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Congo

Congo-Zaire's first reforms

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Before becoming Health Minister, Dr. JB Sondji was director of Kinshasa Hospital, and leader of the Patriotic Front (Front Patriotique), the main radical left party in Kinshasa. Alain Mathieu asked him about the first weeks of the new government.

What has happened to the remains of the repressive forces of the Mobutu regime ?

Most have been disarmed, and have surrendered their arms and uniforms. We have discovered an incredible quantity of weapons in Kinshasa, in barracks, in the university, and in private houses. The officers of the Alliance are puzzled: why didn't Mobutu's soldiers defend the town, since they had all the military resources they could have needed? Many of Mobutu's troops fled to Congo-Brazzaville, contributing to the instability there. There will doubtless be some talk now about integrating part of Mobutu's armed forces into the new army, but it isn't planned for the moment.

What relationship do the Alliance troops have with the population?

Generally, the relationship is good. These are young, but very disciplined soldiers. Obviously, there have been mistakes, like the famous prohibition of miniskirts and hot-pants. But these are isolated incidents, and the authorities have spoken on the radio to assure the population that there are no directives of this type, and that any victims of aggression from the Alliance troops should make a complaint in the offices which the new authorities are opening.

You have to understand that we still have 15,000 Alliance soldiers sleeping outside, because the former regime's demobilised troops and their families are occupying the barracks. We haven't expelled them, because there is nowhere for them to go. This is causing all kinds of logistical problems and, obviously, the occasional regrettable incident.

How will you select delegates to the June 1998 Constituent Assembly?

We quickly realised that it would be impossible to organise a Constituent Assembly this summer, as we had promised. The democratic opposition's experience with the Sovereign National Conference a few years ago showed that, in a large country like this, you need time to organise any truly representative event. My own party, the Patriotic Front is pushing for a speedy clarification and publication of the government's plans for this Assembly.

Will there be a multi-party system? Or will political parties be suspended?

For the moment, we have suspended party activities like large street demonstrations. But the parties themselves have not been banned or suspended. The Patriotic Front functions normally, and we continue to have regular meetings with the membership. In areas where there is an office of the Alliance, we have held a couple of joint meetings, and there has been no interference.

The new government has clearly said that there is no plan to ban political parties. But certain interests are spreading rumours to the contrary. It must be clear that, until the new authorities have mastered the situation, we must prevent these particular interests and the supporters of the previous regime, from blocking the installation of the new regime.

What discussions led to the formation of the new government?

I can't say. But I do know that our party, the Front Patriotique, was the first group which the Alliance (AFDL) contacted when it entered Kinshasa. Since most of the Alliance leaders didn't know Kinshasa, and the political 'microcosm' here, we advised them that it would be premature to form a government in the first 72 hours. We suggested that they wait, and make a serious selection of the new members. In particular, we warned them of the interests grouped around Etienne Tshisekedi, and the danger that they prevent us from managing the country.

Most of public opinion, including within Tshisekedi's own party, the UDPS, is divided in its judgement of the Alliance. But most of the population is in favour of the changes which have taken place.

What are the first measures planned by the new government?

Firstly, a rapid improvement in the public transport system. Then measures to help the jobs situation. We have created a kind of "infobank" to try to match unemployed people with qualifications with those who could employ them. As Health Minister, I have been instructed to overhaul a number of medical establishments. In the first phase, I hope to establish six new centres, one in each province. I will also try to end the system whereby patients must buy their own medicines, outside the hospitals. This means supplying the hospitals with the necessary pharmaceutical products.

We are also determined to improve the security of the citizens and their property. In agriculture, we will take measures to improve the supply of food to the population. And we will reform the currency since, at the moment, the Zaïre monetary system has broken down, which makes exchanges difficult. The National Bank of South Africa will help us introduce the new currency.

The Alliance says it wants a "social market economy." What does this mean?

Look. The "social market economy" is a market economy which tries to take certain social aspects into account. It is a capitalist type of economy. We in the Patriotic Front oppose this orientation, just as we said in the Sovereign National Conference.

We think that, now that the Alliance dominates a national government, composed of various tendencies, that we should re-discuss and reconsider this conception of "social market economy." Let those who propose it, say exactly what they mean!

For the time being, it is hard to say what the Alliance really thinks, because they have been so preoccupied with organising and carrying out the war. Only now are the fundamental questions being asked.

Is the recent privatisation of the railways an indication of the Alliance's sensibilities? [\[1\]](#)

Absolutely. Generally speaking, the Alliance is quite left-wing - against privatisations, automatically suspicious of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and so on. But as I said, it is still too early to see how this standpoint will be translated into concrete policies.

Can the USA, France and South Africa impose their priorities on the Congo?

No, not at all. The general tendency is in the other direction: clear independence, coupled with a willingness to work with all foreign parties in the search of the best solutions to our problems. The French media are wrong to say that Congo is switching over to the "anglo-saxon" zone of influence. We are not a nation of amnesiacs. We remember perfectly well that the disastrous state of our country is due to Mobutu's role as valet of the Americans. After what we have just been through, we are hardly going to throw ourselves back into Washington's arms!

What we would like to see is the French people redefining their country's relationship with African countries. We are convinced that, in development questions, we can find a series of mutually advantageous agreements.

What kind of solidarity can we offer?

We face a massive, well-organised propaganda campaign, led mainly by part of the French oligarchy, frustrated at the loss of one of their most faithful servants. What we would like to do is develop direct relationships with the French population, which was never involved in that unjust policy of their leaders. We hope that you, the left, will organise popular and trade union mobilisations demanding the seizure of Mobutu's assets, and the cancellation of our country's foreign debts. And direct links with your counterparts in Congo! These type of activities would be very useful to us, but for the moment we lack the formal contacts.

Interviewed in Kinshasa by telephone on 1 June 1997 by Alain Mathieu.

[1] The stations were being occupied by railway workers who had been sacked when the company was privatised! - Ed.