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The collapse of Zaïre: implosion, revolution or external sabotage?

Mel McNulty*

ABSTRACT

The collapse of Mobutu's Zaïre in 1996/97 was the result of an unprecedented correspondence of domestic, regional and international interests. The Zaïrean state was established and sustained during the Cold War with Western support as a bulwark against communism and source of raw materials. It maintained itself after the Cold War by playing on external fears of state collapse and by supporting French regional interests. By 1996, with the failure of French credibility and US refusal to intervene, it had no reliable external protector. Internal support was non-existent, and an opposition alliance was constructed under Kabila's leadership. Regional states, notably Rwanda and Angola, intervened to protect their own security. Though successful, this regional alliance itself proved to be unstable, leading to a recurrence of war in 1998.

INTRODUCTION

The seizure of power in Kinshasa on 17 May 1997, by the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), marked the collapse of Zaïre, the 32-year-old state which had been created by Mobutu Sese Seko out of the chaos of the original Congo, and sustained with the help at different periods of his Western allies Belgium, the United States and France.

From the outbreak of the Zaïrean civil war in October 1996, the conflict was subject to opposing and not always disinterested explanations. In much of the French and pro-Mobutu Zaïrean media, analysts pointed to an irredentist attempt by Uganda and its protégé Rwanda to extend their regional hegemony (styled 'anglophone' or 'Tutsi-dominated') throughout central Africa.¹ In contrast, much of the regional press, the Pan African Movement and other advocates of

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the 'New African Political Order' (including President Museveni and President Mandela) celebrated a spontaneous revolutionary uprising by the oppressed peoples of Zaïre to sweep away dictatorship.² However, this article, while enjoying the variously tinted perspectives offered above, seeks to focus on a point between these extremes, and to consider events up to May 1997 as one might a rare astronomical phenomenon, whereby a number of stars and planets align to create an extraordinary effect. Hence the collapse of Zaïre – that is, of the Mobutist state – may be seen as the result of an unprecedented correspondence of interests within Zaïre, internationally and throughout the region.

Crucial here is the recognition that, until the outbreak of a new rebellion in Kivu province in August 1998, the country itself – the territory of the former Belgian Congo – survived civil war intact and did not collapse as many predicted into the multiple secessions or inter-ethnic conflict which had followed independence thirty-seven years earlier. Congolese nationalism proved at first to be a unifying force, despite the arbitrary borders and ethnic heterogeneity which were the country's principal colonial inheritances, and in contradiction of repeated assertions by Mobutu (and his Western advocates) that only he – the enforcer of Zaïrean unity – could guarantee national cohesion: *Avant moi le chaos, après moi le déluge*. Indeed, the fear of this sort of collapse, which would suck the states of the region into a bottomless central African 'heart of darkness', was the principal reason offered by Mobutu's backers for their continued support in a post-Cold War world, from which Marcos and Pinochet had already been ushered offstage.

Instead, it was the state which Mobutu created that crumbled, subject to the trilateral strain of: (a) implosion, given the non-functioning of the state except as a milchcow for its rulers, and those rulers' dependence on foreign military props; (b) revolution, born of both the population's resultant alienation, anger and frustration and the coalition of militant opposition forces to form the AFDL; and (c) external sabotage – the undeclared military alliance of the neighbours which Zaïre had helped to undermine by sheltering and supporting their enemies. These cumulative pressures resulted in the final collapse of the Mobutist state – Zaïre – but not of the country, which re-emerged as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Renascent Congolese nationalism, facilitated by an unprecedented, interrelated combination of Western disunity on the one hand, and regional political and military assertiveness on the other, was able to push a

lightning military campaign to an uncompromising conclusion, at best supported and at worst unopposed by the country's population. As for their opponents, the unpaid, demoralised Zaïrean army (Forces Armées Zaïroises, FAZ) collapsed swiftly; as its systematic extortion and looting had long been the civilian population's only contact with the state, it was utterly devoid of popular support. Organised military opposition to the AFDL was offered almost exclusively by mercenaries, the former Rwandan army (ex-Forces Armées Rwandaises, FAR) and sectarian militias (Interahamwe) in exile, and latterly, as the Alliance closed on Kinshasa, UNITA (Uniao Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola), whose bases and supply routes in Zaïre were threatened by an AFDL victory.³

These battle lines gave the lie to repeated mislabelling of the war as an ethnic conflict, although in April 1997 *The Times* (London, 10.4.1997) could still write of 'Laurent Kabila's Tutsi-led rebels', despite the obvious contradiction: AFDL President Kabila is not a Tutsi. Although inappropriate to explain the conflict, ethnicity has been a potent ingredient in a multiethnic country, and was long used to divide and rule. However, Mobutu's last attempt – the victimisation and denaturalisation of the Rwandophone populations of Kivu province – backfired, and sparked the Banyamulenge revolt there in late 1996. It is all the more ironic that, when faced in 1998 with both the dissatisfaction of his erstwhile regional allies, and suggestions at home that the ineffective government was packed with 'Rwandans', Kabila should choose in turn to stoke ethnic hostility against Rwandans and 'Tutsis', resulting in a witchhunt against all eastern Congolese or perceived foreigners, judged often by physiognomy alone (*Observer*, London, 30.8.1998).

Certainly, the centrality of the Rwandan role in recent Congolese politics is beyond question. It is now a matter of record that the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) spearheaded the AFDL campaign. Rwandan officers planned and directed military operations, and mid-level commanders led AFDL forces throughout. Rwandan troops participated in the capture of at least four cities (Lubumbashi, Kisangani, Kenge and Kinshasa), and Rwanda had provided arms and training for those forces even before the rebellion began (*Washington Post*, 9.7.1997). However, although destruction by the RPA of the refugee/fugitive ministates of Kivu province was made possible by the war within Zaïre, this Rwandan imperative should not be confused with the long-term goals of Congolese nationalism and its campaign against Mobutu which dates back to 1965.

Similarly, a simple Rwandan 'invasion' or annexation of Zaïre would not have been possible without the support of the Zaïrean/Congolese people; a glance at the map or at population figures (Zaïre: an estimated 45 million, Rwanda: 8 million) make accusations of 'Tutsi irredentism' risible. The imperative for the states of the undeclared alliance which backed the AFDL – Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi and latterly Angola – was regional security. The AFDL victory was intended to remove a major source of instability for those countries, while allowing the Kigali government to inflict swift and violent punishment on the perpetrators of the 1994 genocide garrisoned in eastern Zaïre. This aspect of the campaign was driven by the need for Rwanda (and similarly for Uganda and Burundi) to secure their western borders against attack from within Zaïre, and seemed to have been accomplished by late November 1996, with the return of up to a million of Rwanda's refugees, and the establishment of a buffer zone along its border with Zaïre.⁴ However, by that stage, the war within Zaïre had taken on its own momentum, and although commanded by Rwandans, was driven by a primarily Zaïrean imperative: the overthrow of Mobutu.

As the overthrow appeared imminent, one commentator (*The Guardian*, London, 10.4.97) suggested that: 'In Africa ... things stay the same until they fall apart. Laurent Kabila and his rebel coalition in Zaïre have shown that there comes a moment when a seemingly immovable regime is so weakened it can be pushed over with ease.' It is intended here, by considering the creation, durability and collapse of such a regime, to offer an answer to at least some of the resultant questions. If the Zaïrean state was so weak, how did it survive for so long, and how could a Cold War product, Mobutu, outlive the Cold War by seven years? Did the state collapse, and hence must it be rebuilt by a new administration, or was there ever a state to collapse in Zaïre? Why was its overthrow so rapid? Was the Mobutu regime so weak that when, in late 1996, external support was withheld for the first time, it could be swept away in a matter of months?

