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# Congo's Slide Into Chaos

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## How a State Fails

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*Stuart A. Reid*

**O**n January 16, 2001, the Democratic Republic of the Congo tumbled into uncertainty. The country's president, Laurent Kabila, had been sitting in his office at his marble palace in Kinshasa, the capital, when one of his teenage bodyguards entered, drew his pistol, aimed it at Kabila, and fired several times.

Kabila had installed himself as president in 1997, after overthrowing Mobutu Sese Seko, the cancer-stricken dictator of what was then known as Zaire. He had begun fighting Mobutu back in the 1960s, leading a Marxist rebellion in the eastern half of the country before, in the 1980s, fleeing to nearby Uganda and Tanzania, where he raised his children under false names. After years of dodging Mobutu's intelligence agents, Kabila finally got the chance to remove his nemesis, riding in on an invasion backed by eight nations to take the presidency, if not control, of the country he rechristened the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Kabila's Rwandan backers quickly tired of him, however. They launched a rebellion in the east that kicked off the Great War of Africa, a five-year conflict so deadly and confused that estimates of its death toll range from two million to five million. Now, less than four years into a presidency he had spent his life pursuing, Kabila was slumped over, bleeding into his chair.

Kabila's advisers scrambled to react. Keeping news of the attack from the public, they arranged for his dead body to be flown to Zimbabwe, ostensibly for treatment. Congo's borders were sealed, its airports shut down, and a curfew announced. Late at night, Kabila's inner circle gathered to decide on a successor, as Mwenze Kongolo, the justice minister at the time, recently recounted to me. "It was at that moment," he said, "when we decided we had to put in Joseph."

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Joseph, Laurent Kabila's son, was just 29 years old, a commander in the new Congolese military. Having grown up in Uganda and Tanzania, he spoke Swahili and English, but little French, Congo's official language, and no Lingala, its most prominent African one. Shy and inscrutable, he was not a man made for politics. His only civilian work experience lay in doing odd jobs for his father and driving a taxi. Joseph was a mystery, unknown to foreign diplomats and the Congolese public alike; even his age was an open question at the time. Yet having marched across the country as part of the invasion, he enjoyed legitimacy among the military and the confidence of his father. "He was not a stranger," Kongolo said. "And with his father having died, it had to be someone close."

Convincing the country's security forces and government ministers of this succession plan turned out to be easy; convincing Joseph himself, less so. Around four in the morning, a plane sent to retrieve him from a military base landed back in Kinshasa. As a diplomatic cable from the U.S. embassy reported, when his father's advisers asked him to become president, "Joseph was initially 'very resistant' to the idea," most likely because he feared for his life. Yet he assented, and was sworn in as president three days after his father's funeral. Photos at the time show a man who looks stunned by his sudden ascension.

The moment marked yet another bloody transfer of power in Congo's troubled history. The Congolese were ruled for 75 years by the Belgians—particularly nasty, as colonizers went—until 1960, when the country became independent. Its new, democratically elected prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, held office for just two and a half months before he was ousted in a coup by Mobutu, who then orchestrated Lumumba's murder with the blessing of the CIA. After decades of Western support during the Cold War, Mobutu, in turn, would be chased from power by Kabila.

Today, Congo faces another transition crisis that threatens to throw the country into chaos. This time, however, the cause is not a transfer of power but the lack of one. During his 17 years in office, Joseph Kabila has presided over a profoundly decrepit state. Every institution to speak of has been perverted to serve itself rather than the people, 77 percent of whom live on less than \$1.90 per day, which the World Bank classifies as "extreme poverty." Vast parts of the country go ungoverned, with armed militias vying for territory and resources in at least a third of its provinces. In the past two



*Blood in the streets: at a protest against Kabila in Kinshasa, September 2016*

years, the number of displaced people in the country has doubled, to nearly four million.

Pointing to the very disorder he has let fester, the once reluctant president has repeatedly delayed elections originally scheduled for 2016 through a series of administrative maneuvers that the Congolese have termed *glissement* (slippage). With the economy weakening and armed violence on the rise, the pressure on Kabila to step down has never been greater, yet he shows no interest in doing so. The new reality recalls Voltaire's quip about the Holy Roman Empire: in this case, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is neither democratic, nor a republic, nor in control of the Congo.

For decades, the West has been obsessed with finding a cure for failed states, believing that the best way to prevent international problems is to solve domestic ones. Since the 1960s, Western governments have plowed nearly \$1 trillion in aid into Africa alone, partly to ease immediate pain and partly to promote long-term stability. The UN has set up an elaborate system of peacekeeping operations, health initiatives, refugee camps, and food-distribution networks aimed at doing the same. And yet today, a country the size of western Europe and home to 80 million already suffering people is collapsing in slow motion in the middle of Africa.

