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The Kabilas’ Congo

THOMAS TURNER

The assassination of President Laurent-Désiré Kabila this January was a nasty event, echoing the killings of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President John Kennedy four decades earlier. Was there a lone gunman? Were international forces involved? The affair grew even more sordid as further events unfolded. Ten or eleven Lebanese residents of Kinshasa allegedly were murdered by Congolese soldiers seeking revenge for Kabila’s death. Newspapers wrote of former “child soldiers” turning on their erstwhile leader.

Still, many observers preferred to look at the bright side. After years of warfare, was some good news finally emanating from the Democratic Republic of the Congo? The country had been torn apart by its neighbors, who had intervened in the war that began in 1998. Hundreds of thousands—perhaps as many as 2 million—of its citizens have died, in addition to the many thousands of refugees who have been killed on Congolese soil.

Did the murder of President Kabila open the door to peace? The first signs were positive. Laurent Kabila was killed on January 16. After several days of stonewalling, his death was confirmed and army commander Joseph Kabila was announced as his father’s successor. The peace process, which had been stalled by Laurent Kabila’s obstructionism, regained momentum. The United States, which had been locked into an unproductive, hostile relationship with Laurent Kabila, appeared to welcome the change in Kinshasa.

Or is the optimism that followed the installment of Joseph Kabila misplaced? Even if most of the participants in Congo’s multisided war appear to want

out, can a formula be found by which they can disengage? And if the war ends, is there any way to restore an effective Congolese state and economy?

Congo remains incredibly complex, but one way of understanding it is to focus on Laurent Kabila himself: who he was, how he came to power, how he stayed there, and what he left behind.

KABILA AS REVOLUTIONARY

Laurent Kabila presented himself as the successor to the martyred Lumumba. Kabila indeed had a long connection to the nationalism and anti-imperialism of Lumumbism, but he also had a long record of another sort. Throughout his revolutionary career Kabila was always somewhere else, apparently unable to cooperate with Lumumbist colleagues and work in a coherent fashion toward political change.

A Luba from North Katanga province, Kabila may have worked on behalf of the ethnic political party Balubakat in 1960, the year in which Congo became independent. Balubakat was allied with Lumumba’s Mouvement National Congolais (MNC-L) and opposed the Katanga secessionist movement, led by Moïse Tshombe. Kabila did not occupy an important post in the party; he was only about 20 years old at the time.

Following the elections of May 1960, in which Lumumba’s party and direct allies won a plurality of seats, Lumumba assumed power as prime minister. Immediately after independence in June, the Congolese army mutinied, and mineral-rich Katanga seceded, with Belgian support. Lumumba was ousted by his army chief, Joseph-Désiré Mobutu (a protégé of the Americans who later took the name Mobutu Sese Seko), and murdered in Katanga.

The first clear indication of Kabila in public life dates from 1963, when he was listed as secretary general for social affairs, youth, and sports in the faction of the National Liberation Council (Conseil

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National de Libération, CNL) headed by Christophe Gbenye. Lumumbists and other nationalists had formed the CNL, across the river in Brazzaville in the neighboring Republic of Congo, to combat the United States-dominated government in Kinshasa. One CNL faction favored supporting the armed struggle already launched by Pierre Mulele in Kwilu. The Gbenye faction wanted to mobilize the population of the eastern provinces that had supported Lumumba: Province Orientale, Kivu, and Kabila's home area of North Katanga.

By 1964 Lumumbist rebellion had swept across the eastern provinces. In the cold-war context,

Lumumbism had mutated into a more radical Marxist ideology than Lumumba's own nationalism. Gbenye had become president of the "People's Republic of the Congo," based at Kisangani (then still called Stanleyville). He named Kabila "chief of military operations for the East of the Congo" but Kabila apparently never assumed the post. Kabila's name appears again as vice president of the ephemeral "provisional

government" announced in North Katanga by Gaston Soumialot in July 1964.

Kabila was supposed to go to Kisangani to serve as *commissaire politique* of the People's Republic, but apparently never showed up. At the end of 1964, after Kisangani had fallen to the central government (thanks to a Belgo-American paratroop drop), Kabila was in Nairobi. His impressive titles were secretary of state for foreign affairs and minister plenipotentiary accredited to Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda.

Che Guevara, who had traveled to South Kivu, provided testimony regarding the activities of Kabila in 1965. Again Kabila appears as a person whose

whereabouts are unknown, except that he is not at the front. Guevara learned that Kabila had broken with both of his supposed superiors, Soumialot and Gbenye. As Guevara observed, these disagreements allowed Kabila to run his own zone of operations in the area of Fizi (South Kivu) as he wished. This unwillingness or inability to cooperate with others would characterize Kabila to the end of his life.

