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DIRECTORATE OF  
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*The Congo: A Political Assessment*

Special Report  
WEEKLY REVIEW

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## THE CONGO: A POLITICAL ASSESSMENT

On the eve of the eighth anniversary of independence on 30 June, President Mobutu is as firmly entrenched in power as anyone can be in the Congo, with its strife-torn history of coups and countercoups. With the backing of the army, Mobutu has reasserted the central government's authority over the provinces and has suppressed most overt political opposition. Moreover, his leadership apparently is accepted by most of the population because his regime has brought some semblance of order to the country.

Nevertheless, central governmental authority diminishes rapidly in many outlying parts of the country, and tribalism and regionalism persist just below the surface. For security, the regime must rely heavily on the Congolese National Army, a very unreliable instrument. If no new, debilitating crises occur, Kinshasa should be able to extend its control and influence further in the next few years, but it will be a long time before it can exert more than nominal authority over much of the Congo.

### The Army

Although the Congolese National Army is crucial to Mobutu's power, he has carefully limited its involvement in the country's government and politics. Aside from General Mobutu himself, no army officer holds a cabinet or party post or any other policy-making position. After Mobutu seized power in November 1965, he used the army to help stabilize the government and to suppress overt political opposition. Subsequently, however, the army has been used only sparingly as an administrative arm of the government. This restriction has occurred not only because the army is extremely unpopular and grossly incompetent but, more importantly, because Mobutu is intent upon

remaining the only link between the political and military spheres.

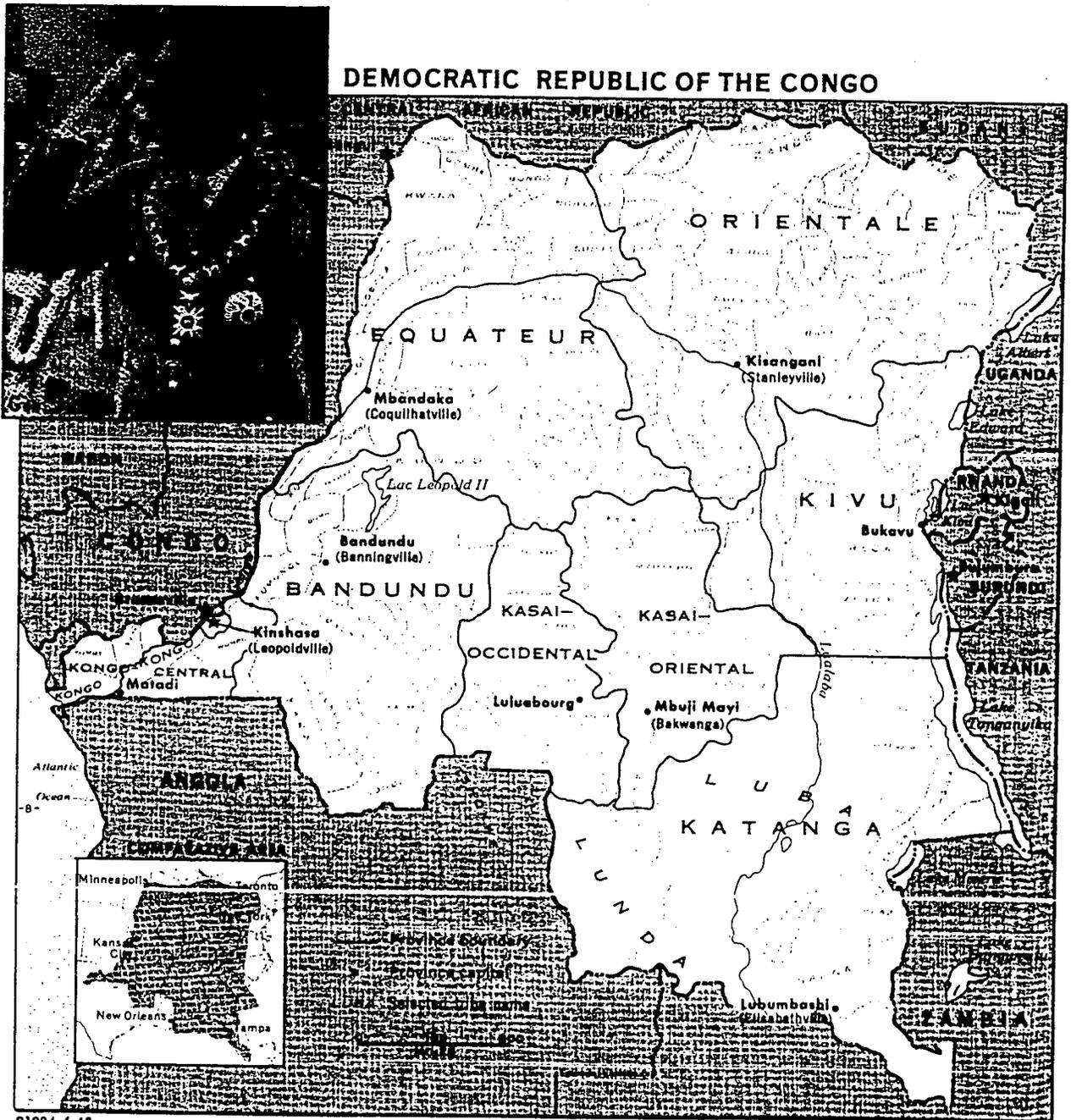
Although the Congolese National Army hardly qualifies as a military force, in the Congo it is capable of providing the kind of internal security required to keep Mobutu in power. At the same time, the army is itself a major cause of insecurity and a contributing factor to rural economic stagnation. Provincial and territorial army units continually harass the populace, confiscating property and levying protection charges on the movement of goods and people. Some army units are also very active in smuggling important export items such as diamonds, gold, palm oil, quinine, and coffee.