## ON THE MAKE

Things weren't supposed to turn out this way. As part of the peace process that ended the war in 2003, Congo created a new political system. Rebel leaders rebranded their militias as political parties and exchanged their fatigues for suits. A new constitution was drafted. Kabila legitimized his rule by winning a 2006 presidential election organized by the UN and generally regarded as free and fair. After a nearly 50-year absence, democracy appeared to have returned to Congo.

But Kabila quickly set about co-opting the newly created institutions. He replaced judges with unqualified loyalists. His allies in Parliament weakened electoral laws and granted him the power to dismiss provincial governors. In 2011, Kabila won another five-year term, but this time, the vote, organized without the UN's help, was marred by fraud. Monitors from the Carter Center reported that some districts had "impossibly high" turnout rates of more than 99 percent and that hundreds of thousands of ballots had disappeared. Content to limit their ambitions for Congo to the absence of major war, the Western governments supplying much of the country's budget turned a blind eye.

The military, meanwhile, remained the predatory force it had been under Mobutu, only with the added complication of having to incorporate disparate rebel groups. Soldiers are poorly paid—as of 2015, colonels were earning less than \$100 a month—and often go months without any wages at all. To make up for the shortfall, they extort civilians. (As Mobutu once told the army, "You have guns; you don't need a salary.") Higher up the chain of command, generals use their power to control local trade, whether it be in timber, ivory, minerals, or their own weapons.

Government ministries function as ATMs for the politically deserving. Ministers enjoy access not only to official budgets but also to off-the-books revenue streams generated through semiofficial fees and outright bribes. In 2012, the chief of staff to the minister of hydrocarbons even published, on ministry letterhead, a list of prices to secure meetings with various officials. Oil companies had to pay \$5,000 to meet with lower-level advisers and \$6,000 to meet with the chief of staff himself at the ministry (and an extra \$3,000 to see him off-site). At the University of Kinshasa, one professor said that of his roughly 1,000 colleagues, only around 200 actually work; the rest, many of whom hold political office, collect their university salaries

without setting foot on campus. At kindergarten, children bring their teachers beignets in return for good treatment.

Every day, the orange-vested police who monitor Kinshasa's traffic circles practice an intricately choreographed form of corruption. An unpublished study conducted by researchers from Harvard University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Antwerp broke down this dance, invisible to the casual passenger, in detail. Each morning, the officers who man the intersections receive a quota from their commanders indicating how many cars they must flag for violations—say, a broken door handle—and redirect to the police station. There, drivers can go through the cumbersome process of receiving a ticket, having their car impounded, and paying the official fine to free it—but nearly all choose to simply pay a bribe and go on their way.

Back at the intersections, once the traffic police have met their daily quota of cars for their bosses, they go to work for themselves, extracting three types of payments. The first is the harassment bribe, one I witnessed when an officer claiming some violation forced himself into the passenger seat of my taxi to shake the driver down for \$8 (a sum that would have been much higher had I not been a potentially well-connected foreigner). The second is a quick handoff of around 50 cents, a preemptive bribe given out of necessity and with a closed hand. The third is a tip, given openly and varying in amount. The study found that these police officers received approximately 92 percent of their incomes through illicit payments. Their bosses made some 99 percent of their incomes that way.

## **GRAND THEFT**

In many poor places, corruption would end with the petty variety. But underneath Congo's soil lies trillions of dollars' worth of copper, cobalt (used in batteries), coltan (used in electronics), tin, diamonds, and gold. Above, some of the planet's poorest people scrape by. The World Bank puts Congo's per capita GDP at \$445 per year, the third-lowest in the world when adjusted for purchasing power. Nearly half of children younger than five are stunted due to malnutrition. In the slums that crowd Kinshasa, the poor live cheek by jowl in cardboard huts near streams clogged with garbage that cut through mountains made of the stuff. It is a far cry from the tony neighborhood of Gombe, a downtown district popular among the political elite where pool nets poke out over walls topped with razor wire.

For about a decade under Kabila, Congo rode the commodities boom. Its minerals—particularly copper and cobalt, which account for 79 percent of the country's exports—fed fast-rising demand in China and other emerging markets. But the price of cobalt crashed in 2008, and between 2011 and 2016, the price of copper fell by 50 percent. Now, inflation has hit 50 percent. Restaurants print special price sheets for patrons to consult separately from the menu. The Central Bank has said that it has only enough foreign exchange reserves to cover three weeks of imports.

The most egregious forms of corruption involve the president and his family. The Kabilas did not grow up rich. During a trip to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, Laurent Kabila was stranded in Moscow, unable to afford the airfare home. His wife, Joseph's mother, sold vegetables in Tanzania. But two decades in power have made the family fabulously wealthy.