Although no one answer can account for the speed and decisiveness of the collapse of Zaïre, each question points to an ingredient which may offer a more useful interpretative framework. Accordingly, it will be contended that there was collapse, but that this did not equal implosion; there was collapse, but not of services and infrastructure already long absent. It was instead the militarily created and externally supported state of Zaïre which collapsed, overthrown by an alliance of internal opponents and regional enemies whose common interest –

regional security in the broadest sense – gave them the necessary unity of purpose and strength. Only when it became apparent to the DRC's neighbours, a year after Kabila's seizure of power and self-proclamation as president, that the security imperative which had united them in support of the AFDL had not been satisfied, did that alliance shatter and a number of new, presumably equally fragile, coalitions emerge to fight for the upper hand in the region's volatile security equation.

Before assessing the combination of factors which permitted its overthrow, it will be useful to identify how the Mobutu regime came about; why it lasted so long in the face of opposition internal and external; and why, when it seemed to have survived its greatest challenge – the end of the Cold War which gave it birth – it collapsed when it did. In the light of twenty-five years of Mobutism, seven years of Western-ordained but still-born 'democratisation', and seven months of combat which deposed post-colonial Africa's longest-ruling dictator, this article will proceed by considering these three periods in turn: the durability of the first, the failure of the second and the rapidity of the third. By way of conclusion, the implications for regional security of the disappearance of the former Zaïre, a source of insecurity for those neighbours instrumental in its destruction, will be assessed.

WHAT WAS ZAÏRE?

The origins of conflict in the country Mobutu named Zaïre date from Franz Fanon's time, when the anti-colonial Martiniquan described the ex-Belgian Congo as 'the trigger of Africa', which would determine the political colour of much of the sub-continent. The first independent Congo, born 30 June 1960, was the premature offspring of Belgian decolonisation, a process which, it is generally accepted, was precipitate and badly thought-out. As elsewhere on the continent, the end of formal empire was determined less by the needs and aspirations of its subjects, than by the perceived threat, if Belgium dragged its heels, of a radical anti-Western regime coming to power by force, presenting an appalling vista of nationalisation of the country's resources and, in the dominant Cold War environment, of Soviet penetration. However, unlike Africa's other major colonial powers, Britain and France, Belgium had done little to promote a local elite to govern on its behalf and assume the reins of state power. As a result, there was not the smooth transition to Western-favoured regimes which largely characterised independence elsewhere; instead, the Congo began rapidly to

implode, the new administration faced with mutiny and multiple secessions which foreign interests did much to foment.

None of the players in the resultant Congo crisis of 1960–3 – Belgium, the superpowers, the UN – emerges with much credit, and foreign complicity in the murder of the new state's first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was to set the tone for the country's externally brokered fate for the next three decades.⁵ Attempts by the UN to prevent Katangese secession were sabotaged by Cold War politics, culminating in the death in September 1961 of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld. Alan James (1996:5), in a recent reappraisal of the crisis, places it and the subsequent creation of Zaïre firmly in the Cold War context: 'The prevailing paradigm ... was that of the Cold War. Willy-nilly, the Congo was to be pulled within it.' James also points out the failure among Western policy-makers to examine

whether a Westward-leaning government would necessarily be a credit to its sponsors, or ... exactly how it might be an asset to their cause. On the other hand, very close attention *was* given to the means whereby a government of the requisite political complexion might be installed and maintained ... At an early stage the CIA is said to have decided that a man to back was ... Mobutu. (Ibid.)

As chief-of-staff of the Belgian-created Congolese army, General Joseph Désiré Mobutu had long been identified as a reliable strongman to hold the ring against Congolese nationalism and/or communism. In 1963, President Kennedy told him, 'General, if it hadn't been for you, the whole thing would have collapsed and the Communists would have taken over' (James 1996:6). He had also been in the pay of Belgian military intelligence since the start of his army career (Braeckman 1992:36). Backed by the Western states most concerned – the US, France and Belgium – Mobutu was chosen as a reliable client in a state which was key to Western Cold War strategy in Africa. Conor Cruise O'Brien (*Sunday Independent*, Dublin, 25.5.97) describes Mobutu as being, like Pinochet, 'a political creature of the United States, created originally from the destruction of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba ... and maintained in power thereafter as a reliable Cold War puppet'.

General Mobutu took power in a coup in November 1965, dismissed the first president, Kasa-Vubu, and established military rule. In the early years of this, the second Congolese republic, Mobutu's rule was not universally unwelcome or antipathetic to the ideals of Congolese nationalism; he had, after all, been first promoted by Lumumba himself, who had sought to elevate Congolese non-commissioned officers to replace the Belgian command structure. Napoleon Abdulai

(1997), giving the pan-Africanist view of the 1997 Zaïrean war, notes that such rapid promotions were the practice in a number of newly independent African states including, significantly, Rwanda, Ghana, Burundi, Uganda and the Central African Republic, and points out that: 'This new class of elevated African military officers were to play a disastrous role in post-colonial politics. According to... President Museveni, they... were "just a colonial levy of riflemen with a low level of education and literacy".'

At the start, Mobutu's credibility and power base rested on restoration of order, which, it was declared, could only be achieved through centralisation of power in a unified state. Crawford Young (1994:260) emphasises the colonial precedent to which Mobutu referred:

The idea of the state persisting from the Léopoldian policy provided a doctrinal vessel for the Mobutist project. The provinces were restored to a close approximation of their colonial physiognomy. Administration, from its presidential centre, was reunited into a single hierarchical apparatus, grounded in 'unity of command'.

Accordingly, Mobutu took charge of all aspects of the state, military, economic and judicial, personally appointing ministers, generals and judges. Young characterises this monolithic polity as an 'integral state', 'a design of perfected hegemony, whereby the state seeks to achieve unrestricted domination over civil society' (*ibid.* 249).

Mobutu's megalomania grew in accordance with his own perceptions of his role in Africa's destiny. Colette Braeckman (1992:148) emphasises the Léopoldian comparison; Mobutu, whom she dubbed 'Le Dinosauré', was 'an African king deeply influenced by the image of Belgian sovereigns... who created a one-man autocracy on Léopoldian lines', and, on the colonial model, secured for his personal and financial aggrandisement what King Léopold had discovered in the Congo basin in 1884: a vast, resource-rich slice of that 'magnificent African cake'. Mobutu's appropriation of nationalist symbols demonstrated a hope that, like Léopold or even de Gaulle, he would be seen to embody the nation. From 1971, presidentially decreed *authenticité*, name-changing (including the state, its principal cities, and Mobutu himself) and the abolition of Western-style dress (the policy of 'abascost', from the French 'à bas le costume', i.e. 'Down with suits!') were populist, if not universally popular, attempts to self-embody 'authentic' Congolese, by now Zaïrean, nationalism.⁶

How did Zaïre, at one time the apparent popular and populist model of 'big man' African nationalism, become a vampire state from the late

1970s? In its early years, Mobutu succeeded in centralising a hitherto disparate, disunited land mass in which the very notion of statehood and government was largely unknown outside the cities; however, this process of centralisation also placed the state's dealings beyond the gaze of popular approval, or indeed any form of scrutiny or accountability. Several studies point out that: 'Throughout the 1970s ... as much as 20 per cent of the government's operating budget went directly to the office of the president without any financial control' (Leslie 1993: 36). Similarly, a recent comparative study of corruption – long classed *le mal zairois* – in three developing countries describes how:

Mobutu's theft of a quarter of Gecamine's gross receipts ... cut directly into the export income needed to finance Zaïre's mounting debts. Combined with Mobutu's systematic looting of hard currency reserves, this situation forced the Bank of Zaïre to default on the nation's foreign debts in 1974 and 1975. (Wedeman 1997: 464)

The mid-1970s marked a turning-point in Mobutu's grandiose projects for his 'integral state'; as Young (1994) points out, quoting Thomas Callaghy, 'the now "lame leviathan" lost its hold on civil society and international standing'. Paradoxically, it was in 1975 during one of his frequent safaris that French president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, negotiated a number of cooperation agreements with Mobutu (including military cooperation), in what has been seen as the transition of tutelage from the US to France with the incorporation of Zaïre into France's well-managed African sphere.⁷ As we shall see, these agreements were to prove the key to Mobutu's subsequent longevity.

