State Failure in the Congo: Perceptions & Realities

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Any new volume on ‘state failure’ or ‘crisis’ in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) runs the risk of either merely fine-tuning solid political analysis or reiterating misguided ‘heart of darkness’ clichés. We have accepted this challenge in order to critically analyse the abundant and sophisticated crisis terminology that has characterised scholarship on the Congo over the past two decades and to document the major shifts and developments in the Congo’s political economy since the early 1990s. These shifts range from local level civil society and popular economy initiatives to the global implications of the replacement of a bipolar international system by a ‘new economic order’. The regional manifestations of this new order in DRC, where cause and consequence overlap, are assassination, war, rebellion, invasion and pillage. Until the recent agreements between President Kabila and rebel leader Jean Pierre Bemba, approximately one-third of the country was occupied by either rebel or foreign forces. Even so, as we write, Rwandan forces occupy large areas notably in the Kivus and in Orientale Province.

These forms of violence translate into political exclusion, stalemate in the peace negotiations, economic decline and dramatic social crisis. Attempting to implement the Lusaka agreements signed in the Zambian capital in July 1999, the Inter-Congolese Dialogue (ICD), thanks largely to its Belgian and South African supporters, has succeeded in organising meetings in Gaborone, Addis Ababa and Sun City but little more. Although agreement has been reached on 37 major issues, no real breakthrough has been achieved because the fundamental questions of who should lead the transition and how the army will be reorganised have not been solved. The prospect of co-habitation between President Kabila and future Prime Minister Bemba does not make much sense if the Rwandan-backed rebels do not accept the Sun City proposal.

Another reason we have accepted this challenge pertains to the complexity of the situation. Complexity is one of the common denominators that link all of the contributions in this issue and applies to the national and international political context, the economy, social problems and issues of identity, ethnicity and nationality. All are inter-connected which makes trying to understand Congo today according to classic analytical divisions a fruitless effort. The need to rethink our analytical framework explains the choice of contributions in the volume. A balance has been reached between Congolese and non-Congolese contributors, empirical studies based on recent field work and theoretical analysis, rural and urban Congo, government and occupied areas and grassroots initiatives and elite politics. This balance is intended to provide students with an understanding of the dynamics of recent events in the Congo while offering the theoretical basis needed to understand future change.
Economic Re-structuring

Congo rivalled Nigeria and South Africa for the economic leadership of Africa between independence in 1960 and the 1970s. Today, it is ravaged by war – and surrounded by countries that are ravaged by war. No major economic partner is tempted to invest in the region given the very real security problems caused by invading forces, rebels and a recent history of looting and destruction. The ephemeral period of economic optimism (from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s) was quickly followed by an unending economic crisis caused by numerous overlapping factors.

The prospects for Zaire’s economic development were based on massive mineral resources such as copper, cobalt, diamonds and gold. Their extraction, processing and marketing, however, requires significant capital investment and sophisticated technical expertise. Moreover, Zaire – like commodity exporting countries elsewhere in Africa – had little or no control over the price of its mineral exports on the world market. The copper and cobalt exports that constituted the country’s major sources of revenue until the late 1980s have become insignificant. A failed state is ostensibly not conducive to the industrial capitalism needed to operate the capital-intensive copper and cobalt mines. Zaire’s parastatals have consequently been replaced by new networks of diamond, gold and timber smugglers. Conversely, these networks thrive on the dismantled Mobutist system of patrimonial exploitation of natural resources and the absence of a Weberian state system with tax collectors, a functioning bureaucracy and impartial judicial system.

The debt crisis of Zaire can be attributed to excessive borrowing in the period of economic optimism. The West willingly lent massive sums to Mobutu for reasons of political expediency and due to the need to recycle petro-dollar reserves. On a national level, this arrangement had a disastrous effect on the economic development of the former Belgian colony. In most patrimonial systems, the treasury and the president’s personal accounts tend to be confused. In the Congo, however, and particularly under Mobutu, the treasury’s only function has been to fill the President’s purse. Hence Mobutu’s echoing of Louis XV: l’état c’est moi (I am the state). De Herdt gives several examples of how monetary policy was destined, not to fix inflation, but to enrich a coterie of barons ‘loyal’ to the guide supreme, as Mobutu liked to think of himself.² Mobutu set an example for the rest of the population by publicly acknowledging that stealing from the state (in moderation) was not only understandable, but permissible as well. The logic is somewhat comparable to the former East German perception that those who do not steal from the state make their families suffer.