This past July, the Congo Research Group at New York University published a report in collaboration with Bloomberg News that exposed

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*The experience of Kabila's predecessors suggests that staying in office is the surest way to stay alive.*

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the elaborate web of businesses that the president and his relatives have constructed in Congo. The Kabilas have their fingers in everything from farming and mining to aviation and construction. Kabila's twin sister, Jaynet, holds an indirect stake in Vodacom Congo, the country's biggest cell phone service pro-

vider; another sister, Gloria, owns 40 percent of a large bank; his brother Zoé's possessions include a boxing gym in Kinshasa and a luxury hotel on Congo's Atlantic coast. Many Kabila-linked businesses receive special treatment—as with the mines that are protected by presidential guards or the company that gets \$60 of the \$185 fee for each new Congolese passport.

Such legitimate businesses probably account for a minority of the Kabilas' income. The rest comes from murkier enterprises. In these, blame extends beyond Congolese elites to include the international mining companies and financiers who have acted as accessories to national theft. As the anticorruption group Global Witness has documented, in deals that took place between 2010 and 2012, the Congolese government sold mining rights at rock-bottom prices to anonymous offshore companies, some of them linked to Kabila's longtime friend

Dan Gertler, an Israeli billionaire. The Congolese state missed out on \$1.36 billion in revenues as a result. Around the same time, the American hedge fund Och-Ziff Capital Management was funneling tens of millions of dollars to a businessman who then bribed two Congolese officials to secure favorable mining deals, a scheme the company admitted to in a 2016 deal with U.S. prosecutors. That agreement did not include names, but the descriptions made clear that the officials were Kabila and his top adviser at the time and that the businessman was Gertler. (Gertler has denied wrongdoing.) Global Witness also counted \$750 million that went into state mining companies and tax agencies from 2013 to 2015 but never made it into the treasury.

Many are quick to call the Congolese state dysfunctional. But it is dysfunctional only if one considers its purpose to be serving the Congolese people. As a mechanism for distributing resources to loyalists in the political elite, it functions beautifully.

### **DEMOCRACY DEFERRED**

What is notable about the Kabila family's many income streams is that to maintain them requires being in Congo—and, ideally, being in power. If Kabila gets chased into exile, he and his relatives stand to lose hundreds of millions of dollars.

Thus, one motive behind Kabila's electoral delay may be financial. Kabila himself does not appear to be an extravagant man. Whereas Mobutu had a taste for pink champagne, Chanel cologne, and European villas, Kabila rarely drinks alcohol and shuns chauffeurs. Aside from watches and suits, his chief luxury is a collection of motorcycles, whose engines residents of Gombe can hear him revving late into the night. But given the involvement of his family, the decision to step down is not his alone to make.

Fear may be another motive. The experience of Kabila's predecessors suggests that staying in office is the surest way to stay alive. And if Kabila did survive a transfer of power, he could easily end up in prison. A future regime could find more than enough evidence to prosecute him for corruption. It might even investigate his conduct in 1997, when, as a commander during his father's invasion of Zaire, he allegedly participated in the slaughter of tens of thousands of Hutu refugees near a town called Tingi Tingi.

Russ Feingold interacted with Kabila dozens of times as U.S. special envoy to the Great Lakes region of Africa during the Obama adminis-



tration. Feingold held five or six direct meetings with the president and pressed him on his succession plans. "I think it's not as simple as a raw desire to keep power," Feingold said, pointing to the psychological factors weighing on a man who missed his youth to serve in a job he never asked for. Now, at 46 years old, Kabila is struggling to come up with a second act. Feingold put the dilemma this way: "What else am I going to do with my life, after I've been president of the Congo?"

And so Kabila plays for time. According to the constitution, a presidential election was supposed to have been held in November 2016, and Kabila, limited to two terms, would not have been allowed to compete. Three years before the scheduled vote, he pushed for an amendment to the constitution that would do away with the two-term limit, taking a cue from neighboring heads of state. But the effort failed, and it triggered defections from Kabila's ruling coalition. Then, his allies proposed a time-consuming national census that would push back the date of the vote, but that failed as well, and Kabila turned to more creative means. In 2015, for example, the government announced that Congo's 11 provinces would be split into 26, which had the effect of weakening rival politicians and diverting resources from elections.

Kabila's principal obstacle is his own unpopularity. Mobutu enjoyed a cult of personality and knew how to whip up a crowd. Holding a cane and wearing a leopard-skin hat, he presented himself as a village chief on a national level (never mind that the hat was made by a Parisian couturier). He was said to possess magical powers, such as the ability to hear one's thoughts. Kabila, by contrast, gives off an air of detachment, reinforced by his foreign upbringing, his lack of fluency in Lingala, and persistent rumors of Rwandan ancestry. He rarely speaks in public, and when he does, he sounds like a schoolboy reading a prepared text. At soccer games, tens of thousands of fans have debuted a chant that causes state television to cut the live feed: "Kabila, watch out, your mandate is over."