Mobutu was able to retain his grip through two principal means: his control of money and his control of force. His vast personal fortune provided a seemingly inexhaustible source of patronage which created a loyal and/or compromised elite, while facilitating the division or elimination of opposition. Estimated at between \$6 billion and \$10 billion in 1997, it was accrued at the expense of his country's economy and natural resources, through creation of the quintessential vampire state (see Bayart 1989; Bayart *et al.* 1997). However, Mobutu's political astuteness, whereby he was able to distance himself from the country's economic turmoil, allowed him to portray himself as an honest broker, above the 'vile scramble for loot' of daily political life. Writing in 1988, Jean-Claude Willame (1988: 41) pointed out that:

Although the collapse of Zaïre's financial and economic structures... significantly increased uncertainties within the political system, neither the

strength of the regime nor Mobutu's grip over it has been fundamentally weakened. While confirming his formal control over the entire state apparatus ... and making himself de facto President for life, Mobutu seems to have chosen to withdraw from the day-to-day management of his country which he has left to his 'insecure' political vassals. Extricating himself from the tragic economic miscalculations in which he was deeply involved, Mobutu has made the members of his immediate entourage responsible for past, present (and future?) mistakes and miseries.

In this respect, Mobutu again recreated in his own person the Léopoldian or colonial overlord/governor-general role of indirect rule, ensuring that he who profited most from his quasi-colonial exploitation of the country's resources would not be perceived in the public imagination as the principal source of that country's resultant ills, and would hence be sheltered, it was hoped, from the direct expression of popular discontent. Such tactics were at best only partially successful; there were no physical attacks on Mobutu's person or palaces, but this may be attributed to the efficiency of state security,⁸ the loyalty of the Garde Présidentielle, and the inaccessibility of the marshal-president's retreats: his marble palace at Gbadolite on the border with the Central African Republic; his yacht *Karamanyola* on the Congo River, and other desirable properties in Paris, Brussels and on the Côte d'Azur. Moreover, all challenges, major or minor, to Mobutu's authority were defused by the fissures – self-inflicted or deliberately provoked – in the internal opposition, many of whose leaders undermined their own credibility through their compromising acceptance of political office awarded by Mobutu.

By the time of the establishment of the national convention which sought to bring about democratisation, the state's only apparent function was the systematic exploitation of its people and resources, while it offered nothing in return, not even security; instead, the state itself and its agents were the principal sources of insecurity. An editorial in the Kenyan daily *The Nation* (Nairobi 28.4.97) suggested that: 'By banning bribe-taking and intimidation and insisting on disciplined behaviour by its own soldiers, the AFDL is bringing more order to daily life than many Zairians have seen in decades.'

WHY DID ZAÏRE SURVIVE?

Central to any examination of the longevity of Zaïre is the issue of intervention by external (i.e. non-African) powers who, according to one commentator (*The Guardian*, London 28.4.1997), 'so mismanaged Zaïre's affairs 35 years ago as to exacerbate its civil war and eventually

deliver the country into the hands of a man who established a militarised lootocracy that exceeded in corruption and waste all others in the continent’.

In his study of state collapse, Zartman (1995:2) argues that ‘the Congo case is of... relevance for its lessons about state reconstitution. An international intervention to restore law and order, a strongman installed with foreign connivance: these were the means of restoring the state and the elements in its gradual collapse again two or three decades later.’ To which could be added, in the light of the principal argument here: the Congo case is key for what it reveals about foreign intervention, and the long-term effects of outside imposition and maintenance of dictatorship. By the time of his overthrow, Mobutu had failed for too long to respond to easily satisfiable demands for change, because he believed that his Western allies would always rally to his support. This belief was fostered by those allies in word and deed, and as late as December 1996, Mobutu had little reason to believe they would behave any differently.

Over two decades, Zaïre’s principal military supporter was France which, as the self-styled ‘gendarme of Africa’, had by the mid-1970s assumed the patron’s mantle from the post-Vietnam US, which itself had earlier assumed it from Belgium, discredited by the post-independence débâcle. President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, aware of the possibilities – commercial, political and strategic – presented by Zaïre, signed cooperation agreements in terms of aid, trade and cultural exchanges, which marked the formal expansion of France’s African sphere of influence from its own former colonies to include the ex-Belgian territories – Rwanda, Burundi and Zaïre – perceived as francophone and hence as natural inclusions in the Franco-African ‘family’. French companies contracted for a number of prestige infrastructure projects – major contributory factors to Zaïre’s national debt which would top \$8 billion by 1996 – in exchange for guaranteed French protection for Mobutu, a former American client now seen as a key African friend of France. A military technical assistance agreement was signed, and Mobutu’s regime was saved with French military assistance on two separate occasions.

In March 1977, anti-Mobutu Zaïrean dissidents (the former police and other exiles from the secessionist province of Katanga, renamed Shaba, who had formed themselves into the *Front pour la Libération Nationale du Congo*, FLNC) launched an attack from Angola across the border into Shaba province. Confused reports as to the nature and gravity of this attack led to a cautious Western response, and despite

precedents to the contrary, there was no immediate intervention. Three weeks after the first attack, Mobutu's appeals for Western help in the face of what he characterised as a concerted Soviet–Cuban plot brought little more than a promise of speeded-up deliveries of previously ordered military supplies. However, the following month, with Mobutu's army routed and his regime nearing collapse, Moroccan King Hassan II, acting under French pressure, offered to send 1,500 troops. President Giscard announced that French military planes would be provided to transport the Moroccan soldiers and, in a televised address on 23 April, told the French people that the airlift demonstrated France's 'commitment to combat the subversion of friendly African countries' (*Le Monde*, Paris, 24.4.1977). By mid-May the FLNC had been driven back to Angola, although they promised to return.

Subsequent official French accounts are clear about the Cold War imperatives behind the Shaba interventions; Mobutu's opponents – the 'Katangese gendarmes' of the FLNC – were 'taken up in 1976 by the communist government in Luanda. Once they were reorganised and trained by Cubans and East Germans, the Soviets, who were the powerbrokers in Angola, launched them into Shaba on 9 March 1977, against Mobutu's Zaïre' (Comité National 1995: 202). There has been little consensus about this view; a recent study suggests the Cold War was a pretext used by Mobutu to quell internal opposition to his rule: 'The popularity of the FLNC in Shaba was more than the result of ethnic links; it was also the expression of serious discontent with the behaviour of the Zairian authorities and the brutality of the armed forces, particularly in Shaba' (Rouvez 1994: 170).

A year after their first defeat, the FLNC launched a further incursion into Shaba as promised, this time crossing from Zambia to take the key mining centre of Kolwezi. Despite extensive arming and training by French advisors, the Zaïrean army again proved unequal to the contest, and Mobutu turned once more to France for protection, obtaining on this occasion a spectacular direct intervention by several hundred French Foreign Legion paratroops, subsequently celebrated in book and film as one of the Legion's finest hours (Sergent 1978). The operation was justified in Paris as protection for French and other European nationals, an explanation largely accepted at the time. Calvocoressi (1982: 367) offers the following figures: 'One hundred and thirty Europeans were killed and in order to save further lives 700 French and 1,700 Belgian paratroopers were flown to Zaïre in US aircraft. Having evacuated 2,500 Europeans they were replaced by a

mixed African force recruited from Morocco, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Togo and Gabon.'

