



Volume 2, Number 37
June 1997

Foreign Policy In Focus

Congo/Zaire

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In September 1996, an ethnic revolt against human rights abuses erupted in eastern Zaire. This rapidly developed into a nationwide rebellion against Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko's 32-year dictatorship. On May 17, 1997, a rebel alliance supported by Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola seized Kinshasa, the capital city, barely a day after Mobutu fled. It quickly reinstated the country's pre-1971 name, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and appointed a new government. Mobutu's departure closed the chapter on Washington's last remaining cold war client in Africa.

Key Points

- During the cold war, the U.S. viewed Mobutu Sese Seko as a valued anticommunist ally.
- Despite the country's vast resources, Mobutu's rule by theft impoverished most Congolese, forcing many to engage in corrupt practices.
- Mobutu's departure has raised Congolese hopes for a better future, but many are concerned about reported rebel human rights abuses and an ambiguous commitment to democracy.

Recruited by the CIA in the late 1950s when his country was still a Belgian colony, Mobutu helped overthrow Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's first and only democratically elected prime minister. Wary of Lumumba's populism and willingness to accept Soviet aid, the U.S. and other Western powers encouraged Mobutu and others to contrive Lumumba's death. Thousands of Congolese lost their lives in the bitter five-year civil war that followed. In 1965 Mobutu, with CIA help, seized power in a coup.

Perfecting a system of rule by theft (called kleptocracy), Mobutu pillaged the public sector, harassing or jailing those who objected. In some years he and his cronies siphoned off up to 50% of Zaire's capital budget as well as hundreds of millions in mineral export revenues, foreign aid and loans, and private investment (some guaranteed by the U.S. Eximbank). The effects were catastrophic. Despite vast mineral wealth (diamonds, cobalt, copper), oil deposits, and immense hydroelectric and agricultural potential, Zaire's per capita income has dropped almost two-thirds since independence in 1960 and is listed as the lowest of all 174 countries in the UNDP's 1996 *Human Development Report*.

Mobutu's impact on people's daily lives was devastating. Extensive corruption crippled public services, from repairing roads to running schools and hospitals. Workers, their salaries stolen, were forced into the system of corruption just to survive. Nurses sometimes

demanded payment before giving shots, while soldiers and police routinely extorted bribes from passersby.

Nevertheless, the U.S. continued to view Mobutu as a useful ally against both global communism and radical African movements. He was vital to the U.S.-backed UNITA rebels' efforts to overthrow the leftist MPLA government in neighboring Angola.

Popular protest exploded in 1990, forcing Mobutu to agree to end his one-party rule. During this period, Zaire's emerging civil society—a lively mix of grassroots women's, human rights, and development groups—initiated many projects to provide basic services (schools, clinics, community radio stations) and to nurture a new politics of accountability. But Mobutu continued to delay Zaire's transition to democracy, maneuvering to ensure his own election.

In 1994 over 1 million Hutu refugees, some of them armed, fled to eastern Zaire following the genocide in Rwanda. Rather than disarming these exiles, Mobutu's military ignored refugee raids back into Rwanda and even sold the Hutus arms. When Mobutu's forces in eastern Zaire began seizing property and deporting Zairean Tutsis (known as the Banyamulenge), this ethnic minority rebelled.

In mid-October 1996 the Banyamulenge joined three other anti-Mobutu rebel groups in an Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Zaire/Congo. The ADFL is headed by Laurent Kabila, a follower of Lumumba who had waged a bush war in eastern Zaire against Mobutu since the mid-1960s. Many Congolese initially praised the well-disciplined ADFL rebels for forcing rapacious government soldiers to flee and banning most bribetaking and intimidation, all of which improved people's daily security.

Congolese widely celebrated Mobutu's exit and welcomed Kabila's promise to organize national elections by April 1999. But some remain concerned over the ADFL's ban on all political activities and parties, continued blocking of access to Hutu Rwandan refugees and possible involvement in refugee massacres. Still others from Kinshasa's traditional political parties have condemned his large number of Tutsi advisers, controversial among the many Congolese who view all ethnic Tutsis as foreigners without citizenship rights.

In recent years U.S. policy has stressed the need for good governance in Africa. Most Africans view this as a supreme irony given Washington's quarter-century of active support for Africa's most notorious and antidemocratic ruling crook, Mobutu. Between 1962 and 1991, the U.S. directly supported Mobutu (with close to \$150 million in CIA bribes and secret payments) and his government (with more than \$1.03 billion in development aid and \$227.4 million in military assistance). It even provided transport for foreign troops used to suppress anti-Mobutu rebellions in 1977 and 1978.