In September 2016, as the end of Kabila's term approached, protesters swelled the streets. Clashes with security forces left more than 50 dead, and the U.S. Treasury responded by imposing financial sanctions on two top security officials. Kabila's government entered into a dialogue with the opposition hosted by the Catholic Church, one of the few credible institutions left in Congo. The result was a deal, announced on New Year's Eve, in which a member of the opposition

would be appointed prime minister, elections would be held by the end of 2017, and Kabila would at last step down. But that has all but fallen apart. The electoral commission, whose head is effectively appointed by Kabila, has invoked the technical difficulties of organizing a vote, marrying legitimate complaints to absurd timelines for resolving them.

Rather than merely updating the voter rolls from the last election, the electoral commission decided to create new ones from scratch. The resulting registration process, which involves collecting biometric data from every voter, has been held up in certain provinces experiencing armed conflict. Once registration is complete, the rolls will still have to be "cleaned," a months-long process that involves analyzing ten fingerprints each for an estimated 45 million voters. But first, the computer

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*Mobutu enjoyed a cult of personality and knew how to whip up a crowd.*

*Kabila, by contrast, gives off an air of detachment.*

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system that does this must be ordered. After the nomination and vetting of candidates would come the gargantuan undertaking of printing the newspaper-like ballots required for an election day that could see voters choose among some 60,000 candidates from 600-plus political parties at more than 100,000 polling stations. Therefore, the commission has argued, it might make more sense to use electronic voting machines—a recipe for failure in a country with such irregular electricity supply and limited technical capacity. By pretending to fetishize democracy, the commission has deferred it.

It has also handed the government a convenient line for deflecting blame. I visited Lambert Mende, Congo's jowly minister of communication and media, at the ministry's dusty headquarters in Kinshasa. Mende kept me waiting for four full hours in a sweaty room full of chairs with torn upholstery. When word came that he was ready to see me, a handler led me upstairs to a glass partition, roused the soldier napping behind it, and brought me into the minister's office. Dressed in a sharp suit and an orange tie, Mende sat leisurely behind his desk, slowly flipping through a stack of newspapers. He shoved them to the side, grunted, and gestured for me to take a seat.

Mende is Congo's Kellyanne Conway, a spokesperson whose fervent displays of loyalty make one wonder if even his bosses think he is overdoing it. With me, he ridiculed the opposition ("lobbyists for foreign

interests”), decried U.S. sanctions (“totally unfounded, irrelevant”), and dismissed criticism of Kabila as a Belgo-American conspiracy (“they are calling him a human rights abuser, as they were calling Lumumba a communist”). He smiled impishly throughout the interview, as if to acknowledge that this was all just a performance, and quite an entertaining one at that.

“We have no responsibility, constitutionally, to organize elections,” Mende answered when I asked when a vote would be held. That, he insisted, was the job of the electoral commission, on whose behalf he could not speak. “We cannot set up an independent body and act as if this body was not independent,” he said. In Mende’s telling, the government was merely waiting on guidance from the commission, while doing its best to ready a vote. “Not because Brussels or Washington is pushing us to do so,” he was quick to add.

And when would elections take place? “The time is coming,” he said. “Very soon.”

A more precise answer would arrive the very next day, when the electoral commission announced that it would take 504 days once registration was finalized to hold a vote. This scientific-sounding estimate meant that elections could be held no earlier than April 2019.

## **DIVIDE AND CONQUER**

Opposition politicians balked. But in Congo today, the opposition has its own credibility problem. Kabila has skillfully co-opted many of its leaders—appointing one as prime minister and others to ministerial posts—giving them an opportunity to trade resistance for the privileges of power. Twice in Kinshasa, I saw the prime minister striding proudly through the lobby of the fanciest hotel, entourage in tow. “Kabila knows that the Congolese political class is corruptible, and he gives them money to divide them,” the journalist Patient Ligodi said. “He knows that the opposition is an opposition of the belly: that his opponents need money.”

The most threatening opposition figures have been sidelined. Jean-Pierre Bemba, who challenged Kabila in the 2006 election, now sits in a prison cell in The Hague, having been handed over to the International Criminal Court, which convicted him of war crimes. Étienne Tshisekedi, a longtime rival of Mobutu and both Kabilas, died last February at the age of 84. (For months, his corpse languished in a Belgian morgue as the Congolese government sought to delay his

funeral and the protests that it feared would accompany it.) And Moïse Katumbi, a former provincial governor, has been forced into exile.

Katumbi was once a Kabila ally, handpicked to govern Katanga, a mineral-rich province the size of Spain, in 2007. He had earned an estimated fortune of \$100 million from food processing, trucking, and mining, and in office, he styled himself a tropical Michael Bloomberg, raising tax revenues nearly 40-fold, overseeing an infrastructure spending spree, and cracking down on corruption (at least when it didn't involve himself). But as it became clear that Kabila might seek to overstay his mandate, Katumbi resigned from the ruling party and announced his intention to replace him as president.

