal character. As Richard Joseph has rightly observed,

[a]s the Cold War drew to an end, external leverage that the West had used to promote economic liberalization during the 1980s was initially applied to promote political liberalization. By the mid-1990s, however, external concerns for order, regional security, and market-based reforms encouraged political closure and the return to largely rhetorical endorsements of democratization.[21]

**The Sacred Union and Visionless Quest for Power**

Owing to its multi-party composition and the revolutionary outlook suggested by its name, the Sacred Union symbolized a new era of unified resistance to political tyranny in Congo. However, there was nothing particularly sacred or radical about this political alliance which originated in the over-celebrated 1980 split between Mobutu and 13 dissident deputies of his single-party legislature.[22] Besides their unabashed scramble for power within the Mobutu-controlled neo-colonial government, these self-styled vanguards of democracy movements shared no clearly defined vision for establishing multiparty rule in Congo. To begin with, Mobutu's principal rivals failed to put their political house in order primarily because they were unable to build one. The Sacred

Union was a bed of strange fellows doomed to perpetual bickering in the face of a formidable foe. Furthermore, its leaders operated on the chimeric assumption that the Mobutu dictatorship could be reformed from within, an assumption that reflected their veiled attachment to the old order. These contradictions were evidenced by the opposition's tendency to discredit the government while, at the same time, seeking accommodation with the latter. Specifically, Mobutu's principal opponents preoccupied themselves with securing political appointments under the auspices of a decadent regime while, at the same time, beckoning the global community to support their cause.

The failure of the Sacred Union to assert genuine control over democratic reform in the seven years preceding the Kabila revolt began with the sovereign national conference that took place from August 1991 through September 1992. Like similar conferences designed to initiate democratization in francophone Africa in the early 1990s, the Kinshasa conference was faced with the contentious issues of defining its mandate, selecting its membership and establishing a new national agenda. However, in contrast to the situation in Benin, Congo Brazzaville, Mali and elsewhere, the Congolese opposition failed to take full advantage of the unique opportunity offered by the post-Cold War situation, especially the growing international isolation of the incumbent regime, to effectively strip Mobutu and his acolytes of control over state institutions that gave the latter unbridled power to impose their political preferences on the civil society.[23] Furthermore, although the Kinshasa conference included representatives from a wide array of political and civic organizations, it was largely urban-based with very limited roles for women and rural constituencies.[24]

It was essential that the Sacred Union maintain its autonomy relative to the Mobutu regime in order to ensure the viability of its democratic agenda. Unfortunately, the Kinshasa conference yielded limited results, thereby setting the tone for future negotiations between the government and the opposition. The opposition deferred to external pressures on matters of transition strategy instead of maximizing the opportunities presented by the post-Cold War situation to redefine Congolese politics. Specifically, it agreed to honor negotiations outside the sovereign national conference on the constitutional and institutional framework of the transition. This resulted in the merging of the High Council of the Republic (HCR) with Mobutu's National Assembly to create the so-called High Council of the Republic-Transitional Parliament (Haut Conseil de la Republique-Parlement de la Transition, HCR-TP), controlled by Mobutu and his supporters.[25] Apart from its failure to negotiate a political framework that would effectively preserve its autonomy, the pro-democracy opposition lacked both the organizational and ideological unity necessary to construct a strong political base. The pattern of rivalry and political opportunism which developed in the Sacred Union did not reflect the basic values of civil society that are essential to the institution of democracy. Inevitably, its disfunctional character fed into Mobutu's machinations against the transition process.

