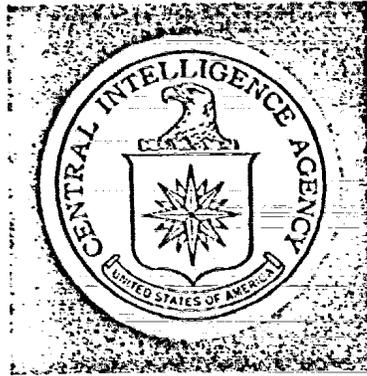


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Mobutu and the Congo

Special Report

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MOBUTU AND THE CONGO

Although the Congo still faces hard times, its future looks brighter at present than at any time since independence. Opposition elements have been effectively subdued, bringing to the country a degree of political stability. The central government is exercising reasonable control over disparate regional elements, and for the first time since independence seems to be directing or influencing events throughout the vast interior. The predominant position of control once held by the Belgians has diminished somewhat. Relations with neighboring African states have improved and will probably continue to do so. The general economic decline since independence has been largely arrested, at least temporarily. A great deal of the credit for this progress is due to President Joseph Mobutu, who, with careful and skillful exercise of power, plus an unusual amount of luck, has brought the Congo to its present pacified position.

The African Chief

Mobutu's approach to government derives from the African traditions of chieftainship liberally interspersed with ideas from his favorite political theorist, Machiavelli. Mobutu believes that the Congolese--whom he describes as but one generation removed from the villages--expect a strong chief who must be the unquestioned authority and the sole source of power. The Congolese, he says, are used to tutelage from their years under both tribal and Belgian rule, and are more comfortable when told exactly what is expected of them. Mobutu also believes that Western concepts of parliamentary

rule, embodied in the two post-independence Congolese constitutions, are strange and, in the final analysis, unattractive to the Congolese.

Mobutu has had a good deal of success with his own ideas during his nineteen months as president. Not particularly popular at the time of his 1965 takeover, he has risen tremendously in public esteem. His Machiavellian approach to cementing his position has drawn admiration from almost everyone, and most Congolese respect him for his power and for effectively bringing a degree of order to the country.

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Mobutu Consolidates His Position

In the first months after he came to power in November 1965, Mobutu sought to eliminate his opposition by either absorbing it or neutralizing it. Fortunately for him, one crucial manifestation of opposition--the rebellion which had broken out in 1964--was on the decline when he came to power. He helped the process along by cultivating neighboring states which had been aiding the rebels and by offering an amnesty to rank-and-file rebels. From the beginning, however, the rebellion was not a major concern and Mobutu could concentrate on other matters.

Immediately after his takeover, Mobutu announced an absolute ban on political activity in an effort to put an end to the six years of intrigue that marked



MOBUTU

Congolese politics. He enforced this order by effectively utilizing the army to discipline errant politicians. In June 1966, he provided a grim example--the hanging of four plotters in the Kinshasa public square--for those who had still not gotten his message. When, in the spring of 1967, Mobutu formed his own unitary political party, the Popular Revolutionary Movement (MPR), most local politicians quickly jumped on the bandwagon.

Mobutu's strategy included the removal of Moise Tshombé--currently in exile in Madrid--as a potential threat and the destruction of Tshombé's support in his old stronghold of Katanga. Through a well-organized propaganda campaign, Tshombé became identified as the Belgian stooge who, as Congolese premier, sold out the country to foreign business interests and as the architect of a new Katangan secession. By the time of Tshombé's March 1967 trial in absentia for treason, many Congolese believed that he truly was a traitor, and those who had lingering doubts were smart enough to remain silent. When Godefroid Munongo, Tshombé's former strong man, became too powerful in Katanga politics, he was called to Kinshasa and replaced by a military officer. With Tshombé gone and his lieutenants dispersed, Katanga fell in line--at least for the present--with other provinces in support of the central government.

Mobutu's New Congo

Having reduced his opposition, Mobutu found himself in a



position to restructure the Congo as he saw fit. A military man, Mobutu first tried using the army as his base and establishing strong military control. He declared a state of emergency in troubled areas and sent a military governor to contain political activity there. After brief experi-

ments on these lines, however, he reverted to using civilian administrators.

