

The history of democracy in DR Congo

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Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja charts the history of the Congo's own democratic traditions, and argues that outside intervention has not assisted their development.

The people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo went to the polls in July 2006 to elect a president and 500 members of the national assembly, the lower house of parliament. (The senate is to be elected indirectly by the provincial assemblies in December 2006.) As faithful organs of propaganda for the dominant interests of the contemporary world order, many international media outlets repeatedly told their audiences that these 'historic' elections were the first free and democratic elections to be held in the Congo since independence from Belgium in 1960. The elections themselves were paid for to the tune of over \$500 million, and supervised by an international community with a marked preference for Joseph Kabila, the incumbent president: the major world powers were keen to legitimise their current client regime in Kinshasa, so that they could continue unfettered to extract all the resources they need from the Congo. There appeared to be a general consensus that Congo was incapable of sorting out its problems without massive outside intervention.

For the record, there is need to recall that the African independence struggle of the post-war years was a social movement for democracy and social progress,

waged against colonialism in its triple manifestations as economic exploitation, political repression and cultural oppression through racism and the colour bar. In the Congo, the commitment to the ideals of democracy was so strong that in spite of the instability brought about by the post-independence crisis involving the army mutiny, the assassination of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and US interference through the umbrella of the United Nations Congo Mission, the rule of law and the rules of the game of parliamentary democracy were for the most part respected. In May 1965, free and democratic elections were held in the Congo, without international supervision or international observers. Out of the total of 137 parliamentary constituencies, the results were disputed in only five constituencies. Why is it then that, 41 years later, the country has no capacity to organise its own elections autonomously, and what does this have to tell us about the Congo's transition from dependent to independent status and sovereignty?

From the Belgian Congo to Mobutu's Zaire

As a popular movement for democracy and social progress, the independence struggle was a great national awakening in the Belgian Congo, as in the rest of colonial Africa, with people from all walks of life ready to shed fear in order to manifest their permanent aspirations for freedom and their desire for a better and more secure future. Given the Congo's impressive ecological diversity, with its rich mineral and non-mineral resources, there were great expectations that the country's natural wealth would now be utilised to improve the living conditions of ordinary men, women and children. Unfortunately, independence and its aftermath did not fulfil these expectations. The democratic experiment was ended in November 1965, when army chief Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (who later changed his forename to Sese Seko) staged a coup d'état, ostensibly to end a political stalemate involving the refusal of President Joseph Kasavubu to retain Moïse Tshombe as prime minister.

Whereas such stalemates have been common currency in countries such as Italy, and indeed Belgium, since 1945, the situation in the Congo was decried as political chaos by the Western media. They welcomed Mobutu's takeover as the insurance needed for Western access to Congo's copper, cobalt, gold, diamonds and other resources. (This was in fact Mobutu's second attempt at a military putsch. His first venture in militarism had been in September 1960 when, under the guidance of the CIA, the Belgians

and the UN forces deputy commander, he played a key role in removing Prime Minister Lumumba from office.)

After the 1965 coup, Mobutu dismantled the institutions of parliamentary democracy to set up personal rule. He soon began to think of himself as the Congo's new king, the successor to Leopold II as the rightful owner of the country and its abundant resources.¹ The sense of personal ownership was so strong that in October 1971 Mobutu saw fit to change the country's name, unilaterally, from 'Congo' to 'Zaire'. Internally, his dictatorship was backed up by military force and a party-state apparatus from which he recruited his cronies and retainers. Externally, he was supported by the United States, France and Belgium. When they were needed, the three external powers intervened militarily to save the dictator from armed insurgents who were seeking to overthrow him. But after more than thirty years in office, that support finally failed to materialise in 1996-97: Mobutu by then was no longer useful, because of the end of the cold war, and his increasing failures in controlling the country. No longer able to hang on to power, he was forced to flee the country in May 1997, and died in exile in Morocco less than four months later.

