

Nationalism, and the Problem of Nation Building in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

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Abstract

Colonial legacies such as conflicts emanating from civil and ethnic strife, bad governance, authoritarian rule, as well as corruption which is omnipresent in various aspects of human endeavours, have been seen as the features of Belgian ex-colonies in Africa. As one of the ex-colonies, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been experiencing turbulent times courtesy of these legacies. Various violent activities captured during the country's struggle for independence, as well as the post-independence problems divulged in this paper evidenced the above assertion. Thus, this paper focuses on nationalism, and the problems of nation building in the Democratic Republic of Congo. These problems are explicated in the paper as the impediments to this African republic in her nation building attainment. Additionally, possible remedial measures which could assist the republic to attain nation building were provided in the paper.

Keywords: Nationalism, Nation Building, Conflict, Corruption.

1. Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Congo was originally inhabited by pigmies. In subsequent periods, however, the Bantu speaking people began migrating into the area and consequently settled in the savannah region of the territory. They increased considerably in number, and were coalescing into states, some of which governed large areas and had complex administrative structures. These people equally worked and traded the copper deposits of *Katanga* province, during this period.

In the fifteenth century- the period described as "the dawn of the age of ocean navigation" (Hochschild, 1998:7)-, Congo began experiencing contacts with the Europeans, following the visit of a Portuguese navigator, *Diogo Cao*, in 1482, to the country. Soon thereafter, the Portuguese established ties with the country.

In the late nineteenth century, the territory was occupied by Leopold II, king of the Belgians (1865-1909). Believing that Belgium needed colonies to ensure its prosperity, and sensing that the Belgians would not support colonial ventures, he privately set about establishing a colonial empire. Intrigued by the findings of Henry Morton Stanley (a European explorer whose work played an important part in the scramble of Africa) basically on the economic potentiality of the region, Leopold engaged him to establish the king's authority in the Congo basin- a development which, in addition to the Portuguese claims over the territory, led to the summoning of the Berlin Conference (1884-1885). In the conference, the European powers recognised Leopold's claim to the Congo basin.

In the early twentieth century (1908 precisely), Congo officially fell under the colonial control of the Belgian government. Discriminatory policies were introduced in the colonial administration of the territory. To facilitate and achieve their exploitative aims, roads and other construction facilities were put up. Furthermore, large plantations, and vast mining operations were set up with Africans (Congolese) forming the labour pool, while the Europeans were the managers.

In the mid-twentieth century (1950s), there were agitations for independence. With this development, a Belgian professor, *Antonie van Bilsen*, published a thirty year plan for granting Congo self-government. Skepticisms had arisen between the Belgians on one side, and the Congolese educated elites on the other. This intensified the agitation for independence especially from the *ABAKO*- a political party. In subsequent time, however, election was held, and political emancipation was granted to the Congolese.

Since independence, post-independence Congo has been an abode of conflicts emanating from bad governance, authoritarian rule, as well as political struggle. Additionally, the African republic is characteristically a home of corruption which has completely engulfed every aspect of human endeavour in

the society. These, as a matter of fact, have been envisaged as prime impediments in the country's attainment of nation building. These impediments are further explicated in this paper.

2. Democratic Republic of Congo at a glance

Democratic Republic of Congo or Congo Kinshasha is a nation located in Central Africa with dense forests. The African nation despite its abundant natural resources is economically stunted due to decades of misrule in the second half of the twentieth century, under dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko (formerly Joseph D. Mobutu). The nation which existed *ab initio* in regions was united as Congo Free State in 1885- a colony created by the Belgian King Leopold II in the late 19th century.

The country is bounded on the north by the Central African Republic, and South Sudan; on the east by Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Lake Tanganyika which separates it from Tanzania; on the south by Zambia, and Angola; and on the west by Republic of Congo, the Angolan enclave of Cabinda, and the Atlantic Ocean (http://www.wikipedia.org/Democratic_Republic_of_Congo). With a population of over 71 million and an area of 2,345,409 km², the country is rated the second largest country in Africa (by area), and the eleventh largest in the world (Ibid).