Faced with a history of petty provincial politics, Mobutu devised a scheme to switch elected governors to other provinces, making the provincial head an

agent of the central government. This maneuver curtailed local patronage and, to a limited extent, detribalized provincial politics. The system worked so well that Mobutu apparently was convinced that the civilian route was the way to go. He then had a new constitution drafted in the spring of 1967 which concentrated all effective power in the hands of the president and gave legal sanction to the close central control Mobutu had already established over provincial governments. The draft constitution was approved in a referendum early this month and is to go into effect on 24 June.

Mobutu made several unsuccessful attempts to mobilize the masses behind his regime. Immediately after he assumed power, he started a "roll up the sleeves" campaign to get the people cleaning up everything from filth in the streets to corruption in government. Many eagerly adopted the campaign--to the point that in some areas one dared not be caught without his sleeves literally rolled up--but the program soon drifted.

Then Mobutu sought to organize a mass movement called the Volunteer Corps of the Republic (CVR). Although performing some useful tasks initially, members of the CVR began associating with the radical youth group from Congo-Brazzaville, and the CVR turned into a band of roving vigilantes. Mobutu skillfully disbanded it by appointing its leaders to positions in the MPR,

his new political party and his most recent attempt to organize mass support.

Mobutu and the Military

It is significant that Mobutu is not using the military as the basis for the political structure he has developed for the Congo. The core of his own strength remains the army; he cultivates its officers and looks after its interests. Nevertheless, in working out a new administration for the country he reverted to a civilian system after the brief experiment with military governors for the provinces.

His effort to keep the army in the background may have been stimulated by several considerations. Mobutu, aware of the army's reputation with the populace, possibly wants to divorce himself from the military in the public mind. Fear that a military satrap in the provinces might be able to build up an independent power base was probably another factor.

Mobutu's own prejudices, however, may be just as important. Of all the military leaders who have come to power in black Africa over the past few years, Mobutu alone is not a professional soldier, although he did become a high-ranking NCO during his six years of service with the colonial army. From his preindependence experience as a journalist and student he retains elements of a nonmilitary outlook,

Mobutu as an Administrator

The Congo has no dependable administration system except where the few thousand foreigners--mostly Belgians--or the few trained and relatively uncorrupted Congolese have been able to impose some order. Duplication and contradiction of efforts are common. Despite the installation of an American computer to match wits with seasoned Congolese bureaucrats, only a few improvements have been made.

of young intellectuals. In keeping with the spirit of Machiavelli's advice, he generally avoids becoming dependent on either set or letting them know exactly what he is thinking.

Ministers Victor Nendaka and Justin Bomboko, who have been close to Mobutu for years, are the advisers in whom Mobutu has the greatest confidence.

They, with Mobutu, have been deep in Congolese politics since independence and have acquired considerable experience in the ups and downs of Congolese affairs.

Mobutu has also brought into his regime elements of young, university-graduate intellectuals and has given them high-level advisory and coordinative positions. He has a dual rationale behind this: he believes that this group will be ruling the Congo within the next generation and wants to be identified as their patron; also, he views them as potential opposition to be controlled by bringing them into his camp. He has respect for and enjoys being with this group, but has been careful to keep a check on them and not give them free rein.

Mobutu's Advisers

Mobutu has two principal sets of advisers--a handful of long-time associates and a group

Relations With African Neighbors

Congolese relations with neighboring African states were in disrepair in late 1965, and Mobutu appeared reluctant at first to devote much attention to the subject. Because good relations with the states which formerly supported the rebellion were in his interest, however, Mobutu found himself being pushed into the role of an inter-African statesman.

Wary initially, Mobutu has warmed considerably to his new role and has begun to project himself more and more as a major African leader. He believes that the Congo, by virtue of its size, its strategic position and its potential wealth, should be one of the greatest powers in Africa. This probably is the basis for his eagerness to mediate African problems. He has persistently offered to help the Nigerians solve their secessionist difficulties, taken a paternal attitude toward easing tensions between Rwanda and Burundi, and tried last year to promote numerous conferences in Kinshasa.

Mobutu has made a conscientious effort to create for himself the image of a true African nationalist. He has been willing to mouth African slogans and, occasionally if reluctantly, to promote the cult of the "martyred" Patrice Lumumba, the Congo's first premier. He agreed to get rid of the South African mercenaries imported by Tshombé to quell the rebellion. Mobutu is also con-

sidering re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union to underline his nonaligned position.

