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Congo

The People are Ready for Change

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Under the Mobutu dictatorship, Jean Baptiste Sondji was a leader of the Patriotic Front, the main radical left party in the Kinshasa-based opposition. The Front distinguished itself from the rest of the opposition parties, by refusing to make compromises with the Mobutu regime. Whenever Mobutu invited opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi to form a government, the FP refused to participate. When it realised that the "transitional parliament" was a farce, it withdrew. In the end, it was Laurent Kabila's eastern rebel Alliance which dislodged President Mobutu, not the opposition in Kinshasa. But the democratic struggle in the capital has marked popular consciousness. In this interview, recorded in April, before the Mobutu regime fell, we asked Jean Baptiste Sondji about the opposition movement in the capital, his perception of Kabila and the Alliance, and his hopes for the future.

In the early 1990s, Zaire, like many other African countries, entered a phase of "democratisation." Seven years later, we have a civil war. Is this a consequence of "democratisation," or something else?

The civil war was a consequence of the particular "democratisation" which was introduced. This country had lived under a dictatorship for many years. When the regime felt the wind of change in the air, it organised a mechanism to resist change. Mobutu's whole "democratisation" programme prevented a real democratic development. The regime's constant, bitter resistance to change exacerbated the contradictions in society, creating the conditions for a civil war.

A few years ago, Mobutu organised a "popular consultation," because he needed to know what the people really thought. The majority expressed a desire for profound changes. Convinced that he could control events, Mobutu began planning a custom-made democratisation authorising just two opposition parties. But popular resistance imposed a multi-party situation. Then Mobutu proposed a "constitutional conference," rather than the "sovereign national conference" demanded by the opposition. Finally, the "sovereign national conference" did take place, but the regime blocked so much of its work that its recommendations were never implemented. Neither were the proposed "hearings" on the people's needs held.

The "sovereign national conference" elected Etienne Tshisekedi as Prime Minister. Mobutu quickly sacked him. But with Kabila half-way to the capital, the dictator invited the opposition leader to side with him against the armed rebels. Why?

This shows the contradictions of the whole "sovereign national conference" scheme. That body recognised the overwhelming responsibility of Mobutu and his system for the disintegration of the state in Zaire. Most of those present wanted to remove Mobutu from his positions. But the US stressed that the dictator must be offered an honourable exit, because of services rendered to them [during the cold war]. US envoys proposed to the Kinshasa opposition that Mobutu surrender real power, but remain as symbolic head of state. The "radical" opposition around Etienne Tshisekedi lapped up this idea, and began repeating it like parrots from the tribune of the "sovereign national conference." Our party disagreed, saying that Mobutu should be removed completely, and should stand trial.

Everyone agreed that Mobutu must go, sooner or later. The "sovereign national conference" wanted to reach this objective by gentle means. This didn't work. As everyone now realises, Mobutu did not become a symbolic head of state. He continued to rule, with an iron fist. He prevented the continuing democratisation of the country.

This blockage is at the root of the emergence of the armed struggle towards the end of 1996. All patriots should support this action, to reach the goals which we have supposedly proclaimed. but strangely, Tshisekedi wanted to

The People are Ready for Change

throw Mobutu a life-belt, by imposing himself between the dictator and Kabila. He even invited Kabila and the Alliance to join a government, with himself as Prime Minister. The rebels accepting posts in another Mobutu government! Grotesque!

French media say Kabila is a puppet of US interests against France in the region.

When the civil war started, the media talked about the rebellion of "Banyamulenge" Tutsis, and warned against the implosion of Zaire in ethnic conflicts. The conflict in Rwanda, and tension between residents of Eastern Zaire, some of distant or recent Rwandan origin, certainly contributed to the rebellion in the East of Zaire. But the conflict cannot be reduced to an ethnic conflict.

As the rebellion progressed, the ethnic thesis was forgotten, and replaced with warnings against the struggle of anglophone interests against France. Everyone knows that this country's enormous resources have always made it an object of desire for the great powers. But when the USA decided that their old ally Mobutu was a bad thing for the country, and that it was time to get rid of him, what were we to do? The new US position coincided with that of the majority of the people of Zaire. We could only welcome the change in US strategy. Mobutu only stayed in power for so long because of the support of the great powers. So if some of them now wanted to offer military or other aid to get rid of him, fine.

To deduce from this that Kabila is the puppet of the US and other powers is to ignore the level of political consciousness among the people of Zaire. We have been deeply traumatised by 37 years of Mobutu, and similar neo-colonial regimes. We have become well aware of the negative role of the foreign powers. The people of Zaire will never again accept to be ruled by puppets. I am convinced that Laurent Kabila is aware of this reality.

As for the conflict between the USA and France, it doesn't concern us. We aren't French, and we aren't going to become Americans. Independently of whether we use French, English or both to communicate among ourselves.

Where Zaire is concerned, the western powers are navigating without a map. They haven't been very good at managing the situation in Zaire. The US, France and Belgium made an enormous effort to impose Kengo wa Dongo as Prime Minister instead of Tshisekedi, ignoring the clear wishes of the "sovereign national conference." But although he had all the resources at his disposition, Prime Minister Kengo wa Dongo failed miserably. If the western powers can't ensure their rule through a perfect agent of neo-colonialism like him, why should they be able to rule through Laurent Kabila?

Kabila's success depends on his ability to commune with the aspirations of our people: better living conditions, in a context of liberty and true democracy. A context in which the common interest is more important than individual interests. These aspirations could take the form of better education for all, full employment, access to quality health care, better housing, and so on.