3. The Europeans and Pre-Independence Democratic Republic of Congo

Since the fifteenth century, Congo has had contacts with the outside world. These contacts which laid basis for trade amongst the Portuguese, Arabs, and the Bakongo people (an ethnic group in the country), started when the Portuguese explorers navigated the Congo River (Leslie, 1993:5). On hearing about the natural resources potential of Congo, King Leopold II, however, became interested in exploring the region. Consequently, Henry Morton Stanley who was during his periods, according to Pakenham (1991:317) "...lionized as the greatest African explorer of his age", was hired by the king for the survey of the Upper Congo. Thus, Congo as Leslie (1993:8) observed, "quickly became the personal property of the king" after three years of Stanley's assignment- a development which prompted the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 following Portugal's claim over the territory and the Congo River (Eluwa, Ukagwu, Nwachukwu, and Nwabani, 1996:179). In the conference, it was therefore formally acknowledged that the Congo was King Leopold's personal possession.

Having been formally acquired by King Leopold II, the country was christened Congo Free State. The administration during this period was based on exploitation and extraction, and by 1906, Congo was divided into fifteen provinces, with each administered by a Commissar. However, in 1908, rather than remain the personal property of the king, the Congo Free State became an official colony of Belgium following a move that was to usher in the close of the *Leopoldian* era in Belgium.

Under the new Belgian administration, the native chiefs were forced to submit to the administration or were undermined through Belgian selection of chiefs and other local colonial officials. Executive power rested with the Belgian Minister of Colonial Affairs who was residing in Brussels, and assisted by a colonial council. The legislative authority, on the other hand, was exercised by the Belgian parliament. Additionally, the country was administratively divided into four provinces- *Leopoldville*, *Equateur*, *Orientale*, and *Katanga*, each presided by a Vice Governor-General. In 1933, however, an administrative reform increased the number of the provinces to six- *Katanga (Elisabethville)*, *Kasai (Luluaborg)*, *Kivu (Bukavu)*, *Orientale (Stanleyville)*, *Equateur (Coquilhatville)*, and *lower Congo* (with the capital in Leopoldville) (Leslie, 1993:25), while the Vice Governors-General became Provincial Governors. Congolese were not recognized in the administration of their state, by the reform.

4. Nationalist Movement in Democratic Republic of Congo: The Road to Independence

Like most African countries, the twentieth century was the age of nationalists' struggle in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The non-inclusion of the Congolese in the colonial administration of the country- a policy adopted by the Belgian colonialists- led to the agitation for mantle of leadership by the educated elites- *evolues*. The works of the missionaries and their schools, and the World War II were contributory factors to the enlightenments of these elites. Many Congolese who were in Europe during the World War II, remained there after the war with the aims of acquiring knowledge in education. However, the discriminatory administrative policy of the Belgian colonialists called for public campaigns on equal treatments with the Europeans, by these elites. Consequently, the colonial administrations were petitioned for reforms in the government's political leadership and office, as well as for access to the scarce resources

of the country. Belgium, at this point, did not only remain adamant in conceding these requests, but also “gave no sign of being ready to surrender Congo” (Schatzberg, 1991:10).

As part of the agitation, associations were formed by different groups of the *evolues* which were aimed at achieving specific interests. For instance, ‘*Association du Personnel Indigene du Congo Belge et du Ruanda-Urundi*’ (Association of Indigenous Personnel in Belgium Congo and in Rwanda-Burundi, APIC)- a nascent union formed by a group of administration clerks which occupies itself primarily with questions such as that of equal pay for equal work, pension questions, and the treatment of Congolese workers and likely matters- was formed. This association as pointed out by Merriam (1961:118), did not only grow rapidly in influence through the provinces of Congo, but also began to create awareness of the necessity for a broader ideology amongst its members.

In a similar vein, the *Union des Interets Sociaux Congolais* (National Union of Congolese Social Interests-UNISCO) was formed in Leopoldville (now Kinshasha)- “which became the capital of colonial Congo from 1926” (http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgia_Congo)- by another group of the *evolues*. This association was founded as a study group with the principal aims of studying “the total suppression of all racial discrimination, the amelioration of social conditions of the Congolese in general, and the defence of the rights of the *evolues* in particular” (Merriam, 1961:118).

