Zaire at the Crossroads

by Shawn McCormick and Bruce Whitehouse

The course of political events in Zaire over the last several years has provided Western decision makers with ample excuses to remain aloof from Sub-Saharan Africa's second-largest country. Since the end of the 1980s, the "hands-off" approach of various foreign powers has stood in marked contrast to their active involvement during the cold war. President Mobutu Sese Seko, ruler of the country for almost 30 years, has seen his once abundant Western support wither away to almost nothing as his abuses of human rights and public finances have become too flagrant for his sponsors to ignore. Zaire has slowly fragmented as the government in Kinshasa has lost both international credibility and control over the provinces. Today many outlying regions are semiautonomous, with communities resurrecting ethnic governance systems and conducting trade with currency from neighboring states in lieu of the country's own currency, the almost-worthless zaire.

As of the beginning of 1994, the economy had ground to a halt, ethnic tensions were on the rise, and the already weak state apparatus was immobilized by political deadlock. At best, Zaire seemed headed not for a violent conflagration such as those which ignited in Liberia and Somalia, but rather for gradual destruction through a "slow burn" that would linger just out of range of newspaper headlines.

Two events in June and July 1994 altered this scenario. First, the influx of well over a million Rwandan refugees into its eastern Kivu province returned Zaire to the international spotlight. Television news footage of the camps around Goma and Bukavu increased the country's salience. As French and later U.S. troops were deployed to eastern Zaire and the government in Kinshasa cooperated with international relief efforts, the Mobutu regime appeared to have a degree of success in shedding its previous status as a global pariah. In another positive development, South African President Nelson Mandela openly enlisted Mobutu in an effort to end the war in Angola. The tragic fates of Zaire's neighbors amounted to something of a windfall for Mobutu, who took full advantage of every opportunity to garner positive attention on the world stage.

An improved reputation in the international arena was not the only force pulling Zaire back from the brink. Another factor was the process of change under way within the government. On July 9, Prime Minister Léon Kengo wa Dondo addressed a session of the legislature. He described with remarkable candor the depth of his country's distress: "Zaire is experiencing the most serious economic and social crisis of its history.... As the guarantor of the social order, the state has for a long time given up its responsibilities. It can no longer assume its basic responsibility in the fields
of justice and security. There is total social and economic disorder.

That such a statement, however obvious, should come from anyone in the Zairian government was peculiar; that it came from a new prime minister was astonishing. But Kengo had a reputation to establish—that of a determined problem solver out to shake up the status quo disorder. Although his tenure as head of state officially dates back to 1965 (at which time he was Joseph-Desire Mobutu the Force Publique, the paramilitary police force. That time, there were very few native Congolese with once a clerk in the Force Publique, was to become the first chief of staff of the new colonial civil service, and not a single Congolese officer in its inception. When it came to quelling insurrections, mutinies, and secessionist movements, the new government had to rely on foreign mercenaries, covert assistance, and United Nations troops. Nonetheless, Mobutu used his position as army chief to wield considerable power in the early days of what became known as "the Congo crisis." (See "Optimism on Zaire: Illusion or Reality?" by M. Crawford Young, CSIS Africa Notes no. 50, November 1985.) In September 1960 he intervened in a political standoff between the Congo's first president, Joseph Kasavubu, and its prime minister, Patrice Lumumba. By temporarily suspending all political institutions and "neutralizing" both leaders, Mobutu set in motion a process that would lead to the downfall and death of Lumumba.

U.S. policymakers, fearful of possible Soviet-bloc meddling in the region and suspecting that Lumumba was a pawn of Moscow, saw Mobutu as a reliable anti-Communist ally. Beginning with the Eisenhower administration, therefore, Washington lent political and covert military support to Mobutu's efforts to bring the tumultuous events in the Congo under control. He, more than any other government figure, was perceived as the key to keeping the Congo—as well as its impressive deposits of strategic minerals and other resources—within the West's sphere of influence.

