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Congo

The Congo challenge

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Laurent Kabila says his new government will prioritise the social needs of the population, while respecting market forces and the global neo-liberal economic context. Eric Toussaint and Denise Comanne evaluate the challenge facing the new regime.

The reconstruction of Congo-Zaire is a huge task. The country ranks 141 out of 174 in the United Nations Development Programme index of human development for 1996.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Laurent_Kabila.jpg]

Over 26 million of the country's 40 m. inhabitants have no access to health care; and 27 m. lack access to clean water. Life expectancy is 51.6 years and falling (down from 53 in 1990). Most of these statistics are probably outdated: the decline of the state apparatus in recent years was so severe that statistical series were no longer published.

At the same time, Alliance leaders are right when they say that Congo-Zaire has colossal material and human resources. This gives the new regime the possibility to impose some conditions on international capital, which is desperate to "come back and do business." A series of progressive measures could be implemented, benefiting from the legitimacy earned by overthrowing former president Mobutu Sese Seko.

First could come a monetary reform, with the aim of reducing the country's catastrophic inflation rate, so as to protect the buying power of the population and encourage the re-launching of economic activities.

Monetary reform is never socially neutral, since it almost inevitably re-distributes wealth. A progressive reform would involve exchanging old Zaire bank notes for a new currency at a fair exchange rate for a sum reflecting reasonable personal savings. Those with more cash than this would have to deposit their Zaires in a blocked bank account, until they explained where the money came from. Wealth that cannot be justified could simply be confiscated. The rest could be exchanged for the new currency, but at a lower exchange rate

The Sandinistas introduced a reform of this type in 1985. Belgium did so after the Second World War. For obvious reasons, this kind of reform is a harsh blow to speculators, who will find it very difficult to exchange their mountains of Zaire bank notes for new money, or anything else of value. Such a bank note exchange would represent an extraordinary tax on personal fortunes, and the confiscation of part of the most illegitimate private wealth. It would favour those with little or medium wealth, at the expense of those who enriched themselves during the Mobutu regime. By reducing the amount of money in circulation, the regime would reduce inflation.

Cancel the debt!

Congo's foreign debt is about US\$12 billion: \$275 for every man woman and child, or rather more than the average yearly per capita income, \$242. About 1/3 of the debt represents overdue interest payments. Three quarters of the total is owed to foreign governments, mainly the USA, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium and Japan.

The new authorities could simply suspend debt repayments, and begin negotiating with the country's creditors to establish what part of the debt should be cancelled as illegitimate ("odious," in banking and diplomatic terminology).

This would allow the regime to use some of the country's export earnings in a vast programme to improve the living conditions of the majority of the population, rather than continuing to see these revenues diverted into the pockets of the country's first world creditors.

Congo-Zaire has enormous resources. Its main exports are copper, diamonds, cobalt, oil and coffee. The country also has important deposits of other strategic minerals, of particular interest to the aerospace industries. Re-starting these export-oriented sectors will generate significant income. Part of the surplus could be used to improve the country's dilapidated mining and processing equipment.

The new regime should demand that the country's commercial partners and creditors confiscate the Mobutu clan's wealth and property abroad, and return these resources to the country's new authorities, as contributions to a national social development fund, under the supervision of the new authorities and popular groups.

When dictators are overthrown, there is usually a need for massive literacy and vaccination projects, and the development of a basic health care system covering the whole country. Congo is no exception. The adult illiteracy rate is 74%. At least 6.2 m. children do not go to school. The infant mortality rate is 93 per 1,000 (ten times higher than in Cuba). Every year, about 350,000 children aged under five die. The country has one doctor for 14,300 inhabitants and one nurse for every 1,350. Under Mobutu, health spending represented only 0.8% of GDP.

No privatisation of land or mining

The state is still the main shareholder in the country's huge mining companies. This leading role should be preserved. The state should negotiate with foreign capital to guarantee a flow of investments for the modernisation of industry and infrastructure.

Seventy percent of the population is rural, and agriculture represents 38% of the country's GDP (the total value of goods and services). Over 25 million rural Congolese live below the poverty threshold. The new regime should guarantee those who work the land continued, or improved access to it.

Land should not be privatised, as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are urging. South African agribusiness has clear plans to expand northwards, and the richer members of Congo's emigre communities may also be tempted to buy up tracts of land.

A democratic and pluralist Congo

The new regime should guarantee complete liberty of expression and association, except for "Mobutu nostalgic." The country is fortunate, in that it already has a variety of independent publications, and a very rich tissue of community and civic groups (trade unions, district associations, Christian base communities, and so on.)

A multi-party system should also be guaranteed. The effervescence of political life a few years ago, in the opposition-dominated Sovereign National Conference, has declined, but has not been forgotten. Political debate at the national level requires the comparison of opposing political programmes, generated by parties which are truly different from each other.

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If fundamental liberties are guaranteed without restriction or delay, the new regime will be able to take the necessary time to prepare the first elections.

There are worrying rumours that all or part of the Mobutu regime's armed forces are to be integrated into the Alliance's rebel army. It is very important that all sections of the former regime's repressive apparatus should be completely dissolved. Key Mobutu supporters should be purged from the civil service. Once the country is pacified, the armed forces should be used for a massive public works programme.

Those thought responsible for crimes against the population should be tried. But the death penalty should be abolished, and measures taken to avoid summary executions, corporal punishment, and local terror campaigns.

The tragic Rwandan refugee crisis was not created by the Alliance. But allegations of attacks against refugees by Alliance troops should be investigated, and those responsible should be tried. The remaining refugees should be returned to Rwanda in the best possible conditions. Those among the refugees who are suspected of participation in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda should be arrested and handed over to the Rwandan authorities for judgement. The international community does not just have a responsibility to come to the aid of the refugees. It has an equal responsibility towards the local population.

The anti-imperialist left in the North must defend the sovereignty of the new Congo. It should campaign for the immediate and unconditional cancellation of ex-Zaire's foreign debt, and the confiscation of the Mobutu clan's wealth abroad. The foreign troops which the Northern powers have gathered just outside Congo's frontiers should be withdrawn immediately.

Our solidarity with the people of Congo-Zaire did not start yesterday. Nor will it end tomorrow. It will continue as long as there is a struggle to rebuild a democratic and sovereign Congo.