The existence of these associations dated prior to the emergence of the first real political parties. Furthermore, these associations gave the *evolues* a forum which did not only enable them to discuss their problems but equally see future possibilities. UNISCO itself, however, was further instrumental in beginning the careers of two Congolese statesmen, Joseph Kasavubu (the first president of the Democratic Republic of Congo), and Jean Bolikango (one time vice premier in the Democratic Republic of Congo), “who were... in the forefront of independence movement” (Ibid).

In the early 1950s were cries of the Congolese for political emancipation- a demand which was instigated by the inability of the colonial government to introduce radical and credible changes following the requests of the *evolues*. As a result, the elites began to take matters into their hands by continuing to organize themselves socially, and subsequently politically. A number of political organizations emerged during this period, but they never truly operated on the national level. Instead, they were developing along regional and ethnic lines- a development which saw “the manipulation of ethnicity for political gain” (McCalpin quoted in Clark, 2002:36). The first political organization to have emerged in this category was the *Alliance des Bakongo*- ABAKO, founded in 1950 as the *Association Culturelle des Bakongo* (lower Congo region), and was headed by Joseph Kasavubu. Initially a cultural association, ABAKO turned political, and from the mid-1950s became a vocal opponent of Belgium colonial rule. Additionally, the organization continued to serve as the major ethno-religious organization for the Bakongo and became closely intertwined with the *Kimbauguist Church*- a revival ministry founded by Simon Kimbaugu (a religious instructor whose movement was perceived as a threat by the Belgian colonial authorities leading to his arrest, imprisonment, and subsequent death in 1951)- which was extremely popular in the lower Congo.

Belgian professor Antoine van Bilsen, in 1955, made a publication known as *Thirty Year Plan for the Political Emancipation of Belgian Africa*, which called for the gradual emancipation of Congo over a thirty year period (the time which was expected would take to create educated elites who could replace the Belgians in the positions of power). This plan was suspicious to both the Belgian government, and many of the *evolues*. To the former, the plan meant eventually giving up Congo as Belgium as observed by House (1978:6-10), was not prepared to grant independence. To the latter, on the other hand, the plan was not just seen as too long a wait for their accession to the political kingdom, but equally meant that Belgium would still be ruling the country for another three decades. As a result, the *evolues*, particularly those of the *ABAKO*, requested for an immediate independence.

By way of experiment, the colonial government, however, organized the first municipal elections in 1957, in which the natives were allowed to stand for office, and cast their votes (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgian_Congo). These elections were held in three urban centres- *Leopoldville* (the capital of the Belgian Congo), *Elisabethville* (now *Lumumbashi*)- a city in the south eastern part of the country and the capital of Katanga region, and *Jadotville* (now *Likasi*)- a city in the south eastern part of the country equally located in the Katanga region. However, there emerged a sudden acceleration in the demands for political emancipation- a development caused by events in 1957 and 1958,

respectively, which took place outside Congo. In 1957, independence was granted to Ghana, and in 1958, President Charles De Gaulle delivered a speech just across the river in Congo-Brazzaville proposing independence for Francophone Africa. With the influence of these events, thus, the demands for independence quickly radicalized and gained momentum in Belgium Congo.

In addition, the World Exhibition organized in Brussels in 1958 (Expo 58), which proved an eye-opener for many Congolese leaders having gained opportunity to travel to Belgium for the first time (Ibid); and the Pan-African Conference held in Accra, Ghana, on December 11, 1958, with three *Mouvement National Congolais* (National Congolese Movement- MNC, a political party established on August 26, 1958, with the aim of achieving Congo's independence and supporting a unitary and centralized Congolese nation after independence) members- *Patrice Lumumba* (the party's president), *Joseph Ngalula*, and *Gaston Diomi*- in attendance, changed the face of independence struggle in the country. The Accra conference did not only reveal to these delegates the independence movements in other parts of the continent, but equally exposed them to other African leaders- Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sekou Toure of Guinea, and Houphouet-Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire (Merriam, 1961:82-83)- who had led their countries out of European colonial empires. Upon their return, Patrice Lumumba made a burning speech. Thus, he stated,

...The conference demands immediate independence for all Africa, and that no country in Africa remain under foreign domination after 1960... we state with satisfaction that the resolutions of the conference coincide with the views of our movement. The independence we claim in the name of peace cannot be considered any longer by Belgium as a gift, but to the contrary... it is a right that the Congolese people have lost. The objective is to unite and organize the Congolese masses in the struggle for the amelioration of their lot, the liquidation of colonial regime, and the exploitation of man by man. It is high time that these Congolese people proved to the world that they are cognizant of the realities of the "autonomy-gift" which the government is preparing and promising. We don't want this autonomy... The Congolese people must stop sleeping and waiting for independence and liberty. The Congo is our country. It is our duty to make it greater and better (Lumumba quoted in Merriam, 1961:83-84).

