

Dreams, Battles, and the Rout of the Elite in Congo-Kinshasa: The Mourning of an Imagined Democracy

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On May 17, 1997, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo (AFDL), led by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, took power in Kinshasa after a seven-month liberation war. According to the opinion of numerous observers, Kabila's rebellion would be a saving act: it would distance the Congo from the specter of civil war toward which it was fatally headed. Ethnic opposition to the Mobutu regime was stirring. The rebellion would save the country from the claws of cynical politicians and from the political chasm they dug with the sovereign national conference, which created nonfunctional political institutions. Ten months after the new leaders were installed at Kinshasa, it is still too soon to evaluate their efforts to put the country back on its feet. But many praiseworthy initiatives, of which the Bulletin of the Congolese Press Agency daily informs us, touch all aspects of national life.

In this analysis, I want to examine, for lack of a better term, *crisis phenomena* that through the Congolese news transform the political elite, reveal their political and symbolic resources, and highlight their tendencies. This is a risky effort. The researcher in contemporary history is in a delicate position, pressured by partisan solicitations, without access to archives, and recording participant testimonies. The reader will keep in mind the conjectural character of a good part of this analysis, which attempts to appreciate the problems and identify paths of future research. I will limit myself to three issues that dominate the current situation: the emergence of a new political and bureaucratic elite, the rehabilitation of former political actors, and the nature of populist discourse.

The Invasion of the "Youths" into the Political Arena

Kabila's victory was a historic action that gave new hope to a people weary of the Mobutu dictatorship. Spontaneous demonstrations greeted Kabila and the AFDL forces.

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especially in Kinshasa. These demonstrations, led by militants hopeful of a voice in the new government, did not write a blank check for Kabila. The proclamation of the new power, starting at Lubumbashi on May 16, 1997, transformed popular expectations. The AFDL suspended all official institutions, including those of the Sovereign National Conference (CNS). Constitutional Statutory Order No. 003, promulgated on May 28, 1997, gave the new self-proclaimed chief of state full executive, legislative, and military powers.

The composition of the first government, announced on May 22, 1997, initiated internal confrontation. Of the 13 nominations for the governmental team, nine were from the AFDL and four from other parties.¹ Kabila's surprise disregard of opposition leaders was a staggering blow to those who had led the popular uprising against Mobutu. After the announcement, antagonisms emerged from within these groups, whose activities were banned several days beforehand. Demonstrations by students and "militants" of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS)—one of the banned political parties—did not deter Kabila. These demonstrations revealed a generational conflict and a struggle over employment and professional competence.

Generational Conflict

Amidst the scuffle of the demonstrations, the leader of the UDPS, Etienne Tshisekedi, went to the Intercontinental Hotel to meet Kabila. However, the president was too busy to see Tshisekedi. The secretary general of the AFDL, Deogratias Bugera, offered to meet him instead, but this did not work either. This was interpreted by the Congolese "standing parliament"² as follows: "Etienne Tshisekedi is the prime minister of the people. He was elected in 1992 by the CNS with 70 percent of the vote. He was sabotaged and removed from office by Mobutu, and is a mythic figure of the opposition. He is Bugera's elder." Senen Andriamirado goes further: "In the mind of Tshisekedi, it's Bugera who must go see him at his residence in Limete. Bugera refused." The commentary of Etienne Tshisekedi: "Kabila is taken hostage by the young people who forbid him to meet me."³

Here is the conflict between those whom Etienne Tshisekedi calls "those young people" (the new strongmen around Kabila) and the veterans of Congolese politics. Tshisekedi represents the older generation who made their

name in the 1950s and 1960s. He was one of the 12 commissioners installed in power after the assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba in September 1960.

Never lacking the ability to bounce back politically, his generation believe they still have something to offer Congolese politics. As their colleague Victor Nendaka said, he "has only the ambition of assuring, in peace, the relief of the rising generation with his experience, his advice, and his training."⁴ Herein lies the crux of the matter.

Jean-François Bayart notes that the "principle of seniority, today like yesterday, remains the primary social inequality, in terms of 'big/small boy,' the great and the small."⁵ With the emergence of a new political elite, the majority coming from the diaspora, their position on the political chessboard is at stake. The veterans of Congolese politics resent their exclusion. To paraphrase Murray Edelman: For all those who feel disinherited or unsatisfied, battles for the conquest of power represent the potential for change.⁶

The War for Employment and the Battle Over Competence

The alliance exerted itself to domesticate political and bureaucratic space by placing its militants, and especially its members from the diaspora, in political positions at the heart of the territorial administration and public enterprises. The internal and banned opposition "considers itself to have weakened the dictatorship in fighting for years and having prepared (psychologically, I would say) the entrance of the alliance, [and] considers itself betrayed and scolded by the new leaders who have come from elsewhere."⁷ These changes in personnel recruitment permit President Kabila to remove the political class of the independence and Mobutu eras and to fabricate by decree a new class of politicians.

