ASR FORUM: THE CONGO (DRC) FIFTY YEARS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

The Structural Roots of the DRC's Current Disasters: Deep Dilemmas

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The staggering dilemmas facing the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) today have their structural roots in both the near and distant past. The purpose of this brief reflection is to consider the nature of these disasters and to deflect discussion away from those hardy perennials that somehow, usually incorrectly, pass as explanations of the Congo's problems. Ethnic tensions, corruption, and the absence of democracy all contribute in harmful ways to the current situation, but they do not tap into the deeper structural roots of the disasters besetting the DRC. More specifically, by "structural roots" I mean those features of the Congolese political landscape that seem to recur, albeit in slightly different form, across time and therefore across different political regimes as well.

I should like to emphasize here the long-term nature of these dilemmas; to do that I shall deliberately avoid the term most often associated with the Congo's problems: *crisis*. This term is profoundly misleading. The original medical metaphor refers to a pathological condition that causes the body to become acutely ill. As the medical situation worsens the stricken individual becomes sicker and sicker, typically with some sort of spiking fever, until either the fever breaks or the patient dies. These medical crises

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are, in other words, typically short-lived and generally have either a positive or negative resolution. The Congo's "crises," however, have been recurring in one form or another since the early days of the country's colonial period. They are really deep dilemmas that are best thought of as long-term, intermittently recurrent, continuities that, more often than not, have resulted in disasters for the Congolese people. Let me address several of these continuities. In doing so, I hope that such an approach will contribute toward at least a partial understanding of some of the things that are going on today in the DRC.

Continuity #1: A Struggle over Visions of the DRC's Basic Political Order

The first continuity I would like to address concerns the struggle over visions of the DRC's basic political order. The political turbulence and violence in the eastern Congo from the early 1990s to the present (2011) is in some ways the most recent manifestation of a long-term debate that has never really been resolved by the Congolese political class. To be sure, this tension also existed under colonialism as well-organized Katangan settlers repeatedly pressed the colonial state for greater doses of provincial autonomy. Moreover, from the earliest days of independence in 1960, there has been in the Congo a political struggle between, on the one side, those favoring a strong, unitarist government in Kinshasa and, on the other side, those favoring a substantial devolution of power to regional centers.

Immediately after independence these two tendencies were most visibly represented by Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, who had staked out a centralizing-unitarist vision of an independent Congo that featured a strong national state. But President Joseph Kasavubu tended to favor a more decentralized and federalist vision—composed of a weaker central government with much power residing in the provinces. The unitarist vision was derailed with the assassination of Lumumba and by the rest of the turbulence of the early years of independence, but the various secessions (most notably in Katanga) from 1960 to 1963 certainly added to a climate that made possible the emergence of the *provincettes* (small provinces) in the mid-1960s. Based on the older administrative districts of the Belgian colonial state, these more localized governments did not last long. The reemergence of Moise Tshombe, erstwhile leader of secessionist Katanga, as head of the national government, and then the seizure of power by Joseph Mobutu (later to rename himself Mobutu Sese Seko) in 1965, ushered in an era in which the centralizing vision held pride of place (see Young 1965). And Mobutu, of course, would remain in power until 1997.

But even at the high water mark of the Mobutu regime in the mid-1970s, the unitarist centralizing state had some very grave limitations. In some ways, its eyes were far bigger than its stomach, and there were large portions of Congo's immense geographic space which the state could not

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effectively control—termed "Red Zones" in the administrative terminology. In Equateur Province, for example, people would withdraw into the forest or to the islands of the Congo River system to escape the long arm of the state. Most notably the Kitawalists, a religious grouping associated with the Watchtower Movement of the Jehovah's Witnesses, delinked themselves from the state apparatus in this way. But ordinary individuals seeking to avoid the long arm of the state also exited to remote areas that the state had neither the resources nor the infrastructure to be able to reach. In the eastern hinterland of the country in the 1970s and 1980s, Laurent Kabila set up a state within a state in the highlands near Fizi, west of Lake Tanganyika; there he was able to preserve his autonomy by striking deals with the local Congolese army commanders in which stolen gold would often be traded for just enough arms to keep the state at bay. Even under Mobutu, and within the state itself, there were always certain pockets of resistance to an extreme form of centralized rule in which all decisions of consequence were reserved for presidential discretion. Under certain conditions and in certain contexts, for example, the magistrates and the judiciary resisted the untrammeled exercise of executive power (see Schatzberg 1988).