When he overthrew the ineffectual Congolese government in a bloodless coup on November 24, 1965, Mobutu was silently applauded in many Western capitals. Although there was considerable opposition in Washington to his takeover, a select group of U.S. policymakers welcomed the prospect of his firm rule after more than five years of factional bickering and governmental indecisiveness in the Congo. They believed that under Mobutu's leadership, the Congo could become a stable outpost of U.S. influence in Central Africa. Internal support for Mobutu was sufficiently strong that the national legislature authorized his presidency and even made a request for its own suspension, which he granted. Mobutu then decreed a new era in his country's history, one that would last for 25 years.

L'Etat, C'est Moi, 1965-1990
President Mobutu's rise to power was soon followed by a restructuring of the entire Congolese government that ushered in what he called the "Second Republic." Multiparty politics (which he banned for five years) was replaced by a new single party, the Mouvement Populaire de la Revolution (MPR). Over time the MPR took control of all administrative structures, including the armed forces and the courts; at one point the MPR even tried to take over the administration of the country's churches. Provincial boundaries were reconfigured to form 8 provinces out of what had been 21, breaking up established political power bases. In 1967, less than two years after Mobutu's rise to power, a constitution formally establishing a highly centralized executive government was approved by national referendum. Three years later, as the ban on opposition parties was due to expire, the 1967 constitution was amended and all branches of government became organs of the MPR. As in much of
Africa, firm one-party rule was to be the doctrine of the Second Republic in Zaire.

At the same time as he was reshaping his country's political system, Mobutu was also reshaping its political class. By exiling some individuals, executing a few, and co-opting many more, he made certain that there were no experienced leaders in government or the military who could pose a threat to his personal rule. Former President Kasavubu was "retired" to his home village, where he died in 1969. The government was regularly purged of those whose loyalty to Mobutu was in doubt or who seemed capable of challenging the president's command; senior officials were rotated through different posts to prevent them from building up a personal power base. Although this policy enabled Mobutu to consolidate his hold on power, it had a damaging side effect. With the effective elimination of the most able civilian and military leadership, the civil service and army were to become notoriously inefficient and incompetent.

But loyalty to the president, not efficiency, was the chief priority of Mobutu's new state system. In return for the exclusive and personal devotion of his followers, the president could bestow posts in government ministries and state-owned enterprises. The political prestige of these posts was matched by the access they provided to state funds. High officials were generally able to use public money at their own discretion. Ministerial budgets allowed for a high degree of personal privilege. Profits from such parastatal companies as the Société Minière de Lukwanga (MIBA) and La Générale des Carrières et des Mines (GECAMINES), the government-owned diamond and copper mining concerns, were siphoned off by their directors into foreign bank accounts. This was an especially lucrative practice in the early 1970s when copper prices were booming. Political success and the wealth associated with it were entirely dependent upon the benevolence of President Mobutu. The elaborate system of patronage that he built resulted in his unprecedented personal hegemony in the affairs of government. That Mobutu could put such a system into place within five years of coming into power is an indication of his skills as a politician, as a leader, and as a manipulator.

Mobutu's strategy to reinvent government and fortify his hold on power was capped with a campaign set in motion in 1971 to "authenticize" his society. Western-supplied place names were replaced with African ones. As of 1971 both the country and the Congo River were renamed Zaire. (The name of the capital city had already been changed from Léopoldville to Kinshasa in 1966.) Joseph-Désiré Mobutu changed his name to the more "authentic" Mobutu Sese Seko (plus a lengthy title extolling his bravery and martial prowess). But the crusade of authenticization involved more than a mass renaming of famous places and public figures. The citizenry too were pressured to Africanize their names and adopt indigenous African garb, a move that did instill a greater sense of national pride. And just as individuals were to become authentically Zairian, so were businesses. Between 1973 and 1974 about $1 billion worth of foreign-owned concerns were nationalized by the state—and became prizes for Zaire's political elite.

Mobutu also attempted to magnify his own public image. Impressed during a visit to North Korea by his hosts' larger-than-life glorification of their head of state, he launched his own promotional campaign in the early 1970s. "Mobutism," a loose and flexible doctrine culled from his collected speeches, was adopted as the official state ideology. The president's image as a firm but loving father figure relied heavily on supernatural beliefs; even in the state media, it was sometimes suggested that Mobutu possessed certain "special powers." But Mobutism and "authenticity" were only window dressing for the real revolution in Zaire: the concentration of unchecked authority, influence, and access to public resources in the hands of one man.