The most obvious manifestation of Mobutu's ambitions has been his attempt to move the seat of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) from Addis Ababa to Kinshasa. Mobutu may have naively assumed that he need only issue the invitation and the OAU would come running; he may also have gotten an exaggerated impression of African dissatisfaction with the OAU's Ethiopian hosts from radical OAU Secretary General Di-allo Telli. At any rate, Mobutu has apparently learned the facts of African life; he seems content for the time being at least with the prospect of hosting the organization's September 1967 summit conference in Kinshasa's brand-new "OAU city."

The Congo's Economic Problems

Much of Mobutu's economic policy revolves around his efforts to achieve economic independence from Belgium. Mobutu is deeply concerned--indeed, nearly obsessed--with Belgian domination of the Congolese economy, although he recognizes the necessity of keeping Belgian technicians and hence of conceding many rights to the Belgians. He distrusts the Belgians and sincerely believes that they are out to cheat and to steal from the Congo. Much of his time and attention have been directed toward the Katanga mining firm, Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK), and the conflict between them

reached dramatic proportions when Mobutu seized the company's Congolese assets in January 1967.

Mobutu has demonstrated little ability to handle the mechanics of economics. His solutions to economic problems are rudimentary and often political in orientation. He has little conception of the consequences of delaying action on economic problems and seldom follows through on his decisions. This past spring, for example, Mobutu sought a reworking of the arrangements between Sabena and Air Congo and began negotiations, but has lost interest for the moment. Negotiations have since stalemated. In another incident, a 10-percent consumption tax was levied in April 1966 on all petroleum products, but oil companies were forbidden to raise prices to absorb the tax. Protesting that they would make no profit, the companies suspended operations for several weeks. Subsequently Mobutu agreed that they could stall their tax payment until the end of 1966. Nothing more has been said and the taxes have not been paid. Numerous similar government actions were deferred, but not rescinded, and their questionable status has created confusion and anxiety on the part of the foreign business community.

Mobutu, however, has begun to realize how little he really knows and has begun to seek more expert advice. He has been discussing purely economic problems with the competent Congolese head of the National Bank and occasion-

ally seeks the advice of foreign businessmen.

Short-term prospects for the Congolese economy are not especially good. While some mines and factories are producing at a fairly high level, most are hampered by supply and transport problems. For example, the loss of a major part of the foreign exchange and revenues during the early 1967 copper crisis is now causing shortages of food and supply, plus high prices. The large northeastern plantations are still mainly deserted as a result of the 1964-65 rebellion and, as a result, agricultural production is still far below preindependence levels. Declining copper prices, among other things, suggest hard times ahead for the economy, even without the threat of erratic government action.

Outlook

Although Mobutu has gotten the Congo started in the right direction, enormous problems remain. The military, having acquired a taste for politics and national leadership, may not quietly accept being pushed back into a strictly military role. Whether the Congolese Army can achieve any cohesiveness or reliability for an extended period of time certainly remains subject to question. Moreover, if anything happens to Mobutu--assassination or retirement--the military may think it is time for a second coup.

Regional disaffection, notably in Katanga, has merely been

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suppressed, not eliminated. Additionally, most of the eastern part of the Congo still must be rehabilitated. Large portions of the population have literally gone back to the bush. Health conditions are deplorable; services, nonexistent. Despite lip service paid to the needs of these people, Mobutu has done little to get reconstruction started.

Over the next few years, the Congo may make some economic progress. Mobutu's major contribution has been to pacify the country, leaving the land and transportation routes relatively safe but in deteriorated condition. If political stability continues, the Congolese leaders and foreign business interests can exert their energies toward improving the general economy. Under the guidance of the International Monetary

Fund, Mobutu has agreed to major monetary reforms, including devaluation of the Congo's currency.

All of the problems which have traditionally plagued the Congo still remain. Tribal conflict has been subdued, but mainly because of weariness and fear; basic antagonisms continue to ferment beneath the surface. The need for hundreds of trained, competent young Congolese administrators and craftsmen still exists, and is only slowly being met. Further frictions with the Belgians are likely. The present period of stability brings the Congo to another threshold: from here it can continue to work out its social and economic problems, or it can take merely a breather from its traditional feuding and begin again. (SECRET)

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