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*“Kabila knows that the Congolese political class is corruptible,” the journalist Patient Ligodi said.*

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Then, Katumbi told me, the harassment began. His private jet was grounded. His car was rammed by a minibus. Security forces tried to kidnap his son. In May 2016, he was charged with hiring former U.S. soldiers as “mercenaries”; Katumbi characterized them as merely unarmed security advisers contracted through General Jim Jones, the former U.S. national security adviser. Katumbi fled the country during the trial and was later sentenced in absentia to three years in prison for real estate fraud. The judge who oversaw that case has also left Congo, claiming she was pressured by the intelligence services to convict him.

A May 2017 poll found that Katumbi would easily win a presidential election, with 38 percent of respondents naming him as their first choice. Only ten percent said they would vote for Kabila. Even with Katumbi in exile, authorities have worked hard to seal his fate: they evidently fear that he may try to return. After the real estate case against Katumbi was appealed, one of the judges set to rule on it received an anonymous phone call instructing him to confirm the sentence, according to Hubert Tshiswaka, a lawyer I met in Lubumbashi who has tracked local judicial decay closely. Having responded to the call by saying he would follow the law, the judge was visited by eight armed men one night this past July. Tshiswaka told me that the men tied up the judge's security guard, raped his wife and teenage daughter, and shot him in the stomach—he survived only because the men fled when a car approached.

## THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS

A different type of threat to Kabila has emerged in Goma. Hemmed in by volcanic mountains, Lake Kivu, and the Rwandan border, the city is the home base of an activist group that is sending the government into conniptions. Called *Lutte pour le Changement* (Struggle for Change), or LUCHA, the group was founded in 2012 by students frustrated with their country's persistent violence, human rights violations, and poor social conditions. But over time, it has become more overtly anti-Kabila.

I met one of LUCHA's members, Rebecca Kabugho, who is 23, in the city one evening. She wore a pink leather jacket and sported short dreadlocks. "Most of the population had decided to cross its arms, say nothing, and accept the situation in which we live—and yet it's not normal," she said. "That's why I stopped being silent and started saying what I thought out loud."

As we sat on the otherwise empty lawn of a hotel near Lake Kivu, out of earshot of staff, Kabugho recalled the night of February 15, 2016. She and fellow LUCHA members were working late at an office making banners for a march the next day. Congo's national soccer team had just defeated Mali's to win the African Nations Championship, and so they painted two lines on a cloth: "2016: We won the cup" followed by "2016: We will win elections." Around four in the morning, Kabugho heard some noise outside. It was the police, who barged into the building and arrested her and five others. They were all charged with attempting to incite revolt and served five and a half months in prison. Crowded into cells with no privacy, they ate meager rations, got sick, and spent time cleaning the septic system.

LUCHA remains small, with 1,500 members nationwide, and has yet to prove that it can turn out the broader population en masse. Even so, the government has rushed to brand it a criminal enterprise. In part, Kinshasa may fear that such groups represent early signs of youth discontent in a country with a median age of just 18. But it may also simply be groping in the dark. Kabila's regime has never met a threat it couldn't co-opt or kill. LUCHA and other similar groups are stubbornly immune to the first strategy, having chosen to remain outside the political system. (LUCHA makes a point of taking no external money whatsoever, and none of its members has run for political office.) And adopting the second strategy would only provoke more furor, because of these groups' strict refusal to take up arms. At LUCHA's initiation

ceremonies, new members stand before existing ones, Congolese flag in hand, and swear an oath committing themselves to nonviolence.

Not all of Kabila's opponents are so inclined. As peaceful methods of forcing a transition have failed to produce results, the violent variety has flared. The country has suffered a rash of recent jailbreaks. One of them, which took place at Kinshasa's central prison in May, was orchestrated by a separatist cult and resulted in the escape of some 4,000 prisoners, including the group's leader. In the southeastern province of Tanganyika, violence between the Bantu and Twa ethnic groups has grown, leaving hundreds of villages destroyed, women raped, and civilians killed.

The most disturbing conflict is the one that engulfed the Kasai, a region in the middle of Congo that had last seen full-scale war in 1961. After Congo's Ministry of the Interior and Security started trying to

replace the region's village leaders, largely unmolested since independence, with Kabila loyalists, security forces searched the home of a chief who resisted. He and his followers retaliated by attacking a nearby city in August 2016, burning police stations and the local office of the electoral commission and assassinating various officials. In a sign of the hybrid nature of Congo's state, they enjoyed the encouragement of Kabila's minister of development at the time, according to an excerpt of a call that took place during the attack published by *The New York Times*. ("The colonel is in his house, and we're burning down the house so he burns to death," a subordinate informed the minister. "Did you kill the colonel's bodyguards?" the minister replied.)

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*"It's not like anything I've ever seen in 20 years in Africa," a Western diplomat in Kinshasa told me.*

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The military, in turn, killed the chief, and a loose alliance of cultish militias formed to carry on his resistance. It enlisted children, who brandished toy wooden guns they were told magic could make real. It may also have been behind the murder of two UN experts—an American and a Swede—sent to investigate human rights abuses, although some observers suspect government involvement.