The failure of the Sacred Union can be better understood in the context of the political backgrounds or profiles of its principal leaders. In an important sense, Etienne Tshisekedi wa Mulumba, leader of the Kasai-based Union for Democracy and Social Progress

(Union pour la Democratie et le Progres Social, UDPS), was the symbol of popular resistance against the Mobutu dictatorship prior to Kabila's appearance on the national scene. Yet his political profile probably offers the most graphic illustration of the contradictions that characterized the latest politics of democratic transition in the Congo. After serving as minister of justice in the short-lived nationalist government of Lumumba, Tshisekedi became a key player in the Mobutu administration. In 1965, he became Mobutu's interior minister after the latter seized political power. In 1967, he again became minister of justice and helped draft the infamous constitution that established Mobutu's one-party state. Subsequently, Tshisekedi served as Congolese ambassador to Morocco (a member of a curious network of client-states), national secretary of the ruling party and chairman of its political division. Tshisekedi's political metamorphosis from being a key player in one of Africa's most corrupt regimes to acting as a democratic reformer began with the aforementioned controversy between Mobutu and his deputies.26

Considering Tshisekedi's long political friendship with Mobutu, it would have been in order to raise questions about his potential limitations as standard-bearer of the pro-democracy movement. However, due to the anti-Mobutu euphoria that engulfed Congo at the dawn of the post-Cold War era and Tshisekedi's newly acquired image as the dictator's bitterest political foe, there was little space for skepticism relative to his ability to shoulder the responsibilities of national leadership. Interestingly, although Tshisekedi professed commitment to change, he did not hesitate to accept political appointments within the framework of a Mobutu-controlled transitional government. The fundamental flaw in this compromise became immediately evident when, following a disagreement with the dictator, Tshisekedi was stripped of his first appointment in late 1991. Not only did the abnormal relationship between the opposition and the Mobutu regime hamstring the former's ability to implement genuine reform, it gave some crude legitimacy to the dictator. On a personal level, this ambiguous political arrangement was a clear indication that opportunism was the driving force behind the opposition's transition agenda. For instance, apart from being at the center of a serious power struggle between the Sacred Union and the Mobutu regime, Tshisekedi made a controversial decision in July 1995 to vote with the Mobutuists for presidential and legislative elections to be postponed to July 1997 and to sack Monsignor Laurent Monsegwo Pasinye as chairman of the HCR-TP.27 As will be shown later, this pattern of ambiguity and the underlying quest for power were also evident in Tshisekedi's conflicting reactions to the Kabila revolt.

Nguza Karl-I-Bond, leader of the Shaba-based Party of Independent Republican Federalists (Union des Federalistes Republicains Independents,UFERI) and Tshisekedi's principal rival within the Sacred Union, shares a similar background with the former. After an earlier relationship with Moise Tshombe, a key player in Patrice Lumumba's assasination and chief proponent of Shaba (Katanga) separatism in the early 1960s, Nguza became a trusted member of Mobutu's cabinet, serving as political director of the MPR in the early years of the Second Republic. He subsequently served as Congolese foreign minister in 1972-74 and again in 1977 when he was accused of treason and sentenced to death. Following strong international protests, Nguza was offered a presidential pardon and appointed prime minister in 1979. While in exile in 1981-85, he

paraded graphic accounts of corruption and excesses on the part of the Mobutu regime before his Western hosts. Despite Nguza's attempts to discredit Mobutu, he was once again pardoned by the latter. In 1986, he was appointed Congolese ambassador to the United States and, subsequently, foreign minister and prime minister of Congo.28

Like Tshisekedi, Nguza's political profile raised no serious concerns about his effectiveness as an opposition leader. Notably, after Tshisekedi was forced to vacate his appointment as transitional prime minister in 1991, Mobutu turned to Nguza as the next in the line of opponents to be enticed. The aftermath of the ensuing rapprochement between the two is a classic demonstration of Mobutu's ability to undermine his political enemies. In November 1991, Nguza was appointed transitional prime minister without the approval of the Sacred Union. In July 1992, Mobutu cemented his alliance with Nguza when he transferred nominal control of the Gendarmerie and the Civil Guard to the latter (Nguza subsequently served as minister of state and minister of defense under the transitional government of Birindwa). These developments became a major source of contention within the opposition. Nguza and his supporters were expelled from the Sacred Union for participating in a Mobutu-orchestrated government (by mid-1994, about ten political parties had been expelled from the Sacred Union). With Mobutu's blessing, he retaliated by suspending the sovereign national conference indefinitely in January 1992. More importantly, the ouster of Nguza led to bloody confrontations in the Shaba province between his ethnic Lunda supporters and Tshisekedi's Luba-Kasai supporters, causing the latter to flee in large numbers to neighboring Kasai province. Tension within the opposition deepened when Nguza and his ethno-political cohorts refused to recognize Tshisekedi's leadership and demanded autonomy for their mineral-rich Shaba homeland.29 The degeneration of Congo's democratic transition to ethno-political contention is aptly captured by the following passage from a 1994 petition to the United Nations by the leadership of the Luba-Kasaian community of Shaba:

