

The Continuing Process of Decolonization in the Congo: Fifty Years Later

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Introduction

While independence negotiations in the Congo were succinct, decolonization was a long and tortuous process. Indeed, in some respects it continues today, at least in the eyes of many people in eastern Congo, who feel that the formal demands of the colonial state are reflected in the informal impositions of the current state—and of neighboring states. Certainly many Congolese today feel that they have no adequate state structure to address their collective needs as a people, or to represent them on an international stage, or even to protect them from invasion, extraction, and occupation. Lacking effective state structures to protect their interests is not new: the colonial state in the Congo was marked by its intrusive presence in mobilizing labor, requiring crop production, and imposing taxes, among many other demands. But the character of life in the Congo today does not reflect anyone's vision of what independence would bring. At best, the last fifty years can be seen as a process of an aborted decolonization, and in some ways the violence now present in the Congo can be seen as the result of the unfulfilled aspirations of decolonization—or as the deferred violence of a decolonization gone awry (see Newbury 2009).

Within this extended, but still unresolved, process of decolonization I see four distinct but overlapping phases.¹ The first phase—a period of

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hope, quickly dashed—consisted of twenty-eight weeks in the immediate aftermath of independence, from June 30, 1960, to January 17, 1961, the date of the assassination of Lumumba.² The second phase—a period of multiple local-level struggles—consisted of the search for a “Second Independence,” as the people of Kwilu referred to it.³ That period lasted from September 1960 (with the arrest of Lumumba and the subsequent flight of his cabinet ministers to Kisangani) to November 24, 1965 (the date of Mobutu’s second coup). The third phase consisted of thirty-two years of autocracy under Mobutu’s rule. During this time the power of the state—actively supported at various times by outside capital, arms, and occasionally military force—moved Zaireans further and further from their goals of economic and cultural security, all under the veil of Mobutu’s vaunted but invented trope of *authenticité*.⁴ The fourth phase—a time of occupation and violence on a horrendous scale—was initiated on October 29, 1996, the date of the first Rwandan invasion. Originally this targeted Bukavu, Goma, and the refugee camps in Kivu. But by January 1997 the Rwandan forces had teamed up with local dissidents, opportunists, and plain dissimulators to establish a Congolese “Front,” which embarked on an epic seven-month, fifteen-hundred-kilometer march across the country, a campaign that resulted in the murder of some two to three hundred thousand Rwandans in Zaire (see Kisangani 2000). In May 1997 Kinshasa was occupied and Laurent Kabila installed as president. But having been rejected by their new client fourteen months later, Rwanda began a more extended occupation of the eastern areas on August 2, 1998.⁵

So these phases included a moment of hope, a time of intense struggle, a long period of repression, and the ordeal of occupation. The outcome has been that, despite their courage and resilience over the past fifty years, the people of the Congo have been denied sovereignty, security, legitimacy, and the chance to address their own problems.

Phase 1

To return to the first phase—those twenty-eight fateful weeks from June 30, 1960: Frederick Cooper phrased it well when he noted that decolonization was a “drama of competing visions” (2008:176).⁶ Within that drama, the power of the departing colonial state was just sufficient to be able to shut down those competing visions but insufficient to dictate a clear resolution. Indeed, the departing colonial state had an agenda of its own, but one that was so manifestly opposed to the immediate well-being of the people that it was rejected by them. Similarly, the people had sufficient organization to reject colonial agendas but insufficient political coherence to resolve the challenges on their own. For that they needed the state. But popular control of the state apparatus was an elusive aspiration; the tragedy of the Congo has been that the state has never been aligned with the people for long. Indeed, for much of postcolonial history the practices of the state

have often been antithetical to the interests of the people; even during the hopeful days tied to independence, exuberance trumped execution. The only means available for narrowing that gap was for individuals to join the state—and in so doing to augment the size of the elite class, leaving intact the class structure in all its monstrous proportions. In very different ways, that process of expanding the ruling class was represented in both the frenetic energy of the second phase, with the twenty-one *provincettes*, each with its associated provincial elites, and in the third phase, with the co-optation that occurred under Mobutu's rule. However, rather than narrowing, the gap between state authorities and the people on the ground only widened, even as the numbers of those with some tentative economic security increased—if only ephemerally.