A short-lived economic boom ended in 1974 when copper prices began to fall. Nonetheless, the government in Kinshasa continued to lavish money on itself. Rural development programs were neglected in favor of grander public works, while an enormous amount of cash simply disappeared into Mobutu's special accounts. According to some estimates, up to one-third of Zaire's national revenue was channeled directly into the presidency. Although much of the money was doubtless secreted away in foreign banks, there is some debate as to how much was saved and how much spent. The greater part of the funds were used to buy and maintain presidential properties, to pay off the president's "political family," and to oil his political machine.

Even as the economic picture steadily worsened, President Mobutu's reign remained solid despite some difficult moments in the 1970s and 1980s. The mineral-rich province of Shaba was temporarily occupied by
Rioting broke out again in Kinshasa on January 28, 1993, as soldiers took to the streets to loot shops and warehouses. The DSP was once more sent in to subdue the rioters; the ensuing strife claimed dozens of lives, including that of the French ambassador. The official explanation of the riots was that troops were rejecting payment in near-worthless 5-million-zaire banknotes. Here are indications, however, that the looting was in fact planned in advance by senior army officers; selected sites around Kinshasa were pillaged by army units whose commanders received a percentage of the spoils. The resulting chaos provided opportunities to crack down on Mobutu's opponents. For example, troops burst into the home of Union Sacrée chairman Frédéric Kibassa Ialba, shot one of his children to death and wounded no others, and set the house on fire—a tactic that has been used repeatedly against Mobutu's foes. Interestingly, Tshisekedi has also been accused of using such tactics against dissenters within the opposition.)

Mobutu publicly blamed the turmoil on Tshisekedi (who had urged that the 5-million-zaire notes be rejected) and on February 5 dismissed him for the third and final time. Tshisekedi held fast, saying that he could only be sacked by the HCR, which had elected him. So while shishesekeki ran his government from within the HCR, obutu convened in March a meeting of the "conclave," political gathering that was boycotted by the Union accèrée. The conclave took two actions to undercut the ICR. It appointed one of Tshisekedi's former associates, Austin Birindwa, to form his own government in lieu of shihisekedi's, and it resurrected Zaire's long-dead National assembly to serve as a provisional legislature in lieu of the HCR. Since both the Birindwa government and the National Assembly were composed solely of Mobutu supporters, a tense standoff ensued between the rival ICR and conclave factions. Although the conclave-appointed regime was not recognized abroad, it did manage to obstruct the nominal authority the Tshisekedi government had over domestic affairs.

The deadlock continued for months, with neither government able to rule in any meaningful way. Despite the international isolation of the Birindwa government, it managed to hold on to vital state functions, including the media and the Bank of Zaire. The Tshisekedi government had to conduct its meetings in the courtyard of Tshisekedi's home and beg for assistance from external sources. Both governments were unable to control the skyrocketing inflation and the growing ethnic tensions in Shaba and Kivu provinces. In October the Birindwa government introduced a new currency, the "new zaire," worth three million old zaires. This move caused more catastrophic price escalations, which in turn sparked scattered rioting. On December 13, 1993, Shaba's Governor Kyungu wa Kumwanza, one of the primary instigators of ethnic conflict, declared the "total autonomy" of his province, which he called "Katanga"—his name under the First Republic; by his side was Nguza Kar-H-Bond, who had been close to independence-era Katangan separatist Moïse Tshombe.

How Kengo Became Prime Minister

At the beginning of 1994, as conditions in Zaire seemed to hit rock bottom, the political stalemate took a new turn. On January 11, representatives of several opposition parties signed a pact (the "Protocol d'Accord") with the Mobutist conclave. This agreement, brokered among all parties over the preceding months but finalized without the radical opposition, allowed for the formation of a "national reconciliation government" and the merging of Zaire's two rival parliaments. The opposition-dominated HCR was integrated with Mobutu's National Assembly, thus diluting the radical opposition's influence in the new parliament. Tshisekedi denounced the accord and called a general strike in Kinshasa on January 19. This call was widely followed, but nonetheless the HCR approved the new accord on January 20. Tshisekedi maintained his claim to the title of prime minister, but his faction was being left behind as more and more elements of the opposition signed on to the Protocol d'Accord.