However, Zaïrean opposition leaders and Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman have queried these figures, and the presumed 'humanitarian' justification for the French operation which, Braeckman (1992:66) argues, was carried out 'under a double pretext: to protect Zaïre against the communist peril, and to intervene for humanitarian reasons in order to save Europeans in danger ... What is less well known is that the humanitarian pretext was provided by Mobutu himself.' This 'pretext' appeared shortly before the intervention by Legion paratroops on 19 May, when a massacre of thirty Europeans in Kolwezi was attributed to the FLNC. However, testimony from witnesses interviewed by Braeckman suggests that the Europeans were in fact killed by the Zaïrean army, as a deliberate tactic to ensure intervention (from an apparently hesitant France) in order to militarily reinforce the same army and protect Mobutu's regime (*ibid.* 66–8). François Mitterrand himself, in 1978 while first secretary of the Socialist Party and still in opposition, criticised the despatch of Legion paratroops to Kolwezi, declaring that: 'The French army went there to assure the security of our compatriots, but also to achieve other objectives which we do not know' (Observatoire Permanent 1995:125); namely, to defeat the FLNC, protect European mining interests and restore Mobutu.

Despite this low-key controversy, Kolwezi was a textbook intervention, good for Mobutu and good for France. France was already by this stage the principal arms supplier to Zaïre, and had sold Mobutu's armed forces hardware including Mirage fighter aircraft, helicopters and transport planes. In sum, it may be seen that throughout the Cold War, particularly during the 1970s when superpower rivalry was played out against the backdrop of Africa's final decolonisations – in Angola, Mozambique and minority-ruled Rhodesia and South Africa – Mobutu made himself indispensable for his external patrons, through shrewd self-casting as an anti-communist bulwark bordering socialist and Soviet-supported Angola and Congo-Brazzaville, while occasionally threatening to turn to the Soviets himself if Western support was not forthcoming. And, in a vast country replete with strategic minerals – diamonds, gold, cobalt, copper, uranium and oil – Mobutu could guarantee security of access for foreign mining interests. The short answer therefore to why Zaïre survived during the Cold War is to be found both in the value and quantity of these resources, and in the country's location as the

strategic linchpin of Western Cold War influence on the continent; external support for Zaïre fitted into a larger pattern of Cold War patron–client relations.

WHY DID ZAÏRE OUTLIVE THE COLD WAR?

The Zaïrean interlude in modern Congolese history – twenty-five years of Mobutist autocracy – was sustained by mechanical and near-unconditional support from powerful external patrons. Unlike Ceaucescu and Marcos, however, Mobutu's regime survived the end of global bipolarity and superpower competition by nearly eight years. The question to be addressed here, then, is how and why Zaïre outlived the Cold War until May 1997; only then can we offer an explanation for the subsequent and resultant questions of why Zaïre collapsed when it did, and whether this was the result of implosion, revolution, external sabotage, or all three.

In asking why Zaïre survived during the period 1990–7, it may be useful to consider why in general states collapse, and what bearing this had on the Zaïrean case. Zartman's (1995; ch. 1) response is straightforward: states collapse because they can no longer perform the functions required for them to pass as states. His definition of a state – the authoritative political institution that is sovereign over a recognised territory – focuses on its three interdependent functions: as sovereign authority, as an institution, and as the security guarantor for a populated territory.

It is readily apparent that from the late 1970s, Zaïre failed to fulfil these functions, with the key exception of its ability to act as sovereign authority; with foreign-assisted suppression of internal revolt or threats to its borders, the Mobutist regime, brought to power with foreign assistance in 1965, retained its monopoly of violence until late 1996. However, when faced then with an armed rebellion at a time when foreign intervention was not forthcoming (for reasons to be discussed below), an alternative authority could rapidly be put in place to fill the vacuum left by the collapsed state-regime.

Usefully, Zartman (1995: 7) explains that authoritarian and militarised states are not necessarily strong and less liable to collapse. Instead, they lose the 'willing allegiance and legitimising support' of the population and become *hard states*. However, his conclusion that: 'The events of the early 1990s... support the hypothesis that authoritarianism is the cause of state collapse and that tyranny, in the end, will

destroy its own hard state' seems inapplicable to Zaïre. Indeed, as events were to show, the Zaïrean hard state did not implode under the weight of its own tyranny alone, but had to be toppled by a powerful regional coalition, and then only when its external props had been removed.

In response to the next logical question – what characterises state collapse, and how is it to be recognised and distinguished from other forms of civil disorder and intrastate violence? – we can consider five tell-tale signs: power devolves to the peripheries when the centre fights among itself; power withers at the centre by default because central government loses its power base; government malfunctions by avoiding necessary but difficult choices; the incumbents practice only defensive politics with no political agenda for participation; and elections are postponed. Furthermore, Zartman (1995:10) classes as the ultimate danger sign the loss of control by the centre over its own state agents: 'Officials exact payments for their own pockets and law and order is consistently broken by the agents of law and order, the police and army units becoming gangs and brigands.' Indeed; as mentioned, the average Zaïrean citizen had little other contact with the state.

All of the ingredients for speedy collapse were clearly identifiable in the Zaïrean state. The economy had been systematically asset-stripped by Mobutu, and the population avoided starvation thanks only to a thriving informal sector (see Callaghy 1984; Schatzberg 1980; MacGaffey 1991). There was no transport or telecommunications infrastructure. Few schools and fewer hospitals survived, and their personnel went unpaid for months or years on end. 'To visit Zaïre in the last years of the Mobutu era', wrote one observer (Collins 1997:592), 'was to enter a world of cannibal capitalism, where most banks and public services and any logic of economic growth and expanding productivity had ceased to operate.' Collins goes on to note that: 'Zaïre's economy shrank more than 40% between 1988 and 1995, and its 1993 per capita gross domestic product – a modest US\$117 – was 65% lower than in 1958, just prior to independence. The foreign debt inherited from the Mobutu regime is close to \$14bn, and economists estimate almost 70% of DRC workers are currently unemployed.'

The regime, as mentioned, controlled force and money; it was at once both hard state and lootocracy. Its economy was a fiasco; rocketing inflation made banknotes valueless. The 5 million Zaïre note, launched in late 1992, was not accepted by traders, and attempts to pay the army with the notes led to further rioting and looting; it is not

excessive to suggest that the state provided the people with nothing except worthless currency and looting soldiery. In 1993 the 'nouveau Zaïre' (NZ) was launched at a rate of 3NZ to \$1; one year later a dollar would buy 4,000NZ (Braeckman 1996). Willame (1988:48) noted in 1988 that: 'For several years now, all the indicators seem to suggest that, from a formal and macro-economic point of view, Zaïre has ceased to exist.'

Mobutu's lampooning and subsequent suspension of the US-brokered democratisation process, his prolonged absences from the country, his extensive collection of overseas real estate, his systematic extortion of the state's wealth, and the resultant disintegration of all aspects of the state apparatus – including the armed forces – surely made Zaïre ripe for revolution in the early 1990s. The key question remains: how could Zaïre and the discredited Mobutist regime have survived so long after the perceived Cold War imperatives had disappeared?