But Mobutu pushed this logic too far. He undermined the state by poisoning relations with foreign investors. The nationalisation of foreign enterprises in the 1970s marked the beginning of crisis. The state was in no position to run the copper mines and perhaps it never really intended to do so.³ It seems that Mobutu had no interest in long term investments, only in rapid access to capital. He needed huge amounts of money to ‘lubricate’ the patron-client relations that kept him in control. As Samset points out, diamonds provided much of Mobutu’s income. They can be extracted with very simple technology and with little capital investment. Moreover, their price on the world market has remained relatively stable, unlike other mineral resources.

Access to vast amounts of capital from diamonds also explains how Mobutu was able to keep Bretton Woods institutions at bay. He had no interest in boosting copper production, let alone in international interference in economic activities. It was easy to refuse adjustment packages at a time when anti-neo-colonial rhetoric and independista
discourse was in fashion. Mobutu did, nonetheless, sign structural adjustment programmes in the mid 1980s. Although his regime did not suffer from structural adjustment, people did. Structural adjustment forced the government to address budget deficits by reducing expenditures in ‘non-productive’ sectors such as health, education, research and culture while increasing investments in trade and production. Mobutu respected only the first half of these conditions.

Western media continue to portray Congo as a mineral rich country that has fallen prey to ruthless exploitation by foreign groups; it was precisely the same image that brought Congo to the attention of Europeans and Americans a century ago. Leopold II of Belgium was attacked in the early 1900s because of the atrocities his agents committed to extract rubber from what was then the Congo Free State (and his personal property). Despite the fact that the foreign troops fighting within Congolese borders initially did so for security reasons (to fight UNITA, the LRA or Interahamwe), the stress is now clearly on the looting of Congolese resources: security activities have been replaced by what is ambiguously described as ‘war economy’. Gold and diamonds transit through Bujumbura and Kigali although neither Burundi nor Rwanda produce them. Samset and Smis and Oyantambwe help conceptualise what the term ‘war economy’ means in Congo today. ‘Looting’ and ‘illegality’ are extremely complex concepts that are perceived differently by different actors. Aren’t the government’s ‘invited’ allies involved in very similar economic practices as the uninvited ‘aggressors/rebels’? The government itself could be accused of ‘looting’ because in a progressive definition, any form of corruption could be considered as looting the resources of the population. Angola is ‘paid’ in petroleum for its war efforts just as Zimbabwe has been granted generous mining concession in Katanga. The strategy of the two Kabila regimes seems more about gaining economic control over the economic networks that operate within the country than about establishing authority and administration over the entire territory of the country.

Diamonds, gold, tropical hardwoods, coltan and cobalt are widely perceived as fuelling the war. Diamonds and coltan have been the subject of concern by the international political community, resulting in certain attempts to establish embargos. There is a genuine concern that Western companies are fuelling the conflict with their business and trade transactions involving minerals originating from the DRC. The Belgian Senate in this respect is conducting a parliamentary enquiry into the involvement of Belgian companies in the war. While such concerns are not misplaced, it often leads to the kind of neo-colonialist conspiracy theories of unscrupulous Western conglomerates plundering the Congo. The reality on the ground, however, is somewhat different – and far more complex. While the ‘greed not grievance’ analysis is certainly pertinent to Central Africa, it misses some important points. It minimises the relationship between mineral wealth (and other economic assets), economic development and the actors involved in conflict.

The big mining concerns have gradually stopped investing in Congo since nationalisation in 1974. They have shifted their attention to more profitable and less risky areas in North America and Australia. Nearly all mineral extraction is consequently small scale. In addition, and due to low copper and cobalt prices on the world market, there is currently no interest in rehabilitating the production infrastructure. The objective of economic actors in the Congo is quick extraction and quick gain at low cost. This also has to do with changes in the global economy (Briefing by Kennes). The only companies currently operating in the Congo are smaller companies willing to take high risks to reap eventual high earnings. Many of the networks that operate on the ground need to negotiate with all sorts of military
actors and often are involved in criminal activities. The militarisation and criminalisation of these networks of economic extraction is an extremely dangerous evolution. At the local level it suffocates local business and economic initiative and has a negative impact on social relations.

The ‘greed not grievance’ interpretation led certain international NGOs to launch campaigns to stop the purchase of minerals originating from conflict zones. ‘No blood on my mobile phone’ was one such initiative because coltan from the Kivus in Eastern Congo is used in mobile phones. The intense but short-lived fury over coltan also reveals that international NGOs and institutions condemning the pillage of the Congo’s natural resources often fail to recognise that local populations also engage in and benefit from war economies (Jackson). The war economy is firmly rooted in their daily lives because they are the ones who are producing coltan in Kivu or heterogenite (a copper and cobalt alloy) in Katanga. The only economic alternative to these ‘informal’ and ‘illegal’ activities for many people is the subsistence agriculture that no longer corresponds to their perceptions and aspirations of well-being or modernity.