Today, the Congolese situate themselves frequently in ethnic terms, which means they "minutely evaluate in ethnic terms the representation of the government, and the role of the Tutsi, the Katangese, the Kasaians, and all the fragments of the national mosaic."⁸

Local cadre do not hesitate to vent their frustrations. The bureaucracy, understood here as a social category monopolizing the sinews of the state, considers itself the nobility of state power.⁹ It attributes such things as inexperience, amateurism, and lack of know-how to members of the diaspora, nicknamed "Diasa-Diasa." The Congolese, who are never short of imagination, use a final caricature: the image of European used cars to represent members of the diaspora, who are rusty because of their unemployment while in Europe and North America.

The Congolese press, from the *Bulletin* of the Congolese Press Agency to the virulent *Le Potentiel*, exposes daily

the scandals that soil the circles of power: the "clan battles," the ministers implicated in shady affairs, and the "incompetent, authoritarian, and corrupt cadres." Announcements that certain officials have been suspended from office, which one finds here and there in the *Bulletin*, confirm the complexity and diversity of these criticisms. The minister of health and social affairs, Jean Baptiste Sondji, when speaking of his fellow ministers, acknowledged that "there is a big mess and that they have a lot of things to learn."¹⁰ This probably is not just a tactical confession, like those to which President Mobutu had accustomed his fellow citizens, but represents a sincere willingness to improve.

Having refused to join with an internal opposition of whom he was not confident, and sort out and control power, Kabila employed members of the diaspora and some local personalities without knowing too much about their talents or virtue.

Co-optation that Will Never Say Its Name

It seems that the placement of the old politicians and the various criticisms of the political and bureaucratic leadership reveal a worrisome loss of the AFDL's credibility. The criticisms are signs of the changing political paradigm that influenced the second round of ministerial nominations, six months after the first. Kabila had to make the difference between the two rounds clear to address the expectations of various groups. He achieved this by co-opting certain political actors, but also by returning to practices that strangely resemble those of the Mobutu era.

Considered as a strategy for regime survival, this co-optation appeared as the continuation of politics by other means. By a more positive reading, co-optation rehabilitated certain "dignitaries" and political cadre, who assumed the responsibilities they had under the *ancien regime*. This is the case notably of Frédéric Kibassa Maliba, Paul Kapita Shabangi, Ferdinand Tala-Ngai, and David Mbwankiem, who were given ministerial portfolios, while Dominique Sakombi Inongo and Umba Kyamitala became advisors to the head of state.

Many difficult questions remain regarding the choice of these political personalities. How were these choices negotiated? What were the criteria: political popularity, competence, political weight, or influence at the regional or national level? To argue that these personalities returned to the political scene because of their individual reputations leaves us perplexed, since some of them are the very incarnation of "the Zairian political culture"¹¹ that Kabila and the strongmen of the alliance detest. They are the incarnation of the political class held responsible today for moral decline and economic and social disorder.

Their reinstatement in the state apparatus is explained less by their adherence to Kabila's ideals than by their willingness to mobilize support in his favor. As a power strategy that wants to split an illegal opposition, this type of instrumentation of political actors is not a new phenomenon. The colonial power formed alliances with the most docile men, replacing those dismissed and exiled, while Mobutu used this strategy to destabilize the internal and external opposition. In the present context, this phenomenon indicates movement toward the political center rather than real reform.

In addition to the reservations with which this "sharing" of power must be greeted, it is not illegitimate to formulate a hypothesis that this co-optation rests on a fragile balance. The arrests of certain Second Republic politicians and former administrators¹² (freed on February 10, 1998, after months of incarceration) threatened many people and ethnic groups who identify with them. While they were wallowing in prison, the old dignitaries from Katanga, Kabila's home region, had the wind at their stern and enjoyed their liberty. Did Nyembo Shabani, the former minister and governor of the central bank, and Kyungu wa Kumwanza, the former governor of Katanga, merit the same punishment? The first led the central bank to an indescribable economic disaster, while the second organized bloody ethnic purges of Kasaians in Katanga and is known as an accessory to the theft of cobalt from the Gecamine mine.