Tshisekedi's star had already begun to dim (in the eyes of the West, at least) in late 1993, when France quietly withdrew its backing from his government. Many foreign diplomats in Kinshasa expressed frustration with the opposition leader's obstinate stand against talks with the Mobutu regime and blamed him for not moving to end the impasse that had paralyzed Zaire's frail state structure. French Cooperation Minister Michel Roussin spoke of finding a "third way" between Mobutu and the radical opposition. The hope was that a figure would emerge who was capable of negotiating a political compromise and leading Zaire through the transition to genuine democracy.

Once the political compromise had been enacted, it was up to the moderate opposition to find a prime minister who could both win favor abroad and build a consensus between Mobutists and opponents. Throughout the first half of 1994, a handful of political leaders in parliament tested the waters and tried to muster support from other parliamentarians. In April, negotiations began in earnest within opposition ranks to nominate candidates, and by May a list of seven names had been drawn up. Although Tshisekedi was on it, he insisted on being confirmed as prime minister without submitting his candidacy to a vote. Because of that condition, Tshisekedi was ultimately excluded from consideration. On June 12, he was arrested and detained for 10 hours near Kinshasa. A UDPS rally to protest his detention, held the following day in the capital, attracted tens of thousands of people. Despite the bitter public sentiment about Tshisekedi's treatment, on June 14 a controversial session of the transitional parliament named Léon Kengo wa Dondo, a political centrist, as the country's new prime minister.

The 59-year-old Kengo was well known to Zaire's political watchers. The former public prosecutor and ambassador to Belgium had served twice in the 1980s as Mobutu's first state commissioner, from 1982 to 1986 and from 1988 to 1990; during those terms he was esteemed for his managerial skills and his commitment to fiscal discipline. As
austerity. Indeed, the positive relationship Kengo had established with international financial institutions was one of the reasons behind his nomination in 1994 (the World Bank and IMF have suspended relations with Zaire as of November 1993 and June 1994 respectively).

Perhaps more important, however, Kengo was regarded as a technocrat without personal political ambitions. Born to a Polish father and a half-Rwandan, half-Zaïrian mother, he is constitutionally ineligible to run for president of the republic and therefore poses no threat of succeeding Mobutu.

The radical opposition claimed that Kengo’s election was illegal; although he won 332 of the 421 votes cast in the transitional parliament, hundreds of delegates had boycotted the vote. Nonetheless, the United Nations and the troika governments gave Kengo their cautious approval. UN Special Envoy Lakdar Brahimi, who had been observing Zaïre’s political negotiations, stated in Kinshasa that the “essential thing is that this [Kengo] government exists and that it can complete the transition to democracy so that the country can stage elections in the right conditions.” Tshisekedi’s increasingly strident claims to legitimacy fell on deaf ears.

Since the investiture of Kengo’s government on July 11, Tshisekedi has been abandoned by many of his former adherents. At least four members of his shadow government have defected to work with Kengo; perhaps most important, public apathy regarding Kengo’s election has undermined Tshisekedi’s position. When his home was attacked by Mobutist forces in July, there was barely a ripple of popular protest. In October the UDPS decided to call off its boycott of parliament, although its still refuses to recognize Kengo’s government. This may be the end of the road for the man who has been the undisputed chief adversary of the Mobutu regime. In the more than 10 years since his campaign to oust Mobutu began, Tshisekedi has been jailed a dozen times and has braved innumerable threats to his life. His commitment to change has been unshakable, and he deserves much of the credit for having brought about Zaïre’s political transition. But now it would appear that his role in guiding that transition will be minimal. For the time being, that job belongs to Kengo wa Dondo.