The Sovereign National Conference

Had Mobutu respected the resolutions of the Sovereign National Conference (*Conférence nationale souveraine*, hereafter CNS), convened by popular democratic forces in 1991, he would have been able to retire honourably as part of a transition period to democracy. The CNS was a broad representative assembly that convened between August 1991 and December 1992 in Kinshasa, with the aim of setting up the institutions and legal framework necessary for the restoration of democracy. Its aim was the transfer of power from the dictator and his allies to those who supported democratic change and national sovereignty. However, because of Mobutu's resistance to change (in which he was assisted by external forces), and also through failures and mistakes within the movement for change itself, the CNS was not able to fulfil its remit. This led to a period of weak government, which was unable to resist the subsequent outside intervention by bordering countries. But although the CNS initiative stalled, its legacy continues

1. See the interesting portrait in this regard in V.S. Naipaul, 'A new king for the Congo,' *The New York Review of Books*, 26 June 1975.

to be an important part of the country's independently developed democratic tradition.

Mobutu rejected the honourable exit option offered by the CNS, because of his own vanity; the influence of his Congolese entourage, whose privileges were threatened by the change of regime; and the encouragement of some of his foreign backers, who were apprehensive about the consequences of the practice of democratic governance for their interests in the Congo. This was likely to mean a rupture with a tradition of externally imposed rulers, more beholden to their foreign mentors than to a domestic constituency.

The CNS had been set up with the aim of bringing about precisely such a rupture, as well as a break with all other practices detrimental to the rule of law and the construction of a developmental state - authoritarianism, impunity, nepotism, incompetence. In this it was broadly similar to a number of other African national conferences in the 1990s, following the example set in early 1991 in Benin. National conferences had become popular in Africa as democratic forums of all the relevant social forces of a nation, designed to take stock of what had gone wrong in the past and to chart a new course for the future. They were conceived as a combination of truth and reconciliation commission and constitutional commission: they provided a forum for national catharsis in the African tradition of conflict resolution through the palaver, whose decisions are binding on all parties and groups; and they also represented a modern rule of law mechanism for restoring multiparty democracy. In a country like Congo-Kinshasa (then Zaïre), which lacked the minimum infrastructure for free and fair elections, the national conference was also seen as the most appropriate forum from which a transitional government could emerge to prepare the way for multiparty elections and social democracy - the kind of democracy that Africa needs, as Claude Ake has argued: 'a social democracy that invests heavily in the improvement of people's health, education, and capacity so that they can participate effectively'.²

The CNS was the largest and the longest running national conference in Africa. Its 2,842 delegates represented all social classes and strata of the Congolese population, including representatives of state institutions, political parties, other civil society organisations, the intelligentsia, the private sector, and traditional authorities. Its course did not run smoothly from the beginning,

2. Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Brookings Institution, 1996, p132.

however - it was interrupted by politically instigated looting by unpaid soldiers in September and October 1991, and then illegally suspended by the Mobutu regime in January 1992. In February 1992, a peaceful Christian demonstration in favour of reopening the Conference was violently suppressed by the Israeli-trained *Division spéciale présidentielle* and the German- and Egyptian-trained *Garde civile*. More than thirty people were killed, with bibles and candles in hand. For the democracy movement they became 'the martyrs of democracy', entitled to the same heroic status as the martyrs of independence who fell in January 1959 in Kinshasa, during the insurrection against Belgian rule.

Overcoming these obstacles, the CNS then met uninterrupted between April and December 1992. During this eight-month period, it accomplished a lot of work in examining the record of the past and making recommendations for the country's future. With 23 commissions and over 100 sub-commissions, the conference dealt with virtually every conceivable aspect of our national life, with subjects ranging from assassinations and ill-gotten property to economic policy, political structures and minority rights.