Desperate to reassert authority in the Kasai region, the Congolese military sent in some of its most thuggish commanders. Soldiers went door to door, killing suspected militia members and sympathizers and looting their homes. Over time, the rebellion took on an ethnic

dimension and spawned yet another militia, this one armed by local authorities. The conflict spread to include five provinces, kill more than 3,000 people, and displace an additional 1.4 million. "It's not like anything I've ever seen in 20 years in Africa," one Western diplomat in Kinshasa told me.

The dead were buried in mass graves—87 of them, by the UN's count—many guarded by soldiers, suggesting that the government had something to hide. In June, Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini, the UN high commissioner for human rights, summarized the findings of UN investigators who had interviewed refugees who had fled the violence: "My team saw children as young as two whose limbs had been chopped off; many babies had machete wounds and severe burns. . . . At least two pregnant women were sliced open and their foetuses mutilated."

By the fall of 2017, the conflict had died down, and Kabila flew in for a peace conference to publicly mark its end. The humanitarian crisis continued. Refugees returned to find destroyed homes and schools and, with two planting seasons missed, a looming famine. The Ministry of Communication and Media denied my request to visit the Kasai, but Claudel Lubaya, an opposition politician from the region, described it for me. "You've seen Mosul and Aleppo?" he said. "That's sort of what the Kasai looks like."

## **EASTERN PROMISES**

Congo's east, especially the provinces of North and South Kivu, has long resisted pacification, the result of ethnic tensions, competition over land and resources, foreign meddling, and loose ends from the 1994 Rwandan genocide and the ensuing regional war. But even against this backdrop, the conflict there is going from bad to worse.

In Goma, the capital of North Kivu, a local researcher named Jean-Claude Buuma explained to me that there were 18 militias alone vying for control of Masisi, one territory in the province. In rural areas, the state is largely absent. Congolese forces' power is confined to major highways, he said: "One meter off, they have no control."

Often, that is by design. For example, in another territory in North Kivu, Walikale, a powerful rebel group has built a symbiotic relationship with the military it is ostensibly battling. The Nduma Defense of Congo-Rénové, or NDC-R, earned its legitimacy by beating back the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, a group of Hutus from Rwanda whom locals viewed as foreign occupiers. But the NDC-R's



*Watch the throne: Kabila at UN headquarters in New York, September 2017*

activities go beyond the realm of security. Its leader, a man known as Guidon, is the area's gold monopsonist, the only buyer artisanal miners can turn to, and also holds a monopoly on the alcohol and cigarettes sold to them near the mines. A Human Rights Watch report estimated his monthly income at more than \$20,000—some of which, according to Buuma, ends up in the pockets of Congolese military commanders, who in turn sell Guidon weapons. It's the traffic bribe, on a grander scale: a wrongdoer paying off the government to avoid punishment.

Kabila's attempts to stay in power have started to upset such arrangements. Capitalizing on growing frustration with the stalled presidential transition, militias are promising not only to secure the population but also to rid it of Kabila. In September 2017, for example, a warlord named William Yakutumba, who had previously confined himself to low-level racketeering, launched a dramatic attack against the military in Uvira, a city of several hundred thousand on Lake Tanganyika, near the Burundian border. Invoking the constitution, Yakutumba announced that he had "chosen the military option as the way to chase the dictator Joseph Kabila from power."



UN peacekeepers were brought in to Congo to enforce a cease-fire during the war in 1999, and they were supposed to disarm the militias and secure a lasting peace. They are still there. Now known

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*More frightening than a never-ending peacekeeping mission is one that ended too early.*

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as MONUSCO, the peacekeeping mission is the world's largest, with 18,000 uniformed personnel and a \$1.14 billion annual budget, a quarter of it paid by the United States.

Three weeks after the Uvira attack, I climbed into the back seat of a white pickup truck filled with five Uruguayan soldiers to accompany them on a UN patrol. Our two-car convoy drove due north from Goma, until the houses thinned out to make way for the lush countryside. Every five kilometers, the trucks stopped and the peacekeepers got out, gripped their guns, and scanned the horizon without saying a word. Mount Nyiragongo, a large volcano, puffed in the distance.

When I asked what the mission was that day, I got a quizzical look, as if I should have known. "To drive you 20 kilometers north and 20 kilometers back," I was told. Only when I pressed did someone mutter something about making a show of force and collecting intelligence. The unwieldy blue helmet and heavy armored vest I had been issued began to feel not just silly but unnecessary, too.