Will the Leopard Change His Spots?
Since taking office in July, Kengo has decreed ambitious programs to get his country on the road to economic and political recovery. His speech before parliament on July 9 highlighted the key points of his plan, including decentralization of government authority and the restructuring of the military. On July 15 he officially opened the government-run television and radio network to “all political opinions and convictions.” He ordered a spending freeze and announced plans to close over half of Zaïre’s embassies abroad. Perhaps his boldest action came on July 22, when he suspended the Mobutu-appointed governor of the Bank of Zaïre, Ndiang Kaboul, and ordered an audit of the Bank’s records. The new prime minister’s programs are so liberal that some skeptics maintain he is merely saying what Western donors want to hear.

Whatever Kengo’s intentions may be, he has run into stiff resistance from entrenched forces within the government. Even though the transitional constitution limits the president’s authority in most realms of government, Mobutu appears determined not to cede any powers that have traditionally been his. His virtually unlimited access to government funds through the Bank of Zaïre has long enabled Mobutu to pay off his “political family” and security apparatus (to the tune of $15 million each month), thus ensuring their fealty. The president therefore sees a direct threat to his rule in Kengo’s moves to bring accountability to government spending (which was conducted entirely without budgets during Birindwa’s tenure). So it is not surprising that Kengo’s attempts at fiscal reform have been blocked at every step. The ousted central bank governor continued to show up for work days after his suspension, while the auditors Kengo sent to the bank were refused entry to the building. There is even evidence of presidential complicity in the illegal currency activities that have pumped out literally tons of worthless new notes into the already hyperinflated economy. It seems that Mobutu, after 29 years as a despot, is having difficulty giving up his old ways.

Indeed, many of the abuses that marked Mobutu’s Second Republic have continued since Kengo’s election. On July 11, following a clash initiated by UDPS militants against government forces in Kinshasa, members of the Civil Guard attacked Tshisekedi’s house using grenades and automatic weapons; although Tshisekedi was unhurt, four of his associates were wounded and a bodyguard was allegedly killed. Opposition leader Léon Muntuntu Kadima was held in detention even as Kengo claimed that there were no longer any political detainees in Zaïre. With his control over state security forces intact, Mobutu has little reason to change his style of governance. He may even be able to circumvent attempts to restrict his spending power. Through collaboration with foreign diamond-buying firms (and perhaps also organized crime and drug cartels), Mobutu has been receiving a steady supply of dollars, which he can use to buy the loyalty of the army or co-opt rival politicians as he has done so ably in the past.

The Troika: Unified No More
Despite such discouraging signs, the “troika” countries—Belgium, France, and the United States—have been shifting more support behind Kengo’s government, and each has recognized its legitimacy. The three countries’ individual reactions to events in Zaïre indicate a widening rift, however, between partners who since 1990 have maintained a united front against the Mobutu regime.

Belgium, whose love-hate relationship with Mobutu has historically been the most contentious, has thus far been reluctant to reestablish links with its former colony. Its government maintains that aid will be conditioned upon a commitment to human rights and good governance. Belgian commercial interests, however,
MOBUTISTS
- **General Kpama Baramoto.** An unofficial but crucial decision maker in Mobutu’s entourage. Commander of the Civil Guard, one of the military units most used in anti-opposition raids. A brother-in-law of Mobutu and native of Mobutu’s Equateur province, he allegedly ordered brutal attacks at Lubumbashi University in 1990.
- **Ngaza Karl-H Bond.** A protégé of the late Katanga separatist Moïse Tshombe (and incorrectly rumored to be his nephew). After serving as minister of foreign affairs in 1972 and 1976, he was sentenced to death in August 1977. Pardoned and reinstated in March 1978 and later named first state commissioner. After another falling out with Mobutu and a period of exile, returned to the fold and served as ambassador to the United States (July 1986–March 1988). Founded the opposition party UXERI in 1990 and became president of the Union Sacrée before switching over to be Mobutu’s first state commissioner again in November 1991 (after Tshisekedi and Mugul Dikita). Minister of defense in the Bérévwa government in 1993 and involved in inciting Shaba disturbances with Governor Kyungu (December 1993). Suffered a stroke in May 1994 from which he is still recovering in South Africa.
- **Ngbanda Nzambo lo Atumba.** Security adviser to Mobutu and one of the most influential figures close to the president. An academic rather than a soldier (holds a doctorate in philosophy). The “thinker” in Mobutu’s repression system, he is seldom seen publicly.
- **General Etienne Nzambi.** Commander of the Division Spéciale Présidentielle (DSP) and a military professional. Has been implicated in money-laundering activities with Lebanese firms. Mobutu’s nephew. An order-follower, not known for taking initiative.
- **Félix Vundwe Te Pemako.** Former law professor, currently Mobutu’s chief of staff. Negotiated with Etienne Tshisekedi’s Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS) when it was still banned in late 1980s. A diehard Mobutist personally opposed to Kengo’s rule, he was jailed briefly by Kengo in 1982 before being freed by soldiers of the DSP.