The first phase was brief but crucial. It was the only time during the past fifty years when there was meaningful hope of aligning the state with the needs and aspirations of the people (see Young 1965; Lemarchand 1964; Weiss 1967). But within two weeks of the formal declaration of independence, the newly installed government was faced with a mutiny of the army (as enlisted men protested the continuing racial exclusivity of the Belgian officer corps), a flight of virtually the entire administrative cadre retained after independence, an attack on the country by Belgian naval units at Matadi (claiming to assist Belgian administrative flight), and the secession of Katanga, its wealthiest region (responsible for 60% of foreign exchange earnings). So the newly “independent” Congo was left without an effective army, a functioning administration, or any significant financial resources. As Larry Devlin's (2007) memoir of the period makes vividly clear, a crucial region of the country had seceded with Belgian support, and increasingly insecure politicians turned to outside support.⁷ These events, and the international response to them, represented not just the dashing of high hopes; at another level, they attested to the theft of any possibility of addressing them in a structured fashion on the part of the people in the Congo.

Phase 2

Such devastating disillusion with the central state led people to turn to the local context in an attempt to redefine their own “Second Independence”—one that would usher in a period in which the wealth of the country would devolve to the people, housing would materialize, education would be available, jobs would be created, and salaries would be decent: in short, a period in which the inequities of eighty years of intrusive colonial power would be righted. In the colonial matrix (as also in the quasicolonial matrix that followed decolonization), wealth, jobs, and education were all associated with the state, so the struggle focused on the control of state resources.

But what began as a struggle for the state ended with the struggle to rectify past wrongs—to undo the inequities of a colonial state in which some

benefited at the expense of others. Thus the struggle for a “Second Independence” was a struggle for an ideological vision of restructuring the relations of the state to the people through the process of popular mobilization against those who had thwarted the original goals of independence. In many areas this struggle turned inward, with violence directed against local beneficiaries of state positions. Indeed, many local conflicts became focused on redefining the contorted colonial structures of power which local beneficiaries of this “faux” decolonization process, by their actions since independence, had sought to extend.⁸ Yet the huge gap between power and authority remained. It isn’t surprising that many of the struggles that continue today are the struggles of these competing legitimacies—struggles which, as Severine Autesserre (2010) reminds us, are often fought out at the local level, in a format reminiscent of the struggles forty years ago.⁹

Phase 3

With the reestablishment of repression from November 24, 1965, the date of Mobutu’s second coup, the vision shifted—but only momentarily. Originally the coup was popular, for with Mobutu’s promise of peace—and his inflated rhetoric of returning the state to the people—hope had returned. But such hope lasted for only a few years. By the early 1970s the penetration of the state to the local areas had become evident, and its major goal had become clear—not to narrow the gap between people and power, but to preserve the privileges of those in power. From 1973, with first the disastrous “Zaireanization” of the economy (by which expatriate-owned commercial, agricultural, and corporate enterprises were turned over to Zairean nationals, irrespective of their qualifications) and then, a year later, with the “radicalization” of the economy (with the state taking over the now hollowed-out, defunct enterprises), followed by the precipitous decline of global copper commodity prices on which the patronage of the state depended, the national economy was effectively destroyed, barely cobbled together by arbitrary allotments from the Presidential Office. But even these distributions diminished over time. By the late 1970s the balance had shifted from a patrimonial state to a predatory one, and the people had to resort to local creativity—now celebrated as “the second economy” (MacGaffey 1987).¹⁰ But while the creativity of the people was indeed worth celebrating, most observers failed to notice that this form of economic creativity emerged because of the total failure of the state to ensure national economic structures accessible to all. Furthermore, the creativity of the people was matched by the mutation of the state back to the colonial vision of raw extraction—this time not through administrative power, which might have assured the development of the corporate economy, but by police power, which only abetted individual aggrandizement. As one observer (C. Newbury 1984a) phrased the question: was the state defunct, or had it just gone underground?

So the third phase—the long phase of Mobutu’s “Second Republic”—mocked the earlier two: while it started in hope, it all too quickly mutated into repression. And repression again brought new initiatives at the local level. Demanding payment for illegally seized property, people demonstrated on the steps of local authorities, engaging in a politics of personal shaming. To protest the crumbling public works infrastructure, citizens—women and well as men—refused to pay taxes, in a gesture of political withdrawal (see Nzongola-Ntalaja 1984; C. Newbury 1984b). To resolve disputes, adjudicators went not to state courts but to their parish elders, part of the extensive Catholic Church networks which, in the absence of the state, remained the only truly national political institution—along with the intense national pride in Congolese music (see White 2008). In Bukavu in the late 1980s Mobutu was publicly humiliated when he attempted to engage in “dialogue” with the people; having had enough of such a one-way “dialogue” with state power, the people turned the encounter into an interrogation of Mobutu. There followed a torrent of demands from below—from the local level—effectively indicting the state on many grounds, exposing the bankruptcy of the state not just in material terms, but in political and moral terms as well. These demands culminated in the monumental constitutional convention, the *Conférence Nationale Souveraine*, which convened in 1991 and brought together some twenty-eight hundred delegates to reexamine and reconstruct the entire constitutional basis of the state (see Nzongola-Ntalaja 2002:189–98; 2004).¹¹ Nonetheless, massive as it was, this initiative, too, was thwarted by its own internal dissention and by Mobutu’s adroit manipulations. Once again, politics was able to subvert but not eliminate the aspirations of the people to construct a new order; the energies and inspiration of the people were not sufficient to overcome the power of the state and the cunning of its power holders.