The right to live in Shaba is officially denied to Kasaians. The freedom to engage in economic activities is refused them, their work contracts have been cancelled and their belongings have been looted. Kasaian students are subjected to hazing and harassment, and they have been expelled from public educational institutions. Deliberate and massive homicides are perpetrated on the Kasaians, who are savagely massacred for the crime of being Kasaians. Women and young girls have been raped, and babies hacked to pieces.30 Mobutu's capacity for undermining political opponents was further evidenced by the rate at which he recruited and fired its leaders. Congo witnessed more than ten transitional governments between 1991 and mid-1997, with several officials recruited from the opposition's high ranks. Mobutu's bid to consolidate power by co-opting political opponents reached a climax in March 1993 when he formed a parallel government with former UPDS co-leader, Faustin Birindwa, as transitional prime minister. Although the HCR-TP did not recognize Birindwa's appointment, the government successfully recruited deputies from the opposition. As Turner explained, co-optation of opposition leaders by Mobutu "was facilitated by the disastrous economic situation, with some politicians concluding evidently that a job with Mobutu was better than no job at all."31

More than any other factor, the Sacred Union was undermined by the vacillation of its leadership. As Mark Huband rightly observed, "[t]he collusion of those who are now Mobutu's opponents in the events which led to his rise to power, as well as their acceptance of ministerial and other posts since he took power, seriously reduces their credibility."32 Ironically, although the struggle for democracy in Congo was partly compromised as a result of Western insistence on a questionable power sharing arrangement between the Mobutu regime and its opponents, the resultant contradictions provided additional excuses for the ambivalence of the international community relative to the country's political impasse. Herman Cohen, the United States' former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, underscored the hypocrisy of Western governments when he made the following remark about the ineptitude of the Sacred Union:

Frankly, as I look at Prime Minister Tshisekedi and the other opposition political leaders, courageous as they have been, I do not see any new blood. I see many of the same tired old politicians who were very happy to feed at the public trough throughout the Mobutu years.33

Inside Congo, public confidence in the strategy employed by the Sacred Union began to plummet by 1994 after Leon Kengo wa Dondo, leader of a moderate faction of the opposition, the Union for the Republic and Democracy (Union pour la Republique el la Democratie, URD), was appointed transitional prime minister by Mobutu. Notably, during the 1991 to mid-1997 period, virtually all the transitional prime ministers were recruited from the leadership cadre of the Sacred Union. Political appointees were expected to serve at Mobutu's pleasure and their tenure was contingent upon political expediency. Despite attempts by radical elements within the Sacred Union to challenge Kengo's appointment, the opposition had become too weak to fend off the latest blow to its legitimacy, with a growing number of its leaders scrambling for appointments in the central government. According to Turner:

Tshisekedi's opposition government continued to meet, but multiple defections and loss of support had rendered it irrelevant. Three Tshisekedi ministers joined Kengo's cabinet, and the fourth was helping to draft Kengo's speeches. Other key elements of the opposition coalition were divided. The Democratic and Social Christian Party (Parti Democrate et Social Chretien, PDSC) split when one of its leaders, Gustave Malumba Mbangula, accepted the post of deputy prime minister/interior minister. Most deputies from the civil society ended their eleven-week parliamentary boycott, and their former leader, Bahati Lukwebo, accepted the Budget Ministry. Only the trade unions stuck with the radical opposition.34

By late 1996, the Sacred Union was clearly in disarray and the struggle for democracy had lost momentum. Until the outbreak of the Kabila-led revolt, Mobutu's declining health and the disintegration of his security agencies were about the only imminent threats to political dictatorship in Congo.

