

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

The Democratic Republic of Congo

By Thomas Turner

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Map of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

History

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) includes several hundred ethnic groups (sometimes called tribes) that were brought together at the end of the 19th century as the Congo Free State. In 1908, King Leopold II of Belgium was forced to cede his scandal-ridden private colony to Belgium, which ruled it until 1960. Since 1960 Congo has been known variously as the Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Zaire, and again, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

ing its six provinces into more than 20 so-called "provincettes." Designed to satisfy the demands of various ethnic groups, the new territorial subdivisions had the perverse effect of setting off a new round of ethnic conflicts. By 1964-65 Lumumbist insurgents seized nearly half of Congolese territory, before they were put down with the aid of white mercenaries and U.S. air power.

In November 1965, Mobutu seized power, inaugurating 32 years of personalistic, kleptocratic rule. He reversed territorial fragmentation and supported

The Belgians did little to prepare their Congolese subjects for the transition to independence. When political parties did emerge, most of them were ethnic or regional in scope. The most successful party, the Congolese National Movement of Patrice Lumumba (MNC/Lumumba) was nationalist and pan-African. However, it gained barely a third of the seats in parliament.

Lumumba governed Congo only for a few months before he was overthrown and murdered. He was a victim of his Congolese rivals, including his former aide Joseph Mobutu, but the U.S. and Belgium were also involved.

Congo's territorial integrity was threatened by the attempted secession of mineral-rich Katanga and South Kasai. The country experimented with federalism, divid-

Foreign Policy In Focus

Self-Determination

Regional Overview

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expression of ethnicity. At the same time, favoritism toward his own region (Equateur) and ethnic group (Ngbandi) kept ethnic resentment alive.

Challenged from within by an illegal opposition party, the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS), Mobutu's single-party regime was propped up by aid from Western countries. By 1960, however, both the U.S. and France had lost patience with their ally.

Multi-party activity in the early 1990s offered Mobutu new opportunities for divide and rule. The democratic opening also allowed local people to take action against "strangers" seen as monopolizing jobs and political power. In Katanga, Luba-Kasai from a neighboring province were the victims of ethnic cleansing, while in North and South Kivu, Rwanda-speaking Congolese were the victims. When some of these Rwanda-speakers organized to defend themselves, the stage was set for "convergent catastrophes" i.e., linking up of the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the struggle against the moribund Mobutu regime, and the local-level struggle for power, land, and survival. In 1996-97, the first of two Congo wars brought veteran Lumumbist rebel Laurent Kabila to power, at the head of a coalition including many Congolese and Rwandan Tutsi. In 1998, a split between Kabila and his former backers (Rwanda, Uganda, and the Tutsi of Kivu) led to the second war, which continues to present.

Ethnic Breakdown

There are more than two-hundred peoples (ethnic groups, tribes) in the Congo. Perhaps 75 or 80% of these peoples and of the Congolese population speak Bantu languages. Of the four major ethnic clusters, three are Bantu: the Mongo, the Luba, and the Kongo. The fourth is the Mangbetu-

Azande cluster of northeastern Congo, speakers of Sudanic languages.

Together, the Mongo, Luba, Kongo, and Mangbetu-Azande account for about 45% of the Congolese population. However, these ethnic clusters are not the most relevant political actors. Often they are divided e.g., Luba-Kasai vs. Luba-Katanga, or Tetela (Mongo of Kasai) vs. Mongo-Equateur.

Much of the fighting since 1994 has taken place in North and South Kivu, along Congo's eastern border. In North Kivu, Rwanda-speakers (both Hutu and Tutsi) constitute a major ethnic community, along with Nande and others. In South Kivu, the major group is Shi. Rwanda-speaking "Banyamulenge" are few in number.

Major Actors

Kinshasa Government: Laurent Kabila came to power as head of the AFDL, a coalition of anti-Mobutu groups in which Rwandan and Congolese Tutsi occupied key positions. Kabila strengthened his position by bringing in Congolese from his home province of Katanga. The split with his Tutsi backers led to the second war. However, the Kabila government remained divided between Kivu and Katanga factions, the latter in turn split between Luba-Katanga (ethnic group of Laurent Kabila's father) and Lunda (ethnic group of his mother).