The Conference rejected the recommendations that came from its Economic Affairs and Parastatals Commissions, since they were perceived as being little more than a straightforward endorsement of the Washington economic consensus. The CNS was all the more upset in that these proposals, which included advocating the wholesale privatisation of state enterprises, came from people who had only recently deserted from Mobutu's inner circle - the very people who had been busy plundering the country and already had privatised much of the state and its resources. They were now arguing that if the state enterprises were legally privatised, they would be willing to bring back the millions of dollars they had stashed away in foreign banks and securities, in order to purchase the enterprises and invest in their rehabilitation. For most delegates, the real question was the restitution of these ill-gotten gains to the Congolese state, so that the enterprises could be rehabilitated through strict respect for their missions and mandates, and effective and transparent management. Privatising state enterprises would simply mean selling them on the cheap, to individuals, both foreign and national, who were more interested in profits than in the public welfare.

In addition to rejecting the wholesale privatisation of public enterprises, the CNS came up with another position that met with the open disapproval of Western embassies in Kinshasa. This was the resolution that all of Congo's debts had to be

renegotiated, and that the state had no obligation to repay 'odious debts' - those that had never benefited the country in any substantial manner, since the money had been embezzled by Mobutu and his cronies, all too often with no action being taken by the lenders, who were fully cognisant of the corruption involved.

With these two radical positions, the CNS refused to toe the neo-liberal party line, rejecting the dogmatic and anti-democratic affirmation of a single model of socio-economic organisation. This radicalism on economic policy and the election to the post of prime minister of Etienne Tshisekedi, a radical nationalist who would put the country's interests above those of the rich North, helped to diminish the enthusiasm of the United States and its Western allies for the CNS. Thus, while they offered lip-service recognition of the Tshisekedi government, these advocates of democracy and good governance did little to help it consolidate its power against the onslaught of Mobutu, who used all means possible, including military, to retain control over revenue-producing parastatals and key economic agencies. The Western powers were quite relieved when opportunists in the pro-democracy coalition subsequently abandoned Tshisekedi in April 1994, joining hands with Mobutu's followers in the Parliament of Transition to elect Léon Kengo wa Dongo as prime minister.

As I have argued elsewhere, Kengo's return to the prime minister's office was for all intents and purposes the restoration of the Mobutu regime.³ Kengo had been Mobutu's most trusted and longest-serving prime minister between 1978 and 1990, and was thus an unlikely prime minister for the overseeing of the transition to democracy. In fact allowing the inclusion of a party such as Kengo's *Union des démocrates indépendants* (UDI) in the democratic opposition coalition was a major tactical weakness. The leaders of the UDI were technocratic opportunists, beholden to foreign interests and the richest people in the Congo, and determined to reposition themselves for political office in the new democratic dispensation. Indeed, Kinshasa's free press and *radio trottoir* (street radio or rumour mill), which continued to function in spite of other setbacks to the planned transition to democracy, saw no democrats among them. To popular delight, they dubbed the UDI *union des dinosaures impunis*, or *union des détourneurs incorrigibles*. With this group taking over the transition to democracy, the hopes

3. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History*, Zed Books, 2002, pp203-204.

raised by the CNS and its comprehensive plan of democratisation and social transformation, were simply dashed.

In 1996, with Kengo safely at the helm, the powers that be felt confident that the establishment of a National Electoral Commission (*Commission nationale des élections*, CNE) would not perturb the kind of democratic transition they had envisaged for the Congo - that is, one that would take place under the careful tutelage of the dominant powers of the world system, and the international organisations under their control. Having served as deputy president of the CNE, and leader of the opposition half within it, I had a very useful vantage point from which to understand the underlying dynamics of the situation. Prime Minister Kengo and Internal

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Affairs Minister Gérard Kamanda wa Kamanda did their best to undermine the work of the commission. Kengo himself called into the question the integrity of members of the commission, and in eight months, the CNE received only 4 per cent of the budget that Parliament had allocated for it. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was making arrangements to carry out duties that the Electoral Law had clearly vested in the CNE, and this led to a confrontation between the ministry and the commission.