In the name of the Cuban government, Guevara offered Kabila about 30 military instructors—Cubans and Rwandan Tutsi—and some weapons. Kabila accepted "with joy." But during the time that Guevara was in South Kivu, Kabila never spent

more than five successive days there. He always had something more important to do, either in Cairo or in Dar es Salaam. Perhaps, as Belgian political scientist Jean-Claude Willame speculates, Kabila felt upstaged by the famous Che.

In 1967, two years after Mobutu assumed power in Kinshasa, Kabila and a handful of men crossed from Tanzania into South Kivu. This time, Kabila formed a real

"liberated zone," something he had not possessed when Guevara came. The liberated zone lasted about 20 years but never showed signs of expanding.

Within the zone there was a single party, the People's Revolutionary Party (Parti de la Révolution Populaire, PRP) and a single leader: Kabila. Kabila's followers were taught a simplified Marxism, according to which Congo had seven classes, including the "compradore bourgeoisie." Discipline was maintained by tribunals and by antiwitchcraft poison ordeals (the accused was forced to ingest poison to determine whether he or she was a "witch").

Externally, Kabila himself was a sort of comprador, selling gold and ivory collected by his fol-



lowers. Sometimes he swapped them for supplies, arms, and intelligence about upcoming military operations against his zone. Kabila's rebels survived in a kind of symbiosis with the state headed by his old adversary, Mobutu.

None of Kabila's activities represented a threat to Mobutu. On the two occasions when action by the PRP might have had some effect, during the so-called Shaba I and Shaba II attacks on Katanga from Angola in 1977 and 1978, Kabila failed to move.

By the 1980s, small-scale gold mining had developed across eastern Congo. Because of this competition, Kabila's operations became less profitable. His forces dwindled. After several spectacular but inconsequential operations (a kidnapping from western Tanzania, two attacks on the town of Moba, in eastern Katanga), most of the PRP fighters surrendered to the central authorities.

Again, Kabila disappears from view. One version has him serving as intermediary between the southern Sudanese rebel John Garang and Mobutu. Another version has him pursuing his gold- and ivory-marketing career in East Africa. One fact is clear: Kabila had no party and no army in 1996, when he was recruited to join the movement to overthrow Mobutu.

KABILA AS LEADER

Kabila came to power in Kinshasa through the interaction of several processes in Central Africa:

- The decay of the dictatorial regime of President Mobutu, who remained strong enough, however, to thwart the transition to a democratic successor regime;
- The descent of the eastern provinces of North and South Kivu into virtual civil war, pitting local people against long-settled migrants from Rwanda who were seen as foreign interlopers occupying their land and monopolizing political posts;
- The 1994 Rwandan genocide, following which approximately 1 million Rwandan Hutu refugees fled to Kivu, which was already near the boiling point.

The Mobutu government provided backing to the Hutu, including army and militia elements, thereby earning the enmity of the new Tutsi-dominated government in Rwanda that took power after the genocide. The Banyamulenge, ethnic Tutsi of Rwandan origin whose ancestors settled several centuries ago in what is now South Kivu, staged an uprising in the summer of 1996, with the support of the Rwanda government. By the second half of that year,

the alliance of Banyamulenge, Tutsi of North Kivu, and Lumumbists and others, headed by Kabila, had taken over substantial parts of eastern Zaire. The corrupt and demoralized Mobutu army disappeared in the face of their advance. After a short, seven-month campaign, Kabila and his army entered Kinshasa as Mobutu fled into exile.

Kabila had been chosen, probably by Rwanda, to act as spokesman for the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo-Zaire, AFDL). The AFDL allegedly brought together four anti-Mobutu groups. In addition to Kabila's PRP (which hardly existed at that point), other groups in the AFDL were: the Conseil de Résistance Nationale pour la Démocratie (National Council of Resistance for Democracy, CRND), led by André Ngandu Kasesse, who had broken from one of the splinter groups of the MNCL; the Alliance Démocratique Populaire (People's Democratic Alliance, ADP), led by Déogratias Bugera; and the Mouvement Révolutionnaire pour la Libération du Zaire (Revolutionary Movement for the Liberation of Zaire, MRLZ), led by Anselme Masasu Nindaga.

