

**The Democratic Republic of Congo: Promise and Pain in the Continent's Heart**  
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**Outline**

- I. "Congo," like "Timbuktu" or "Zulu," conjures up all sorts of images in the Western mind. Whatever their validity, there is no getting around the place's significance. The Congo's history provides vivid—almost magnified—illustrations of major processes in Africa's more recent history: conquest, colonization, decolonization, and perhaps most of all, the struggles for—and the difficulties in achieving—stability and development.

A quick clarification: there are in fact *two* countries often referred to as "Congo" or "the Congo." They adjoin each other, and the some of the border is represented by—you guessed it—the Congo River. *Republic of Congo* is the more northerly of the two countries, and was formerly part of the French empire in Africa. We are focusing on the *Democratic Republic of Congo*, which was formerly known as the "Belgian Congo" (and for a time in the 1970s-1990s as "Zaire".)

Let's "cut to the chase." As we speak, the Congo is preparing for what may—or may not—be a turning point in its recent history: on July 30 national elections are scheduled—only the second reasonably open elections in the country's history, and the first since those which launched Congolese independence from Belgium way back in 1960. The present elections, which are being supported and largely financed by the United Nations, face enormous obstacles based on geography and history. It might be said that our object today is to develop a better and deeper understanding of just what those obstacles are.

- II. We can start our investigation with GEOGRAPHY—both natural and human. The Congo is a *huge* place—as big as the US east of the Mississippi. It encompasses much of a gigantic rain forest, vast savanna belts, mountain and lake environments. It includes scores of ethnic groups and languages, and was home to numerous major kingdoms like the Luba, Lunda, and Kuba. Perhaps it is little wonder that it has proven such a challenge.
- III. The modern Congo originates with the rather amazing and still shocking tale of Belgian King Leopold II, a man of gargantuan ambitions and—let us state it plainly—greed. He never set foot in the Congo, but was ultimately responsible for devastating the lives of millions and starting the country down a path from which, in some ways, it has never recovered.
  - A. Leopold's "Congo Free State" was something unique: this was *his* project, his colony, not the possession of the Belgian government. His principal henchman

- was none other than Henry Stanley—yes, *that* Henry Stanley, of “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” fame.
- B. Leopold’s economic bounty perfectly illustrates the relation between the “Scramble for Africa” and the industrial age. He was after rubber—needed, of course, for the new electrical and automobile industries.
  - C. To get the rubber, he unleashed an army of rogues and sadists who forced the population to collect the wild rubber—difficult and dangerous work in itself. Failure to meet the assigned quota often resulted in the loss of one’s hand, foot, nose, or head.
  - D. One reputable scholar estimates that Leopold’s mayhem depopulated the Congo by some ten million. Eventually, the Western World—a world which had, obviously, no objection to colonialism *per se*—became so appalled by the excesses that what might be seen as the world’s first international human rights movement arose. The pressure finally led to Leopold turning the Congo over to the Belgian government in 1908.
- IV. For the next half-century, the Belgians reigned over a generally quiet colony. In fact, the Belgian government delegated a substantial amount of its responsibility.
- A. The Catholic church played an unusually large, quasi-public role, especially but not exclusively in education and health.
  - B. The Belgians granted gigantic monopoly concessions over vast regions to private firms. Lever Brothers, for instance, controlled palm products over ¾ of million hectares, while Union Miniere held exclusive rights over the colony’s most lucrative resource, copper from the Katanga region.
  - C. At its best, the system represented a reasonably benevolent though firm paternalism. Union Miniere led the way, for instance, in the “stabilization” of its labor, allowing workers to reside with their families in company towns, with company provision of services.
  - D. None of the colonial powers were fond of Africans engaging in politics, for this was equated with “troublemaking.” But the Belgians were especially resistant to any notion of African involvement in decision-making. Theirs was a “direct rule” with little place for notions of “assimilation.”
  - E. As a result, when the winds of African nationalism began to blow in the 1950s, the Belgians at first cracked down hard and then permitted only the most modest exercises in local elections. Political parties were legalized only in August 1959; then, astonishingly, they announced in January 1960 that independence would be granted in *six months*.
- V. The Belgians had done virtually nothing to prepare the nation for independence. If France and Britain eventually showed a haste to decolonize, Belgium showed a panic—or perhaps, as some have argued, Belgium hoped to retain essential control by quickly installing leaders it could manipulate. In any case, given the size and the diversity of a country with less than a dozen university graduates, what followed was perhaps predictable.