To these arrests we should add the relegation, in February 1998, of Etienne Tshisekedi to his home village. This leads one to suspect the exclusion of a category of political actors from the Congolese political market. Tshisekedi's exile, ordered on the eve of the 16th anniversary of the UDPS to stop the festivities, recalls the worst hours of the Mobutu regime. As Colette Braeckman notes, Etienne Tshisekedi was made "more than ever, a martyr of democracy because, since the beginning of the 1980s, he dared to defy Mobutu and taught the people to defeat fear."¹³

Co-optation politics shows the AFDL at a crossroads. Two logics (not necessarily antagonistic) are apparent: the new logic that faints in the direction of what C. Kabuya Lumuma called a controlled and partisan "political purging"¹⁴ of former administrators, and the old logic of the omnipotent state, controlled by a group—a scenario that Jean-François Bayart called "authoritative restoration."¹⁵

A progressive installation of the members of AFDL committees is occurring throughout the country. Samy Kizombi, secretary of the AFDL Kisangani II in the commune of Kimbanseke, instructed committee members "to collaborate with the administrative authorities to avoid jurisdictional conflicts, to ask the population to support all government actions, to denounce all enemies of the people, to strictly apply government measures, notably the interdiction

of the activities of political parties during the period of the transition."¹⁶

This discourse of mobilization is not very different from that of the former party-state. It is in line with Kabila's address to the nation on June 30, 1997. Numerous questions can be asked about the expectations of the people and especially about the importance of the AFDL with the installation of the *Tshembe-Tshembe*, the AFDL's committees.¹⁷ Since the AFDL is a political party, it is unfair to let it promote its activities, while other political parties are banned. The government of the AFDL clearly rows against the current of the democratization movement since 1990.

When the Popular and Populist Discourse Mix

Can President Laurent-Désiré Kabila tolerate or permit a political opening without returning to the past? In my opinion, the question would be, does he have any choice? As in 1965, when Mobutu took power, the discourse of the new power uses the most fruitful nationalist figures and the reality of the social and economic collapse of the prior regime. Kabila has no problem making the leaders of the Second Republic take responsibility for the collapse of the country. As such, he invokes "the odious conspiracy of 1960 against Lumumba, the divisions, the disappointed hopes, the killings, the intolerance, the personal ambitions, the mess, the dilapidation of infrastructure, the systematic pillage of the state, etc."¹⁸

These declarations wink in many directions, notably toward the old politicians *who have blood on their hands* for assassinating Lumumba and his companions, and toward the politicians and administrators who committed numerous political assassinations and bled the country without concerning themselves about the life of the population. Behind this quest lies a pitiless interpellation of the old elite—the dinosaurs—but also, and especially, a right to pursue the forgotten memory of Lumumba. President Kabila proclaims: "All these men, at least a big part of them, are alive. They are in this country and we know them.... You know them because you read history. They must ask for their pardon in front of you."¹⁹

This right of chase has been at the center of debates since the work of the CNS, out of which came a consensus that insisted on the rehabilitation of the memory of the victims of both the First and Second Republics.²⁰ But Kabila's only goal is to disqualify political competitors for their past acts and complicities.

Considering the social and economic catastrophe passed down by the Second Republic, the invitation to exiled former leaders to return to construct the country follows the same logic of disqualification: "We invite the fugitives turned refugees to come back to their beautiful and rich

country, to come back to invest what they stole and to return a little of their loot to the people."²¹

Forced into secrecy, divided between moderate and radical, these fugitives today wander in exile, making their discordant voices heard. While Gérard Kamanda, president of the Assembly of Congolese Patriots, has argued since Lomé (Togo) that the invitation is only a "trap,"²² many other dinosaurs request "a general amnesty and the restitution of their confiscated goods."²³ Discredited because they have sheltered "what they stole," in Europe and South Africa, the leaders of the Second Republic, in the country and in exile, face a symbolic death in the Congolese context. The internal exile of Etienne Tshisekedi did not rouse public opinion. Kinshasa proceeded to enjoy the national team's participation in the semi-finals of the African Cup, played in Burkina Faso.

Conclusion

The AFDL's capture of state power aroused political divisions and provoked disorientation at the heart of the Congolese political elite. The regime's timid arrangements and mechanisms have neither resolved these divisions nor encouraged political actors to arrive at a compromise. The co-optation of political and administrative personnel and their mobilization show the persistence of partisan and authoritarian politics and a tendency to monopolize the state because the "winners" seem to take all while those "excluded" are deprived of the standing and resources they need to reenter the scene.

Without a doubt, some political actors are unwilling to make concessions needed to maintain the rules of the democratic game. Willingness to make concessions requires a political culture in which political actors think that it would cost them less to lose according to the rules than to win by violating them. Does not ignoring the old political routines and numerous dinosaurs exacerbate the virulence of conflicts that, once made public, tend to reproduce themselves? At least the motives for political change should not whither away with the "excluded," producing a transition in which a recourse to arms would be profitable—but by what miracle?