Burlesque of democratisation

There were opportunities to turn Zaïre around, and to rebuild it on a model used elsewhere, notably in that 'paradigm of Africa's dilemma', Chad; it is worth noting that although: 'state collapse is a long-term degenerative disease... it is also one whose outcome is not inevitable: cure and remission are possible' (Zartman 1995:8). On 24 April 1990, Mobutu yielded to external pressure and announced the start of Zaïre's evolution to multiparty democracy, starting with a National Conference composed of delegates chosen by the population. However, this process was to be of dubious integrity and pitifully short lived: 'When it became clear that the reform process would destroy Mobutu's personal power, he attempted to derail it' (Metz 1996:2). Mobutu once again played one patron off against another, threatening France that he would give preference to US overtures if demands for reform were too exacting. A more experienced Machiavellian than any in Paris or Washington, Mobutu could be all things to all men; like a Mafia capo to his moll, Mobutu promised Western leaders whatever they wanted – 'you want democracy, you got democracy' – while continuing unhindered as before. The compromising and division of the internal political opposition, and the growing repression and silencing of civil society in its other manifestations – trade unions, the churches, the universities – undermined any attempt at an organised challenge to the regime. As Willame (1988:42) pointed out, 'Zaïre might not be governed at all, but it is ruled.'

Although he frequently seemed finished, Mobutu continued through a series of clever reinventions to make himself indispensable for Western perceptions of regional security. He repeatedly claimed to be, and was cast by much of Western opinion as, the only ‘Guarantor of unity’ of his vast country. The choice he offered was stark: *moi ou le chaos*. In other words, he would play the ethnic card, as his Rwandan ally Habyarimana was to do with such terrible consequences. From 1990 to 1993, and again in 1996, Mobutu stirred the ethnic pot in the two most sensitive provinces of the country, Shaba and Kivu. Memories of earlier internecine conflict remained painfully clear in Zaïre, as Braeckman (1996:220) makes clear: ‘The West and the Zaïrean population had understood the terrible message sent by Mobutu during and after the National Conference. If he were obliged to leave, he would unleash chaos and would reawaken so-called tribal conflicts which had so bloodied the country during the sixties...’

It appears that this strategy was successful, despite pressures internal and external for Mobutu to make way for a more presentable post-Cold War figurehead. Daniel Volman (1993:22) claims that ‘President Bush’s vision of a new world order faced its severest test in Zaïre’, and points to Bush’s assistant secretary of state for African affairs, Herman Cohen, as an advocate of Mobutu as guarantor of stability at a time when ‘the governments of France and Belgium ... privately pressed the Bush Administration to join them in urging the President [Mobutu] to step down’. Cohen told the Senate Sub-Committee on Africa in November 1991 that it was Mobutu ‘who had united his country after the ethnic strife and civil war of the 1960s’. He questioned ‘whether anyone else could maintain national unity in Zaïre’, and insisted that the opposition must be willing to share power with Mobutu. He went on to warn that unless Mobutu was kept in office and allowed to maintain his authority over the army, Zaïre would be engulfed in a ‘kind of ethnic-based civil war’ that ‘would destroy what is left of the country’s infrastructure’ and ‘create waves of refugees that would destabilise Zaïre’s neighbours’. Accordingly, the US brokered a compromise which forced Zaïre’s first elected government – formed at the National Conference by the united opposition (Union Sacrée) led by Étienne Tshisekedi – to share power with Mobutu, who remained head of state. (A version of this discredited arrangement was proposed again, to the AFDL, in April 1997.) Weiss (1995:165) notes that: ‘[T]he international community was free to deny the Tshisekedi government effective recognition. Here then was a government democratically elected...being denied recognition in favour of a

dictator who was openly condemned by the very powers doing the denying', i.e. the US and France.

By 1990, France's relationship with Mobutu was of a different order and a greater complexity than that of Belgium or the US. Like an alcoholic unable to forego the company of old drinking partners, France, under both Mitterrand and Chirac, clung to Mobutu despite his worst excesses, claiming all the while that the old leopard could change his spots, and would climb on the wagon of reform and democratisation. No matter how often the marshal-president seemed to put himself beyond the Pale – the Lubumbashi University massacre of students by the Presidential Guard (Division Spéciale Présidentielle, DSP) in May 1990; the sabotaging of the National Conference and subsequent suspension of the first Tshisekedi government; the (deliberately fomented) riots and looting by the unpaid army in 1991; the state-sponsored ethnic cleansing in Shaba and Kivu provinces – French support wavered but did not fall. Even the still unexplained shooting dead in Kinshasa in January 1993 of French ambassador Philippe Bernard, by allegedly renegade troops of the FAZ, did not cause a breach in Franco-Zaïrean relations, or provoke any inquiry by the Quai d'Orsay. Some accounts suggest that ambassador Bernard and his Zaïrean telephonist knew too much about a planned assassination attempt on Tshisekedi (Krop 1994, ch. 4; Braeckman 1996). Significantly, although rioting by opposition supporters and looting by the army in 1991 provoked the intervention of several thousand French troops, officially to evacuate French and other Western nationals, subsequent requests by Tshisekedi, during further army rioting in 1992, for foreign intervention to protect the population and help topple Mobutu fell on deaf ears. The FAZ was simply learning the lesson that was to be their rulebook for the remaining years of the regime; in the absence of pay, they should 'live off the land' (*vivre sur le terrain*), i.e. through theft and extortion from the population. However, as Weiss (1995:163) points out, this was an opportunity missed: '[H]ad they wanted to, this was a moment when Belgium, France and the US could have ended the regime's tenure of power with relative ease.' This key foreign failure is directly attributable to Mobutu's shrewd reading of the runes of regional security; France, he realised, still needed him. Christopher Clapham (1996:93) notes that:

Mobutu's capacity not merely to survive these pressures [for democratisation and human rights], in the course of which the French ambassador to Zaïre was assassinated by his troops, but to emerge as co-chair of Mitterrand's farewell Franco-African summit at Biarritz in November 1994, provided the clearest

example of the way in which a skilful African leader could manipulate the francophone relationship to his own advantage.

This was made possible by factors unique to France – notably the President's unchecked control over African affairs – and to Franco-African relations, often termed 'familial'. However, the repeated rehabilitation of Mobutu could never have worked in the post-Cold War era but for one key factor: Mobutu made himself indispensable to France during its interventions in the Rwandan civil war, operations *Noroi* (1990) and *Turquoise* (1994).

The cutting edge of this first French-led intervention in Rwanda (*Opération Noroi*) was provided not by French troops, but by forces swiftly made available by Mobutu. Although initially hailed as defenders by the Habyarimana regime in Rwanda, by late October the Zaïrean troops had caused such havoc by looting and raping Rwandan civilians as if *they* were the enemy, that Habyarimana had to ask Mobutu to withdraw them.

In June 1994, three months after the implementation of the long-planned Rwandan genocide began, 'a good suitcaseful of dollars and a new political virginity' for Mobutu secured French access to bases and airfields in eastern Zaïre, at Goma, Bukavu and Kisangani for a French re-intervention into the Rwandan conflict. By this stage, the genocide was nearly complete, but at the same time an RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) victory seemed imminent. *Opération Turquoise* fulfilled the letter of its French-drafted UN mandate – to stop the genocide, protect refugees and hand over to the UN (UNAMIR II) after two months. But this 'success' failed to conceal other purposes of *Opération Turquoise*: an attempted rearguard action to forestall the RPF victory and force the movement into a power-sharing compromise with the genocidal regime. When this failed, French forces created a 'Safe Humanitarian Zone', and facilitated the exfiltration of the defeated Rwandan army (FAR) and the genocidal militias which, by sweeping the panicked population before them, established the refugee/fugitive ministates in eastern Zaïre (see Prunier 1995; McNulty 1997).

Although the relocation of the defeated Rwandan regime – the FAR, militias and the short-lived interim government which oversaw the genocide – to Zaïrean territory became a cause of major alarm to other governments of the region, it continued to serve Mobutu's purposes on both international and domestic fronts, as identified by Wm Cyrus Reed (1998: 139):

By hosting a movement which threatened to perpetuate regional instability, Zaïre became a key player in any attempt to achieve an internationally

backed settlement to the crisis. Within Zaïre's domestic political realm, the FGOR [former government of Rwanda]... represented a strong authority which had a long pattern of cooperation with the central government of Zaïre and which, because of its status as a foreign power on Zaïrean territory, was likely to strengthen rather than weaken the influence of Kinshasa.