**Mobutu's Isolation and Kabila's Ascent to Power**

As stated earlier, the security of the Mobutu regime was largely underwritten by the West in return for Congo's regional police role during the Cold War years. While the

Congolese military (Armee Nationale Congolaise, ANC) served as an instrument of internal repression, it lacked the basic qualities of a professional military when it came to dealing with critical security problems. Not only did the United States and its European allies provide equipment and training for Mobutu's army, on a few occasions they intervened directly to ward off armed insurgency against the Mobutu regime. The assurance of Western intervention concealed the underlying contradictions of Mobutuist statecraft which, among other things, included calculated measures by the dictator to set limits on the professional competence of the military. According to Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, a major consequence of Mobutu's craftiness was the "legendary indiscipline and repeated incapacity" of the Congolese military to "defeat even small and poorly armed foes" since Mobutu came to power.[35] They further indicated that the ANC was involved in the following six major military engagements from 1964 through 1980:

- The campaign to eliminate insurgent pockets subsisting from the 1964-65 rebellions.

- The Katanga gendarme mutiny in Kisangani in July 1966.

- The much more serious mutiny of mercenary and Katanga gendarme units from July to November 1967.

- The invasion of Angola, in coordination with FLNA forces, from August to December 1975.

- The 80-day war against FLNC invaders from Shaba, March through June 1977 (Shaba I).

- The brief war against FLNC fighters who seized Kolwezi in June 1978 (Shaba II).[36]

With the exception of the mercenary-led revolt of 1967 that was suppressed with outside assistance -- US Air Force C-130s resupplied the ANC at Bukavu while Belgian and American military personnel assisted with planning and logistics -- the ANC made very poor showings in each of the above campaigns. During Shaba I, Moroccan troops were brought in to push back the meagerly equiped Front for the National Liberation of Congo (Front pour la Liberation Nationale du Congo, FLNC) insurgents. Similarly, during Shaba II, Belgian and French paratroopers, with logistical support from the United States, came to Mobutu's rescue. Subsequent to the last campaign, indiscipline and low morale within the ANC had assumed dangerous proportions, resulting in the government's decision to disarm some units. In addition, Mobutu was compelled to secure the assistance of an inter-African peacekeeping force in order to ensure government control of mineral-rich Shaba as well as the safety of its foreign residents. The ANC's poor performance was attributed to several factors, such as overdependence on mercenaries and foreign advisors, nepotism, ethno-regional rivalry, inadequate compensation, sub-standard training and equipment, and reckless military assignments. The army's incompetence was further attributed to the highly politicized nature of the upper ranks

and Mobutu's relationship with the latter. In contrast to the traditional hierarchical command structure established by Belgian officers, Mobutu preferred a patron-client command structure that was congruent with his patrimonial political style. The loyalty of the military leaders was of paramount importance to the commander-in-chief. Consequently, appointment to strategic military posts was generally based on political considerations rather than professional competence and was open to frequent renegotiation as demanded by circumstances.[37] Mobutu's astuteness in manipulating the military is aptly described in the following passage:

Mobutu used ties of personal loyalty and the politics of threats and rewards to overcome the absence of an organized command structure. With tactical advice and financial support from the United States, Mobutu established his authority to the point where he could threaten, pay, or influence in other ways the upper ranks .... His control was much like that of the center of a spoked wheel: the officers were often divided by personal hatreds and rivalries and linked to their commands only by Mobutu at the center. By rotating officers often and encouraging them to report every piece of news or rumor to him personally, Mobutu established his supremacy over the command structure.[38]