From about 1990, however, new developments also occurred in the international domain. With the collapse of the USSR, Cold War alliances were no longer necessary. Within the new parameters Mobutu’s steadfast support from abroad evaporated, as “human rights” and “democratization” became the favored watchwords of Western diplomacy, replacing political stability and economic access as the key factors by which the West related to Mobutu’s regime. The effect was monumental for Mobutu, who found himself lacking the external support that had for so long propped up his corrupt regime militarily, financially, and diplomatically. But it meant less for the people, as external resources that formerly had provided for a reliable client were not redirected toward ameliorating the pain he had caused within Zaire.¹² Once again, the people were left on their own; although the CSN represented new political energy from below, little had changed for the people on the ground.

Phase 4

Despite the misery of the final years of Mobutu's vaunted Second Republic, the most recent phase has proved even more discouraging. The arrival of a million refugees from Rwanda in 1994 initially reinforced Mobutu's position, as he adroitly turned human catastrophe into his own political advantage, once again, in obtaining external support. The subsequent invasion of the Congo by a series of outside forces led by Rwanda, first in 1996 and later in 1998, initially brought about the overthrow of Mobutu and his replacement by Laurent Kabila, but quickly turned into an external occupation of the eastern third of the country and the extraction of massive amounts of raw materials that were used (in part) to sustain the occupation. Although the presence of these troops was nominally intended to defend targeted minorities within the Congo, in fact these surrogate regimes had virtually no effective ties on the ground. Local militias, originally formed to defend Congolese territory, ended up with a plethora of agendas of their own (often replicating the divisions of phase 2), and the east turned into a vast domain of displacement, insecurity, and death on a massive scale.¹³

Now the people are demoralized, vulnerable, and abandoned by the state, which is disdained universally. With the return of the *provincette*-like structures under the rubric of decentralization, many more people have been incorporated into provincial legislatures and administration. Yet for most people state structures are, once again, to be avoided where possible and deferred to only when necessary. Again, everything is a potential target for extraction—for those who can extract. At the local level (at least in the east), financial demands proliferate, including new market taxes, gasoline taxes ("paid for" by the simple extraction of gas), extra fees (or favors) for school attendance, required "gifts" to obtain medical care (with supplies and food remaining the patients' own responsibility), additional fees to secure essential documentation—or even for permission to collect firewood—all to benefit not the state but prebendal power holders. This is a familiar pattern in the Congo, reminiscent of the local-level struggles of the second phase. But whereas the second phase was marked by military violence against the state officials, this phase reverses that script. The primary feature of today's struggle is the structural violence by state officials against the people at the local level, as political culture at every level is marked by appalling venality. So the decolonization of the Congo has indeed led to struggle—a struggle between local-level solutions and state-level predation, with the extraction of the state actors operating at increasingly lower levels.

Conclusion

The answers cannot come from within; that is clear. Nor will they come from a weakened, distracted, and indifferent international community, as has been shown many times over—from the extraction of neighboring

states, to the incoherence of U.N. presence, to the rigid structural demands of the International Financial Institutions. Caught up as it is in the political culture of state, international involvement has consistently been part of the problem for people on the ground, not a source of resolution.

With civil society prostrate, state actors intent in their own enrichment, and the international community distracted, new hope for any answers can only come from the diaspora community and their allies abroad. I am not suggesting that diaspora members return to Congo—they would likely not have a great deal of influence there, for many reasons. Instead, I am simply noting that diaspora members and their allies can exert influence from abroad, not only in aiding with material resources, but especially in serving as catalysts in the formulation of a viable national vision challenging the venality of current political culture, insisting that public resources be used for public purposes, and creating space for local people to act on those principles.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the diaspora community is divided against itself. It is worth asking therefore if its members care to make a difference, or if they simply wish to invest in such a way that reinforces the existing power structures—to extend and deepen, and make more intractable, the penetration of state extraction. Are they to serve as an arm of the state, or as a forum for interrogating the state? From experience elsewhere, it is clear that by “investing” in entrepreneurial schemes in Africa, diaspora community members can be, and often are, part of the problem, not part of the solution. For “investing” in Africa is an ambiguous concept: it can refer to a long-term commitment to transform societal processes to meet local objectives, but as a strategy for a quick financial return, “investment” can also be simply a euphemism for more effective extraction. Not a few people confuse the two, using the discourse of the former role to act in the latter role; semantics matter.