The Alliance of Democratic Forces began to break up almost as soon as it was founded. Ngandu Kasesse was eliminated only a month later. The AFDL put out the story that Ngandu—whose CRND was the only one of the four movements to be engaged in armed struggle against the Mobutu regime—was killed in a Zaire Armed Forces (FAZ) ambush. Few believed the story. Some blamed Kabila, who feared a dangerous rival. Others saw the hand of Rwanda or the Congolese Tutsi and said that Ngandu was killed because of his persistent questioning of Tutsi domination of the AFDL military.

Bugera, a Tutsi from Masisi Zone, North Kivu became secretary general of the AFDL. He was widely regarded as Rwanda's man in the inner circle around Kabila, or one of several, along with Foreign Minister Bizima Karaha. Bugera reportedly lost most of his influence during the first year of Kabila's regime, but later was named to the important post of state minister to the presidency. He escaped Kinshasa shortly after Kabila's order that all foreign troops should leave and joined the "rebellion" against Kabila at the start of the current war.

Masasu Nindaga was named general and chief of staff of the new Congolese army, which meant that he commanded mainly the *kadogo*, the very young Congolese who joined the AFDL on its march to Kinshasa. (The first war was presented to the public as a civil war, pitting the AFDL against Mobutu.

Behind the scenes, it was an invasion, directed by Rwanda in alliance with Uganda, and later Angola. Rwandans, Ugandans, and Angolans had their own commanders.)

Masasu was arrested in 1998, along with several Tutsi officers, and accused of preparing a “plot” against Kabila. Kabila released him in March 2000, apparently as a gesture of goodwill toward Kigali. But Masasu was arrested again, toward the end of 2000, along with a number of military men from North and South Kivu. Again, a coup plot was alleged. Masasu was transferred to Katanga, where he was executed.

Thus, one cluster of arguments as to who killed Laurent Kabila focuses on the elimination of his rivals Ngandu Kasesse and Masasu Nindaga. These should not be excluded; they are not in themselves complete.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

In the weeks after his father’s assassination—while Joseph Kabila was off visiting Washington, Brussels, Lusaka, and Syrte (in Libya) and apparently making a good impression—the situation in Kinshasa went from bad to worse. Tensions that had been latent under Laurent Kabila were brought into the open by the assassination, and now threaten to tear the regime apart.

The official position is that Kabila was killed by Kasereka Rachidi, a member of the presidential bodyguard, and that Kasereka himself was killed immediately thereafter. Kasereka, 26 years old, was from North Kivu. Beyond that, we have several contradictory versions of the events.

At the beginning of February, *Le Monde* published a long report, based on interviews with self-identified participants in the assassination and on a document in which they outlined their coup plot. According to this version, Kasereka was a minor figure in the plot, which had been organized by other former child soldiers—Congolese who had begun their military careers as teenagers or even younger, in Uganda or Rwanda. They had been with Kabila since 1996 but now felt betrayed by him. There was no foreign involvement in the killing, *Le Monde* concluded.

However, *Le Monde’s* version fails to answer a number of key questions. In particular: Why were Congolese soldiers disarmed and confined to their barracks at Kinshasa’s main military bases, Camps

Tshatshi and Kokolo, on the eve of the assassination (apparently on orders from General Nawej Yav, army commander for the capital)? And why was Kasereka killed on the spot (apparently by Colonel Edy Kapend, Kabila’s aide-de-camp), rather than being captured and interrogated?

In the eyes of Kinshasa and Lingala-speaking western Congo, Kabila’s regime was based on the Swahili-speaking east. Within the regime, however, a split had emerged between people from Kivu (the provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and perhaps Maniema) and those from Katanga. The official story laid blame for the assassination on the Kivu officials.

The finger of suspicion soon shifted. Many leading regime figures were arrested on suspicion of involvement in the assassination, included Colonel Kapend, General Nawej, and several other Lunda. These arrests brought to the surface the rivalry between the Lunda and the Luba-Katanga, the two leading ethnic groups in Katanga. Laurent Kabila had bridged the ethnic gap, since he was a Luba by his father and a Lunda by his mother.

Beyond the ethnic rivalries loomed the prospect of a split between Congo’s two main allies. Kapend, a Lunda from southwestern Katanga, apparently was one of a number of schoolboys who accom-

panied the “Katanga Tigers” back to Angola following Shaba II, in 1978. After an amnesty, he returned to Congo and studied at the University of Lubumbashi. In the early 1990s he was active in the predominantly Katangan political party, the Union of Independent Federalists and Republicans (Union des Fédéralistes et Républicains Indépendants, UFERI). In 1997 he was an officer of the “Katangans” (who actually included a variety of Congolese and Angolans) who fought alongside the AFDL against Mobutu. He was seen as Angola’s man in the Congo.