Given the checkered state of the ANC, Mobutu faced the potential risk of being ousted by the Sacred Union in the mid-1990s. However, as already explained, the pro-democracy opposition lacked the cohesion and discipline to turn the tables on the government. While Mobutu might have had the insight to anticipate the hollowness of Western rhetoric and the political irresponsibility of his principal opponents, he was unable to calculate the broader implications of his growing isolation in the post-Cold War order for the survival of his regime. For instance, apart from losing military and economic assistance from the West, Mobutu and his cronies faced a severe revenue shortfall which partly resulted from a steady decline in national economic productivity. The political consequences were two-fold. First, owing to strangulating economic conditions, the people became more defiant in their demand for reform. More importantly, the military became increasingly restive and unreliable as a result of growing discontent among the lower ranks over poor working conditions. In September 1991, riots by disgruntled soldiers left about 250 Congolese dead in Kinshasa. In January 1993, the soldiers again went on a rampage over new Zaire notes that were declared illegal by the Tshisekedi administration. Like the first, the second incident exacted high costs on Congolese citizens and foreign residents in terms of human lives and property. Furthermore, not only did these riots and similar incidents drive a wedge between the Mobutu regime and the people, they signaled a growing tension in what had been a strong alliance between the government and the military.[39]

In 1994, Mobutu made a strategic miscalculation that further revealed his growing insecurity as well as the ineptitude of the ANC when he lent support to Hutu perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide. With Mobutu's blessing, Hutu refugees were also implicated in a campaign to expel the Banyamulenge ethnic Tutsi who migrated to eastern Congo from Rwanda in the late eighteenth century and had been denied Congolese citizenship since 1981. Ironically, in an attempt to deflect attention from his domestic troubles, Mobutu sparked a hitherto unlikely insurrection against his regime. As Philip Gourevitch stated, throughout Mobutu's puppet rule Congo had served "as an arms bazaar and a staging ground for cross-border insurgencies that plagued neighboring states. Rwanda was the

most extreme case, and the world's stunning passivity before Mobutu's sponsorship of a renewed central-African holocaust was the last straw."40 Symbolically, Mobutu's decision to meddle in the Rwandan crisis signaled the senility of a failing dictator. By early 1997, his troubles were compounded by the unexpected emergence of Kabila's coalition on the political landscape and the ravages of advanced prostate cancer. From his confinement in the Tshatshi military camp (Kinshasa), the embattled president and his cronies strove to project a false air of invincibility at the height of the Kabila rebellion. As David French explained:

Mr. Mobutu is . . . the prisoner of his immense pride and a self-serving entourage that is eager to hold on, to the bitter end, to whatever residual power there is in Kinshasa.

When French emissaries suggested . . . that Mr. Mobutu relinquish power, people in the Presidential entourage said that their leader was so shocked that he appeared to suffer a heart attack.

For people in these circles, composed of Mr. Mobutu's northern ethnic kinsmen and other financial beneficiaries of his decades of corrupt rule, the cause is never lost, no matter how desperate it seems.

One of the die-hards, Mr Mobutu's son, Kongulu, strapped on a black bullet proof vest and led the crackdown on Mr. Tshisekedi's supporters in the streets of Kinshasa on April 9.41