These factors are crucial with respect to conflict management. Outside intervention in war economies of this type confronts many complexities. Due to the involvement of local populations, who have few other economic perspectives than participation in this war economy, there is a concern that sanctions and embargos will target them more than anyone else. Actors higher up on the ladder in these networks of economic extraction are more mobile and thus capable of shifting their ‘business’ elsewhere. On the other hand, the big economic gains made within the context of this war economy are not re-invested in ways that help local communities.

The goals of the different warring factions have never been really clear and are becoming increasingly nebulous. This can be accounted for by the multiplicity of actors, shifting alliances, the changing nature of economic possibilities and problems related to decoding official discourses. One thing has however remained constant and clear since the beginning of the war: the maintenance of at least low intensity conflict is in the economic interest of the various actors. While organisations such as ALIR pose a real threat to Kigali, Rwanda prefers keeping this kind of opposition in check rather than fully destroying it. The same can be said for other countries involved in the DRC war, such as Burundi or Uganda. This makes it difficult to end the conflicts. Those who currently possess the means to end the violence are the ones invited to the negotiating table. And what would they be negotiating about? Who can set the agenda? It is still not clear who to include or exclude in the current Inter-Congolese Dialogue.

A Stateless State?

All of the problems raised above can be considered as both cause and effect of state failure, another theme addressed throughout this volume. A weak state cannot protect its borders, control rebel groups or manage its natural resources efficiently. Mobutu dominated the political economy of Zaire for 32 years, adapting to changes within the global diplomatic scene with relative ease. During the period of ‘intransitive’ democratic transition, he also continued to control the political landscape, largely by playing opposition groups against each other (de Villers & Omasombo). Carefully elaborated economic strategies employed by the ruling elite were also designed to smother political opposition as explained by De Herdt. Eventually, however, the Mobutu regime’s patrimonial and predatory networks

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reached their limits. The self-destructive system consumed itself leaving only remnants of a state.

Democratic transition was supposed to be the next phase of Congoese political history but has remained illusory (de Villers & Omasombo). Internal and external actors consequently started to think in terms of a 'stateless' state and developed strategies to fill this vacuum. Although the Congoese themselves have replaced the Mobutist state with new forms of state–society relations, it also appears that people expect very little from the state. In the image of the country's strongman whose health deteriorated rapidly due to a spreading cancer, Zaire seemed to have contracted the same fatal illness plunging the country into an unseen depth awaiting its final coup de grâce. The words of Mobutu again in Louis XV mode: après moi le déluge reveal his own expectation of chaos.

There is clearly no absence of political life and ideas in Congo but people have yet failed to crystalise their political aspirations into concrete political initiatives. This could be related to the particular culture of la débrouille. Mobutu kept people individually and creatively occupied in search of survival so as to avoid political mobilisation. It can also be accounted for by the perception that political mobilisation is a long term investment with little chance of success. People are disillusioned about those they blame for having sabotaged the democratic transition. They have consequently turned their back on political elites and their networks. It is, for instance, noteworthy that political parties currently termed as unarmed opposition, namely civil society and the Catholic church, who were the main pillars of the National Conference, which indicated the direction of a the new political order, only played second fiddle at the Inter-Congolese Dialogue established within the

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**Evolution of Congoese Political Economy**


1975: World copper prices plummet, high inflation, devaluation of Zaïre currency.

1980: Crisis temporarily lets up, inflation under control, positive balance of payments.


1990: SAPs unable to redress situation, social situation tense.


1997-1999: No coherent economic policy under Laurent Kabila. The economy is devoted to war effort. Resources looted by Rwandan and Ugandan aggressors – booty offered to Zimbabwe and Angola in exchange for military support.

2000-2002: Kabila fils liberalises economy and re-establish negotiations with IMF and World Bank. Foreign debt approx. $9 billion. No improvement in social conditions.
framework of the Lusaka peace process. Instead, new networks came to the fore and have transformed the political arena and social life.

**Identities & Nationality**

At the present, ethnic and regional networks but also numerous churches and sometimes politically powerful prayer groups have reshaped political and economic landscape. The number of politicians who turned preachers (such as former MPR ideology guru Dominique Sakom), and vice versa, is impressive. Ethnicity has also become a stronger mobilising factor, as demonstrated by the contribution on the Banyamulenge (Velzenroot); whole economic networks are clearly ethnically based. Diamond digging in the border region with Angola is, for instance, forbidden terrain for foreigners and almost exclusively done by members of the Luba ethnic community. Until recently the Nande in Eastern Congo monopolised trade from East Africa to the Middle East and were instrumental in establishing what was perceived in the region as their university in Butembo. The mutuelles or solidarity networks that have helped Congolese to survive are also, in many cases, based on ethnic links.