Following this speech were the serious riots of January 4-7, 1959, in Leopoldville- events which made an unanticipated independence seem inevitable.

A roundtable conference was convened in Brussels in January 1960 with the plan of granting independence within six months. In addition, Patrice Lumumba who had been convicted because of incitement against the colonial government was discharged for the occasion. Thus, it was agreed at the conference that Congolese be granted practically of all her demands. A general election was scheduled for May, 1960, and full independence was scheduled for June 30, 1960. Additionally, a constitution- the *Loi Fondamentale* (supreme law), which was to be the basis of social and political order of the new state- was equally drafted and approved by the Brussels authorities.

More so, the creation of political parties in respect of the upcoming elections was encouraged by the Belgian administration. The National Congolese Movement (MNC) led by Patrice Lumumba, whose support was concentrated in the East Kasai, and Orientale; the ABAKO headed by Joseph Kasavubu, which has its constituent support in the capital and the rest of the lower Congo region; and the *Parti National du Progres* (National Progressive Party- PNP)- a coalition of ethnic based parties which had support base of native chiefs, with Equateur province as its regional centre, and Paul Boyla as its leader, became the three most important political parties. The elections were held on the scheduled date, and on June 30, 1960, emerged an independent Democratic Republic of Congo.

5. Post-Independence Democratic Republic of Congo: Problems of Nation Building in an African Republic

Since attaining independence, the Democratic Republic of Congo has been known for her incessant chaotic situation which has become a feature of the society. This situation hinders the country from achieving nation building- a term which Abia (2006:53) sees as the process whereby commitment and loyalty are transferred to the larger central political system of a country by the indigenes with the aim of achieving a common desired goal.

Conflict has been a major contributor to the chaotic state of the country. Since independence in 1960, there's been recorded numerous eruptions of conflicts stemming from authoritarianism, foreign interference, political tussle, and ethnic strife. For instance, early in May, 1960, the new administration of Congo experienced mutiny, and subsequently, multiple secessions of her provinces- *Katanga*, with *Moise Tshome* as its leader (Palmer and Perkins, 2010:341); *South Kasai*, with *Albert Kalonji* and *Joseph Ngalula* as president and head of government respectively; as well as *Orientale*, and *Leopoldville* provinces, respectively. These secessions were as a result of the ethnic strife which had emanated from the Kasavubu-Lumumba (ABAKO, and MNC members, respectively) tussle over legitimacy in the country's political leadership- a situation which had arisen following a discord between these two Congolese political lords over constitutional impasse having engaged in an uneasy partnership with Kasavubu as the president, and Lumumba as the prime minister. The situation further worsened when the cold war brought the fight between Soviet Union and the United States to the country. As a result, Lumumba received Soviet's support as the legitimate leader of the country, while the rival United States of America challenged the development.

The Kasavubu-Lumumba government further experienced another uprising in one of the provinces of the country- *Stanleville* (now *Kisangani*)-, caused by pro-Lumumba government, leading to the declaration of the province on September 17, 1964, as *People's Republic of Congo*, with the recognition of *Antonie Gizenga* (former deputy prime minister in Lumumba's government) as the prime minister - a development whose root was traceable to the dismissal of the prime minister by the president on September 5, 1960. Additionally, in the eastern province of *Kivu*, another *Lumbuist* rebellion led by Laurent D. Kabila, was launched in the same year (1964).

Another example was the numerous revolts launched by Congolese students against the regime of Joseph D. Mobutu (later Mobutu Sese Seko), who had come into power following the *coup d'etat* launched in 1965. These revolts were directed towards his dictatorial and/or authoritarian rule. For instance, there had been cases of severe human rights violation and political repression, the absoluteness of the executive power, constant changing of the constitution which was done at his discretion, banning of the political parties and the compulsory nature of membership into his political party- *Popular Movement of the Revolution* (MPR), periodic holding of elections with the incumbent head of state as the only candidate, and the integral nature of corruption into the system which are mostly conspicuous on the politicians who depend on his good will during his regime. The conflicts or revolts however ended in May 1997 with the ousting of the head of state by the Allied Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo (*Alliance des Forces Democratiques pour la Liberation du Congo-Zaire- AFDL*)- a resistant force led by Laurent D. Kabila (Mobutu's successor).