Unlike Tshisekedi and other opposition leaders whose credibility had been tainted as a result of their high profile involvement in the Mobutuist system, Kabila initially occupied the vantage position of being able to tap the widespread anger in Congo at the monumental corruption and waste attributed to the Mobutu regime and its supporters. Furthermore, he initially enjoyed the advantage of being perceived as a faithful disciple of Congo's slain nationalist, Patrice Lumumba, and an unwavering opponent of Mobutu.42 Significantly, at the beginning of the rebellion the AFDL was dismissed as an insignificant factor in the power struggle between the government and the oppositions. However, Kabila and his supporters rapidly offset the balance of power as AFDL troops scored swift victories against the ANC. This development had the critical effect of casting the alliance as a third center of power in Congolese politics -- one that did not lend itself to easy manipulation by Mobutu -- and further underscored the growing crisis of legitimacy faced by both the government and the Sacred Union. In a curious move to undermine Kabila's coalition, the Mobutu regime and the mainstream opposition reached a joint decision to purge ethnic Tutsis from all state institutions and to sever diplomatic relations with Kabila's regional allies.43 At the same time, Tshisekedi made a futile attempt to join forces with Kabila in a separate effort to salvage the political fortunes of the Sacred Union.44 Tshisekedi's vacillation was further demonstration of the confused strategy pursued by the Sacred Union throughout its futile effort to unseat Mobutu. In what amounted to a dramatic vote of no confidence against both Mobutu and the Sacred Union, the Congolese people overwhelmingly threw their support behind Kabila whose troops had captured over two-thirds of the country by mid-May 1997. Significantly,

under the circumstances there were no apparent reasons to pose penetrating questions about Kabila's background, his ideological convictions and his vision for the country.

Although Luba by ethnic origin, Kabila has generally identified himself simply as Congolese. He was 21 when Patrice Lumumba was assassinated in 1961. He had studied philosophy in France and worked for a Lumumbist party. Throughout the early 1960s, he took part in insurgencies in eastern Congo. Thus initial popular perception of him as a national hero was not without some basis. During the first six months of his administration, Kabila's legitimacy was bolstered by this messianic aura of a hitherto little-known rebel, who for three decades had prepared himself for the monumental task of recovering Congo's stolen independence, and rallying the people against a formidable tyrant. Philip Gourevitch makes an insightful observation on Kabila's ability to exploit the political psychology of the Congolese masses:

Kabila . . . does not suggest a particularly frolicsome disposition. Physically, he has a very low center of gravity, and when he blinks, as we all do frequently, he does so in alarmingly slow motion. I have watched this at several press conferences. For a moment, he looks as if he were falling asleep on his feet in mid-sentence, so when his eyelids come back up you are surprised, and quite relieved, to see that he has been right there all along. This also happens to be the impression Kabila wants to project about his political leadership that he has been there all along, steadfastly seeking to avenge the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the only popularly elected national leader in the history of the Congo.45

However, revelations pertaining to Kabila's activities prior to his recent rise to national fame have produced less complimentary images of his leadership style and his political vision. After Mobutu managed to consolidate power with Western assistance in 1965, Kabila took to the hills of southern Kivu where he founded the People's Revolutionary Party, and lived through the rest of the 1960s and all of the 1970s as an isolated rebel warlord. There he ran a quasi-fiefdom and trafficked in precious minerals. In 1975, Kabila and his men allegedly kidnaped and held hostage for months three American students and one Dutch researcher who were later set free after their families paid a $160,000 ransom. According to Cuban advisors who provided training for Kabila's guerrilla militia in the 1960s, he was unreliable as a rebel leader and his followers displayed a serious lack of discipline. In the early 1980s, he moved to Tanzania where he continued to conduct business under various aliases, vanishing from public view until 1996 when he resurfaced as the leader of the AFDL.46

Following Kabila's takeover of power in May 1997, he began to display Mobutuist tendencies, including misappropriation of public funds, human rights violations, suppression of dissent within the AFDL, tribalization, clientelization and nepotization of state apparatuses.47 According to Michael Schatzberg, "[d]espite the gaps in our knowledge, it is clear that Laurent Kabila's resume is short on democratic credentials."48 In a similar effort to assess Kabila's leadership, Keith Richburg suggested possible connections between his authoritarian tendencies and his association with Presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Kagame of Rwanda:

Museveni and Kagame are autocratic figures who brook no opposition and seem more comfortable with the strict military chain of order and command than with the compromise of politics. Kabila who renamed Zaire the Democratic Republic of the Congo, has already displayed a notably undemocratic streak, barring all elections for two years, suspending all political activity and criminalizing the act of forming a political party, creating a cabinet that excludes some of the key politicians who opposed Mobutu's regime and, in his latest move, banning miniskirts and tight trousers for Congolese women.[49]

