

A Research Note on Congo's Nationalist Paradox¹

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The Paradox

Precious little is redeeming about the state in Congo. Created as a foreign enterprise of exploitation, it reproduced as the instrument of an extractive colonization system, in turns violent and paternalistic. Once independent, it provided the stage and the reason for five years of sheer chaos and three decades of brutal arbitrary rule, predation and economic ruin, before collapsing at the end of the 1990s into civil wars marked by ethnic polarization, displacements, plunder, deprivation and death. Yet Congo endures, and the Congolese profess unusual fervor in their attachment to it. Their support for its territorial integrity and its failed institutions is stronger even than their powerful commitment to democratic principles and it stands in contrast with the lack of material benefits that the state has ever provided the larger mass of them. This is Congo's nationalist paradox.

The apparent willingness of the Congolese to embrace their arbitrarily imposed territory and to avoid challenging their failed and predatory state institutions begs inquiry. What explains the permanence, if not the rise, of a nationalist discourse among the heterogeneous people of Congo and general public alike? Why do 90% of them reject the idea of partition of their country?² Why the enduring allegiance to the state when the institutional void should beckon new experiments with collective action?

Predation, Security & Institutional Resilience

To a large extent, Congo's failed institutions are kept alive because they serve as resources for individuals at many levels of society. Ministries, state agencies, pro-

vincial administrations and other bureaucratic instruments of the state, whether in government or rebel territory, are maintained by state elites, their employees and citizens in general because they derive private benefits from them irrespective of these institutions' capacity to perform their initial public functions.³ These benefits mostly come in the form of reciprocal predation. Anyone with a state office, or part of a state office, can market it and extract resources from fellow citizens, while others, not directly associated with the state, can also benefit from these practices.

This is probably most obvious in the field of customs or border controls where individual extractions are most visible. It can also be seen in the multiplicity of state agencies in charge of security, which are used to extort resources from citizens by offering to reduce the harassment they suffer in exchange for payments. Through some multiplier effect, these practices benefit a large number of intermediaries who make a living as 'facilitators,' sellers of the ubiquitous stamps that make documents official, street-side copiers of all the required paper work, handlers who negotiate the many check-points at airports, and so forth. People's capacity to use the weak state as an instrument of predation is thus a crucial element of the logic of its survival and reproduction. Congo's old institutions never die, they just become private resources.

At the heart of this process is the lack of clear empirical distinction between predators and prey dominant and dominated. Many people benefit from the system in some ways and contribute to its reproduction, although as a country all of them end up arguably worse off for it. This approach presumes that Congo's current situation is not merely one of chaos, but represents some sort of short-run equilibrium, at least for some people.⁴ It also assumes that the state does not stand in sheer opposition to society, although it was created that way, but that most

people participate in the predation that surrounds it and have developed a vested interest in its preservation. Somehow, the Congolese have adjusted so well to the arbitrariness of their state and become so dependent on it that they want to maintain it.⁵

Yet, the failed state is not just an instrumental resource for predatory human relations. It also represents an intrinsic resource to individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy. For grassroots Congolese, who may fall out of these networks of reciprocity and find themselves systematically on the victims' side of history, the state remains a resource to the extent that it offers a minimum level of certainty about public life, the opportunity to form relatively stable expectations about where power and resources lie, and a measure of reduction of the transaction costs of daily life.

Political uncertainty, warlords, insurgencies and the like, on the other hand, complicate and endanger their existence. State stability is therefore an intrinsic resource for people who have to struggle for survival because it represents an anchor in their volatile and vulnerable lives.⁶ This helps account for the widespread nationalist sentiment among the population and for its strength at a time of failing statehood. To some extent, the idea of Congo's *grandeur* is all that remains to a people that has been dispossessed of its wealth, its peace and much of its dignity. Far from contradicting their misery, the nationalist discourse further reinforces for the Congolese that their own state may lie at the roots of such dispossession.

Nationalism & Sovereignty

The value of state institutions as resources (their capacity to become instruments of predation) is dependent on the sovereignty of the state. International sovereignty gives state institutions substance, as state agents rely, in the imposi-

tion of their authority, on the internationally recognised status of their power. Sovereignty serves thus as institutional gold standard – the guarantee of the exchange value of state institutions on the private market for resources – and allows failed institutions to outlive their formal functional existence. Whereas one would expect separatist or alternative institutions of collective action to arise in their stead, no such process takes place – beyond associative life, which does not challenge the state – for these institutions, deprived of the power of international recognition, would require substantial use of force to become reliable instruments of predation.

Congolese identity, the imagination of Congo and of the Congolese nation, serve as ideological foundations for the reproduction of the state, denying legitimacy to alternative scenarios and confining political action either to factions fighting for control of the state itself, or to the non-threatening realm of 'civil society.' By reinforcing the reproduction of an internationally sovereign structure, the nationalist discourse guarantees the predatory potential of Congo's institutions. By maintaining and reproducing the weak but sovereign state (incapable of supporting itself), it also provides the rationale for continuing aid flows and perpetuates the necessary structure of (relative) contract and insurance guarantees, which the vast majority of foreign investors require. These aid and investment flows, in turn, provide the funds that finance networks of patronage throughout the state and magnify the returns to sovereign statehood. Global cultural norms of statehood and global flows of aid and investment condition and constrain therefore the strategies of self-determination of the peoples of Congo, leading them to privilege an imported nation-state discourse (essentially a reproduction of the colonial 'Congolization' of their societies) despite its failure to allow for the expression and emancipation of their cultural diversity.