Paradoxically Congolese in general have a very strong sense of national identity – perhaps a remnant of Mobutu’s single party state system. There is no prominent political party or group that advocates fragmenting the country along the lines of the secession movements immediately after independence. As in other conflicts, moreover, Congolese identity has been reinforced by external threats. The rampant anti-Rwandan sentiment, particularly during the ‘Battle of Kinshasa’ in August and September 1998, is the most obvious example. The Congolese do, however, have very low esteem for the state. People clearly expect very little from the state in terms of social services. People also seem to expect little from opposition leaders. A major frustration inside Congo is that political change has not come from within but has been imported by external forces (Tshiyembe).

While solidarity systems based on identity and ethnicity may be positive mechanisms that help people adapt to political and economic constraints in Kinshasa, the ethnicity and nationality problems constitute major obstacles to peace in the Kivus. Democratic elections are on the agendas of numerous international agencies and Congolese political actors but two prerequisites have to be resolved before elections can take place. First, a population census has to be carried out. The number of Congolese are estimated somewhere between 50 and 55 million but as the last census was in 1984, nobody knows for sure. AIDS has certainly taken its toll on the population but there is no nationwide data on AIDS deaths or seropositivity rates. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimates war casualties to be approximately 2.5 million – again obfuscating population data.

Second is the question of who is eligible to claim Congolese nationality and consequently vote. The Banyamulenge question that of the Tutsis from South Kivu raises very serious challenges to elections at the national legislative and presidential levels. Ethnicity is also directly related to regional demands. Will Congolese institutions remain intact, will the constitution for a Third Republic, started during the hopeful moments of ‘democratic transition’, be pursued or will a new form of federal model be adopted along regional and ethnic lines?

The relative political void created with the restructuring of the Zairian-Congolese state also facilitated neighbouring states to export their war against armed opposition movements into Zaire-Congo. At the same time they were able to appropriate new
zones of influence in a country that has always been the object of foreign greed. In addition to economic incentives, these new actors had clear political motives to either fight the Kinshasa regime, its opponents or other rebel movements. Mobutu wanted to play king-maker in the region and although he did not succeed, he continuously manipulated politics in neighbouring countries by supporting the government or armed opposition. As a result, neighbours needed, feared and hated him. This explains the extraordinary coalition of states in the first war to topple Mobutu and the division of this anti-Mobutu alliance in the second war against Kabila.

The international community also played an ambiguous role. On the one hand, it sided with the anti-Mobutu coalition and to a certain extent supported efforts of regional strongmen to appropriate for themselves parts of an ailing state (Smis & Oyatambwe). Thus, the international community was supporting change in the DRC’s leadership while risking partition of the country. On the other hand, it based itself on the idea of African ownership and supported a mediation process initiated by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) resulting in the Lusaka agreements of 10 July 1999. However, most states misjudged one of the legacies of Mobutu: the strong feeling of ordinary Congolese to live together in one state. This patriotism, the succession of Laurent-Désiré Kabila by his son Joseph, who seemed to be more receptive to Western demands, and the growing tension between Rwanda and Uganda, brought international players to a more nuanced position. They thus put significant diplomatic efforts into the Lusaka process hoping that Congolese (and states militarily involved) would find a way out to the conflict through a political settlement.

**Political Constraints – Social Innovation**

The Congolese people have been struggling through crisis for over forty years. A brutal transition from colony to nation-state in 1960, 32 years of Mobutu’s tyranny and the hardship caused by a war that involved at different times most of the country’s nine neighbours, have all converged to impoverish the population. In terms of Human Development Indicators (nutrition, literacy, life expectancy at birth, availability of clean drinking water), the country is amongst the poorest of the poor.