As for the international community, it showed none of the overwhelming support for the CNE that it later gave to the 2004-2006 Independent Electoral Commission. Indeed, one of its key representatives, the United Nations Development Programme Resident Representative, openly supported the Kengo government. I came to the conclusion that the CNE was becoming a waste of time, and resigned in September 1996. Then in October 1996 Rwanda moved to destroy the Hutu refugee camps in the Congolese border cities of Goma, Bukavu and Uvira, thus launching the war that ultimately interrupted the democratic transition, and paved the way for the coming to power of Laurent-Désiré Kabila in May 1997.

The dictatorship of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, 1997-2001

Who is Laurent-Désiré Kabila and how did he become the Congo's president? For twenty-five years, between 1960 and 1985, Kabila was a major actor in Congo's

guerrilla wars. He started his career in this regard in the resistance against the Katanga secession in 1960-63.⁴ In 1964-6 he served as second in command of the eastern front of the popular insurrections for a 'second independence'. In 1967, following the defeat of the insurrections in the east (by a counter-insurgency effort led by the US and Belgium, and involving white mercenaries from Europe and Southern Africa, as well as Tshombe's former Katanga gendarmes, brought back home from exile in Angola), Kabila founded his own party, the *Parti révolutionnaire du peuple* (PRP). From its guerrilla base in the mountains along Lake Tanganyika, the PRP waged an intermittent armed struggle against the Mobutu regime until 1985. Kabila kept the PRP as his vehicle for revolutionary change in the Congo, but he himself switched from being a warlord to become a business operator; it is a well known fact that even during his halcyon days of guerrilla warfare, he preferred the comforts and pleasures of city lights to the rigor of the bush.⁵

In 1996, when the disintegration of the Mobutu regime provided the Rwandan regime with the opportunity to destroy the bases of the Hutu extremists in eastern parts of the Congo, it became useful to find a Congolese cover for the Rwandan invasion; and a coalition of states in East and Southern Africa, including Angola, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, were also resolved to get rid of Mobutu and needed an ally. Laurent-Désiré Kabila, a retired Congolese revolutionary, was ready and willing to take charge of the propaganda war as leader of the national struggle to liberate the Congo from Mobutu. Three other groups joined Kabila to form the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo* (AFDL) in October 1996.

The seven-month war that resulted in the fall of the Mobutu regime was waged mainly by units of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), and not by the AFDL, which did not have a military organisation capable of defeating Mobutu's army. The exception in this regard were Congolese exiles who had accumulated military experience as auxiliaries of the Angolan army, and who were allowed by Angola to join the AFDL campaign. Known as *tigres*, these men showed their mettle in defeating Mobutu's Serbo-Croatian mercenaries at Kisangani,

4. This secession played a major role in the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba.

5. During Che Guevara's seven month stay in the Congo bush in 1965 he witnessed only one visit by Kabila to his guerrilla camp. See William Galvez, *Che in Africa: Che Guevara's Congo Diary*, translated by Mary Todd, Ocean Press, 1999.

his presidential forces near Lubumbashi, and Jonas Savimbi's fighters at Kenge in the Bandundu province. In addition to pursuing and killing Hutu refugees, RPA units led Kabila's AFDL in a long march that culminated in a triumphant entry into Kinshasa in May 1997. In Lubumbashi, Kabila announced the fall of the Mobutu regime, changed the country's name back to 'Congo' and proclaimed himself president.

By announcing the fall of Mobutu, and changing the country's name with the stroke of the pen (just as Mobutu had done a quarter century earlier), Kabila accomplished what a democratically made decision of the CNS could not do. When, in August 1992, the overwhelming majority of CNS delegates had voted to give back the country its original name, and to pave the way for the retirement of Mobutu, the international community had chosen to follow Mobutu in not recognising these decisions as sovereign and binding on all parties. But in May 1997, not only did the international community take notice of Mobutu's ouster and the change in the country's name, it moved quickly to recognise the new name and the newly self-proclaimed ruler.