MONUSCO's reputation among the population is mixed. On the one hand, it has succeeded in protecting countless civilians, and some grateful locals have staged pro-MONUSCO demonstrations. On the other hand, many view it as too passive or, because it is an occasional partner with the unpopular Congolese military, as a party to the conflict. (It does pick and choose which commanders to work with, consulting a database of soldiers' behavior that goes back over a decade.) MONUSCO troops, moreover, have sometimes raped civilians, and a 2016 poll found that 57 percent of people in North Kivu thought they should simply leave. When we stopped in one village, I asked a 28-year-old cauliflower vendor named Janvier what he thought of the peacekeepers. "They're trouble," he said. "When they pass through, they ask questions about security, but they don't buy anything."

After 18 years in Congo, MONUSCO has grown into an entrenched institution, replete with its own visitor lanyards, regular video press

conferences, and glossy newsletter. At its headquarters in Goma, I lunched on a sumptuous buffet—\$6 for a vegetarian version, \$10 if you wanted meat. A poster advertised weekly tai chi classes.

A common knock against the mission is that with large parts of the population still living in a state of constant warfare and regular massacres, it has little to show for the \$18 billion it has consumed since its inception—and displays no signs of working itself out of a job anytime soon. The organization also has little leverage over the Congolese government, at whose pleasure it serves. “MONUSCO behaves according to four verbs here,” Lubaya, the politician from the Kasai, said. “MONUSCO condemns; MONUSCO regrets; MONUSCO disapproves; MONUSCO calls.”

All of that may be true, but more frightening than a never-ending peacekeeping mission is one that ended too early. Indeed, it was MONUSCO forces who saved the day in Uvira, doing the job that should have been done by government soldiers, who, long unpaid, melted away. For all its flaws, MONUSCO is helping provide Congo's most badly needed service: security.

Before the surge in violence, 94 percent of the peacekeepers had been concentrated in the east, but with the recent flare-ups—protests and prison breaks in Kinshasa and other big cities, rebellions in the Kasai and elsewhere—they have had to spread themselves more thinly. At the same time, MONUSCO has lost eight percent of its budget, after the Trump administration put pressure on the UN to cut peacekeeping costs. So beginning in September, MONUSCO withdrew 1,700 troops from Congo. “Not only do we have a larger area to cover; we also have fewer troops to do so,” complained David Gressly, an American who serves as the UN secretary-general's deputy special representative for Congo.

Having to do more with less, MONUSCO has switched strategies, replacing fixed positions with more mobile patrols—or, in its terms, moving from an approach of “protection through presence” to one of “protection through projection.” It has closed five bases in North Kivu alone. In the run-up to possible elections, Gressly said, his job “is only going to get more difficult.”

## **NOW WHAT?**

The paradox of Congo's current regime is that it looks utterly unsustainable, and yet somehow, it is sustained. Congo is a place where one can spend hours wandering from office to office trying to get the

right piece of paper, or slice easily through red tape with a well-placed phone call. Nothing works, and everything works. Competing power centers vie for access and dominance. Publicly stated motivations mask a darker private reality. Alliances flip overnight. But at some fundamental political level, nothing ever changes. Armed rebellions that look certain to gain momentum unexpectedly fizzle out. Promised protests fail to materialize.

Perhaps that is why so many obituaries of Kabila's regime have been published prematurely: because events in Congo proceed according to the competing logics of stasis and change. The most likely outcome is that Kabila will remain in office tomorrow, just as he did yesterday. That pattern could easily go on for years. But it is safe to say that ever since Kabila consolidated his power in the years immediately after his father's death, never before has he seemed so likely to go.

If Kabila does leave soon, he will exit in one of three ways. The first is the smoothest: he voluntarily steps down. It's possible he could do this in the context of somehow running for a third term and losing. Or he could bow to pressure and allow an ally to succeed him. Kabila's political coalition is not monolithic, and aspirants may seek to clear their own path to the presidency, promising to protect him and his family.

Kabila's opponents have little faith that he will experience a spontaneous change of heart, and so they have sought to apply pressure. Some of that has come from Angola, Congo's oil-rich southwestern neighbor, which has grown frustrated with the refugees streaming in. Once a crucial ally, it has withdrawn its military advisers from Congo. And Sindika Dokolo, a Congolese businessman who is a son-in-law of Angola's still powerful former president, has started a pro-democracy citizens' movement targeted against Kabila.

Most international pressure, however, has taken the form of sanctions. In May, the EU imposed an asset freeze and a travel ban on nine Congolese officials, including Mende, the minister of communication and media. Shortly thereafter, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed financial sanctions on Kabila's top military adviser and on a beach resort he owns, adding him to the list of five other officials it had sanctioned in 2016. Activists have welcomed these measures, and called for more. "The sanctions so far have just scratched the surface," said Sasha Lezhnev of the Enough Project, an Africa-focused advocacy group based in Washington, D.C. "What's needed is measures against some of the banks that Kabila and his business partners use to move

the proceeds of corruption, as well as sanctions against the senior financial advisers, the family members, and the companies they control.”