The unfavourable activities in Kabila's regime such as the encouragement of favouritism and nepotism, lack of state budget, issuance of laws by presidential decree, poor monetary policy which led the nation to a near economic collapse, banning of political parties, dissolution of the parliament, and the suppression of local bodies, pushed the country towards another conflict in August 1998 (and ended in 2003)- the Congo war, which was regarded as the world's deadliest conflict since World War II (Naidoo, 2000:91-92). As a result, the country suffered hugely with fighting between the Congolese government supported by Angola, Chad, Sudan, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, and on the other side, Congolese rebels backed by Burundi, Rwanda, and Uganda. Many other militia groups that claimed to be defender groups for their communities also became active participants in the conflict.

In post-Laurent Kabila era, conflicts continued to permeate the country. Despite the pacific measures, reforms, and negotiations initiated and carried out by the new government (under Joseph Kabila), violent activities has not come to a complete halt. In the early era of Joseph Kabila's government, the Eastern provinces, specifically, the *Ituri*, *North Kivu*, *South Kivu*, and *Katanga*, remained unstable while rebel groups continued fighting among themselves and with the government. As a result, there have been consequences like killings, sexual crimes, and the use of women as sexual slaves (Whiteman, 2006:38).

Corruption, alongside conflicts, has equally been playing a contributory role in preventing the Democratic Republic of Congo from realizing nation building. This has been a major challenge facing the nation (as it has been deeply rooted in the system) since its acquisition by King Leopold II. Despite its abundant resources, the economy of the country has been in shambles courtesy of corruption. State resources are not only squandered in election campaigns, but are equally siphoned off to private accounts. The customs

revenues are embezzled, a quarter of the national budget is not properly accounted for, and millions of dollars are misappropriated. The abuse of public office for personal gains is omnipresent from clerical staff to the highest members of government. Political actors regularly interfere in the administration, customs service, army, and control of natural resources to embezzle funds- a development which has perpetuated a system of governance that is largely predatory, with the state living off the citizenry and the country's resources without providing even the basic social services.

Corruption and politicization within the administrative apparatus undercuts the state's capacity to collect revenues or use them judiciously, while promotions in the administrations depend more on connections than competence. In the armed forces, the higher authorities with relative ease embezzle the salaries of their troops. In turn, the local population are harassed by the troops who live in terrible conditions (<http://www.worldbank.org/WEBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/CONGODEMOCRATIC>). Furthermore, the army itself is a threat to civilians in the country, while the police are seen as a menace in many areas.

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Absence of peace and stability has been the greatest challenge facing the Democratic Republic of Congo. Despite the official end of a huge conflict in 2003, the country continued to be regularly listed as the site of world's most humanitarian crises. Furthermore, there still exist problems of insecurities even with the current practice of a democratic system of government.

Since the beginning of the conflicts in post-independence Democratic Republic of Congo, millions of lives have been terminated, unaccounted injured, and other millions displaced. The conflicts have not only shattered the economy, but have equally destroyed infrastructure with decades of mismanagement, and authoritarian and corrupt rule. Health and educational services have equally been severely affected leading to high rates of deaths, illiteracy, and proliferation of diseases. These conditions have been persistent in the country.

As remedial measures to these problems, thus, democracy must be effective in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and improvements in governance should be the primary focus of all the local, regional, and international actors in their efforts to assist the long-suffering masses. Political ruckus emanating from misconduct of elections (as one was reported to have taken place in the country in connection with the concluded parliamentary and presidential elections conducted on November 28, 2011) which can lead to the outbreak of conflicts should be avoided. More so, developments of initiatives on violence prevention, and the addressing of the disparities among different ethnic groups in the country will be advantageous to violence control efforts.

Additionally, strategies should be adopted or employed on how to promote democracy and rule of law. These measures, if adopted, can enable the country to be chaos free and consequently, attain nation building.

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