The U.S. also helped funnel World Bank loans and IMF credits to Mobutu's government, even though internal documents reveal that these agencies knew in advance the money was likely to be stolen and the loans unlikely to be repaid. Mobutu used IMF and World Bank loans to repay Zaire's private creditors, thereby transforming private debt into public debt now amounting to almost \$14 billion.

Mobutu reciprocated by providing bases and supply routes for UNITA rebels and by backing the U.S. in various arenas. For instance, as chair of the UN Security Council in the months immediately prior to the Gulf War, Zaire was crucial in rallying support for the U.S.-led military operation.

By the late 1980s, Mobutu's scale of corruption and human rights abuses had become a growing political embarrassment to the U.S. In 1990, the outbreak of widespread popular protests against his rule moved the U.S. Congress to cut all bilateral aid to Zaire and begin demanding that he step down. During this period, Mobutu, in line with economic liberalization policies championed by the U.S. and the World Bank, privatized many state enterprises he'd nationalized decades earlier. By selling them to supporters at bargain prices, Mobutu transferred dwindling public resources into the hands of many of the same people who'd already looted the public coffers.

During the next two years, the U.S. embassy initiated contacts with Zaire's opposition political parties. The U.S., France, and Belgium briefly worked in tandem, cutting all development aid and downgrading diplomatic contacts to pressure Mobutu to relinquish power. But they failed to persuade him to cede control over two vital pillars of his power: Zaire's elite military units and the central bank. In 1993 the Clinton administration refused to replace its outgoing ambassador to Zaire and barred Mobutu and his closest associates from visiting the U.S. But Washington ignored calls to apply a more potent lever: a freeze on the overseas assets of Mobutu and his close cronies. It also accepted a Mobutu designate, Kengo wa Dondo, as prime minister rather than the person chosen by Zaire's parliament, veteran anti-Mobutu opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi.

U.S. policy toward Zaire has been largely reactive since 1993, with policymakers divided over how to respond to developments. Ironically, the massive influx of refugees following the 1994 Rwanda genocide forced an end to Mobutu's diplomatic isolation. But even as it called for change in Zaire, the U.S. unduly distanced itself from opposition leaders like Tshisekedi, who has considerable political support in Kinshasa, Kasai, and eastern Congo.

U.S. officials were even less attuned to Congo's vibrant civil society groups, many of whom had distanced themselves from Kinshasa-based political maneuverings and built up significant public support as a result of their grassroots human rights, civic education, and development work. Until late 1996, the U.S. appeared to acquiesce to flawed election arrangements likely to favor Mobutu. Not until many months after the 1996 rebellion began did the U.S. actively press for a transition government to facilitate Mobutu's departure. Even then, active shuttle diplomacy in April by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Bill Richardson only built on prior efforts by Nelson Mandela.

U.S. officials admit that given U.S. support for Mobutu, they have limited influence or credibility with the ADFL. (U.S. and western mining companies who eagerly sought and even signed investment agreements with the cash-strapped rebel movement before it took Kinshasa, however, may carry more weight.) The U.S. has been unwilling to challenge the Rwandan government over its reported involvement in massacres of Hutu refugees inside ex-Zaire and implicitly sanctioned Rwandan and Ugandan covert support for the ADFL military advance. They are less happy that the Angolan government, which also aided the ADFL, is now trying to eliminate UNITA forces, which had long used Zaire as a rear base. The advance of Angolan army forces into UNITA-held areas in May risks unravelling the fragile Angola peace agreement. Relieved that Kinshasa fell with relatively little bloodshed, U.S. officials welcomed the ADFL's inclusion of several non-Alliance members in its new government. United for decades around the need to oust Mobutu, Congolese remain divided on other issues. Some anti-Mobutu politicians and grassroots activists feel inadequately represented in the new government. The Congo will need ongoing dialogue and mutual accommodation among the new government, other former opposition politicians, and civil society to reconcile competing views and to create the basis for long term stability.

Key Problems

- The U.S. has lacked any coherent policy toward the Congo since the end of the cold war.
- Up to now the U.S. has failed to insist on rigorous preconditions to ensure truly free and fair elections and full accountability for human rights abuses.
- Many corporations courting the Congo's new government benefited from Mobutu's corrupt rule, or from World Bank and IMF funds used to compensate them for money stolen by Mobutu.