- A. The country's first leader, the former clerk Patrice Lumumba, was almost immediately faced with a series of secession crises. His charisma combined with his radical agenda did not endear him to the West; he was not at all what the Belgians had in mind. It has now been established that the American and Belgian governments connived in his murder after only six months in power.
- B. There ensued a half-decade of incredibly complex chaos, which saw the country remain a single entity of sorts mainly through the efforts of a United Nations intervention.
- C. Behind the scenes a shrewd young army officer, Joseph Mobutu, was consolidating his power. In November 1965 he pulled off a bloodless *coup d'état*.

VI. Thus began thirty-two years, no less, of Mobutu's regime. An open question in all of newly-independent Africa was what Africa's new rulers would do with their power; the answers vary and change. In Mobutu's case, the answers are clear and disheartening.

- A. Internally, Mobutu was quite prepared to hammer any opposition, but also showed considerable political acuity, rewarding allies or buying off rivals, adept at both carrot and stick.
- B. Internationally, he played the geopolitical game rather cleverly, adroitly positioning himself as a friend of the West to keep the Cold War-era aid coming.
- C. Above all, he lined his pocket, on a colossal scale, becoming literally one of the richest men in the world. Most of the wealth wound up in European banks and real estate. Meanwhile, the country deteriorated. Most of the infrastructure—roads, especially—were reclaimed by the forest and became impassable. To this day transportation remains exceedingly difficult. As established industries collapsed, living standards plummeted. The police, army (except for Mobutu's elite presidential guards) and civil servants went unpaid. Predictably, corruption and disorder prevailed.
- D. Eventually, the center could not hold. *De facto*, "Zaire," (as Mobutu had renamed the country), had largely ceased to exist by the 1990s.

VII. At this point, it is necessary to take a regional rather than narrowly national approach. Specifically, catastrophic violence centered in East Africa's "Great Lakes" region—and symbolized by the 1994 genocide in Rwanda—spilled over into Congo and played a major role in the final fall of Mobutu's tottering regime.

- A. Thousands of perpetrators of the Rwanda genocide—members of the Hutu *Interahamwe* death squads—went into exile in the eastern Congo after the genocide ended. The new, post-genocide Rwanda government launched military invasions of Congo to go after them. A sort of domino-like destabilization had begun. Long-dormant rebels based in eastern Congo or Uganda, with Rwanda's backing, seized the moment to take the offensive against what was left of Mobutu's state. By 1997 Mobutu had been driven into exile, where he died shortly thereafter.

- B. One of the rebels, Laurent Kabila, took power in Congo's capital. One might have hoped that better days had arrived. They had not. In fact a vicious and multi-sided war engulfed much of the eastern part of the country. Tens of thousands of ordinary people became refugees or simply took to the bush to avoid the warfare. Not only power was at stake, but enormous mineral wealth. At least seven other AFRICAN nations intervened militarily, backing either Kabila or his rivals and seeking riches themselves. In some respects this has resembled a perverse and ironic rendition of the era of Leopold and the EUROPEAN "Scramble for Africa," a hundred years ago.
- C. Laurent Kabila himself was murdered by his own security guards in 2001, and his son Joseph took over. A fragile peace accord was brokered in 2002. This ended the worst of the conflict, but hardly all of it—violent militias continue to operate in the east of the country.

VIII. The scale of suffering in the Congo in the past decade is staggering. Some estimates put the number of deaths at around 4 million, most from hunger and disease. This would make it statistically the worst disaster since World War II anywhere on earth. Indeed this is often referred to as the world's greatest humanitarian crisis today.