The message that the world community of nations sent to the people of the Congo and Africa as a whole in these two instances is loud and clear. Changes through democratic means and the rule of law in Africa are not as deserving of unequivocal support as changes through the barrel of a gun. Leaders who have come to power by the latter means have actually been touted by the US State Department and its collaborators in academia as the 'new breed' of African leaders - bold, self-reliant, and persons on whom Washington can rely for long-term strategic alliances. Unfortunately for these ideologues, however, Kabila failed to live up to expectations, and the so-called 'new breed' has shown itself as being made up of the same material as the old breed of authoritarian rulers - except that they seem willing to regularly hold multiparty elections, while taking every precaution not to lose them.

As a self-proclaimed ruler initially backed by external powers, Laurent-Désiré Kabila did not see the need to win the people's confidence. His project of personal rule was diametrically opposed to the social and political democracy that had been on the national agenda since 1956, and to the democratic vision and legacy of the CNS. It could not satisfy the deepest aspirations of the Congolese people, who had already created for themselves a space of democratic freedoms and liberties during the struggle for multiparty democracy against the Mobutu

regime. Kabila failed to recognise the fact that, had it not been for the erosion of Mobutu's power following popular opposition, and in particular the CNS in 1992, he and his Rwandan allies would not have been able to march from Goma to Kinshasa without a significant military challenge from Mobutu's army.

Kabila squandered the political capital he had earned in overthrowing Mobutu. On two separate occasions, he failed to seize a rare historic opportunity to unite the country behind him: he could have led a collective effort to rebuild the social and economic infrastructure destroyed under the previous regime following in his rise to power; and he could have led a patriotic war against the invasion of August 1998, following his break with his Rwandan allies. Instead of making common cause with the democratic forces that emerged from the CNS, and thus merging the revolutionary legitimacy of overthrowing Mobutu with the democratic legitimacy of the CNS, he opted for personal rule, relying on relatives and cronies. With its adventurism, amateurism and unorthodox ways of conducting state business, his regime did not succeed in making a clean break with the past. Furthermore, he reversed the growing freedoms of the twilight of the Mobutu regime - the free press, freedom of expression and the right to organise freely. He was also unable to defeat the Ugandan and Rwandan forces that invaded after his break with them, and had to rely on the support of forces from countries such as Zimbabwe and Angola. At the time of his death, large parts of the country were occupied by Rwanda and Uganda, who were linked to Congolese-based political allies, which in turn contributed to political division within the DRC.

Kabila has not been greatly missed since his assassination in January 2001, either internally or by the governments that supported his war effort, for whom he had become a great burden. He was a major stumbling block to the peace negotiations, and particularly the inter-Congolese dialogue after the Lusaka Agreement of 1999, which had established a process to lead to peace and new political institutions. The Agreement had marked the end of the war but had not ended the occupation of large parts of the country.

Joseph Kabila and the internationally supervised transition, 2001-2006

Joseph Kabila, Laurent-Désiré's son and successor, was soon to become very popular internationally, for committing his government to the inter-Congolese

dialogue. Having failed to control either the CNS or Kabila, the international community now looked to Joseph Kabila - a 29-year old with no experience in government and international affairs - for the establishment of their tutelage over the Congo. And this tutelage seems to have been accepted by the representatives of Congolese political and civil society organisations that participated in the inter-Congolese dialogue that subsequently took place in Sun City, South Africa. The comprehensive and inclusive accord reached at these talks, signed in Pretoria in December 2002, provided for a new process of transition to constitutional government, but this was to be under the aegis of an International Committee to Accompany the Transition (*Comité international pour l'accompagnement de la transition*, CIAT) as a formal institution of the transition. The CIAT is made up of representatives of the five members of the UN Security Council, plus Belgium, South Africa, Angola, the African Union and Congo-Brazzaville (the country currently holding the AU chair), and it is chaired by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in the Congo and head of the United Nations Mission in the Congo. According to informed sources, France and the United Kingdom have played a major role in drafting most of the CIAT positions concerning the management of the transition. William Swing, the UN Special Representative and a former US Ambassador to DR Congo, is the chief coordinator of the international tutelage over the country.