While Kabila's foreign connections played a central role in his ascent to power, they have also been the main source of his political troubles. This is because virtually all the regional governments involved in the Congo crisis have been motivated by parochial calculation of national interest. For instance, Kagame's long-term objective of entering into the alliance with Kabila was to make Congo safe for his country by replacing the Mobutu regime with a friendly regime. The choice of Kabila who did not have a solid political base inside Congo to lead the rebellion aganist Mobutu was clearly intended to achieve this objective. To guarantee Kabila's continuing good intentions after his May 1997 victory, he was expected to retain a number of ethnic Tutsis in key positions in the government and the army. He was further expected to allow a Rwandan zone of influence in north and south Kivu, to be controlled by Rwandan troops and Congolese Tutsi or Banyamulenge auxiliaries trained in Rwanda. To many Congolese, the Rwandans were aggressively taking on the role of an army of occupation. On the one hand, public support for the Kabila regime waned rapidly when the Rwandans began to actively support the Banyamulenge Tutsi in their demand for political autonomy in south Kivu. On the other hand, Kabila incurred the wrath of his allies who became increasingly dissatisfied with continued incursions into Rwanda by Hutu rebels operating from eastern Congo. By the end of 1997, he was faced with the dilemma of maintaining relations with his protectors and running the risk of losing his domestic political base. A decision to terminate the alliance seemed all the more inevitable as a result of rumors of an impending palace coup against Kabila who, on 28 July 1998, announced the dismissal of all foreign elements from the Congolese army. Given Kabila's erratic style of leadership and his vacillation on political reform, which had been a bone of contention between his government and the RCD, this decision only compounded his crisis. According to Rene Lemarchand:

By yielding to the rising anti-Tutsi sentiment in Kinshasa, Congo's new king had turned the king-makers into his most bitter enemies. The sense of outrage felt by Kagame struck a responsive chord among several Congolese opposition figures whose distaste for Kabila exceeded their grievances against the Rwandans. The crisis thus presented them with a unique opportunity to use Rwanda's support to turn the tables on Kabila. On Agust 16, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (CRD) came into existence.[50]

Unfortunately, like the AFDL the RCD has proven to be a bed of strange fellows. At least three distinct and even opposed tendencies can be identified in the opposition: the political wing led by Professor Wamba dia Wamba, who was ousted from the RCD leadership last May; the Banyamulenge group, which is closely allied to Rwanda; and, ex-Mobutuits. The balance of forces within the alliance is skewed in favor of the last two groups who represent the core of the militarist tendency in the rebellion. As a result, the RCD has been unable to articulate a coherent agenda for democratization and national reconstruction.[51] Summing up the internal contradictions of the Kabila regime and the

opposition, Mahmood Mamdani stated that the dominant tendency on both sides is a militarized form of politics which has resulted in continued marginalization of all civil society-based politics in post-Mobutu Congo. The fixation on a military solution to the country's political troubles resulted to the multi-nation war which exacerbated existing social and economic problems in both Congo and the intervening countries.52

## CONCLUSION

Until the collapse of the Mobutu dictatorship, paving the way for Kabila's dramatic ascent to power, the latter was an obscure figure in Congolese politics. Kabila captured power on account of the political vacuum created by the fragmentation of the Sacred Union and the ineptitude of Mobutu's army. Notably, Kabila was initially regarded by the Congolese masses as a national hero and his self-appointed role of president of the DROC was virtually uncontested. However, the euphoria that greeted his triumphal return was quickly replaced by disappointment over his autocratic style of leadership, his ambiguous stance on democratization and his lack of a clear strategy for revamping the economy.

