

The Death of Laurent Kabila

By Thomas Turner

Recent events in the Democratic Republic of Congo could come from pulp fiction. There are murders, conspiracies, betrayals, red herrings, and high stakes—including diamonds, gold, cobalt, and petroleum. Unfortunately, this is no thriller, but a tragic reality. A country has been torn apart by its neighbors. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of its citizens have died, in addition to the refugees killed on Congolese soil.

At the center of the drama are the Kabilas, father and son. Laurent Kabila was killed on January 16. After several days of stonewalling, the death was confirmed and Joseph Kabila was announced as his successor. The peace process, which had been stalled by Laurent Kabila's obstructionism, has regained momentum. The United States, which had been locked into an unproductive, hostile relationship with Laurent Kabila, appears to welcome the change in Kinshasa. It is too early to relax, however, since the war is not over and the problems facing Joseph Kabila's government are enormous.

Ethno-regional tensions

While Joseph Kabila has been off visiting Washington, Brussels, Lusaka, Syrte (Libya) etc., and apparently making a good impression, the situation in Kinshasa has gone from bad to worse. Tensions that had been latent under Laurent Kabila were brought into the open by the assassination, and now threaten to tear the regime apart.

The official position is that Kabila was killed by Rachidi Kasereka, a member of the presidential bodyguard, and that Kasereka himself was killed immediately thereafter. Kasereka, 26 years old, was from North Kivu. Beyond that, we have several contradictory versions of the events.

At the beginning of February, *Le Monde* (Paris) published a long article on Kabila's death, based on interviews with self-identified participants in the assassination, and on a document in which the perpetrators outlined their coup plot.

According to this version, Kasereka was a minor figure in the plot, which had been organized by other former "child soldiers" who had been with Kabila since 1996 but now felt betrayed by him. There was no foreign involvement in the killing, *Le Monde* concluded.

However, the *Le Monde* version fails to answer a number of key questions, including:

1. Why were Congolese soldiers disarmed and confined to their barracks at Kinshasa's main military bases, Camps Tshatshi and Kokolo, on the eve of the assassination (apparently on orders from General Nawej Yav, army commander for the capital)?
2. Why was Kasereka killed on the spot (apparently by Colonel Edy Kapend, Kabila's aide de camp), rather than being captured and interrogated?

In the eyes of Kinshasa and the Lingala-speaking West of the Congo, Kabila's regime was based on the Swahili-speaking East. Within the regime, however, a split had emerged between people from Kivu (the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and perhaps Maniema) and those from Katanga. The official story laid blame for the assassination on the Kivu people. Then, the finger of suspicion shifted. A number of leading regime figures were arrested on suspicion of involvement in the assassination, including Col. Kapend, General Nawej, and several other of the Lunda ethnic group. These arrests brought to the surface the rivalry between the Lunda and the Luba-Katanga, the two leading ethnic groups of Katanga. Laurent Kabila had bridged the gap, since he was a Luba by his father and a Lunda by his mother.

Beyond the ethnic rivalries loomed the prospect of a split between Congo's two main allies. Kapend, former member of the "Katanga Tigers" and thus an officer in the Angolan army, was seen as Angola's man in the Congo. The danger was that Zimbabwe might side with the Luba-Katanga faction, splitting the pro-

Kinshasa coalition. In the first week of March, there were reports of shooting between Namibian and Angolan troops, the latter siding with Lunda deserters. Namibia is a minor player; a split between Angola and Zimbabwe could endanger the unfolding peace process.

Kabila's inner circle reportedly is split also between those who favor his revival of the peace process and those (especially old cronies of his father) who oppose it.

Disengagement

At first, Joseph Kabila's willingness to talk gave him the diplomatic initiative over Kinshasa's two main adversaries, Uganda and Rwanda. Then Uganda withdrew some troops from Congo, and Rwanda pulled its troops back from Pweto (in eastern Katanga), to Pepa, 120 miles to the north. At that point, Rwandan President Paul Kagame reiterated his country's position, namely that full withdrawal of Rwandan troops from the Congo would follow the disarmament of the Rwandan Hutu forces fighting for the Congo government and the initiation of an "inter-Congolese dialogue" bringing together the Kabila government, the armed and unarmed opposition, and civil society organizations.

As Joseph Kabila (army commander under his father) knew only too well, those Rwandan Hutu and their Burundian counterparts have constituted an essential element of Congo's military forces. Unable to build a Congolese army, Laurent Kabila had depended upon the support of his allies (Angola and Zimbabwe) to hold the front and coordinate logistics, and on the Hutu to launch offensives.

If the peace process is to advance, the timetable of withdrawals will have to be worked out and executed with care. This is mainly the responsibility

of the United Nations and the parties to the conflict.

A poisonous legacy

The slain Kabila left a poisonous legacy to his country and to his son, and in other respects as well. Joseph Kabila will need to establish a dialogue with the armed and unarmed opposition, and attempt to revive the Congolese economy. A particularly thorny set of problems derives from Kabila's habit of financing the wars by mortgaging Congo's resources. He signed, then cancelled, a \$1 billion contract with American Mineral Fields International (AMFI), based in Bill Clinton's hometown of Hope, Arkansas, and another with the Barrick Gold Corporation. AMFI reportedly invested heavily in mines and processing plants in Kolwezi and Kipushi, in Kabila's home province of Katanga. It will be interesting to see whether President George W. Bush shows any inclination to intervene on the side of AMFI. If he doesn't, certain investors may learn the meaning of "risk" capital.

In return for their military support, Kabila's main allies received stakes in Congo's mining sector. Zimbabwe and Namibia reportedly received stakes in copper/cobalt and diamonds, respectively. Angola's national oil company, Sonangol, was allowed to create a subsidiary, Sonangol-Congo, which has a major role in production and distribution of petroleum and petroleum products in Congo. Presumably Congo's allies will want to preserve their stakes in the Congolese economy, even as they withdraw their troops. Joseph Kabila will need to be skillful if he is to extract his country from its present semi-colonial status.

The U.S. Role

It is too early to say how important the transition from Clinton to Bush

will prove for U.S. policy in Africa. Candidate Bush had said Africa was not a priority. Since he entered office, Africa seems to be forcing its way upward on his agenda.

The change of administrations can have some positive aspects, even from the point of view of progressives. The U.S. may step back from some of the previous administration's commitments and take a new look. For example, Sudan was the "bête noire" of Clinton and his Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Susan Rice. The Bush administration reportedly is debating the usefulness of this stance. Clinton's departure may also mean the end of some of his less helpful ideas, such as his administration's focus on "trade, not aid" and "new leaders."

The nearly simultaneous disappearances of Kabila Sr. and Clinton permit a new start in the Congo. As the sole remaining superpower, the U.S. has a modest but important role to play in promoting peace and reconstruction in Congo. As a start, Washington should encourage regional peace talks (such as the planned "inter-Congolese dialogue" to be hosted by Belgium in April 2001) and peacekeeping, which Laurent Kabila obstructed.

The Congo war persists; the U.S. played its part in starting it and has a responsibility to help the Congo and its neighbors to end the war and rebuild their countries.

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