This was a strategy which, wilfully ignoring the changed power structure in the region following the RPF's victory, failed spectacularly; it was the unbearable threat to regional security represented by the FGOR's camps which was to be the major contributory factor in Zaïre's subsequent destruction. *Opération Turquoise* discredited France as a force for any form of regional peacemaking to the extent that, when faced in late 1996 with a rebellion in Kivu province which would escalate to threaten Zaïre itself, no further intervention was possible. Both the state and its leader had to be sacrificed to those forces which France had done so much to oppose.

WHY DID ZAIRE COLLAPSE?

After twenty-five years of dictatorship and seven years of pseudo-democratisation, it took just seven months of war – from October 1996 to May 1997 – to bring down Zaïre. If we accept that the state's durability was based on external military support, particularly direct interventions to protect Mobutu against opponents internal and external, it follows that the removal or withholding of this support when Zaïre was threatened would be a key contributory factor to its downfall. The threat itself had to be credible; and it was the threefold combination of external non-intervention, of regional – particularly Rwandan – military prowess, and the fertile insurrectionary ground of popular discontent which made possible Mobutu's overthrow.

External factors

Key among external factors to explain the success of the AFDL campaign were: the unsustainability of Mobutu; the failure of French-sponsored propaganda which argued that he must be sustained none the less; the lack of a potential intervenor in the absence of France; and crucially, a corresponding Western (i.e. US) non-intervention response which, coupled with Ugandan and Rwandan backing and expertise, created the time and space for the swift military advance of the AFDL. The immediate effect of the removal of external support – due to

changed strategic imperatives (US) and/or discrediting (France) – has been the collapse of Zaïre, by which is meant the implosion of the hard state, as societal collapse had already happened.

The point at which the US decided to pull the plug was crucial. In the immediate post-Cold War period, there was no direct American intervention to support African allies due to disagreement in Washington: a good thing, Volman (1993:22) concludes, as

the [Bush] Administration never developed any real strategy... for dealing with the kinds of political, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts emerging after decades of repression and manipulation by brutal and unrepresentative regimes. It did not know how to react to the political violence provoked by the resistance of ruling elites to popular demands for democracy and basic human rights.

The turning point for US attitudes to African conflict would appear to have been the inglorious outcome of its 1992 intervention in Somalia; the new administration's zeal for 'humanitarian' intervention was short-lived after the *débâcle* of Operation Restore Hope. The political impossibility of further direct involvement on the ground in African crises, and the emergence of new regional powers in central and southern Africa, offered Clinton and his African affairs secretary George Moose a new strategy: push at the open door of the 'second decolonisation', and benefit from the vacuum created by the rollback of traditional spheres of influence.

Stephen Metz (1996:2) points to a consistency in US policy, which has sought simply to back the candidate most likely to bring stability to the region:

Although Mobutu was the most important American ally in sub-Saharan Africa during the Cold War, both the Bush and Clinton administrations recognised that his regime was a source of great danger for both Zaïre itself and for Central Africa. The primary objective was preventing wide-scale violence that could spill over to neighbouring states and spark a massive human disaster.

By late 1996, with an invasion of Rwanda from eastern Zaïre feared imminent, American goals in the region corresponded with those of the new African coalition of Rwanda, Uganda and the AFDL: the dismantling of the camps in eastern Zaïre, and the replacement of Mobutu, now considered the only means to restore regional security.⁹ As the Alliance neared Kinshasa, the only US-imposed condition was an attempt at South African brokered mediation between Kabila and Mobutu. And when, as Kabila predicted, this came to nothing (there

being 'nothing to negotiate but the terms of Mobutu's departure'), the US requested, and obtained, a 'soft landing': the non-violent departure of Mobutu and fall of Kinshasa to the AFDL on 17 May. Stability is the key to US policy in Africa, a stability based on regional peacekeeping which will relieve the US of any world's policeman's burden. Stability apart, much current American thinking considers US national interests in sub-Saharan Africa to be 'so limited that the region will receive only a very small proportion of the human, political, military and economic resources devoted to American national security strategy' (Witherspoon 1996).

When rebellion broke out in Kivu province in 1996, Belgium had already long distanced itself from the embarrassing and 'unfrequentable' Mobutu; when the AFDL seemed unstoppable after the fall of Kisangani in March 1997, the US decided to pull the plug and go with the New African Political Order; only France persisted with the line that Mobutu alone could save Zaïreans from themselves and the inevitable ethnic bloodbath that would follow. However, when in November 1996 the RPA broke up the refugee/fugitive camps and over half a million refugees returned, this regional military assertiveness (albeit crudely violent) pulled the carpet from under French demands for a 'humanitarian intervention' to freeze the conflict and force the AFDL into a power-sharing compromise with Mobutu. Moreover, there was little international enthusiasm for France's demands for intervention; a report tells how:

After a visit to Zaïre ... by the Dutch cooperation minister Jan Pronk, a Dutch official accused Paris of denying reality in its efforts to persuade the international community to let it halt the rebel advances. 'The French want to discuss a situation that doesn't exist,' he said. 'They refuse to allow any talk of the Zaïrean conflict as internal. Paris only wants it discussed in terms of a foreign invasion. That way it can justify foreign intervention to prop up what it sees as a pro-French government.' (*The Guardian*, London, 11.3.1997)

Such was also the stuff of American diplomatic discourse. The US ambassador to Kinshasa, Daniel Simpson, reacted sharply to French foreign minister Hervé de Charette's criticism of the slowness of the international community (i.e. the US) to support its plan for intervention, telling the local press: 'France can no longer impose its will in Africa... Such neocolonialism is no longer acceptable. The French attitude does not reflect the reality of the situation... There is no longer any question of supporting dictators because they are pro-Western' (quoted in *Le Canard Enchaîné*, Paris, 4.12.1996). As the Zaïrean war approached its turning point – the fall of Kisangani in

March 1997 – de Charette turned on Uganda, accusing it of intervening directly to support Kabila's forces, described in a Reuters report as: 'rebels seeking to overthrow President Mobutu Sese Seko, a Paris ally. But de Charette indicated that France, which has been pressing for United Nations intervention to stop hostilities in a move which could save Mobutu's crumbling authority, would not intervene alone in Zaïre' (*The Monitor*, Kampala, 7.3.1997).

This begs the obvious question, why not? Voluntary non-intervention where intervention is expected is, according to much of the literature, the same as intervention itself. However, events in late 1996 suggest that although France wanted to intervene, unilaterally, multilaterally or by proxy, its hands were tied by its record in the region, and its eventual non-intervention response was involuntary. The Western non-intervention response to the Zaïrean war may be attributed to a double discrediting: of France, and of external military intervention itself. As a result, by 1997 there was no-one left to save Zaïre.

Internal factors

In Congo (Zaïre) in 1960–61, the collapse of the colonial state in the process of transferring to nationalist groups shaped inter-African relations for the next half-decade. Subsequent waves of collapse have followed a repeated process of contraction, alienation and repression by successive regimes until the last one destroys the ability of civil society to rebound and reconstitute the state. (Zartman 1996: 54)

In the euphoria of May 1997, it appeared that Zartman's gloomy prediction would not be borne out. As there was no state to collapse, the new administration has had to start almost from zero. Zaïre itself had been ripe for revolution for many years. Added to this was profound cynicism with any state-sponsored political process after the seven-year burlesque of democratisation which had seen the creation of hundreds of political parties, mostly manufactured by the Mobutist MPR (Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution) to keep the opposition divided and weak. In any case, presidential elections promised since 1990 were so often postponed as to be overtaken by events in 1997. The state's campaign of terror against potential opponents, which reached its nadir with the massacre of students on the university campus at Lubumbashi in 1991, and the murder by troops of demonstrators in Kinshasa in 1992, increasingly narrowed the options for bringing about change. The deliberate attempt to ethnicise the incipient civil war of have-not against have so heightened the urgency of the search for a

means to overthrow Mobutu that armed revolt became an imperative. What made 1996 different was that the attempt at ethnic divide and rule backfired; the victimised peoples of eastern Zaïre fought back, having been armed and trained by neighbouring states with administrations now hostile to Zaïre, and also urgently seeking the security which only the destruction of the Mobutist state could bring.