Global Focus: A New Foreign Policy Agenda 1997-1998

Edited by Tom Barry (IRC) and Martha Honey (IPS)

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The rebel victory has decisively ended Mobutu's kleptocratic rule and opened new possibilities for the Congo's future. How can the U.S. best assist the Congolese in rebuilding their country while making some amends for its own role in creating and perpetuating Mobutu's misrule?

First, the U.S. should offer critical support to the new government being formed. The new government has stressed its desire to end corruption and rapidly rehabilitate the economy but lacks expertise in many areas. The U.S. should encourage it to draw on such expertise available elsewhere in Africa. Some have questioned the ADFL's support for democracy after it banned all political activities and parties. Others, including Nelson Mandela, argue it deserves more time to develop a vision and strategy for national reconciliation and recovery. The U.S. should insist on concrete progress towards democratic participation—including local and regional elections that would most empower grassroots communities—without trying to dictate specific solutions. It should, however, insist on international access and humanitarian aid to those refugees still in the Congo.

It is vital that negotiations on the transition to a democratic, post-Mobutu era not be limited to dialogue between Kabila and Kinshasa-based politicians alone. Human rights and women's groups, development groups, and community peace campaigns in cities and rural areas across the country's vastness had already begun to create democracy, transparency, and accountability at a grassroots level. The U.S. should encourage a transition process that enables these embryonic democratic experiences to trickle up and help shape national politics.

Second, accountability for human rights abuses in the Congo must be evenhandedly, not selectively, applied. Many actors—including rebel and splinter groups, Zairean army soldiers, armed Rwandan refugees implicated in the 1994 genocide, Mobutu-allied mercenaries, and Rwandan or Ugandan ADFL allies—have been implicated in such abuses. Genuinely impartial inquiry into all human rights violations by all parties through international or national truth commissions is vital. This will help counter the culture of impunity in a region already awash with reciprocal

killings and ethnic cleansings, while contributing to national cohesion. Coming to power after 32 years of dictatorship, the new ADFL-dominated government will be closely scrutinized on human rights. But to focus excessively on ADFL abuses alone, as some parties (notably the French) have sought to do, is akin to focusing solely on the human rights violations of South Africa's African National Congress while ignoring the pervasive horrors of apartheid that made the ANC's struggle necessary.

Lastly, the U.S. must acknowledge and make amends for its own crimes in Zaire. The U.S., Western European governments, the World Bank, the IMF, and many international corporations knowingly conspired to loot Zaire. They all lent money to Zaire by the millions, carefully monitored Mobutu and his friends as they stole it, then cynically demanded its repayment. Mobutu, of course, obliged, squeezing debt service funds from a destitute population in his periodic bouts of structural adjustment.

The debts are owed by Mobutu and his close associates, not by the Congo. Just as the U.S. supports efforts to reclaim wealth seized by the Nazis, it must help the new Congo reclaim its stolen wealth. The country's almost \$14 billion in foreign debt, if not totally forgiven, should be repaid by those corporations and individuals who conspired in Mobutu's criminal pillage. This would free up resources earmarked for debt repayment but desperately needed to reconstruct roads, telephone systems, sewers, and other basic public services.

The U.S. should join and assist in a systematic global search to locate and reclaim for the Congolese people the bank accounts, palaces and villas, and other wealth that Mobutu and his cronies have stashed around the world. Switzerland has already frozen all such assets; several other European governments are currently trying to identify other stolen wealth.

Despite the end of open fighting in the Congo, the country remains linked to a series of volatile localized conflicts stretching from the Horn of Africa through Central Africa to Angola, each with spillover effects (refugee flows, economic effects, growing militarization) on neighboring countries. U.S. involvement in the Congo will not be effective unless linked to expanded diplomatic efforts to resolve these conflicts and to address their political and economic causes.

Carole J. L. Collins is a former American Friends Service Committee Southern Africa representative and former IPS Visiting Fellow. She has written extensively on Mobutu and his ill-gotten wealth.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should support inclusion of Congo's civil society and other anti-Mobutu forces in new democratic structures and should back African efforts to help the Congolese rebuild their country.
- The U.S. should insist that all parties guilty of human rights abuses be held accountable, in the Congo and elsewhere in Central Africa.
- The U.S. should help the new Congolese government locate and reclaim wealth stolen by Mobutu and his cronies, and should support measures to write off ex-Zaire's foreign debt.

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). It is supported by subscriptions, by financial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

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