People have responded to the challenges of daily survival by developing their own popular solutions. Analysis of how people get things done on a daily basis raises the question of whether or not the distinction between formal and informal economy is of any analytical value. These solutions are based most notably on the ‘parallel’ economy, innovative use of resources and space and on a host of social, kinship, community, religious and commercial networks. The way diaspora populations contribute to family needs back home, as well as how Congolese expatriates are perceived in the countries where they have settled, is addressed here by Sumata and Hirsh. These solutions are what can be considered as the legendary capacity of the Congolese for social innovation and adaptation to economic and political constraints. One could think that social institutions fall apart in times of intense social stress and transition from authoritarian rule, but in the Congo they appear to be diversifying and even strengthening. Examples that support this hypothesis pertain to the shaping of civil society institutions, class and gender formations; access to power and ‘voice’; and the roles of ethnicity and of neighbourhood and professional organisations. The Congolese are also reknowned for their cultural inventiveness as witnessed in popular painting, music, fashion and use of language.
Harsh security, political and economic problems are felt throughout the country – in the occupied territories and those ‘controlled’ by the government; in urban areas and in rural ones (the urban-rural population ratio is approximately 50-50); and in the equatorial forest of the north and the savannahs of the south. The human cost of dictatorship has been dramatic. In the cities, economic and political crisis translates into the decline, absence or hijacking of municipal and administrative services, public transport problems, inadequate water and energy distribution and housing shortages. In Kinshasa, 50 per cent of the population have only one meal per day, 25 per cent have one meal every two days. Also in Kinshasa, 25 per cent of the population – and in this case it is children and women – have to walk more than one kilometre to fetch water.

In the rural areas, people survive thanks to their subsistence activities – hunting, gathering, fishing and farming. Due to the decay of road infrastructure they live in relative autarchy. Access to health care, education and administrative services is extremely limited. In the rebel-held areas, basic supplies have disappeared. Medicines, batteries, petrol, soap, salt, and food are often referred to as ‘memories’. Lack of salt is not only a question of taste: without the iodine it provides, many children now suffer from goitre, a deficiency that had been nearly eradicated by the end of the colonial period. Clothing is also increasingly hard to find. Many children consequently stay home from school because they have nothing to wear. Children are particularly hard hit by crisis across the Congo where, like in most other parts of Africa, 50 per cent of the total population is less than fifteen years old. Some become soldiers like the kadogos who helped Laurent Désiré Kabila come to power. In Kivu, as noted by Jackson, militia youth claim that ‘with a gun you can eat’. Others seek their fortunes by digging for diamonds in Angola – the bana lunda. On the streets of Kinshasa, others simply live by their wits as phaeurs or sheges. Un schooled, undernourished, disillusioned, away from their families, these children are part of a lost generation.

**The Future**

Political science research on Africa has focused for many years on the failed state syndrome in Africa in general and Congo in particular. State systems in Africa were copied from Western values and models that were not politically, culturally and socially embedded in Africa. They corresponded neither to African ‘tradition’ nor African views of modernity in a rapidly changing globalised system. In this volume we have tried to address the fundamental question of ‘what is beyond the failed state in Congo?’ As no one in Congo or elsewhere seriously believes in a stateless society, the only solution is to rebuild the state by taking African realities into account. Many Congolese intellectuals emphasise ethnicity as one of the fundamental differences between African and Western systems. They argue that ethnic groups are far from the backward social constructions that were maintained during the colonial and post-colonial period. On the contrary, they are modern constructions upon which the new post-colonial state could be built.

Most of the attention regarding the Inter-Congolese Dialogue is focused on the settlement of the war and the various local and regional conflicts linked to it. This, however, is only part of the problem. Another major challenge is the establishment of a New Political Order (NPO), although it remains unclear what the legal basis for any new government emerging out of the ICD will be. According to Tshiyembe, the ICD should not only involve political and military elites but also intellectuals who can lift
the debate to a more theoretical level as well. Any type of state model will have to accommodate the specificities of Congolese history and culture with universal models of democracy, giving voice to both the individual (the cornerstone of Western liberal democracies) and the group (a major constitutive factor in Congolese and African political, economic and social life).

Although the social cost of the ongoing crisis in the Congo is enormous, it has helped people appropriate the sentiment of ‘being Congolese’. There is a Congolese nation – plural indeed, yet with a clear sense of collective belonging and destiny. It will take a long time to heal the wounds of poverty, oppression, rebellion and war but perhaps this sentiment of ‘being Congolese’ can be transformed into the energy needed to reinvent the state and society.

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Endnotes

1. Bemba heads the Mouvement de Libération du Congo (MLC) group. He is based in Gbadolite, Mobutu’s village of origin transformed into a luxurious jungle retreat.

2. Litho, Seti Yale, and Bemba père were business men who amassed huge fortunes. Kengo wa Dondo, former Prime Minister, like many other occupants of key ministerial posts, did the same.

3. Most nationalised industries and businesses rapidly became bankrupt. Depleted stocks were not replenished and maintenance of productive units and infrastructure was abandoned.

4. The Katanga secession in the early 1960s was largely fomented by non-Congolese interest groups.

5. This figure is often cited in the press, reports and articles but is probably exaggerated.

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