Perhaps by the end of the 1980s, and certainly by the 1990s, the sway of the central state had declined substantially. And, according to a very old pattern, when the central state's effective reach narrowed and withdrew from the hinterland, there arose in the provinces a series of regional autonomies that took more and more effective power unto themselves. This political pattern was replicated in the economy as economic activity fled from the formal to the informal economy (see MacGaffey 1988). So the effective power of the central state varied inversely with the power of these regional autonomies. Unfortunately, the rise of regional autonomies was often accompanied by a vision of ethnic exclusivity that could often take a nasty and violent form. Violence in the Kivus, for example, dates from the early 1990s—before the Rwandan genocide—and was intimately tied to both land rights and citizenship rights.

In short, from the 1990s there was in the Kivus what David Newbury (1966) has called "convergent catastrophes." Catastrophe number one was the condition at the local level, spawned by these local confrontations. Catastrophe number two was the Rwandan genocide and the flight of one million refugees into the eastern Congo. Catastrophe number three was, as we have seen, the larger collapse and ongoing demise of the central Congolese state and its consequent inability to prevent the Hutu *genocidaires* and the Hutu FDLR from continuing their struggle against the Kagame RPF state in Rwanda from Congolese soil. And the fourth catastrophe, dating from the 1996 invasion of the Congo by its eastern neighbors, has been the four to six million deaths that have occurred in the eastern Congo since then, as well as the on-going war against women and civilians (see Newbury 1996). The result, of course, has been a humanitarian disaster of staggering proportions.

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Over time, however, the interplay between these two visions of power, as well as the inability of the Congolese to decide this question in a way that most people would find satisfactory, has led to political conflicts in the absence of institutions able to contain them. Please note, for example, that although the DRC's 2005 constitution called for the creation of twenty-six new provinces to be carved out of the already existing eleven by 2009, as of 2011 this was not yet fully implemented. These new provinces, it must be added, are the direct descendants of the old colonial districts and of the *provincettes* of the early 1960s. Moreover, it remains to be seen if they will ever fully exist, much less actually receive the 40 percent revenue sharing they were promised under the 2005 constitution.

Continuity #2: Internal and External Predation

A second major continuity is, unfortunately, predation—both international and domestic. Historically, both the Independent State of the Congo and the Belgian Congo, the colonial state, were involved in the siphoning of resources from the Congo, although the latter did reinvest a small portion of the extracted resources back into unpaved rural roads, health care, and primary education (see Hochschild 1999; Young 1965:229). After independence, the pattern of predation continued, but this time international greed and local greed worked very much in tandem. Multinational interests became wealthier, but so did Mobutu and members of the political class around him. By the end of the Mobutu regime, a profound weakness in the central state had created regional opportunities for predation. Whereas this was once a phenomenon driven largely by interests external to the African continent, the opportunity to plunder the Congo was now also fully seized by neighboring African states during the two Congo Wars (see Turner 2007; Reyntjens 2009; Prunier 2009).

And then there are those commodities that seem to bring out the worst in both international and local interests. The "red rubber" atrocities of an earlier era have given way to those surrounding the mining of coltan, the colloquial African name for columbite-tantalite. The 2000 launch of the SONY PlayStation2 required a large increase in production of electric capacitors. These are made primarily with tantalum, which greatly increased the world price of the powder from US$49/pound to US$275/pound and resulted in accelerated mining of the Congolese hills containing coltan. In addition, sales in computers, mobile phones, and DVD players—all of which need coltan—spiked around this same time (see Lasker 2008). This type of resource base, combined with a weakened central state, regional political disaffection, and an uncontrollable flow of arms creates insecurity while providing a powerful incentive for the emergence of regional warlords.

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Continuity #3: Culture and Power

The third, and final, continuity I will mention concerns a cultural understanding of power. A Congolese political axiom, "Le pouvoir se mange entier" (Power is eaten whole), conditions how Congolese politicians understand and appreciate power. What this means, concretely, is that there is a real reluctance to share power, to devolve power. The impulse, even today, is to hang on to whatever parcel of power one might be lucky enough to have, and then to exploit it for all it is worth. This is usually done because of the insecurity of the political situation and because one can never really know, especially in a nondemocratic context characterized by political instability and weak political institutions, just how long one will have power. There is thus a tendency to counter political insecurity by exploiting whatever power one has, as quickly as possible, because the political class—and I include the military officers in this grouping—never know when that power will disappear (see Schatzberg 2001).

Of course, struggles for political power exist everywhere. But elsewhere there are institutions, often strong ones, that facilitate the sharing and the checking of power. Unfortunately, that is not yet the case in the DRC (see Human Rights Watch 2007; International Crisis Group 2007).

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