Does the Alliance have a plan which can satisfy these social aspirations?

If the Alliance wants to succeed, if it wants to enter into communion with our people, it has no alternative but to put into place a policy which aims above all to satisfy these aspirations. If it does not, then the civil war will have been for nothing. This might sound idealist. But the central question is precisely this.

The Alliance is a young organisation, formed in autumn 1996. As such, it is not easy to develop a coherent project. But it could orient itself by analysing our country's recent past, and identifying the factors which led to the current

collapse. Our economy is completely outward-turned. It meets the needs of the west for raw materials much more than the needs of the people of Zaire. This is what has led to the current situation. So the first thing we must do is reverse this economic situation. To build up an economy which has as its central goal the satisfaction of the needs of the population.

Nowadays, humanity is shocked by the neo-liberal currents which, in this part of the world, are imposing the privatisation of public sector enterprises, on the grounds that they are badly managed. As far as Zaire is concerned, we have plenty of badly managed private companies too. Plenty of bankrupt private sector companies too. The solution to bad management is not privatisation, but good management.

In the industrialised countries, the second World War was followed by three decades of constant growth, and practically full employment. These sustained levels of growth and employment were only possible because the state controlled whole sectors of the economy, and was able to orient these sectors in a direction which benefited the community.

What do we see today? The state is totally withdrawing from sectors which it once controlled. Not because they are badly managed, but just because neo-liberal ideology says so. We see social crises, growing unemployment, and poverty.

Surely, an economy which is not at the service of the community can only be a source of troubles.

All this means that our country, and the Alliance in particular, should draw these lessons, and firmly reject the structural adjustment policy being imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This is a fundamental choice. It will determine the direction events in our country will take.

How widespread are your views within the Kinshasa opposition?

You have to distinguish the leaders of the political parties from the ordinary people. 95% of the politicians in Zaire are agents of neo-colonialism. For these people, Zaire's problems are a simple problem of bad management. They think we just need to improve the management of the country, and inject a dose of morality, and the splendour of the good old days will return. This is quite obviously false. But it is this type of analysis which leads Zairian politicians to opt for reformism. Many even envisaged some kind of harmonious cohabitation with Mobutu. They considered the armed struggle against the Mobutu regime as something opposed to good behaviour, even anti-democratic.

All of these politicians are frightened of the real changes which our country needs. Because they know that if those kind of policies are implemented, they and those like them will disappear from the political scene.

The political blockage in Zaire [in the months before Kabila took power, Ed.] is largely the fault of this political class.

What other types of political activism are there?

The "parliament on its feet" is a phenomenon of the 1990s. Its name stresses its difference from a regular parliament, where the deputies are comfortably seated, and therefore less alert. During the Sovereign National Conference period, the population followed the debates with great interest.

Whenever a participant said something which was against the interest of the population, the sanction was immediate.

The People are Ready for Change

The politician's house was identified, and totally destroyed by the crowd. The luxury villa of one of Mobutu's Ministers of Health was destroyed in four hours. Even the walls were dismantled, by hundreds of angry people.

Later, "parliaments on their feet" began to meet at newspaper stands. Political activists were invited to come and discuss with them. The movement had a semi-clandestine organisational structure. But it was efficient enough to be able to survey any state representative or politician, anywhere in the country. I remember once, when Tshisekedi was prime minister, he received a European Union delegation, mainly German-speakers. When they emerged from Tshisekedi's house, the "parliament on its feet" was waiting, with a message in German which they passed to the delegation. As you can see, the eyes and ears of the people are organised!

There are almost as many trade unions as political parties. Some were only created so that their leaders could participate in the Sovereign National Congress. There is not, in these groups, a sense of struggle in defence of workers' interests.

Of course, given the extreme poverty of Zairian workers, you can imagine the enormous difficulties which those few unions which do try to organise themselves face. Among those which have managed to organise the workforce, and oblige the authorities to renounce certain practices are the union at ONATRA, the company which controls Matadi, Kinshasa and some other ports, and the Matadi-Kinshasa railway. This union forced the Kengo government to abandon its plans to privatise ONATRA, through a strike which almost suffocated the country, particularly the capital, Kinshasa.

The civil servants' union has also managed to organise strikes, though it is a weaker organisation than the ONATRA union. Another serious union exists at Gecamines, which has a monopoly on the exploitation and sale of Zaire's copper and cobalt. Workers there went on strike recently, to reclaim several months unpaid wages, which Mobutu wanted to allocate to the "war effort."

Is there any kind of revolutionary left in Zaire?

This is a country with enormous human and natural potential, but characterised by extreme poverty. The situation is explosive, and the contradictions are so sharp that a radical change is overdue. And yet, there are no well structured, well implanted revolutionary political organisations, which could respond to this situation. This is for historic reasons. Zaire's intellectual elite was mainly trained by the Mobutu regime, and most of the education system is controlled by the Catholic church. All this has limited the penetration of revolutionary theories and ideas into the country. But, in our opinion, the current situation, which is obliging a growing number of Zairians to adopt a revolutionary praxis, can only facilitate the rapid assimilation of revolutionary theories by the masses.

Jean Baptiste Sondji was interviewed in Kinshasa by our equatorial Africa correspondent Jean Nanga. This interview was first published in the May 1997 issue of our French sister publication Inprecor. In the coming days we will interview Mr. Sondji again, concentrating on the situation since Laurent Kabila's troops entered Kinshasa. That interview will be printed in the July issue of International Viewpoint (see ["Congo-Zaire's first reforms"](#)).