Laurent Désiré Kabila's colourful past has been the subject of much press comment. A former Lumumbist and Marxist considered unpromising revolutionary material by Che Guevara, Kabila's 30 years in the political wilderness made him a little-known figure, but one who, unlike more prominent leaders of the Zaïrean opposition – Kengo wa Dondo, Karl I Bond and others – was in no way compromised by association with Mobutu or acceptance of political reward from him. Whether Kabila seized the opportunity of the Banyamulenge uprising in late 1996 to organise a full-scale attack on Mobutu, or whether the Rwandans plucked him from obscurity in their search for a Zaïrean unbesmirched by acceptance of the Marshal-President's patronage, is of less consequence than the effectiveness of the AFDL's war. Building on the uprising by the victimised Banyamulenge and Banyarwanda of Kivu province (organised as the *Alliance Démocratique des Peuples*), Kabila formed an alliance with other militant opposition groups the *Mouvement Populaire pour la Libération du Zaïre*, and the *Conseil National de Résistance pour la Démocratie* (which drew their support from the long-standing pool of opposition in Shaba and Kasai), to form the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo* in November 1996.

Commanded by Rwandan officers who had already fought two successful campaigns using Museveni's 'Ugandan model' of guerrilla warfare, the AFDL applied the strategy of the *guerre mobile* with astonishing effect. Town after town fell to the rebellion 'like so many ripe fruit'; as word of the AFDL's effectiveness preceded it, it became sufficient to surround a town (leaving one road open), announce its fall, and wait for the panicked and demoralised Zaïrean army (FAZ) to loot and flee. Such tactics were used to seize Kisangani in March 1997, a turning point both strategic and symbolic in the campaign;¹⁰ Albert Bourgi (1997) noted that: 'Kabila's intelligence has been to take into account, during his march to power, the strong sense of nationalism of the Zaïrean people, and to leave in the shade the assistance in men and matériel his regional backers have brought him.' Accordingly, resurgent Congolese nationalism was effectively harnessed by the AFDL, pushing at an open door of people wearied by corruption, looting and the collapse of public services, to hasten its progress across

a country in which it was at best actively supported and at worst unopposed (see Reed 1998).

Regional factors

This was the third planet in the alignment which made the total eclipse of Mobutu possible: regional security imperatives, namely the urgent need – primarily for Rwanda and Angola, and to a lesser extent Uganda and Burundi – to secure their borders and restore their own internal security against attacks from counter-revolutionary forces based in Zaïre. Expressing his wish to take international pressure off the new AFDL administration, Rwandan Vice-President Kagame (*The Washington Post*, 9.7.1997) admitted in July 1997 that his forces had indeed led the offensive against Zaïre, and that the killings of *génocidaires* and refugees in Kivu province were an inter-Rwandan affair.

The initial establishment by the AFDL and Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) of a buffer-zone (on the Israeli South-Lebanon model) along Rwanda's western border served a dual purpose: the break-up of the refugee mini-states there, which had been used as secure bases for the defeated FAR and *Interahamwe* to launch attacks against Rwanda, and from which by late 1996 an reinvasion was presumed imminent; and the subsequent destruction of those forces – whether separate from or sheltering amongst the refugees they had forced to retreat with them deeper into Zaïre. International expressions of horror at the bloodshed this policy entailed took little account of the failure of the international community to bring those forces to justice, and this failure's contribution to the irresistible pressure on the Rwandan government to act when faced with urgent popular demands for security and retribution. This ruthlessly efficient application of victor's justice, to a problem which had proved insoluble to the international community, should have come as no surprise. Declarations from leading figures in Kigali throughout 1996, as attacks on genocide survivors and witnesses within Rwanda increased, made clear that the Rwandan government would defend the security of its territory. According to Braeckman (*Le Soir*, Brussels, 21.8.1997), Kagame had made plain since 1995 his determination to sort out the security problem himself if the international community was unable to do so.

Essential for the achievement of both goals was to make a clear distinction between them: that is, between Rwanda's immediate security need on the one hand, and the larger issue of the governance

of Zaïre. By December 1996, when a Canadian-led international intervention had been agreed, the RPA had destroyed the eastern Zaïre camps, and up to a million refugees began to return to Rwanda. The argument from Kigali was that there was little for the intervention to do; Vice-President Kagame told how:

When the Canadians came here we told them off. We said there were two issues: the problem of refugees, and that of a rebellion aimed at changing the situation in Zaïre. Let us handle the situations separately. You don't have the mandate to separate armed groups from refugees, only to open corridors for all. That won't solve the problem. So, they changed the headquarters from here [Kigali] to Entebbe [Uganda]. (Mamdani 1997)

In Angola, the government of President José Eduardo Dos Santos had a long-standing score to settle with Mobutu's Zaïre. Since his seizure of power, Mobutu had missed no opportunity to assist in the destabilisation of the MPLA government in Luanda. The significance of the Zaïrean role is emerging in recent studies which tell how, for example: 'A secret meeting to arrange support for UNITA took place in Kinshasa in 1983, in which US officials met with representatives from South Africa, Israel, Zaïre and UNITA. In November of that year, the US Navy delivered arms shipments for UNITA to the ports of Boma and Matadi in Zaïre' (Volman 1993:23). When the coalition of Rwandan-led forces marched into Kinshasa in 17 May, Angola brought tanks and heavy artillery up to the border to squeeze their common enemies – UNITA, the ex-FAR and the rump FAZ – across the river into Brazzaville.

Angola, however, did not long enjoy the secure northern border that it had hoped its support for the AFDL had achieved. None the less, President Dos Santos chose in August 1998 to support his ally Kabila against the new rebellion's attempt to take Kinshasa from the west, following an airlift of troops across the breadth of the Congo. Angolan airpower and personnel proved crucial in the administration's defence of the capital, and, with the support of a Zimbabwe seeking a more dominant role in the new SADC, seems likely to guarantee Kabila's political survival as long as he retains their favour. The transcontinental alliance which overthrew Mobutu so soon before seems irreparably shattered as new, competing spheres of influence emerge to the east and the south of the DRC.

The collapse of Zaïre seemed to augur well for regional security in central Africa. Informed editorial comment told of 'an African Waterloo' which would be as significant for the security of the troubled Great Lakes region as the end of minority rule in South Africa was for

the frontline states. Indeed, as has been argued here, the end of Zaïre was partly attributable to the key factor which hastened the demise of the old South Africa: the removal of external support when the geostrategic game was no longer worth the candle.

At the insistence of the new AFDL administration, the UN agreed in August 1997 to expand the remit of its inquiry into the killing of civilians during the seven-month Zaïrean war to include human rights violations by Mobutu and his army, although by early 1998 the UN inquiry had been abandoned in a welter of claim and counter-claim of obstruction and intrusion. Voices from the international community which sought the ostracisation of the AFDL regime for human rights abuses were met with queries about their concern during the Mobutu years; one assessment suggests that a million Zaïreans died as a direct result of Mobutu's misrule (Mukendi & Kasonga 1997:9). Until his death in exile in Morocco in September 1997, no effort was made to prosecute Mobutu or members of his entourage for any human rights violations, and attempts to recover his misappropriated wealth have proved largely fruitless.