KENGO SUPPORTERS
- **Justin Bomboko.** An early ally of Mobutu, the Congo’s first foreign minister at independence, and part of the “Binga Group” that launched Mobutu’s 1965 coup. Served as ambassador to the United States and later condemned to death after criticizing Mobutu at a party meeting (subsequently pardoned). Member of the opposition since 1990. A political moderate prized for his knowledge of Mobutu, he campaigned for Kengo’s candidacy in the Haut Conseil de la République (HCR). House was damaged in a grenade attack in July 1994. Seen as an experienced potential elder statesman.
- **Kamanda wa Kamanda.** Kengo’s current deputy prime minister, minister of institutional reforms, minister of justice, and keeper of the seals. A former Union Sacrée spokesman, member of Tshisekedi’s government, and deputy secretary general of the OAU.
- **Pierre Lumbi.** Kengo’s minister of posts, telephones, and telecommunications. A defector from the Tshisekedi camp, seen as the only credible figure from the radical opposition serving in Kengo’s government. Active in Solidarité Paysanne, a grassroots development organization in eastern Zaire.
- **Pay Pay wa Syalasige.** Kengo’s minister of finance. Involved in HCR negotiations leading to Kengo’s candidacy. Former professor of economics and member of the technocratic “Kengo Clan” during the 1980s (when he served as governor of the Bank of Zaire).
- **Alexis Tambwé Muamba.** Member of Kengo’s entourage and leader of Kengo’s Union des Démocrates Indépendants (UDI). Campaigned for Kengo within the HCR in early 1994. “Kengo Clan” member in 1980s, when he headed Zaire’s Office des Douanes et Assises (OFIDA, the customs office).

RADICAL OPPOSITION
- **Frédéric Kibassa Maliba.** President of the Union Sacrée coalition and president of the UDPS.
- **Lambert Mende.** Tshisekedi’s spokesman and minister of communications and press. Belongs to the Mouvement National du Congo-Lumumba (MNC-L) and has lobbied actively overseas for democratic reform. Narrowly escaped death in a December 1992 attack on his home by security forces. Although a steadfast opponent of Mobutu, loyalty to Tshisekedi is uncertain.
- **Joseph Mukendi wa Malumba.** Political adviser to Tshisekedi and former head of Zaire’s bar association. Active as a lawyer and has defended many top Zairian political figures, including Mobutu’s chief of staff, with whom he was imprisoned by Kengo wa Dundo in 1982.
- **Joseph Olenghankoy.** “Young Turk” of the radical opposition. Member of the HCR and leader of the hard-line Forces Novatrices de l’Union Sacrée, which has had much influence on Tshisekedi. Detained and interrogated for 12 days by security forces in June 1994. On September 5 asked all foreigners to leave Zaire. A mobilizer, not a strategist, he is reported to be fiercely loyal to Tshisekedi.
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have been pressuring officials in Brussels to step up the reconciliation with Kinshasa. On September 23, a delegation of Belgian business people, brought together by Sabena Belgian World Airlines President Pierre Godefroid, arrived in Kinshasa to meet with Kengo’s government. The warm welcome given their “economic mission” probably did not entirely allay the delegates’ fears that French businesses are poised to take over areas that have historically been Belgian commercial territory.