The assassination of Laurent Kabila was blamed on soldiers from Kivu, but in the aftermath, leading Lunda figures were arrested. This reduced the influence of Angola, which was associated with the Lunda.

Joseph Kabila's own background has been contested. Some has questioned whether he is the son of Laurent. It has been alleged that his mother is a Rwandan Tutsi. The official version is that his mother is a Bangubangu from Maniema. Joseph has struggled to reduce the influence of his "uncles" (older kinsmen and associates of his father) while retaining their support.

Joseph Kabila has been recognized as head of state by a number of foreign governments, which gives him a considerable advantage in dealing with opposition groups.

Foreign Governments: Rwanda and Uganda back “rebel” factions, while Zimbabwe and Angola back the Kabila government.

Armed Opposition Groups: The armed anti-Kabila factions call themselves liberation movements and claim that Joseph Kabila is only another faction leader. However, they are handicapped by their dependence on their foreign backers. The Congolese Democratic Movement (Rassemblement Democratique Congolais, RDC) has undergone several splits and leadership changes, reflecting the impossible balancing act between the interests of its Congolese members and Rwandan masters. The major faction, known as the RDC-Goma, is currently headed by Adolphe Onusumba, a Tetela with a medical degree from South Africa.

The other major movement, the **Congolese Liberation Movement** (MLC), is headed by Jean-Pierre Bemba, a Ngbaki from Mobutu’s home province of Equateur.

Mayi-Mayi: Literally, “Water-Water” in Swahili, the vehicular language of eastern Congo. The label evokes not only magical protection (bullets turning to water) but a link to the Lumumbist insurgents of 1964-65. There is no coherent Mayi-Mayi movement, only a cluster of local militias created in reaction to the Rwandan occupation of eastern Congo. Some Mayi-Mayi groups have received aid from Kinshasa. The RDC and Rwanda

have tried to organize Mayi-Mayi, for example in the Bukavu hinterland, but find them difficult to control.

Internal Political Opposition: The most important of the political parties that opposed first Mobutu, then the Kabilas, are the Union for Progress and Social Democracy (UDPS), headed by Etienne Tshisekedi; the Democratic Social-Christian Party (PDSC) of Andre Bo-Boliko; and the Unified Lumumbist Party (PALU), headed by Antoine Gizenga.

Civil Society: Church-affiliated groups (Catholic, Protestant, Kimbanguist), human rights associations, and others, constitute an important part of the Congolese political landscape.

Proposed Solutions and Evaluations of Prospects

The “Inter-Congolese Dialogue” is to resume (or begin) in South Africa early in 2002. The international community must provide adequate material assistance to allow this to happen. It is equally important that sufficient pressure be applied to all sides to oblige them to reach necessary compromises. The dialogue supposedly is to lead to a transitional government, which would be followed by elections. Foreign troops would be withdrawn, following or in association with the disarming of “negative forces” within the Congo, notably Rwandan and Burundian Hutu insurgents.

Congo needs a new constitutional order, in which the center is sufficiently strong to hold the vast, diverse country together. Power needs to be sufficiently decentralized, to permit

meaningful political participation on the regional and local levels. Congo’s vast mineral and forest wealth must benefit the Congolese, both nationally and in the regions and localities concerned.

The complexity of this list of imperatives means that prospects for success are low. At the same time, there is no alternative, since a collapsed state in the center of Africa is a menace to the continent and a problem for the global community.

The U.S. Role

The United States abandoned its cold war ally Mobutu in the early 1990s but failed to provide sustained support for a democratic transition. After failing to intervene in Rwanda to prevent the slaughter of 1994, the U.S. has provided sustained backing to the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front, during the first and second Congo wars.

Following the assassination of Laurent Kabila, his successor Joseph Kabila was well-received in Washington. But the promise of a more balanced policy regarding the Congo war has yet to materialize.

At the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, the U.S. should use its influence to lead all parties to the compromises necessary to a successful agreement to end the war and resume the democratic transition.

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<http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/>

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Center for Policy Studies

<http://www.cps.org.za/>

Congolese Democracy Movement

<http://www.dac.neu.edu/congocrisis/>

Congolese Rally for Democracy-Liberation Movement

<http://www.congorcd.org/>

Congolese Rally for Democracy

<http://www.congo.co.za/>

Human Rights Watch

<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/congo/>

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<http://kongo.paxchristi.de/>

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