The first anniversary of Mobutu's overthrow was marked by growing criticism of the AFDL regime, and an apparent distancing of the new Congo's regional allies from the leader, Laurent Kabila, whom they had assisted to power. The Democratic Republic of Congo was soon trapped in a vicious circle apparent at its rebirth: Mobutu's overthrow was facilitated by assertive regional powers responding to their own security imperatives, responses which paid often scant regard to Western models of human rights. Since that time, international finance and diplomacy have sought to isolate the DRC for its failure to observe these models. Initially elated at his lightning success, Kabila's regional patrons were soon disappointed by an unglamorous leader who failed to meet the exacting standard of the New African Political Order, and subsequently grew angered by a lethargic administration which failed to guarantee the regional security which was the overwhelming motive for their assistance in his installation.

When a new rebellion broke out in Kivu province in August 1998, it seemed that history was about to repeat itself. The Kigali government, already coping with the re-internalisation of its war with the FGOR, was faced with inescapable evidence, as conflict intensified in Gisenyi and Ruhengeri prefectures during 1997 and 1998, that its western border was still not secure. The fears this generated were multifold: that no administration in distant Kinshasa could even secure the massive Congo's eastern borders, or satisfy the social and economic

aspirations of all its people, or protect its victimised minorities, notably the Banyamulenge and Rwandophone populations of Kivu; that Kigali and Kampala would continue to intervene in the Congo and support rebellions there until their security needs were satisfied; that, as Vice-President Kagame reportedly stated, no-one could govern in Kinshasa without his support.

However, it has been observed that by mid-1998, the Rwandans who helped bring Kabila to power had overstayed their welcome in Kinshasa; writing in the Kampala daily *The Monitor* (25.2.1998), editor Charles Onyango-Obbo pointed out that the Ugandans, themselves assisted in their overthrow of Idi Amin by Tanzania's 1979 intervention, would not have made such a mistake:

[T]he Tanzanian experience in 1979 has taught us that a foreign force, however popular it is at the beginning like the Tanzanians after they helped kick out Idi Amin, soon becomes a hated force ... The advice of ... Museveni ... was largely ignored ... Today it is clear that he was right ... Rwandese troops are hated in Congo. Kabila is struggling to establish his authorities, and is running the Rwandese out and calling on the Tanzanians more and more. Because Kampala has, once again, been shown to have had the best understanding of events in the Congo, it is probably more influential today in Kinshasa, and by extension in the Great Lakes, than it was two years ago.

Accordingly, it had been hoped that Uganda's long-standing low-intensity war against the Lord's Resistance Army, the West Nile Bank Front, and more recently the Allied Democratic Front, organisations which benefited from bases in Zaïre, would be greatly facilitated by that state's destruction; however, by early 1998 those forces had consolidated within Congolese territory and were bypassing the Ugandan/SPLA buffer-zone in southern Sudan, to attack Uganda from the west. Uganda, unlike Rwanda, has acknowledged its support for the 1998 RCD (*Rassemblement Congolais pour la Démocratie*) rebellion, in reaction to Kinshasa's inability to secure its eastern provinces and protect Uganda from attack by the insurgent movements based there.

Most coverage of the collapse of Zaïre ignores this dimension – the pressing and as yet unsatisfied demands by the Congo's neighbours for the secure borders without which they could never enjoy domestic stability – and typically focuses instead on ethnicity, competition between anglophone and francophone states, and by extension a new scramble for Africa, with the US allegedly carving out its own sphere of influence in parts of a continent kept warm for it by Cold War allies now expendable. However, such analyses are insufficient to explain

conflict and revolution in central Africa, as they focus solely on the power of Western models of action to shape events. The region's internal dynamic is key to understanding conflict there, and much of the failure of the external response to these conflicts may be explained by the failure to understand this dynamic.

The Democratic Republic of Congo still has the potential to transform the political map of central Africa, its restoration marking the expansion and consolidation of a new, Afrocentric sphere of influence. France is still the most powerful extra-continental actor on the African stage, but its days as unchallenged regional hegemon throughout the continent's 'francophone' states are finished. Does global *Realpolitik* still dictate that a new hegemonic power – the US – must fill the gap created by the ejection of the old? This might be the case had that ejection created a vacuum, but not if we conclude that the ejectors have been newly assertive regional powers. The collapse of Zaïre – at once implosion and revolution – would not have been possible without them.

END NOTES

1 See, for example, *Le Monde*, 11.2.1997, Frédéric Fritscher, 'La contagion de la violence gagne toute la région': 'The rebels... have exported the instability which reigned in the west of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, to the interior of Zaïre, in line with the plans of Yoweri Museveni, Paul Kagame and the American intelligence services.' The 'Anglo-Saxon plot' was also common currency in leader articles in *Jeune Afrique*, November 1996 to May 1997, and editorial comment on *France Inter*.

2 An editorial in *The Nation* (Nairobi), 28.4.1997, stated: 'For the first time in the century of chaos that began when Belgium's King Leopold brutally invaded central Africa, Zaïre... may be on the brink of peace. [W]e should rejoice with the Zairian people at the rapid advance of rebel forces...' Pro-AFDL opinion was also prevalent in *The New Vision* (Kampala), *La Nouvelle Relève* (Kigali) both pro-government – and among the diaspora in *Panafrica* (London) and *Le Nouvel Afrique Asie* (Paris). See also Abdul-Raheem 1996; Mukendi and Kasonga 1997; Huliaras 1998.

3 Zaïre had provided an important supply route and bases for UNITA's attempts since 1975 to destabilise the MPLA government in Luanda.

4 The AFDL campaign was facilitated by the availability of the 'Ugandan' guerrilla model, and the skilful application of that model in Zaïre by the RPA. This included the use of sophisticated psy-ops, effective propaganda and careful media management; crucial for the campaign's unimpeded progress was the absence of foreign camera crews. No images were recorded of the destruction of the refugee/fugitive camps or the killing of ex-FAR and *Interahamwe* personnel, as well as many of the refugees among whom they were sheltering.

5 In 1975 US Senate investigators disclosed the the CIA had, in fact, plotted the death of Patrice Lumumba; and in 1984 two former CIA officials spoke about the Agency's involvement with Mobutu during the crisis. See Gibbs 1993: 163.

6 In 1971, as part of Mobutu's campaign of 'authenticity', the Congo was rebaptised 'Zaïre'. This name was used originally by Portuguese explorers who, when they first asked local people the name of the mighty river, were told 'nzadi', which simply means 'the river' in Kikongo; the word was transcribed as 'Zaïre'. 'Authenticity' also forbade the wearing of Western-style suits, and the banning of Christian names; 'Joseph-Désiré' Mobutu became Mobutu Sese Seko ngbendu wa za Banga, 'the great warrior who triumphs over all obstacles and leaves fire in his wake'.

7 For an account of France's African sphere and its expansion to include former Belgian territories, see especially Wauthier 1995.

8 The Centre National de Documentation; Willame (1988:40) notes that: 'The security branch of the state, and not so much the army, is the major instrument that has been employed to maintain the status quo.'

9 Officially, the US military role *vis-à-vis* the RPA has been 'to assist in the professionalisation of soldiers with a guerrilla background, to teach respect for human rights and instruct in the use of sophisticated telecommunications equipment', although in August 1997, the American 'Physicians for Human Rights' accused the US army of training the RPA in counter-insurgency techniques (see Braeckman, *Le Soir*, Brussels, 21.8.1997).

10 Thirty-three years earlier, in 1964, Kabila had been named political commissaire of Kisangani – then called Stanleyville – under the short-lived Popular/People's Republic of Congo, but did not then have the time, faced with the Belgian counter-offensive, to take up the position.

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