The United States is investigating the possibility of increasing its aid to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights groups operating in Zaire to supplement the humanitarian assistance it has been providing in the Rwandan-refugee zones in Kivu province. Support has been expressed for Kengo’s reforms, particularly his “courageous measures” to strengthen the “independence and accountability of the Bank of Zaire.” Although U.S. officials have adopted a wait and see approach that precludes rapid resumption of aid, they have sent encouraging signals to the Kengo government. Kengo met with senior State Department and White House officials, including National Security
the new prime minister’s many ambitious priorities. In an indication of the challenge that progressives within the order properly to evaluate his chances of sustained Kengo’s Other Goals: An Assessment

Bringing his country back in from the cold was just one of apparent that a major objective of Prime Minister and commercial influence in Central Africa. Whatever campaign to establish France as the dominant political overtures toward Zaire as part of a long-term case in point. Some observers interpret French counterparts. “Operation Turquoise” (the humanitarian mission in southwestern Rwanda) is a in point. Some observers interpret French overtures toward Zaire as part of a long-term campaign to establish France as the dominant political and commercial influence in Central Africa. Whatever the motives behind the French involvement, it is now apparent that a major objective of Prime Minister Kengo has been achieved: Zaire’s period of diplomatic isolation is over.

Kengo’s Other Goals: An Assessment

Bringing his country back in from the cold was just one of the new prime minister’s many ambitious priorities. In order properly to evaluate his chances of sustained success, it is necessary to look to the other sectors that Kengo has targeted for reform. These trouble spots are an indication of the challenge that progressives within the Zairian government will face in the months ahead.

- The Bank of Zaire. The autonomy of the central bank is perhaps the most crucial part of Kengo’s plan. This is a prerequisite for dealing with such economic ills as the country’s 12,500-percent-a-year inflation. The audit Kengo ordered in July encountered obstacles, and its results have not yet been made public (indeed, the audit may be ongoing at the time of this writing). In early October, Kengo told an audience of policymakers in Washington that the auditors had gone ahead (using unofficial channels to get the necessary information) despite a complete lack of cooperation from Bank officials. Until the audit findings are announced, the status of the suspended bank governor will be in limbo. Kengo would like to appoint a new governor who would be more responsive to his goals. The United States and other foreign governments are pressuring for a central bank that would be under the authority of the prime minister, that uses and publishes reliable budgetary information, and that makes rational economic decisions.

- Infrastructure. One of the major symptoms of Zaire’s economic decay is the dilapidated state of its roads, bridges, harbors, and other means of commercial transport. According to the government’s own figures, less than a third of the country’s 150,000 kilometers of roads are still being maintained and 70 to 80 percent of railroad tracks are out of service. Even riverboat traffic along the Zaire River has fallen as the region’s largest waterway has become clogged with silt and debris, making navigation dangerous. The October 1994 issue of African Business (London) estimates that it will cost $420 million to rehabilitate these vital networks, whose failings “not only represent obstacles to the farmers and traders who supply Kinshasa, they also fragment the country into several unnecessarily separate markets.” Social infrastructure is in a similar state of disrepair. Many schools have been closed since 1992 and many hospitals have also shut down, lacking medications and funds.

- The Armed Forces. Since Mobutu took power in 1965, units of his army have received training and equipment from such diverse sources as Egypt, France, North Korea, China, and Israel (see “Zaire and Israel,” by J. Coleman Kitchen, CSIS Africa Notes no. 10, March 1983). Yet the Forces Armées Zairoises (FAZ) have generally proven to be more of a liability than an asset to the country’s citizenry. Since the independence era, the military has proven itself incapable of stopping either incursions from beyond Zaire’s borders (such as the Shaba occupations of the late 1970s) or internal rebellions such as the “simba” uprisings of 1964. While senior officers collaborate openly with businessmen in smuggling and protection rackets, the army continues to engage in sporadic pillaging and violence against civilians.