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Mobutu is aware of the need to reform the army, but he has been hesitant to make any changes that might erode his support within it. Recently, he initiated some measures aimed at streamlining the top of the command structure. This move could portend more extensive reforms, but they are likely to be unhurried. In making changes, Mobutu doubtless will balance the advantages of a stronger, more competent force against the risks of replacing incompetent but loyal commanders with younger, better-trained officers who might be more likely to challenge him.

#### The Administration

When Mobutu took over two and a half years ago, the Congo was divided into 21 virtually autonomous, often chaotically administered provinces. Mobutu reasserted the central government's authority by reducing the number of provinces to eight and making all high provincial officials directly responsible to Kinshasa. He also centralized the police force and budget operations, and disbanded indefinitely the elected provincial assemblies in which tribal politics had all but paralyzed many provincial governments.

Kinshasa's grip on the provinces is not strong, however, largely because its provincial officials are ineffective. Often they simply do not have the means to carry out government policy or to provide basic governmental services. In economically important areas such as the Katanga

and Kasai mining complexes, for example, private or foreign managerial firms, not the government, provide road maintenance, health services and, in Kasai, even housing for government officials.

Furthermore, army unruliness, inflation, food shortages, and urban unemployment continue to breed discontent and potential unrest. Provincial authorities assume that their careers depend more on jockeying for favor with the Kinshasa leadership than on attacking these thorny problems. The governors, therefore, spend most of their time on activities designed to please their superiors in the capital--arranging visits for government officials, enforcing the proper display of official notices, or getting out the vote for a government referendum.

Moreover, until the country's infrastructure is rehabilitated and the great deficiencies in administrative and technical personnel are alleviated, Kinshasa's control and influence will probably not extend effectively much beyond the provincial capitals and the few modern economic centers.

#### Mass Support

Centralization and suppression are the main means that Mobutu has used to strengthen and consolidate his control, but he has sought popular support, too. Immediately upon assuming power, he started a "roll up the sleeves" campaign to get the people involved in doing something themselves about everything from cleaning up the

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streets to eliminating corruption in government. The results were somewhat nebulous and the campaign soon lost momentum and direction.

Mobutu also created the Volunteer Corps of the Republic to provide a base of mass support for his regime, but it was equally unsuccessful. A number of provincial units of the corps became fronts for opportunistic local politicians, and some cadres in Kinshasa came under the influence of left-wing youth groups in neighboring Brazzaville. Mobutu finally disbanded the corps in early 1967 and incorporated its leadership into a new political party, The Popular Revolutionary Movement.

Created and guided from above, the movement has not generated much mass support. At first, Mobutu tried to use the same technique to organize the party that he uses to control the provincial administration. He appointed all the high provincial officials himself, and assigned them to areas outside of their own tribal grouping, making them dependent upon Kinshasa for both money and support. This arrangement, however, created competing channels of authority between the movement and the local administration, and did not prevent the re-emergence of local political factions.

Finally, Mobutu placed the party organization in the hands of the provincial governors and subordinate civil servants. The movement thereby gained greater organizational cohesion, and the governors acquired authority to keep

local party activists in line. Nevertheless, the governors have had little success in unifying local tribal factions, and in several provinces the party has built no effective structure at all.

At best, the movement gives the regime the appearance of a popular, mass-supported, progressive government. It also provides an outlet for political activity, albeit a narrow and officially controlled one, and some remuneration and status for party officials.

#### Opposition Elements

After eight years of turmoil, some groups and even entire regions remain discontented with the central government and alienated from it. These elements are mostly unorganized, partly because Mobutu and the army have kept them so. The only open opposition to Kinshasa comes from isolated rebel bands, the remnants of the 1964 rebellion. Although they continue to harass the local security forces in Bandundu Province and in the eastern Congo, they are small, poorly equipped, and ridden by dissension--an irritant, but little more.

As always, tribalism is a big problem for the central government. Some tribally conscious groups--the Kongo, the Luba, and Lunda--have never become completely reconciled to centralized rule from Kinshasa. Although they are kept in line partly by fear of the army, there is a general sense of weariness and apathy among the rural population as well as a bitterness toward politicians

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that Mobutu has been able to exploit. In addition, he has adopted a sort of carrot-and-stick approach to politics, bringing people from the various tribes into his government, but making it explicit that he will tolerate no opposition. This tactic, so far, has proved workable.

#### Outlook

National elections are expected sometime this year. Whenever they are held, it is almost certain that only the Popular Revolutionary Movement's slate will be presented to the electorate. With a hand-picked slate of candidates and a tailor-made constitution that gives very little authority to the National Assembly, the elections will be little more than a symbolic show of citizen participation in government. Decisions will continue to rest with Mobutu, as before.

Meanwhile, there remain all the traditional social and political problems that have made the

Congo more a geographical label than a unified country. Local disturbances and outbreaks can be expected to continue sporadically. Distances are so great, and tribal and cultural diversity so extreme, that many of these local flare-ups will probably not affect Kinshasa, but some may.

It is conceivable, for example, that Moisé Tshombe, if and when he is released by the Algerians, could re-emerge on the political scene by exploiting the discontent among the Lunda. It is perhaps significant in this respect, however, that during the mercenary crisis of last summer, no indigenous group hostile to the government attempted to take advantage of the situation.

If no new, debilitating crises occur, the central government should be able to extend its control and influence further in the next few years. It will be a long time, however, before Kinshasa can exert more than nominal authority over much of the Congo. (~~SECRET~~)

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