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Déjà vu? Congo from Mobutu to Kabila, twenty years later

Twenty years ago, Laurent Kabila's AFDL troops marched into Kinshasa, thus putting an end to 32 years of rule by Mobutu. In fact, however, it was a victory orchestrated not by Kabila alone, but by a wide regional coalition whose members had good reasons for wishing to topple the regime. Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and Angola wanted to neutralise the Zaire-based rebel movements that threatened them with Mobutu's overt or covert support. Other countries, such as Eritrea, Ethiopia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, had their own reasons for supporting Kabila's campaign. They all reasoned that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". The anti-Mobutu alliance was circumstantial, and its frailties would soon appear.

The march toward Kinshasa was spearheaded by Rwanda and Angola. It is they who brought Kabila, whose own troops were not up to much, to power. Although it initially denied any involvement, Rwanda was the first to move in October 1996. After the 1994 genocide and in the face of the RPF's military victory, over 1.5 million Rwandans fled to Zaire, where they settled in immense camps close to the Rwandan border. Armed elements –the defeated former government army and militias– conducted raids and intended to regain power. This was an existential threat to the new regime, which, faced with international inaction, decided to put an end to the situation. Using the AFDL as a proxy, the Rwandan army moved in and destroyed the camps. Hundreds of thousands of refugees were repatriated, some voluntarily, some forcibly. Hundreds of thousands of others moving westwards deeper into Zaire were hunted down and exterminated. In what the UN High Commission for Human Rights later called crimes against humanity and even labelled potential genocide, some 200,000 Hutu civilians were slaughtered (http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/CD/DRC_MAPPING_REPORT_FINAL_EN.pdf).

Circumstantial alliances are fragile by nature, and they soon began to shift. Less than 18 months after Kabila seized power with their support, Rwanda and Uganda again invaded the country, now named the Democratic Republic of Congo. Their aim was to topple the man they had made king in 1997. However, their former allies, particularly Angola and Zimbabwe, sided with Kabila and saved his regime from collapsing. This created a military stalemate in which the country was partitioned into three: about a third was controlled by the government army and Kabila's foreign backers, another third by Rwandan proxy the RCD, and the final third by Ugandan proxy the MLC. This impasse eventually led to a peace accord signed in Lusaka in 1999. Its implementation would take another four years.

It became clear in the meantime that Kabila's take-over had been one of those accidents of history, rather than the outcome of a social-political

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“With His Family’s Fortune at Stake, President Kabila Digs In”

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-12-15/with-his-family-fortune-at-stake-congo-president-kabila-digs-in>

process of change. Nothing in the history of Kabila, an old-fashioned Marxist rebel leader of the 1960s who drove Che Guevara to despair, provided any hope that he would be able to put the DRC on track. From the outset he exhibited authoritarianism, incoherence and statism; and since the 1980s, the Congolese state had no longer exercised its most essential functions, so Kabila’s demeanour could not lead to state reconstruction. There seemed to be no way out of the impasse, and many were in fact relieved when Kabila was murdered by one of his bodyguards in January 2001. After he was succeeded in an almost dynastic fashion by his son Joseph, the first actions of the young (29-year-old) president again seemed to offer some reason for hope. Joseph Kabila restored relations with the international community, which had deteriorated sharply under his father’s rule, relaunched the peace process and promised democratisation and economic liberalisation.

After a three-year transition period agreed in the Sun City accord (2003), elections were organised in 2006. Although the road was bumpy at times and the process nearly collapsed on several occasions, the elections were by and large free and fair. This was due in part to the presence of a large UN peacekeeping force and the supervision of the diplomatic corps in Kinshasa, which was serving as a consortium known as CIAT (Comité international d’accompagnement de la transition). Kabila won the presidential poll in the second round with 58% of the votes, compared to the 42% won by his challenger Jean-Pierre Bemba. The result revealed a deeply divided country, with Kabila scoring well in the East and in Katanga, while Bemba performed well in the North and in Kinshasa.

The regime soon moved in a direction that was also being seen elsewhere in Africa. The opposition and civil society came under increasing pressure, media were curtailed, and the president, his family and associates began enriching themselves in a way that was reminiscent of Mobutu’s days. Last year, Bloomberg found that the Kabilas have built a network of businesses which reaches into every corner of Congo’s economy and which has brought hundreds of millions of dollars to the family (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2016-12-15/with-his-family-fortune-at-stake-congo-president-kabila-digs-in>). Such wealth and impunity can only be preserved by clinging to power. This Kabila did by winning the 2011 elections fraudulently and by ignoring constitutional norms in 2016, at the end of his second and last term in office. In hanging on to power, Kabila found inspiration in neighbouring countries Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, Uganda, South Sudan, Rwanda and Burundi, where sitting presidents have disregarded the limitations of presidential term limits without much international protest.

Kabila and his coterie made sure that the December 2016 elections could not take place, because voter registration was delayed and nobody trusted the “independent” electoral commission, among other reasons. At the very end of 2016 an agreement was reached under the auspices of the Congolese episcopal conference that postponed the polls to December 2017, but this deadline has again been jeopardised. The opposition has become the (willing) victim of divisive actions on the part of the regime, and the risks of violent protests among the frustrated population are again becoming real. In Kasai, where the opposition is strong, hundreds of people have recently died in violent confrontations with and between militias, some of which are manipulated by the regime. This violence is currently spreading to Katanga. Under these circumstances, the organisation of elections is impossible,

which is probably the idea.

Decades-long poor governance makes it very difficult to put Humpty Dumpty together again and reconstruct a state that functions in some way, at least. In many places, mainly in the East but also elsewhere, territorial control is limited, taxation is largely privatised, many enterprises behave like predators in enclaves directly linked to the global economy, the rule of law and the justice system hardly function, and citizens are exposed to the arbitrary violence of local administrators, warlords, the army and the police.

The “geological scandal” Congo nevertheless has the means to fund its own human and economic development. With no empirical state, however, this development remains an illusion, instability and violence continue to be endemic, and the DRC remains a potential source of new regional conflicts. But as state reconstruction is not seen as being in its own best interests, the political class is unwilling –and often unable– even to start looking down that path.

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