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Congo

The Congo in permanent instability

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The assassination of Laurent Desire' Kabila has not, at first sight, changed much in the Congo. The military apparatus quickly designated his son, Joseph Kabila, as successor, giving rise to a certain surprise as he had never had a prominent political role, but there was no significant resistance to the nomination.

Certainly not among the people, who were indifferent to the announcement of the death, even if they were later mobilised for the funeral ceremony, and certainly not in a parliament nominated by his father. But there are many dangers: the regime of Kabila, born in 1997 largely as a result of the combined military intervention of a number of countries, some of which are unequivocally philoimperialist, has not managed to give any sign of change. It has continued to rely on military support, primarily from abroad, even though the alliances have changed. While Uganda and Ruanda, whose armies were decisive during the last stages of the struggle against Mobutu, had already stopped supporting Kabila in 1998, worried that the new government would take over Mobutu's policies (persecution of the Tutsi and relative toleration in relation to the militias of the Hutu of the interhamwe, who were responsible for the genocide of 1994), and, together with Burundi and Congo Brazzaville, had resumed their support for the "indigenous rebels" occupying between one third and one half of the vast territory of the Democratic Republic of Congo, on the other hand, Namibia, Zimbabwe and even Angola intervened immediately to support the central powers of Kinshasa, even though this was for different reasons (the presence of the UNITA rebels in the oil extracting regions of the Cabinda enclave and along the border between the two countries).

To understand the logic of the conflict without being blown off course by the appeals to long ago anti-imperialist roles of this or that country, it has to be remembered that six out of seven of the countries involved in the conflict have recently bought arms worth 125 million dollars in the United States through IMET (International Military Education and Training).

The rapid changes of alliance are due on the one side to the temptation of various bordering states to take advantage of the crisis of the central power by accelerating the dismemberment of this enormous country (2,350,000 square km, nearly eight times the size of Italy), in order to take possession of the enormous mineral resources, in particular diamonds, and on the other to bring about the same objective while holding up a central government which is obliged, in order to survive, to pay a very high price to those who are supporting it.

The Italian left has sustained a myth around Laurent Kabila, presumed successor of Lumumba, friend of Che, etc., in particular on the pages of "l'Ernesto", a paper that refers to Che, but which often hosts the writings of comrades who in their time had more to do with Breznev than with Guevara. Che knew Kabila during the journey of preparation of the Congolese venture, and had initially admired his intelligence, but he became severely critical of him when he realised that his words were not supported by the facts. Kabila was one of those "Lumumbist" leaders who wanted to be trained in Cuba (if possible in the hotels of Varadero) but did not want help in the organisation of the revolutionary army in the field. Guevara had described in his African diary the corruption of those leaders who had been trained in the USSR, China or Bulgaria, and specialised in procuring Soviet, Chinese (and later Cuban) aid.

For Che, the main reason for the defeat of the Cuban enterprise was the attitude of Kabila and the other leaders comfortably installed in Dar es Salaam engaged in weaving networks with their continual travels to Cairo, Algeria, Moscow and Beijing but absent from the front line of the struggle. This was why the two hundred Cubans, sent as military consultants to train the Lumumbist army who just one year before had conquered one third of the immense country, found a body of men who were depoliticised, disorganised, totally lacking in military techniques and practically without leaders: these latter, indeed, were all living a life of luxury in the hotels of the African capitals.

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Guevara and the small force he had joined up with at the last moment - which he had not chosen or trained - realised he could be of little or no help given the lack of officers who could have acted as mediators in the training of the large but undisciplined troops. With the French and even Swahili that Che had begun to study they could communicate with the educated upper classes of the population, but not with the peasant-soldiers who spoke dozens of different languages, didn't understand French and laughed when Guevara tried to explain himself in the few words of Swahili he had learned.

In his *Passaggi della guerra rivoluzionaria: Congo*, Che makes several bitter references to Kabila, who was always announcing his arrival but never actually turned up. When in July 1965 he finally deigned to make a tour of the zone of operations he was nominally responsible for, Guevara and other Cubans such as the doctor Rafael Zerquera Palacio (Kumi) were scandalised because he arrived with a large entourage, amongst whom were several attractive Guinean women and a large number of cases of whisky. He stayed only five days before he left with a variety of contradictory excuses which convinced no one: "Kabila is now discredited" was Che's conclusion, observing that his departure led to a plummeting of morale among not only the Congolese troops but also the Cubans themselves.

This was during Guevara's times. So what about later? Gianpaolo Calchi Novati, one of the greatest experts on the left on the Afroasian countries, wrote in "il manifesto" on 18 January 2001 that "Kabila has never stop behaving like a politician of the long-ago sixties, when he was a militant in the ranks of Lumumbismo or of neo-Lumumbismo. But for more than twenty years he was mainly engaged in trafficking in the capitals of the Great Lakes region, where everything passed through, gold, diamonds, arms, drugs - and the nearest he got to political action was discussion in little circles".

Another expert on Africa, Carlo Carbone, who met Kabila on several occasions, and whose judgement of Kabila expressed in remarks to me were less severe than those of Guevara, wrote in no uncertain terms in a recent interesting book that "Kabila previously assured his anti- Mobutist rebellion the agreement of the large multinational corporations that governed the extraction and trade of the Katanghese minerals" (Carlo Carbone, *Burundi, Congo, Rwanda. Storia contemporanea di nazioni, etnie, Stati, Cangemi*, Roma, 2000, p. 79).

So why was he killed? Probably we will never know, not least because the person who killed him can never tell, as he was immediately killed. Perhaps Kabila didn't keep the promises he had made to those who were supporting him? Or perhaps there was a plot inside the leadership group, which might explain why there was so little reaction among the population? Could the extreme rapidity with which the son was nominated as successor give credence to suspicions that he was involved in the assassination? It is hard to say, but any changes in the international relations and internal politics of the Popular Republic of Congo may shed some light on these questions.

In any case, whatever skills he acquired and relationships he established during his studies in Ruanda and his military training in China, it will not be easy for the young Joseph to govern a country in which his father was not able to create a political force distinct from the army, a country so big and disunited, and coveted not only by world powers but also by neighbouring countries which are smaller but better organised and therefore capable of successful military intervention with the leverage of the chronic instability and ethnic conflicts inherited from imperialism.