Begun with approximately 360 delegates staying in the luxurious hotels of Sun City in February 2002, the inter-Congolese dialogue had its ups and downs, but the negotiations eventually resulted in the adoption of the Pretoria Agreement and an interim constitution for a two-year transition period, which could be extended for one more year if the electoral commission demonstrated that it had material difficulties in holding free, fair and democratic elections within the allotted time. As it turned out, delays in the transitional process were caused not by material difficulties but by the slowness of the government and parliament in enacting enabling laws, in a conscious scheme to prolong their tenure; the transition was illegally extended, and elections were not held until July 2006.

The arrangements for the period of transition between the agreement and elections under the new constitution consisted of a complex set of institutions, including a 'presidential space' of five members, which comprised of a president and four vice-presidents. The Kabila regime retained the presidency, and

one vice-president's post; the latter went to Abdoulaye Yerodia, a close ally of the elder Kabila and a man who had distinguished himself with virulent anti-Tutsi rhetoric during the battle of Kinshasa in August 1998. Of the three remaining posts of vice president, one was allocated to the Goma branch of the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD-Goma), the Rwandan-backed rebel group established in August 1998; one to the *Mouvement de libération du Congo* (MLC) of Jean-Pierre Bemba, the Ugandan-backed rebel movement, which enjoyed popular support in the Equateur province; and one to the unarmed opposition. The fact that power was to be shared by the three major belligerents, with the unarmed opposition as a useful appendage, was a major flaw of the Sun City/Pretoria agreement. It condoned the idea of achieving power by the barrel of a gun, and conferred impunity on the leaders and their lieutenants - many of whom were awarded ministerial, parliamentary or parastatal positions.

In addition to transitional institutions of state sovereignty - government and a bicameral parliament, courts and tribunals - five democracy-supporting institutions were established, as follows: the independent electoral commission; the high authority of the media; the national observatory of human rights; the truth and reconciliation commission; and the commission on ethics and the fight against corruption. It is interesting to note that, with the prevailing tendency of confusing democracy with elections, it is the electoral commission that received massive support from the international community. With the exception of the media watchdog unit, which did receive some support, the other democracy-supporting institutions had few resources with which to become effective.

The 2003-2006 transition will be best remembered for the vanity, corruption, incompetence and total disregard for the welfare of Congolese citizens displayed by the authorities. Money is the religion of the political class in Kinshasa, and the current rulers see power not as a tool for peace and development but as a means for acquiring and maximising their wealth. The elder Kabila started making business deals with foreign entrepreneurs, including rogue businesspersons, even before he took power in May 1997. And, in reports on the illegal exploitation of Congolese resources and other forms of wealth, a UN team of experts have identified prominent individuals in the entourage of current President Joseph Kabila as looters of natural resources in alliance with foreign interests. Today, the privatisation of land, mining, forests and other national assets for the benefit of

foreign entrepreneurs and their Congolese associates at the highest levels of the state goes on unlawfully, against existing laws and against the interests of both the people and the state.