The danger was that Zimbabwe—which had sent troops to back Kabila in 1998—might side with the Luba-Katanga faction, splitting the pro-Kinshasa coalition. In the first week of March, there were reports from Kinshasa of shooting between Namibian and Angolan troops, the latter siding with Lunda deserters. Namibia is a minor player; a similar clash between Angola and Zimbabwe could endanger the unfolding peace process.

These rivalries reflect the fact that the various external powers entered the Congo wars for different, incompatible reasons. The first war (1996–97)

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stemmed from the desire of Rwanda and Uganda to establish a security zone along Congo's eastern border. Angola joined to pursue its fight against guerrilla leader Jonas Savimbi's rebel movement, UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). Once it had joined, the fighting was bound to extend to Kinshasa. (An Angola "security zone" along the Congo border would stretch from Katanga to the Atlantic Ocean, in any case.) Much as Rwanda used Rwanda-speakers of North and South Kivu as its agents and as camouflage, Angola used "Katangan" troops as a screen for its own intervention. The core element of the so-called Katangans was made up of Lunda from southwestern Katanga, including Kapend and Nawej, but many came from other regions of southern Congo or from Angola itself.

In August 1998 Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia foiled an attempt by Rwanda and Uganda to overthrow Kabila. This was the opening chapter of the second Congo war.

Rwanda and Uganda were disappointed with Kabila, who had failed to defend their security interests. In fairness, Kabila or any Congolese in his position would have been pressured to break with the Rwandans and their Congolese Tutsi allies, whose dominant position in Kinshasa was resented.

Angola's action in 1998 should have surprised no one; like its earlier interventions in Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville, this intervention aimed to protect Angola's oil and to fight Savimbi. In contrast to the motivations of Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia apparently backed Kabila on the basis of ideological affinity (Kabila, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, and Namibian President Sam Nujoma were old Marxists) and in the case of Zimbabwe, a rivalry with South Africa for leadership of southern Africa.

The so-called rebels of 1998 were a mixed bag of Congolese opposing Kabila for one reason or another, ranging from Marxists to Mobutu loyalists. Initially united under the banner of the Congolese Rally for Democracy (*Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*, RCD), the rebel movement split several times. Today, Rwanda backs the RCD-Goma faction, while Uganda's main protégé is the Congo Liberation Movement (*Mouvement de Libération du Congo*, MLC).

Whatever their initial reason for intervening in Congo and then backing or opposing Kabila, each of the foreign powers soon acquired an economic stake. To a considerable extent this was due to a policy pursued by Kabila, who rewarded his allies.

Zimbabwe reportedly received a stake in copper and cobalt, and Namibia, diamonds. Angola's national oil company, Sonangol, was allowed to create a subsidiary, Sonangol-Congo, which has a major role in the production and distribution of petroleum and petroleum products in Congo. Uganda and Rwanda reportedly financed their own war efforts with diamonds, gold, columbite-tantalite, and other minerals from northern and eastern Congo.

The falling out between Angola and Zimbabwe, which followed the death of Laurent Kabila, was prefigured in the fighting between Uganda and Rwanda. The two East African armies virtually destroyed the city of Kisangani in July 2000, in a struggle to control mineral resources.

COPING WITH A POISONOUS LEGACY

Almost as soon as Joseph Kabila was chosen as successor to the murdered Laurent Kabila, he was subjected to attacks designed to weaken his position. Press accounts alleged that his mother was a Rwandan Tutsi (an explosive charge, given the anti-Tutsi rhetoric, including incitement to violence, used by Laurent Kabila from 1998 on). It was even suggested that Joseph was not the son of Laurent but the son of a deceased Tutsi man, adopted informally when Laurent married his widowed mother. (Regime spokesmen replied that Joseph's mother was not a Tutsi but a Bangubangu from Maniema, in western Kivu. They ignored the question regarding his paternity.)

These attacks aside, Joseph Kabila has inherited a very narrow political base. Laurent Kabila relied heavily on a core group of Katangans, now divided into two hostile camps. The inner circle reportedly is split also between those who favor a revival of the peace process and those (especially old cronies of his father) who oppose it.