The vibrancy of local cultures and their desires for better control of their destinies remain real, however, expressed in the routine invocation of equally routinely repressed federalist aspirations by most groups in society. Unable to find any institutional outlet, these pent-up cultural aspirations surface in what the Congolese refer to as the plague of 'tribalisme,' a compound of ethnic-based clientelistic social relations and local ethnic polarization and violence. 'Tribal' clientelism provides a mode of access to state institutions; ethnic polarization a mode of exclusion of 'the other'. Either way, these strategies never translate into a broader agenda of self-determination, as they enhance rather than challenge the failed and predatory institutions they pursue. And so Congo goes on, a violent, arbitrary and alienating creation, with no sustainable challenge from the large diversity of peoples, cultures, and resources it contains, stifling over and over again the political expression of competing identities and providing the context for a low-level development trap, an endlessly failing but never quite fully failed state.

War, Self-Determination & the State-as-Resource

From this perspective, Congo's current civil war is not a struggle for liberation, self-determination, or even secession, despite persistent paranoias (and propaganda) about Rwanda's irredentist agenda in the East. The *Mouvement de Libération du Congo* (MLC) and the *Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie* (RCD-Goma) are little more than instruments of access to the state by groups that have been excluded from its prebends. The MLC was formed by Mobutuist clients whom Laurent Désiré Kabila isolated. The RCD is mainly under the leadership of Banyamulenge elites, Congolese Tutsi from South Kivu who fell out of grace with Kabila when he expelled Rwandan forces from Congo in the summer of 1998. The MLC's overwhelming interest in regaining access to state power was illustrated

by the agreement between its leader, Jean-Pierre Bemba, and Joseph Kabila in the margins of the Sun City Inter-Congolese Dialogue in April 2002. The same is true of the RCD whose rebellion is an exercise in repositioning rather than self-determination. These groups use a nationalistic discourse as ideological justification for their objectives. In the words of RCD-Goma Secretary-General Azarias Ruberwa:

We want a united Congo. There are more advantages to a united Congo than a partitioned Congo. We have never thought of secession. [...] Let's create a Congolese nation because it does not exist yet.⁷

How are we then to explain past instances of separatism in Congo's history, from the secessions of Katanga and the 'Great Mining State of South Kasai' in the early 1960s to the drives for autonomy of Shaba and Eastern Kasai in the 1990s? The answer lies in the strategies of power-maximization by Congolese elites. Although the country's natural wealth may be concentrated in peripheral regions, the limited likelihood that any secessionist movement would be internationally recognised usually reduces the appeal of local separatist strategies of power. Separatism becomes a credible option, however, when the sovereignty of the central state is challenged from outside or when the economic returns to sovereignty depreciate. This happened in the very early years of independence when it was not yet clear how livable post-colonies would be, and when political chaos in the capital led foreign powers to consider other options than backing the state as a whole. It also happened in the 1990s when Mobutu's failure to convincingly democratize and his recourse to violence against opponents led the West to marginalize him and cut off virtually all aid flows to his regime. In times like these, it makes sense for local elites to capitalise on the weakening international status of the state and ex-

periment with local strategies of power and access to resources. Secessions can thus be expected if the potential return of local resources, in the absence of international recognition, outweighs the potential return of resources associated with control or partial control of the national state. The embrace by the West of Mobutu's and Kabila's takeovers in 1965 and 1997 respectively put an end to opportunities for local strategies of self-determination and brought the Congolese back around their state.

Despite claims about the state-diluting effects of globalization, the sanction of international recognition continues therefore to constrain the realm of possible actions for the Congolese. Global cultural norms relating to what constitutes acceptable statehood and international flows of aid and investment promote Congolese nationalism by conditioning recognition and its attendant benefits on territorial integrity. It is this very recognition that gives the Congolese state its residual power despite its feebleness below functional capacity, and that benefits the reproduction of local patterns of domination, predation and ultimately, poverty.

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Endnotes

1. This 'briefing' summarizes an argument on which I am currently working for a forthcoming paper, part of Oxford University's Queen Elizabeth House Carnegie Project on 'Global Economic and Cultural Dimensions of Self-Determination in Developing Countries.'

2. Bureau d'Etudes, de Recherches et de Consulting International. Opinion Poll: November 1998. Kinshasa, Mimeo.

3. See, for example, Denis Tull, 'A Re-configuration of Political Order? The State of the State in North Kivu (DR Congo)', paper presented at the XVIII. International Biennial Conference of the African Studies Association in Germany (VAD), Hamburg, May 23-26, 2002, for evidence of how the RCD-Goma has

maintained local administrations as instruments of patronage in the territories it controls.

4. See also Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: The Instrumentalization of Disorder*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

5. This echoes Mbembe's idea of 'conviviality' (Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001, 128).

6. I am grateful to Alice Sindzingre to whom I owe this point. For a germane argument, see Michael W. Nest, 'The Evolution of a Fragmented State: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo.' Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2002.

7. Azarias Ruberwa, interview with the author, Goma, November 2001. Emphasis mine.