As actors in and beneficiaries of this plunder, the former belligerents have no interest in establishing the rule of law and integrating their armed groups into a single national army. The army integration process has proceeded very slowly, with the belligerents keeping some of their best fighters in parallel units or private militias. Thus, Kabila's presidential guard is not part of the integrated army, but it is deployed all over the country. Likewise, Vice President Jean-Pierre Bemba is rumoured to have thousands of well-armed troops of his own; while Vice President Azarias Ruberwa, the RCD-Goma leader, can count not only on his own troops but also those of renegade Tutsi officers and ultimately, troops from Rwanda. In such a situation, there is no guarantee that losers in the electoral competition might not be tempted to use force in order to retain power. And peace is still elusive in four areas of the northeast: the Ituri District of Eastern province, North Kivu, South Kivu, and North Katanga. Here, the array of armed groups involved in looting resources and killing innocent civilians includes rebel groups from Uganda and Rwanda and Congolese militia known as Mai-Mai, who have shifted from their original goal of fighting foreign invaders to turf fights over territory and resources, in acts bordering on banditry. The Rwandan and Ugandan rebels do not represent any immediate danger to their countries of origin, but the latter still exploit the apparent threat as a pretext for incursions into the Congo to loot its abundant natural resources.

The United Nations force of 23,000 persons, including 17,000 troops, has failed to put an end to the armed conflict in the northeast, yet the international community is spending approximately 1 billion dollars a year on it. The European Union also deployed over 2000 troops of its own as reinforcements during the four-month period of elections, with an estimated expenditure of \$5 to \$7million. Add to this the \$500 million spent on the elections, and it is difficult not to argue that all of this money could have been better spent. It could have been used to assist local communities in rebuilding their infrastructures, and to create jobs to promote greater human security, thus helping to remove the severe problems faced by many young people, and the sense of hopelessness that leads to their enrolment in militia groups. In themselves, elections cannot solve the underlying issues of security. What is needed is a

restructured and integrated national army; the reunification, pacification and reconstruction of the country; the restoration of territorial integrity; and the establishment of the authority of the state over the entire national territory.

Conclusion: the legacy of the CNS for Congo's democratic transition

There is no doubt that the Congolese people are tired of too-long a transition and would like to have democratically elected leaders whom they can hold accountable, at least at the next elections. But in a country that has been torn asunder by years of plunder and neglect, elections for elections' sake will simply become a ritual without meaning if they cannot lead to substantial change in building effective institutions and in delivering badly needed basic services to the population. As the culminating point of the Congolese democracy movement in the 1990s, the CNS helped people to shed their fears of the dictatorship, gave greater impetus to the culture of freedom and political discourse, and promoted the right to discuss public affairs freely and to criticise the government. The consolidation of an independent press, the increasing clout of civil society, and the growth of popular forms of political debate and organisation have all increased the capacity to resist authoritarianism and oppressive rule.

All this is evidence of the Congolese people's own democratic traditions. And these must continue to play a central role in the democratic transition, particularly the legacy of the CNS, which established the crucial building blocks of democracy; these remain its major achievement, and the source of its legitimacy as a defining moment in the political history of the Congo.⁶ In its clarity and comprehensiveness, the CNS provides essential guidelines for the political future of the country. It follows, then, that however credible and successful any elections held during the current internationally supervised transition might be, they cannot succeed in effecting a genuine democratic transition if they are not faithful to the democratic legacy of the CNS.

In order to achieve the convergence between this legacy and free and fair elections, the Congo must complete its transition from colonialism to genuine independence; from a dependent territory with 60 per cent of its budget and

6. For a summary of the legacy of the CNS see my monograph entitled *From Zaire to the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Second and Revised Edition*, Nordic Africa Institute, 2004, p.11.

key policies coming from outside the country to a truly sovereign state with its own social project and capacity to make and implement its own development policies. This requires that the country be governed by independent, patriotic and democratic leaders. And these are likely to emerge not from political parties financed from abroad, by foreign business enterprises involved in looting the country's economy, or by misappropriated state revenues, but rather from mass democratic movements bent on emancipating the country from foreign control and the culture of corruption. We need leaders who put the interests of the country and its people above their own narrow class interests. For such leaders, the democratic legacy of the CNS will remain the alpha and omega of the democratic transition in the Congo.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the views of UNDP or the UN system as a whole