Notes

1. They were Mme. Justine Kasavubu (former representative of the UDPS in Belgium), Paul Bandoma (UDPS), Dr. Jean-Baptiste Sondji, and Kinkela Vinkansi (members of the Patriotic Front).
2. This "parliament" is the crowds who gather around Kinshasa newspaper kiosks to discuss the political events of the day.
3. S. Andriamirado, "Visages du nouveau régime: Kabila n'est pas seul," *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1899, May 28–June 3, 1997.
4. Victor Nendaka Bika, "Lettre 'confidentielle' adressée au Citoyen président de la République, le maréchal Mobutu Sese Seko," *Le Potential*, May 15, 1991.
5. J.F. Bayart, "La problématique de la démocratie en Afrique noire: La Baule ... et puis après?" *Politique africaine*, no. 43 (1991): 5–20.
6. Murray Edelman, *Pièges et règles du jeu politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), 101.
7. C. Braeckman, "Kinshasa commence à se faire à ses nouveaux maîtres. Congo: Kabila a remis l'ethnisme à l'ordre du jour," *Le Soir*, July 31, 1997.
8. *Ibid.*
9. P. Bourdieu, *La noblesse d'État* (Paris: Minuit, 1989). See also F.W. Riggs, "Évolution sémantique du terme bureaucratique," *Revue Internationale des Sciences Sociales*, no. 4 (1979).
10. B. Mwamba, "Ex-Zaïre: qui contrôle le pouvoir à Kinshasa" (enquête et reportages), *Jeune Afrique Economie*, no. 246 (1997): 58.
11. Expression borrowed from E. M'bokolo, "L'agonie d'une dictature. Aux sources de la crise zairoise," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, no. 518 (1997): 5.
12. These included former ministers Kissasi, Bati, Tshibanda, Kamitatu; former Pdg. Tshiongo (Department of Water), Amuli (National Society of Electricity), Leni (National Society of Insurance), General Kikunda (Department of Airline Flights); Deamboleka, ex-chair of the Central Bank; Kithima Bin Ramazani ex-patron of the Popular Movement of the Revolution, International Africa, number 310, December-January 1997.
13. C. Braeckman, "le président et les faux amis," *Le Soir*, February 24, 1998.
14. C. Kabuya Lumana, *Lettre ouverte à Laurent-Désiré Kabila: Démocratie et droits de l'homme au Congo-Zaïre* (Kinshasa: Secco Press, 1997), 27.
15. J.F. Bayart, "Fin de partie au sud du Sahara," in *La France et l'Afrique: Vade mecum pour un nouveau voyage*, ed. S. Michailof (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 510.
16. Voir Actualité Provinciale, "Kinshasa: Installation du comité cellulaire de l'AFDL Kingasani II dans la commune de Kimbanseke," *Bulletin quotidien de l'Agence Congolais Presse*, Kinshasa, February 3, 1998.
17. Swahili term used by Kabila to designate the commit-tees of AFDL ("Hommage à Patrice Émery Lumumba: Discours du Président de la République Démocratique du Congo, M'zee Laurent-Désiré Kabila," *Bulletin*

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- quotidien de l'Agence Congolais Presse*, January 19, 1998).
18. These declarations find themselves in many statements and press conferences, particularly in the speech of January 17, 1998. "Hommage à Patrice Émery Lumumba: Discours du Président de la République Démocratique du Congo, M'zee Laurent-Désiré Kabila." *Bulletin quotidien de l'Agence Congolais Presse*, Kinshasa, January 19, 1998.
 19. Ibid.
 20. M. Kalulambi Pongo. "De l'argumentation politique à la mémoire collective: le passé récent revisté à la Conférence nationale souveraine du Zaïre." in *L'histoire en partage. Usages et mises en discours du passé*, ed. B. Jewsiewicki and J. Létourneau (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996) 103-127.
 21. "Hommage à Patrice Émery Lumumba: Discours du Président de la République Démocratique du Congo, M'zee Laurent-Désiré Kabila." *Bulletin quotidien de l'Agence Congolais Presse*, Kinshasa, January 19, 1998.
 22. See a communication of the Assembly of Congolese Patriots, #009 from December 26, 1997, relative to the press conference of Laurent-Désiré Kabila from December 24, 1997.
 23. See the document "Position of Former Leaders of the Republic of Zaïre on the Call by President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo." Brussels, December 31, 1997. Signers include Mutombo Bakafwa Nsenda, Kitenge Yezu, Kabuya Lumuna, Ekumbani Ombata, Kyembwe Jules, Tambwe Mwamba Alexis, Kin-Kiey Mulumba, Kisombe Kiaku Muisi, and Anzuluni Bembe.