So is the claim of a privileged diaspora status by some anything more than a blatant attempt to set aside a *domaine de chasse*—an exclusive domain of extraction? Or is the Congolese diaspora capable of actually transforming the country? In the name of “community,” do its various members simply seek a bigger slice of the extraction, transforming collective patrimony into personal wealth? To be sure, there have been many honest attempts by exiled individuals to engage directly with the problems of the Congo; but overall the results have been meager from the point of view of social amelioration. What is needed is a firm, consistent, coherent presence by those diaspora members who truly seek to transform the current political culture so that it takes account of collective needs—and takes responsibility for addressing them.

The first three phases of postcolonial Congo have taken us through a period of short-lived inspiration, a period of aspirant revolution, and a period of sustained repression and the loss of a sense of responsibility of the state toward its own citizens. The results are apparent in the fourth

phase: invasion, extraction, and despair. The curse of riches has become the curse of venality—and seems to have no end. But the energy, the intensity, and the hope of the Congolese people still remain. There must be another way out. The diaspora community cannot of course solve all the problems, but its members can conceivably provide visionary and vigorous leadership in allowing the emergence of a more effective political and economic future than the first fifty years of decolonization experiments have shown. Let us hope that such a turnaround will not take another fifty years. But it certainly won't stand a chance without a renewed sense of caring and collective commitment from the outside—to create space for the emergence of new visions from within.

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Notes

1. I accept that periodization is always arbitrary, for many factors are brought to bear on defining distinct periods. As with lived history, there are no definitive origins for any period, only roots, and no definitive closure, only continuing legacies. Periodization, then, can only be seen as a heuristic device. But it can nonetheless clarify complexity, even if historical processes are never as clearly compartmentalized as such a presentation might suggest. However, there is nothing symmetrical about the phases proposed here: they vary in length, in regional effect, and in intensity; that is simply because lived history does not conform to regular chronological patterns. Yet despite the lack of precision and the differing length of such proposed "phases," I submit that they still hold utility in understanding the character of Congolese history over a turbulent half-century, in which each phase was dominated by its own particular characteristics—a combination of popular aspirations, political style, public tropes, and personal concerns, as outlined below.
2. The most complete consideration of this tragic event, and especially the role of outside powers leading up to it, is de Witte (2001). I recognize that one could advance different dates of closure for this phase: Sept. 5 or Dec. 1, 1960 (Lumumba's arrest and eventual capture, respectively), or Feb. 13, 1961 (the date of the public acknowledgment of his death). I have used the date of his actual death simply because it holds such powerful symbolism in the minds of many Congolese; all the same, I am aware that his iconic status is contested by others.
3. The classic article on the Kwilu rebellions is Fox, de Craemer, and Ribeaucourt (1965). The major work on the "rebellions" (though some refer to them as "failed revolutions") is Benoit Verhaegen's magisterial two-volume study (1967, 1969). See also Young (1970). The prelude to the Kwilu rebellion, and in many ways the theoretical foundations for our understanding of such "rural radicalism," is eloquently articulated in Weiss (1967). A useful overview is found in Turner (1972).
4. Among many other sources on the Mobutu regime, see Young and Turner (1985); Callaghy (1984); and Schatzberg (1988). On the external support for the Mobutu regime, see Gibbs (1991) and Schatzberg (1991).
5. For more on the violence that followed this invasion, see Turner (2007), Prunier (2008), and Reyntjens (2009). For a moving personal testimony to the ordeal of those fleeing the armies, see Umutesi (2000).
6. For extended reflections on these issues, see also Cooper (2002, 2005).
7. On the role of outsiders in the Katanga secession, see Libois (1967) and O'Brien (1966), among others.
8. In addition to the sources cited in note 3 above, see Coquery-Vidrovitch, Forest, and Weiss (1987).
9. See also Turner (2007). Though both Autesserre and Turner deal with the wars after 1996, they also show the importance of understanding local antagonisms as driving these conflicts, even as they deal with the context of foreign military intervention.
10. On the character of the early Mobutuist state, in addition to the sources cited in note 4 above, see Willame (1972). For a testimony of the plight of commoners under this regime, see Vansina (1982).

11. Many people would see these events as a terminal point for “phase 3.” But although the CNS represented new political energy from below, in fact little changed for the people on the ground; despite increasing local dissention, Mobutu’s position was to be temporarily reinforced in 1994 with the influx of a million refugees from Rwanda—a catastrophe he adroitly turned to his own political advantage in obtaining significant external support.
12. For an overview of the disintegration of the state under Mobutu, see Young (1998) and Nzongola-Ntalaja (2002:141–214).
13. In addition to the sources cited in note 5 above, see Reyntjens (2005); Lemarchand (2010); Stearns (2011); Turner (2007); Autesserre (2010).