If Kabila's murky background was initially overshadowed by his military victory, it was due in part to the magnitude of the national predicament and the people's desperate longing for a political messiah. In fact, most Congolese would have eagerly joined forces with the devil to rid the country of the Mobutu dictatorship. In other words, they chanted praises of Kabila and the AFDL for the same reasons they had rallied to the defunct Sacred Union. Unfortunately, with the inception of the Kabila regime Congo began to witness a replay of the post-independence saga of replacing one brand of autocracy with another. As a result of Kabila's failure to provide effective leadership on democratization, national reconstruction and reconciliation, the country has become severely divided. For the same reasons, the political factions have became highly inclined to use force to resolve differences. Furthermore, the government and, with few exceptions, rebel leaders have relied heavily on the traditional strategy of exploiting Congo's ethno-regional divisions for the purpose of advancing personal or sectional interests. Ultimately, the failure of the Kabila revolt to open the political space to a broad range of interests has brought into sharp focus the long-standing problem of marginalizing women, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups in the public sphere.

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need to refocus national attention on political dialogue within the framework of an inclusive sovereign national conference. However, the prospects for a national dialogue will remain bleak until the Kabila regime and rebel groups agree to abandon armed conflict in keeping with the recently concluded Lusaka peace settlement (at the time of concluding this article, the rebels had not signed the ceasefire agreement).53 A national conference will pave the way for the construction of a democratic constitution that reflects the people's past experience and their aspirations for an inclusive system of governance and a good standard of living. The key to producing a democratic constitution is the determination of Congolese leaders and civil society groups to invest the time and resources necessary to ensure the participation of all relevant constituencies in the process. Among other things, this approach will give the

Congolese people the opportunity to define the nature and scope of military involvement in national life as well as establish legal safeguards against coups. Given the country's experience, there could be a mandatory requirement that coup plotters like Mobutu be tried and punished even long after their stay in power. Furthermore, the new constitution could include a strong provision for specialized human rights courts with powers to award compensations to victims. To effectively compensate for the negative effects of discriminatory policies during the Mobutu era, it may be necessary to have a constitutional requirement for adequate representation of historically marginalized groups at all levels of government. For instance, although Congolese women have demonstrated their capacity to act as an important political force in the 1990s as they did during the three decades of Mobutu's rule, neither the Kabila regime nor the opposition has demonstrated strong commitment to including them in leadership roles. Constitutional solutions to this and similar problems (ie, proportional representation, gender quota, zoning or rotation of key political and administrative appointments) must be a high priority to ensure the consolidation of a democratic system that is open and responsive to the concerns of popular constituencies.[54]

Without doubt, constitutional reform, elections and transfer of political power to a civilian government are only a part of the complex process of institutionalizing democracy. Like many Africans, the Congolese have been denied the opportunity to experiment with multiparty rule since independence. The country has been deeply infested with corruption, inter-group conflicts, waste, mismanagement and other forms of social malaise that are the legacy of the Mobutuist state. In view of the oppressive nature of the Mobutu regime, generations of Congolese citizens were forced to adopt negative views on the purpose of the state or its role in the life of the people. An aggressive program of civic education may be necessary to reverse the vicious pattern of greed, opportunism and visionlessness in Congolese national life and instill public confidence in the state. Notably, a civic project of this magnitude cannot be implemented outside an inclusive political framework that encourages open discussion among members of the academic community, pro-democracy and human rights groups, labor unions, religious organizations and other civil society groups.

While it is the primary responsibility of the people of Congo and their leaders to devise long-term solutions to their political problems as well as create a national climate that is conducive to economic recovery, the international community can support their efforts in some basic ways. For instance, Western governments and financial institutions could collaborate with Congolese officials in devising ways to recover public money stolen by Mobutu and his cronies and discourage future leaders from hiding such money abroad. Similarly, they can support the process of democratization and national reconstruction in Congo by creatively writing off the country's foreign debt. Finally, Western governments can help to reduce senseless bloodshed and human rights abuses in Congo and neighboring countries by imposing arms embargo on governments and rival political groups that engage in brutalization of local opponents and/or unnecessary wars.

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