Katumbi, the exiled presidential aspirant, has pushed for sanctions, too, and hired a D.C. law firm, Akin Gump, to lead the lobbying effort. An American friend of his, a former mining company executive and one-time partner at the firm, has started a curious nonprofit named United for Africa's Democratic Future: it ostensibly promotes democracy across the continent but appears designed principally to place pro-Katumbi op-eds and anti-Kabila think-tank reports.

In an apparent countermove, Bill Meierling, the chief marketing officer of the American Legislative Exchange Council, a nonprofit that has been described as “a stealth business lobbyist,” published a piece of sponsored content in *The Washington Times*. In it, he accused Katumbi—who is the son of a Sephardic Jewish father who fled to Belgian Congo from Rhodes just before World War II—of being in the pockets of “wealthy foreign financiers,” a “tightly-knit and highly interconnected group headed by George Soros.” (A representative from *The Washington Times* said that whoever paid the newspaper to publish Meierling's article preferred to remain anonymous.)

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*Kabila seems to be preoccupied with the idea that he could meet a violent end.*

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Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, has emerged as the Trump administration's point person on Africa, and she has continued the Obama administration's policy of urging Kabila to hold elections and step down. She even stated flatly, “The government is corrupt and preys on its citizens.” In October, Haley visited Congo, where she was moved to tears at a refugee camp in North Kivu and, in an hour-plus-long meeting with Kabila at the presidential palace, warned him not to postpone the elections to 2019.

“President Kabila made a commitment to his country's constitution,” Haley told me over e-mail. “He knows we expect him to honor that commitment to his constitution, as it is written—meaning he cannot be on the 2018 ballot. He also understands, the United States will not accept elections any later than 2018.” A week after her visit, the electoral commission released a long-awaited calendar, with election day scheduled for December 23, 2018—not as early as the opposition wanted, but an improvement over the 504-day timeline.

The asset freezes and travel bans are rankling the officials affected, especially those who live part time in Europe. Inflicting pain is not the same thing as changing behavior, however, and there is no evidence so far that the government is mending its ways in response to the sanctions. The logic of regime survival will always supersede the logic of sanctions avoidance. If a crowd needs to be dispersed violently today, it will be dispersed violently today, whatever consequences the U.S. Treasury Department might impose tomorrow. In lobbying for sanctions, then, the opposition may only be enhancing its reputation for spending too much time in Brussels and Washington and not enough back home organizing. Congo's political elite suffers from a misguided sense that power must come from elsewhere—no doubt a holdover from a time when it really did.

All of this pressure is aimed at getting Kabila to “leave through the front door,” as Congolese are fond of saying. But Kabila could resist, leading to the second type of exit: a popular revolt that forced him to flee through the back door. The model is Burkina Faso, where in 2014 an uprising forced an abrupt end to Blaise Compaoré's 27-year presidency.

With economic conditions worsening and Kabila's popularity so low, it's conceivable that fed-up Congolese will take to the streets en masse and march toward the presidential palace. In that environment, opposition leaders could seize the moment. Katumbi, for example, might return home on his private jet, surround himself with supporters, and declare himself transitional president. Kabila appears to be preparing for the possibility of mass riots. In the last two years, he has transferred some of his most trusted (and brutal) generals to Kinshasa, and his forces have stocked up on tear gas and water cannons.

One big obstacle to a mass uprising is Kabila's talent for repression. Nothing scatters a crowd like live fire. What's more, as bad as the economy is today, it was worse during the early 1990s, when the Mobutu regime began its death spiral. Back then, a running gag had it that Congo's constitution included a mythical Article 15: *Débrouillez-vous* (Deal with it). People may invoke it again.

Equally destabilizing as a popular revolt would be the third method through which Kabila could leave power: a coup or an assassination. Kabila once publicly complained that he didn't even have 15 people he could count on. He is thought to enjoy the loyalty of his presidential guards, who, like him, are well-compensated Swahili speakers. But regular soldiers are poorly paid, and they have guns, too. Manya Riche,

an analyst and former adviser to Kabila on peace building, told me that people vastly underestimate the internal threats to the regime. She had been predicting a possible coup back in 2015, and she believes one is even more likely now. "It's a house of cards," she said. "Which card is the one that will cause everything to fall down?"

Kabila himself seems to be preoccupied with the idea that he could meet a violent end. Like his father, his grandfather, a former colonial administrator, was assassinated; Joseph has openly worried that he will meet the same fate. "Any time the assassination of his father would come up, his face would noticeably change," said one U.S. diplomat who has met with Kabila many times.

In a country with so much dry tinder—poorly fortified borders with nine different countries, scores of militias, and more than 250 ethnic groups—it is all too easy to imagine the chaos that might result from any variety of the last two scenarios. The Great African War, the world's deadliest conflict since World War II, ended only in 2003. And many of that war's underlying causes—above all, a weak state—persist. "Evacuation is on everyone's mind," one member of Kinshasa's Western diplomatic corps told me. Most Congolese, of course, have no such choice. 🌐