The military’s response to the 1994 wave of refugees from Rwanda has been predictably poor. Instead of keeping the peace in the crowded camps, the soldiers have incited riots by systematically looting arriving refugees, plundering aid shipments, stealing vehicles, and extorting “landing fees” from humanitarian flights. The
resulting international outcry led Prime Minister Kengo to replace one of the battalions stationed near Goma, but he admitted in October that there was no guarantee "the replacement troops won't commit the same exactions" as their predecessors.

Analysts are in general agreement that the only hope for the military is a long-term restructuring program that would result in a less political and more professional force, and one probably smaller than its present estimated size of over 50,000 troops. And as long as most troops are inadequately paid, building discipline within the rank-and-file is judged to be practically impossible.

Kengo has made some moves to curb the military's seemingly unbridled power. Immediately after taking office he decreed that soldiers would no longer be allowed to roam about with their weapons while not on duty. He also officially put a stop to the widespread harassment by security forces persists outside the capital. Apparently his order was heeded in Kinshasa, but harassment by security forces persists outside the capital.

Are Elections in 1995 A Realistic Goal?
Zaire's transitional constitution, which took effect on April 9, 1994, calls for national presidential and legislative elections within 15 months. President Mobutu and Prime Minister Kengo have each voiced their desire that this vote be held. Such an endeavor, if it is to be free and fair, would be unprecedented in Zaire's history and would pose logistical problems that Kinshasa could hardly be expected to overcome without assistance. Some NGOs are now beginning to prepare the way for a vote to take place, but there is much well-warranted hesitancy. No foreign government or private organization wants to spend millions of dollars to bankroll an election that has every likelihood of being stolen by the incumbent tyrant or used to legitimize his continued rule. Kengo himself is said to be dubious about the prospect of organizing a truly representative poll in less than a year, and the radical opposition has maintained that a vote would only be acceptable under United Nations supervision.

Democracy advocates point to a critical problem area in the Zairian state system that would have to be dealt with before any vote could take place: the army answers only to Mobutu, as do the country's provincial governorships and regional administrations. Moreover, Mobutu's MPR has the advantage of a nationwide presence, albeit one that is thin in many areas. A source close to the president was quoted in Jeune Afrique (August 4, 1994) as saying that "only the MPR is at present in all the small towns of the country. To run an election campaign in the four corners of Zaire costs a lot of money. Only Mobutu has the means."

On the other hand, as Prime Minister Kengo suggested during his October visit to Washington, the promise of imminent elections could weaken Mobutu's opposition to reform: "I hope that President Mobutu understands that his political survival depends on the manner in which the transition is managed, on the manner in which the economy of the country is managed—that his people must not live in subhuman conditions. . . . He who demands a popular vote must put the people in a condition in which they can vote for him." And there is guarded optimism among interested foreign NGOs that holding a well-run, transparent election is an attainable goal—but only if progress is made to wrest significant control of the state, its media, and its army from Mobutu's hands, and only if international financial institutions, pro-democracy NGOs, and foreign governments commit resources and support to the process. Working with Zairian organizations, most notably the Catholic Church (which has an extensive nationwide structure), these groups may be able to create the foundations needed for a democratic election.

Zairians can look to regional precedents for a possible UN-assisted vote in their country. A number of neighbors to the south—Namibia, Angola, South Africa, and Mozambique—have experienced such elections in recent years, organized and carried out in difficult (and often war-ravaged) environments and despite serious problems with local communication and transportation networks. The mechanisms to manage an election properly do exist. The question is whether the international community wants to commit itself to supporting such a process in Zaire.

The chief U.S. concern regarding Zaire as of 1994 is regional stability. Continued decay of central authority could jeopardize each of the country's nine neighboring states and shatter hopes for recovery in such trouble spots as Rwanda, Burundi, and Angola. If the transition can be managed without presidential interference and if elections are properly run, Zaire's Third Republic could become a reality. But Zaire's three-decade tradition of strife and political manipulation, incarnate in the person of Mobutu Sese Seko, will be a formidable obstacle.


Bruce Whitehouse, a member of the CSIS African Studies Program research staff, joined the program in 1992 after a period of study in Africa. He participates in the preparation of a range of program publications and reports, and specializes in analysis of francophone African countries.