One of Joseph Kabila's greatest assets is the simple fact that he is not his father. The son appears reserved and reflective but less inclined than the father to try to do everything himself and more cognizant of the need to build support. In contrast to Laurent Kabila, Joseph is also promising to cooperate in the peace process outlined in the Lusaka Accords (signed in the Zambian capital in July-August 1999, and violated by all signatories since then). Belgium, the former colonial power, has offered to host the "inter-Congolese dialogue" called for in the Lusaka accords, but some of the parties have expressed a preference for one or another African site, including Gaborone (Botswana), Libreville (Gabon), and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). The var-

ious suggestions reflect a struggle among outsiders, including English-speaking southern Africa and French-speaking equatorial Africa, for influence in Congo. Gabon may well be a stalking horse for France. The dialogue is to bring together the Kabila government, the armed and unarmed opposition, and civil society.

The Lusaka accords, as supplemented by agreements reached in Harare and Kampala, also call for military disengagement and deployment of United Nations observers. By the end of March the first observers were in place. The UN was reporting all parties to be in compliance with the disengagement agreement, except Jean-Pierre Bemba's MLC. Bemba's faction said it was awaiting guarantees for the safety of civilians before it started pulling back in Équateur province; it seemed to be trying to use the pullback as a bargaining chip.

At first, Joseph Kabila's willingness to talk gave him the diplomatic initiative over Kinshasa's two main adversaries, Uganda and Rwanda. Then Uganda withdrew some troops from Congo, and Rwanda pulled its troops back from Pweto (in eastern Katanga). At that point, Rwandan President Paul Kagame reiterated his country's position: that full withdrawal of Rwandan troops from Congo would follow the inter-Congolese dialogue and disarmament of the Rwandan Hutu forces fighting alongside the Congo government. But as Joseph Kabila (the army commander under his father), knew only too well, these Rwandan Hutu and their Burundian counterparts have constituted an essential element of Congo's military forces. Unable to build an effective Congolese army, Laurent Kabila had depended on the support of his allies Angola and Zimbabwe to hold the front and coordinate logistics, and the Hutu to launch offensives.

The positions of the parties on disengagement are incompatible, the interests less so. Kabila says he will not ask Zimbabwe, Angola, and Namibia to withdraw their troops until all the "aggressor troops" of Rwanda and Uganda have left Congolese soil. Kagame says that Rwanda will not leave until the Hutu "negative forces" have been disarmed. Behind these positions the interests are less sharply opposed. Kabila needs to retain enough military force to be able to defend his regime. Kagame needs to prevent attacks by the Hutu forces. Withdrawals by stages, in which some Angolans and Zimbabweans remain while the Hutu are being disarmed, might satisfy Congo and Rwanda.

RENEWED WAR?

The slain Kabila left a poisonous political and economic legacy for his country and for his son. Joseph Kabila must try to revive the Congolese economy, especially agriculture. The announcement, late in March, that the government was opening all Congo's roads to permit the free circulation of goods in the divided country was a step in the right direction.

A particularly thorny set of problems derives from Laurent Kabila's habit of financing the wars by mortgaging Congo's resources. He signed but canceled a \$1-billion contract with American Mineral Fields International (AMFI), based in former President Bill Clinton's hometown of Hope, Arkansas. AMFI reportedly invested heavily in mines and processing plants in Kolwezi and Kipushi, which are in Kabila's home province of Katanga. It remains to be seen whether President George W. Bush will intervene on the side of AMFI to recover investment costs.

Congo's allies presumably will want to preserve their stakes in the Congolese economy, even as they withdraw their troops. It will take an adept Joseph Kabila to extract his country from its present semi-colonial status.

In the political sphere, the new president must balance several contradictory imperatives. Although he will want to consolidate his position in the center, he must also build alliances. In the early 1990s many groups opposing the overly centralized Mobutu regime opted for federalism. In short order some federalists began engaging in genocidal violence, notably in Katanga, where Luba-Kasai were victims.

Kabila's strongest challenger is Jean-Pierre Bemba of the MLC, based in Mobutu's home region of Équateur. It is hard to see how that rebellion can be brought back into the fold without some form of power-sharing. But the danger of quid-pro-quo violence in Équateur is considerable.

Nowhere is the danger of postwar violence greater than in Kivu, and especially in North and South Kivu provinces. The old interlocking questions of nationality and land tenure remain unresolved. Rwandan withdrawal could lead to collapse of the RDC-Goma, never politically successful, and revenge seeking in which Tutsi and others aligned with the RDC and Rwanda will be victimized. Given the ambiguities of his own ethnic origins, this promises to be particularly dangerous for Kabila. Anti-Tutsi violence in North or South Kivu could even lead to renewed international war, undoing all progress made since the death of Laurent Kabila. ■