- A. Prompted by this crisis, the United Nations has intervened on an unusually large scale, with armed peacekeepers confronting warlords and militias, and substantial humanitarian aid. The UN is also overseeing the elections scheduled to be held shortly. As noted at the outset, this would be the first chance since 1960 for the Congolese citizenry to have a meaningful voice in selecting their leaders. As such it is a moment of potentially electrifying hope. But imagine the difficulties: suppose you had to organize elections among a population with virtually no electoral experience; in a country the size of the eastern United States BUT with essentially the equivalents of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers as the only means (aside from the air) of transport; in a country with a now ingrained tradition of corruption as the means of getting anything done. At the time of writing there are 33 presidential candidates, 9,707 candidates for 500 national assembly seats, and 187 political parties.

It may take a miracle. But miracles can happen. Who predicted South Africa's successful elections in 1994?

#### **Images used in Presentation:**

1. Kennedy & Mobutu:

<http://www.eleves.ens.fr/home/dauphant/mobutu-et-son-boss-kennedy.gif>

2. Mobutu in his later years

<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/35/272b.png>

3. King Leopold II  
[http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/39897000/jpg/\\_39897345\\_leopold203.jpg](http://newsimg.bbc.co.uk/media/images/39897000/jpg/_39897345_leopold203.jpg)
4. © Anti-Slavery International  
Mola and Yoka, victims of atrocities committed in the Belgian Congo circa 1905  
<http://www.antislavery.org/homepage/images/photohist.JPG>
5. A chicotte or simbo used in the Congo Free State  
<http://home.tiscali.be/be074683/Image46.gif>
6. Lumumba and Gaston Eyskens, Belgian Prime Minister, sign the Declaration of Congolese Independence, 30 June 1960.  
<http://www.learner.org/channel/courses/worldhistory/archive-files/1000/1586f.jpg>
7. An open-pit diamond mine in Mbuji-Mati, (Congo)  
[http://www.africaphotos.com/stock/subject/commerce\\_industry/mining/cz01a.htm](http://www.africaphotos.com/stock/subject/commerce_industry/mining/cz01a.htm)
8. Hutu refugees on the run, Tingi-Tingi, Zaire  
[http://www.africaphotos.com/r\\_images/CZ43r.jpg](http://www.africaphotos.com/r_images/CZ43r.jpg)
9. A Serbian mercenary training a Zairian soldier in Kisangani, Zaire  
[http://www.africaphotos.com/r\\_images/CZ62r.jpg](http://www.africaphotos.com/r_images/CZ62r.jpg)
10. National Highway No. 1, just outside of Kinshasa, Zaire  
<http://www.africaphotos.com/stock/subject/transportation/roads/cz19b.htm>

Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire)

Some resources

Books:

Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*. An excellent and very readable account of the still-shocking story of Belgian King Leopold's creation of the "Congo Free State," which later became the Belgian Congo and then the DR of Congo. The brutal system of forced labor to extract natural labor caused a human rights uproar even a century ago.

Michela Wrong, *In the Shadow of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo*. A journalist's lively account of the 32 year reign of Mobutu Sese Seko, who pillaged the Congo—with Western support—for his own gain while the country disintegrated.

Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba*. A painstaking reconstruction of the events which transpired just around the time of Belgium granting independence to Congo, c. 1960-61. Traces the role of outside powers in the murder of Congo's first president and his eventual replacement by Mobutu.

Howard French, *A Continent for the Taking: The Tragedy and Hope of Africa*. This book by the African-American former New York Times correspondent in Africa covers much more than just the Congo, but puts the Congo story in a wider perspective. Very powerful.

Websites:

[www.allafrica.com](http://www.allafrica.com)

Excellent source of news on the whole continent.

[www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/) click "Africa."

Ditto.

[www.africa.upenn.edu/home\\_page/country.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/home_page/country.html)

University of Pennsylvania's site has many resources.

[www.monuc.org](http://www.monuc.org)

The United Nations' site has many features, photos and videos concerning the current UN efforts to oversee a democratic transition in the Congo.